

EFL Learners' Creativity and Their Listening Comprehension Strategies

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Abstract

Listening is one of the fundamental language skills which plays a crucial role in facilitating language learning. However, very little research has been conducted on the relationship between EFL learners' listening strategy use and their individual differences. Listening strategies are the techniques that we use consciously or unconsciously to understand and interpret the text we are listening and they are directly contributed to the comprehension and recall of listening input. Despite the relatively small number of investigation in the realm of listening strategies, there is a lack of research study investigating them in relation to specific traits or skills. This study aimed at investigating the relationship between creativity and the use of listening comprehension strategies by EFL learners. To this end 45 students at the advanced level were chosen out of 88. The adapted version of Listening Strategy Questionnaire was administered to the subjects to identify their listening strategies. Then, Torrance Test of Creative Thinking was administered to measure their creative abilities. The descriptive analysis indicated that these EFL learners employed meta-cognitive listening strategies more than cognitive strategies and they used cognitive strategies more than socio-affective strategies. The Pearson Correlation analysis showed that there was a statistically high, significant and positive association between Iranian EFL learners' creative abilities and their listening strategies at <0.01 level. The correlation between creativity and meta-cognitive strategies was higher than those of other strategies, followed by the correlation between creativity and cognitive strategies and then the correlation between creativity socio-affective strategies. In the end, pedagogical implications and areas for further research were provided.

Key words: Creativity; Listening comprehension; Metacognitive strategies; Cognitive strategies; Socio-affective strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

As a species-specific faculty of language users, creativity seems to be indispensable to the wide range of language uses which vary from slogans and everyday conversations to the most sophisticated texts in literature. Creativity as one of individual differences in language learning was found to contribute to the language learning success of EFL learners (Danesi, 1986).

Rubin (1975) and Naiman, Stern and Todesco (1978) were the first researchers who attempted to study individual differences in language learning to identify the traits of successful language learners. The aim of these researchers was to make other students to follow the route of the successful language learners. Their assumption was that there was a single right way to learn a language.

It soon became evident that language learning is too complex and that different learners with different backgrounds are all likely to be successful to differing degrees. According to Skehan (1989), researchers have not been so much interested in characterizing the "ideal" language learner since then, but in exploring individual differences in the complex process of language learning. They began to study a vast repertoire of factors which have increasingly emerged in researchers' studies ever since. The aim of this study is to contribute further to this new array of research into individual differences in foreign language learning.

Listening is one of the fundamental language skills. Research has demonstrated that 40-50 percent of adults' communication is devoted to listening (Gilman & Moody, 1984). Listening is "the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, understanding his grammar, recognizing his vocabulary and being able to grasp the meaning of what he says." (Howatt & Dakin 1974, p.93)

Listening is an active and integrated process which plays a major role in language learning. However, it was a neglected skill for some decades and its importance in language learning has been recognized recently. So, this paper will explain how students can enhance their listening comprehension abilities as one of the major element of second language acquisition.

Listening strategies are the techniques that we use consciously or unconsciously to understand and interpret the text we are listening (Vandergift, 1999); they are directly contributed to the comprehension and recall of listening input. Despite the relatively small number of investigation in the realm of listening strategies, there is a lack of research study investigating them in relation to specific traits or skills (Liu, 2008; Macaro, Graham, & Vanderplank, 2007). Furthermore, very little research has been conducted on the relationship between learners' listening strategy use and their individual differences particularly in EFL contexts in Iran. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the listening strategies employed by Iranian EFL learners, their creative abilities and the relationship between these two variables.

Listening is an active, integrated and complex task in which listeners deal with discriminating, coordinating and interpreting sounds, incorporating vocabulary, grammatical structures, and background knowledge, interpreting the meaning, etc. and in doing this, they use a great deal of mental processes. "These mental processes that listeners use to understand spoken English can be broadly described as listening comprehension strategies." (Coskan, 2010, p.35) Listening is among the skills requiring strategy use and teaching learners how to incorporate strategies into learning process can improve their performance on listening task. Learning strategies have been categorized under three main groups: (O'Malley et al., 1985, p. 582-584):

a. Cognitive strategies (e.g. repeating, translating, grouping, note taking, deducting, imagery, auditory representation, key word, contextualization, elaboration, transfer, etc.)

b. metacognitive strategies (e.g. planning for learning, thinking about the learning process as it is taking place, monitoring of one's production or comprehension, and evaluating learning after an activity is completed)

c. socio-affective strategies (e.g. social-mediating activity and transacting with others)

Although language learning strategy research has gained great interest in recent years, the number of studies dealing with listening comprehension strategies is limited. Nevertheless, the limited number of studies suggests that expert listeners employ cognitive and metacognitive strategies effectively and applying metacognitive strategies help language learners manage their own learning, thereby improving their task performance (Yang, 2009). Furthermore, instruction in strategy use can enhance learners' performance on listening task.

Some researchers have also showed that the difference between more and less successful learners is not only in the repertoire of strategies they use, but also in the manner of their strategy use, particularly in their use of metacognitive strategies into learning process (1994; Laviosa, 1991). Laviosa notes that:

The efficiency or inefficiency of any particular strategy employed appears to depend not only on the subjects' L2 knowledge, but mainly on individual differences in perceiving the problems and on their ability to employ strategies and orchestrate the use of a variety of strategies (1991, p.109).

Learners' strategy use and choice seems to depend on many variables: individual differences, learning contexts, teachers' familiarity with strategies, listening materials, etc. Although early research was specially focused on investigating various listening skills, most recent research over the past 20 years has shed new lights on the role of individual differences in listening process. According to McCroskey et al. (1998), the main reason for this interest is the emergence of a new approach to studying communication, namely "communiology" which argues that most of our personality and psychological constructs are biologically based and they can affect our interactions with others.

The present study has specially focused on the role of creativity, as one of the learners' individual differences, in listening process. This factor was chosen as one of the variables since such a factor cannot logically be reduced to a special trait of talented people, without any relevance for the huge number of average people learning foreign languages. It is rather a psychological variable which is present in everyone and accordingly its influence on language learning cannot be disregarded (Albert, 2010).

Guilford (1950) maintained that the underlying components of creativity (such as imagination, flexibility, fluency, etc.) have normal distribution in human populations and it is probably a significant factor in foreign language learning, especially in the realm of listening comprehension. This is because "Creative people attend their subjects with skilled concentration. They're intimately familiar with the state of intense absorption that characterizes profound listening." (Ruth, 2008)

Creative listener is an active listener who not only listens to the words, but also understands the ideas behind each word of the speaker. Creativity can help listener to summarize the main ideas of the speaker, judge the

speaker's arguments, arouse interest in the speaker to go on, and finally learn to understand other people. Regarding the use of these and many other listening strategies, the present study was carried out to determine if EFL learners' creative abilities relate in any way to their use of listening comprehension strategies. In other words, this study attempts to find an answer to the following question:

Is there any relationship between creativity and listening comprehension strategies used by Iranian EFL learners?

PARTICIPANTS

A group of 45 out of 88 EFL university students at a large university in Zanjan were randomly chosen. They were all females and aged 20 to 22. This is to avoid their age and gender difference to have an impact on the findings of the study. They were from different cities of Iran, participated for partial course credit. Based on their scores on Oxford Placement Test, their level of English listening proficiency was advanced.

METHOD

Two instruments were utilized in this study. First, to make inferences about the students' potential creativity, the standard Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (TTCT) was used. Although there are numerous approaches to assessing creativity, the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking is the most widely used one. TTCT is based on a questionnaire (60 items) that addresses those attitudes and interests which are indicative of creative potential of participants. Some benefits of using such a questionnaire are ease of scoring, ease of administration, reduction of fluctuations in scores and reduction of errors which are caused by variations in the creative process. A Persian version of TTCT with 60 items was used in order to reduce the designated time for answering the questionnaire, increase interest and motivation to answer the entire questionnaire, and reduce the errors caused by participants' inappropriate translation. The participants were supposed to complete the standardized Persian version of the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking in 30 minutes.

The second instrument was the Listening Strategy Questionnaire adapted from the previous research by Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal, and Tafaghodatari (2006).

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
Creativity	45	80.00	120.00	99.1111	11.89389
Metacognitive strategies	45	3.00	34.00	22.5778	9.73627
Cognitive strategies	45	1.00	36.00	18.0667	11.41849
socio-affective strategies	45	3.00	22.00	11.0222	5.28501
Total listening strategies	45	9.00	90.00	51.4889	24.33070
Valid N	45				

Note: N=Number of subjects.

This 23 item questionnaire included three categories: Items one to eight deal with organization and evaluation of listening (meta-cognitive strategies), items nine to seventeen deal with the use of mental processes (cognitive strategies), and items eighteen to twenty three deal with learning with others (socio-affective strategies). A five-point Likert-Scale ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree) was used to represent students' strategy preferences.

The descriptive statistics (Means, Standard deviations, etc.) were used to describe the important features of the data in the study. They provide simple summaries about the sample regarding their listening strategy categories and creative abilities. Then, for measuring the relationship between the variables, normality of the data was needed to be tested. One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was run to test the normality of the distribution. The results indicated that p-values of the variables were not significant at the level of 0.05. Therefore, the data followed a normal distribution and Pearson Correlation analysis was used to show the relationship between the two variables. Then, the strength of the relationship was interpreted based on Guilford and Fruchter's (1973) rule (< 0.20: slight and almost negligible relationship; 0.20 – 0.40: low correlation and small relationship; 0.40 – 0.70: moderate correlation and substantial relationship; 0.70 – 0.90: high correlation and marked relationship; > 0.90 very high correlation and very dependable relationship).

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Analysis of Listening Strategies

The descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum) of the listening strategies (meta-cognitive, cognitive, socio-affective and total listening strategies) and creativity were computed (Table 1). The mean value for total listening comprehension strategies was 51.48 and a standard deviation of 24.33 and for creativity, the mean value was 99.11 and a standard deviation of 11.89.

The mean value for meta-cognitive strategies was 22.57 and a standard deviation of 9.73, followed by cognitive listening strategies (Mean=18.06, SD=11.41) and then by socio-affective listening strategies (Mean=11.02, SD=5.28). This implies that all the subjects try to think about the ways in which they can plan, monitor, and evaluate their listening.

THE ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LISTENING STRATEGIES AND CREATIVITY

In order to find out about the relationship between listening strategies employed by Iranian EFL learners and their creativity, the Pearson Correlation method was run. The results in Table 2 showed that there were significant positive relationships between learners' creativity and their total listening strategies, meta-cognitive, cognitive and socio-affective listening strategies with correlation coefficients (r) of 0.906 ($p < 0.01$), 0.888 ($p < 0.01$), 0.840 ($p < 0.01$), and 0.779 ($p < 0.01$) respectively. This means

Table 2
Pearson Correlation Matrix

	Creativity	Metacognitive strategies	Cognitive strategies	socio-affective strategies	Total listening strategies
Pearson Correlation(r)	1	.888**	.840**	.779**	.906**
Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000
r^2		78.9 %	70.6%	60.6%	82%
N	45	45	45	45	45

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In addition, scatter-plot showed the linear association between EFL learners' listening strategies and their creativity (see Figure 1). Figure 1 indicates that high scores on listening strategies correspond to high scores

that there were marked, significant, high, and positive relationships between the listening strategies employed by EFL learners and their creativity. Their percentages of variance were $r^2 = .820$, $r^2 = .789$, $r^2 = .706$ and $r^2 = .606$ respectively. This indicates that learners' creativity can explain and predict 82%, 78.9%, 70.6% and 60.6% of the variations in their total listening strategies, meta-cognitive, cognitive and socio-affective listening strategies respectively. This implies that although more creative learners are actively employing all listening strategies while listening to a text, they prefer meta-cognitive listening strategies to cognitive and socio-affective listening strategies.

on the learners' creativity and that the pattern of the scores is close to a straight line. It reveals a positive linear relationship between EFL learners' listening strategies and their creativity.

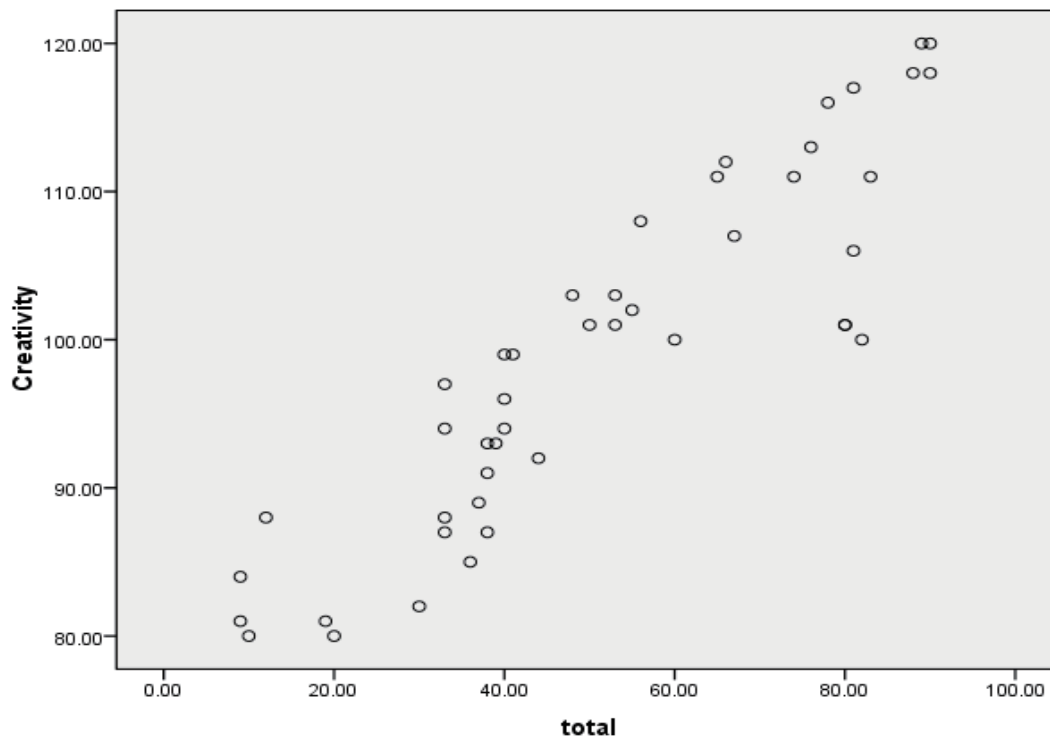


Figure 1
Scatterplot for EFL learners' listening comprehension strategies and their creativity

The main purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between the listening comprehension

strategies employed by Iranian EFL learners and their creative abilities. To answer the research question, the

descriptive analysis of listening strategies indicated that meta-cognitive listening strategies, which let students learn through planning, monitoring, revising and evaluating, were mostly employed by the subjects, followed by cognitive listening strategies and socio-affective listening strategies respectively. This is in agreement with Shirani Bidabadi and Yamat's (2010) studies. Many researchers have agreed on the significant role of metacognition in enhancing learners' comprehension, regulating and managing their learning, and providing them with a perspective on their own learning styles and strategies ().

In addition, the results from the Pearson Correlation analysis revealed that there were significant and positive relationships between creativity and listening comprehension strategies, metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and socio-affective strategies which were employed by Iranian EFL university students. The strength of the correlation between creativity and listening comprehension strategies is very high ($r > 0.90$) and it signifies a very dependable relationship (Guilford and Fruchter, 1973). Furthermore, the strength of the correlations between creativity and meta-cognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies is high (0.70 – 0.90) which indicates marked relationships. Meanwhile, the correlation between creativity and meta-cognitive strategies is higher than those of other strategies followed by the correlation between creativity and cognitive and then socio-affective strategies.

CONCLUSION

This research study attempted to discover Iranian EFL learners' creative abilities and the listening strategies used by them as well as the relationship between these two variables. The findings of this study revealed that there was a statistically high, significant and positive association between learners' listening strategies and their creativity.

According to Shi-qiao (2008), Listening strategies have positive effect on listening outcome. According to him, effective learners actively use more strategies than the ineffective. Furthermore, Flowerdew and Miller (2005) have indicated that effective learners use both top-down (using background knowledge) and bottom-up (analysing words for meaning) approaches to listening, while ineffective learners use bottom-up approaches to listening. In terms of creative abilities, creativity is product of both bottom-up and top-down processes. Therefore, the possible conclusion for listening strategies used by EFL learners with different degrees of creativity is that more creative learners prefer listening strategies which focus on detailed information and also those which help them grasp the whole information. This implies that creative learners apply more listening strategies such as metacognitive strategies for regulating, directing, monitoring and evaluating their own listening process, cognitive strategies

for manipulating the material and socio-affective strategies for managing cooperative interaction dealing with the listening processes. Creative learners make use of all pre-task, on-task and post-task strategies to fully understand the whole and detailed information in the listening materials they encounter.

Another finding of the present study was that more creative learners apply metacognitive strategies more than cognitive or socio-affective strategies. Using metacognitive listening strategies is a crucial factor in learning a language. "Learners with high degrees of metacognitive awareness are better at processing and storing new information, finding the best ways to practice and reinforce what they have learned." (Vandergrift et al., 2006, p. 435). Yang (2009) also considers metacognitive strategies as one of the distinctive features of successful listeners. Applying metacognitive listening strategies would lead to better performance of learners in listening activities. Creative work is also one of the best ways to learn how to listen, since engaging in creativity and creative works means being more receptive, giving up control and *not wanting anything* regular. Nunan (2001) indicated that "If learners are aware of what they are doing, if they are conscious of the process underlying the learning they are involved in, then learning will be more effective". Therefore, if they are informed of the importance of using metacognitive strategies in their listening process and the role of creativity in enhancing their metacognitive strategies, they will perform better in listening and consequently they will learn more effectively. This is the role of teachers to give the appropriate insight into learning and listening processes and encourage students to apply the strategies to the point that they become more creative, effective and autonomous learners.

Research about listening strategy of skilled and less skilled listeners would help learners and teachers make appropriate preparations for their listening and learning activities. Nunan (2001) indicated that if teachers make learners more aware of the processes underlying their learning, they will take greater responsibility for their own learning. When the learners understand the significance of listening strategies, they accept and apply the strategies willingly, engage in risk-taking situations more, lower their inhibitions, manage their own learning and have control over what is going on.

This study implies that teachers should make their students to identify their own creative potential to help them become self-aware learners. When the learners are aware of their own creative potential, they apply appropriate listening strategies to improve their listening and consequently their learning. The reverse is also true. Being aware of their preferred listening strategies, learners can adjust their listening and learning with their own creative potential. Teachers should also incorporate creativity into listening strategy training that help both

teachers and learners employ appropriate strategies to cope with learners' various creative abilities.

Furthermore, creativity can be measured and developed. To foster creativity in class, teachers need to be creative, to encourage and support learners' creative behavior and to promote creativity with wisdom. Improving learners' creativity would lead to effective use of listening strategies, particularly metacognitive strategies, by them which consequently results in better learning.

This study and much other research on the effectiveness of strategy training and creativity fostering will convince English teachers, teacher trainers, course book writers and curriculum designers to become more aware of the role of creativity and strategy training in prompting the quality of their work in lessons, course books and curricula.

Needless to say, there are limitations concerning this study. For example, adopting written questionnaire makes subjects overestimate or underestimate the use of strategies. This instrument was a Likert scale, which may not be the best method to gain sample specific data. So a replicated study may be conducted with other and maybe a newly invented instrument, in addition to written questionnaire, to obtain a more accurate result. Therefore, this study can be extended to further explore the relationship between creativity and learners' preferred listening strategies concerning other tools, contexts and subjects for assessing listening strategies.

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