

Research Article

The Impact of Metacognitive Strategies on Listening Comprehension in EFL Contexts: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Listening is a central yet often neglected component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Many learners struggle with comprehension because classroom practices frequently emphasize grammar and vocabulary rather than listening development. In response, researchers have underscored the importance of strategy use, with metacognitive strategies – planning, monitoring, and evaluating – emerging as especially effective. This paper reviews literature on the impact of metacognitive strategies on EFL listening comprehension. Empirical research shows that these strategies improve learners' understanding, confidence, and autonomy by making listening an active, self-regulated process. Classroom practices such as reflective activities and the Metacognitive Pedagogical Sequence demonstrate their effectiveness, though challenges like limited awareness and time constraints remain. Overall, metacognitive strategies provide a valuable pathway to stronger listening skills and greater learner independence.

Keywords

Metacognitive strategies, listening comprehension, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), language pedagogy

1. Introduction

Listening and reading are the two main receptive skills in language learning, as they provide the input that allows learners to develop productive skills such as speaking and writing (Al-Jawi, 2010). Among these two skills, listening is often regarded as more fundamental because it is used extensively in daily communication and in academic settings. Good listening skills allow learners to understand spoken messages, maintain effective communication, and build a strong foundation for overall language development (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

In Vietnam, the English language curriculum is designed to cover all four skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, classroom practice often places a heavier focus on grammar and vocabulary acquisition, while listening instruction tends to receive comparatively less attention.. This imbalance has led many students to lack confidence in their listening ability and to remain unaware of strategies that could assist them in improving comprehension. Consequently, listening proficiency among learners often remains underdeveloped, creating considerable challenges when they

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Received: 05/07/2025; Accepted: 02/08/2025; Published: 15/09/2025



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attempt to process spoken English in academic tasks, examinations, or real-life communicative situations.

To address these challenges, researchers have emphasized the importance of listening strategies, which support learners in managing and enhancing their comprehension. According to Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), listening strategies can be categorized into three types: cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective. Among these, metacognitive strategies have received particular attention, as they encourage learners to plan, monitor, and evaluate their listening processes. Empirical studies suggest that metacognitive strategies are not only the most frequently applied but also among the most effective in improving listening comprehension (Namaziandost, Neisi, Mahdavi, & Nasri, 2019). These strategies help learners become more aware of their listening processes and allow them to take greater control over their learning.

Given the importance of these strategies, this paper conducts a literature review on the impact of metacognitive strategies on listening comprehension in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Specifically, it aims to synthesize findings from prior research, identify both the benefits and challenges of applying metacognitive strategies, and examine their practical implications for classroom instruction. By reviewing existing studies, this paper seeks to offer insights into how explicit training in metacognitive strategies can enhance EFL listening comprehension and contribute to more effective language pedagogy.

2. Metacognition and language learning

Metacognition, often described as “thinking about thinking”, refers to the awareness, understanding, and regulation of one’s own cognitive processes (Flavell, 1979; Livingston, 2003). It encompasses two key dimensions: *knowledge about cognition* – such as understanding tasks, strategies, and one’s own strengths and weaknesses – and *regulation of cognition*, which involves planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning activities. In language education, this dual focus allows learners to reflect on how they learn, make strategic decisions, and adjust their behaviors to achieve better outcomes.

In the context of second and foreign language learning, metacognition plays a particularly critical role. Language acquisition is not a straightforward process; it requires learners to engage with complex tasks like reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Learners with strong metacognitive skills are able to prepare for these tasks by setting clear goals, monitor their comprehension and performance as they proceed, and evaluate their success afterward. For instance, a student reading an English article might preview key vocabulary (planning), check whether each paragraph makes

sense (monitoring), and afterward reflect on what strategies helped them understand the main ideas (evaluating). Such regulation enables learners to identify gaps in their knowledge, recognize where difficulties occur, and develop effective solutions (Anderson, 2002).

The significance of metacognition in EFL listening lies not only in immediate comprehension but also in promoting learner autonomy. Wenden (1998) emphasizes that metacognitive knowledge guides learners’ approach to language tasks, encouraging independence and self-regulation. Explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies, such as those described by Vandergrift and Goh (2012), provides learners with structured approaches to handle the demands of listening. This structured support transforms listening into a more strategic, manageable, and effective process, laying the groundwork for long-term language success.

3. Metacognitive strategies in listening comprehension

Listening is widely considered one of the most difficult skills to master in a second language. Unlike reading, where learners can revisit the text, listening requires the rapid processing of fleeting spoken input, often complicated by unfamiliar accents, speed, or background noise. To manage these challenges, learners rely on metacognitive strategies – particularly planning, monitoring, and evaluating – that help them approach listening tasks more strategically and effectively (Vandergrift, 2003).

- *Planning* occurs before listening, as learners set goals, anticipate possible content, and activate prior knowledge. For example, predicting vocabulary before listening to a lecture primes learners to recognize key terms (Anderson, 2002).

- *Monitoring* occurs during listening, as learners check their comprehension, confirm predictions, and adjust strategies when breakdowns occur (Goh, 2008). Skilled listeners monitor meaning actively, while less proficient ones often fail to recognize gaps.

- *Evaluating* occurs after listening, as learners reflect on their comprehension, assess whether goals were met, and consider strategy effectiveness. This reflection builds awareness and prepares learners for future tasks (Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010).

Research consistently shows that EFL learners trained in these metacognitive phases demonstrate stronger comprehension, higher confidence, and increased independence (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Thus, metacognitive strategies transform listening from a passive reception into an active, goal-driven process, which is particularly vital in foreign language contexts where exposure is limited.

4. Research findings in EFL context

Metacognitive strategies have been widely studied in EFL contexts, particularly in relation to listening comprehension. Findings from empirical research consistently highlight their positive effects on learners' language performance and autonomy. At the same time, classroom-based studies show how teachers can implement these strategies effectively, while also revealing certain challenges and limitations that hinder their application.

4.1. Positive Impacts

A substantial body of research has confirmed the positive impact of metacognitive strategies on EFL learners. Learners who are trained to plan, monitor, and evaluate their listening processes tend to achieve higher levels of comprehension and greater self-confidence. Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010), for instance, reported that learners who received explicit metacognitive instruction significantly outperformed a control group in listening comprehension tasks. Similarly, Goh and Hu (2014) found that learners with higher metacognitive awareness not only demonstrated better listening performance but also reported reduced anxiety, leading to a more positive learning experience.

Beyond listening comprehension, metacognitive strategies promote learner autonomy and self-regulation. Wenden (1998) argued that learners who are aware of their cognitive processes and strategy use can take greater responsibility for their learning. This independence encourages motivation, persistence, and long-term success in language acquisition. Collectively, these findings emphasize that metacognition contributes to both cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning, enabling learners to become more strategic and resilient.

4.2. Classroom Applications

Research has also provided valuable insights into how metacognitive strategies can be integrated into classroom practice. Vandergrift and Goh (2012) proposed the Metacognitive Pedagogical Sequence (MPS), a framework that guides learners through pre-listening planning, while-listening monitoring, and post-listening evaluation. Studies applying this framework have shown that structured reflection significantly improves students' comprehension and strategy use.

Collaborative learning has been identified as another effective classroom application. Cross (2011) observed that when learners worked in pairs to discuss their listening processes, they not only clarified misunderstandings but also enhanced their metacognitive awareness by articulating and reflecting on strategies together. Similarly, Chamot and

O'Malley's (1994) Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) highlights the importance of explicit teacher modeling of strategies, followed by opportunities for learners to practice independently. These approaches demonstrate that metacognitive instruction can be effectively embedded into communicative EFL classrooms without detracting from content learning.

4.3. Challenges and Limitations

Despite these benefits, implementing metacognitive strategies in EFL contexts presents several challenges. One major issue is learners' limited awareness of metacognition. Many students struggle to articulate their thought processes or fail to recognize when comprehension breaks down, limiting the effectiveness of strategy instruction (Goh, 2008). Cultural expectations may also play a role, as students in teacher-centered educational systems may be less accustomed to reflecting on their own learning or taking responsibility for it (Oxford, 2017).

From the teacher's perspective, metacognitive instruction requires time and expertise. Graham and Macaro (2008) noted that teachers often find it difficult to balance strategy instruction with exam preparation and curriculum demands. Furthermore, not all learners benefit equally; some readily adopt metacognitive strategies, while others require prolonged guidance and support (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). These challenges suggest that successful implementation depends on both learner readiness and institutional support, highlighting the need for ongoing teacher training and curriculum integration.

5. Implications for practice

Metacognitive The findings from research on metacognitive strategies in EFL contexts suggest several important implications for classroom practice. To maximize the benefits of strategy use, teachers should move beyond traditional comprehension-based instruction and incorporate activities that explicitly build learners' metacognitive awareness and self-regulation skills.

First, teachers should include explicit metacognitive instruction in listening lessons. Research shows that learners benefit from being guided through the phases of planning, monitoring, and evaluating during listening activities (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Teachers can model these processes by demonstrating how to set listening goals, predict content, check comprehension, and reflect on outcomes. Such instruction not only enhances listening performance but also helps students internalize strategies for independent learning.

Second, it is important to encourage students to reflect on their listening process. Reflection can be integrated into

lessons through post-listening journals, self-assessment checklists, or peer discussions about strategies used and difficulties encountered. By verbalizing and evaluating their listening experiences, learners become more aware of their cognitive processes and are better able to adjust their strategies in future tasks (Goh, 2008).

Finally, teachers can use technology to support metacognitive strategy practice. Digital tools such as mobile apps, podcasts, and self-recordings allow learners to engage in repeated listening, monitor their progress, and practice strategies at their own pace. For example, learners can record themselves summarizing content or predicting outcomes, then listen back to evaluate accuracy and clarity. These tools not only make strategy practice more accessible but also encourage learners to take responsibility for their own improvement.

Overall, integrating explicit metacognitive instruction, reflective practice, and technology-enhanced activities provides a practical pathway for teachers to foster autonomy and long-term success in EFL listening development.

6. Future Directions

Although existing research highlights the benefits of metacognitive strategies, several areas require further exploration. Longitudinal studies could clarify the long-term effects of metacognitive training on listening and overall proficiency (Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010). More attention should be given to individual learner differences – such as proficiency level, motivation, and cultural background – that influence strategy adoption (Oxford, 2017). Additionally, with the increasing role of technology, future studies should examine how digital platforms, AI-based tutors, or collaborative online tools can enhance metacognitive instruction (Goh & Hu, 2014). Finally, researchers should investigate how metacognitive strategies transfer across language skills, exploring integrated instruction that fosters broader competence.

7. Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this paper confirms that metacognitive strategies – particularly planning, monitoring, and evaluating – play a critical role in enhancing listening comprehension in EFL contexts. By fostering awareness and self-regulation, these strategies improve learners' performance, confidence, and autonomy (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012; Wenden, 1998). Classroom applications such as the Metacognitive Pedagogical Sequence (MPS), reflective activities, and collaborative learning demonstrate effective ways to integrate these strategies, though challenges such as time constraints, learner readiness, and cultural factors

remain.

Future research must continue to explore long-term outcomes, learner differences, and the potential of technology to support metacognitive development. Ultimately, the integration of metacognitive strategies into EFL instruction not only strengthens listening comprehension but also equips learners with transferable tools for lifelong learning in second language acquisition.

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