

## **An Investigation into the Relationship between Gender and Cognitive Listening Comprehension Strategies**

Zahra Sobhani

Department of English Language, Science and Research Branch,  
Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran  
ZahraSobhani21@yahoo.com

**Abstract.** Gender has received a great number of studies in the literature of language teaching and learning. The studies, however, on the relationship between gender and listening comprehension strategies are few. This study investigates whether there is a significant relationship between the cognitive listening strategies used by Iranian EFL learners and gender. Accordingly, a survey design with a quantitative method was used for the study. The participants were Iranian EFL male and female students at Shokouh institutes in Tehran. The Vandergrift's (1997) questionnaire was employed to collect data. The findings indicated that no statistically significant difference was observed in the relationship between the participants' their use of the cognitive listening strategies.

**Keywords:** Gender, Learning strategies, Cognitive Listening strategies

### **1. Introduction.**

Researches along with the experience show that a considerable number of EFL students attending IELTS preparation course experience difficulty in listening section of the exam. The poor listening performance of the students may be due to different reasons. Perhaps, this could happen partly because these students have problem of using appropriate strategies which fit the nature of tasks and activities given. If language learners learn to develop communicative skills and if the effectiveness or otherwise of these learners' development of these language skills is related to the strategies they use, L2 instruction should help them to discover and employ relevant strategies to the given language tasks and activities (Burden & Williams, 1997). In this regard, there are variables influencing the choice and use of language learning strategies. Some of these variables are more dynamic in affecting skill-based language learning strategies (Dörnyei, 2005 & Macaro, 2006).

Gender has been recognized as one of the factors which might affect learners' language learning strategy use. The effect of gender on strategy use has been investigated separately and along with other variables as well (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989, Wharton, 2000). In the majority of these studies, females have consistently been reported of using LLSs more frequently than males. Coyle et al. (2007) work can be cited as one of the first empirical studies that discovered gender differences in language learning strategy use. The sample for the study comprised 90 American students in a university context. The findings revealed that female students use social strategies significantly more than male students. Then, Ehrman and Oxford (1989) conducted a study on the relationship between gender and strategy use of different occupational groups. They found that a much more frequent use of four strategy categories (general learning, functional, searching for/communicating meaning, and self-management) by female students.

There are a number studies addressing the relationship between gender and language learning strategies. For instance, Bacon (1992) investigated the learning strategies used by fifty learners of Spanish at an American university when listening to and comprehending authentic text (e.g., radio broadcasts in Spanish). Bacon employed a self-report survey method, interviewing those fifty, first year students who were studying Spanish. Students were asked to try to be aware of the strategies that they were using while listening to the passages. Though no significant differences in levels of comprehension were found, the study revealed that females and males reported using different strategies from some studies reviewed so far, many researchers disclosed that males and females employ different strategies in relation to their gender characteristics. However, looking from a broader perspective, studies which have examined the relationship between gender and strategy use have come up with mixed results. Thus it appears that further studies are needed to look into the effects of gender on strategy use among language learners with differing characteristics in both EFL context. To bridge this gap, a research investigating the influence of gender variable on learners' listening strategy use is necessary. The main purpose of this study is, therefore, to investigate the relationship between gender and listening strategy use by learners at Shokouh institutes.

In spite of the findings of many studies that EFL students use different strategies both in type and frequency in learning listening, other important dimension-effects of variables were not addressed i.e. gender on learners' listening strategy use particularly in IELTS classes in EFL contexts as Iran.

Implementing learning strategies particularly in listening classes will have different effects on students' performance both in English and also other subjects. In fact, listening is the most fundamental skill to develop the other three skills (i.e. speaking, reading, and writing) and note-taking abilities, and academically useful for better accomplishment (Nunan, 2002). In addition, it is the most frequently used skill in the classroom (Yang, 2007). Hence, with increased attention to listening skills of a foreign language instruction, teachers should understand the listening strategies their students adopt in order to help them in improving their English proficiency (Long & Macian, 1994).

However, recognizing the strategies students use is not the whole job since language learning strategy use is influenced by several variables (Cohen & Macaro, 2007). Some of the variables may have profound effects on how learners approach language learning tasks and how successful they are (Cook, 2001). Among students' characteristics, gender is of utmost importance which has not received the research attention it deserves especially in IELTS classes. The main purpose of the current study is, therefore, to investigate the relationship between gender and listening comprehension strategies use of EFL learners attending IELTS preparation courses.

Studies and researches on language learning strategy are evidence for how learners are comparable and different in terms of learning a foreign language. Although the ordinary systems of memory and language and cognitive processing in the brain, language learners show a discrepancy in terms of factors such as: aptitudes, demographic variables, affective variables, learning styles, and learning strategies when they start learning a foreign language (Cook, 2001). These variables may have intense effects on how the learners approach language learning tasks and how they are doing well they are. In effect, getting more information about how language learners truly learn will assist teachers to make any teaching method more effective and help them put their hunches on a firmer basis. Ehrman et al. (2003) also suggested that the more we learn about individual differences; the more we gain a sense of how many different ways we can understand the complex system of language learning and teaching.

Research on the relationship between listening comprehension strategy use and the variable i.e. gender will provide insight to IELTS teachers' taking into account the right factors in language learning strategy training in general and a listening focused Styles and Strategies-Based Instruction (SSBI) in particular. It will also offer invaluable feedback to curriculum designers and textbook or module writers on the effects of students learning style preferences on their strategy use to take necessary measures. Although Studies indicated that EFL students use different strategies both in type and frequency in learning listening, they did not address one of the important variable i.e. gender on learners' listening strategy use especially at IELTS classes.

## **2. Methodology.**

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used for the data collection and data analysis phases of the study. The quantitative part of the research targeted the statistical analysis of questionnaire results which described students' learning Listening Skills in English as a foreign. The qualitative aspect of the study was the qualitative analysis of data actually to expand and elaborate the quantitative results and to find the level of learners' use of the three types of listening comprehension strategies including metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective strategies. To collect data, the participants were asked to participate in the listening proficiency test to determine their level of proficiency in listening comprehension. Firstly and for the validation stage, the learners accepted written consent forms. Then the questionnaire was administered to IELTS learners to determine their listening strategy use.

## **3. Participants.**

The participants of this study were 60 language learners at IELTS preparation courses at Shokouh language institutes 30 of whom are male and the others are female at intermediate level. They are representative sample of Iranian EFL learners in IELTS classes in Iran. All participants were native speakers of Persian aged between 19 and 30.

## **4. Procedure and Instruments.**

In order to study the relationship between students' gender and listening comprehension strategies employed by them, one structured questionnaires to find out learners use of cognitive, metacognitive and social/affective strategies by Vandergrift (1997). The questionnaire was firstly put forth based on studying a thorough literature review and also some similar studies on listening strategies use particularly those carried out Vandergrift (2003 & 2007). Afterward, it was validated via item construction and at times, items adaptation, expert judgment, and field-testing. In order to validate the questionnaire more, pilot study was conducted on twenty subjects from the target population.

Accordingly, the reliability of the questionnaire was calculated at an aggregate level; the Cronbach alpha test was used on SPSS 16 for Windows (Pallant, 2005) and the test result had a good internal consistency with the alpha coefficients of .92 for the listening strategy questionnaire.

The concluding questionnaire had 32 items taking account of metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective strategies. The scores were on a five-point scale with strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, and strongly disagree. Also, the statements were subdivided into three sections the statements: items 1 to 10

determined Metacognitive strategies use preference, items 11 to 29 determined. Cognitive strategies use preference, and the remaining ones determined social/affective strategies use preference.

In detail, the metacognitive questions demonstrated the way learners developed a series of cognitive steps to do a listening task, such as advanced organization, selective attention, double checking monitoring, and one's performance evaluation. The cognitive processing questions verified the ways learners used information to give support to comprehension such as inferencing meaning from linguistic cues, describing what is heard, or using a dictionary for unfamiliar vocabulary. In the social/affective ones, the learners were involved in interacting with his/her interlocutors in a conversation and showed how they managed their emotions.

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Before administration of the questionnaire, the instructors showed how to do listening activity. According to Vandergrift et al. (2006) in this way, learners by doing a specific task would find how to give their responses. The significance of the research and learners' cooperation to respond carefully in making the results of the research more reliable was emphasized. The learners were guaranteed that all collected data would be kept anonymous. The questionnaires were distributed among the subjects to be fulfilled and all these procedures took just about 60 minutes.

For getting better results, Learners were required to ensure their responses and. Consequently, the response rate was 100% and none of the completed questionnaires had to be discarded.

### 5. Results.

According to the results, the most frequently used component of cognitive strategies among male students was using material in the answer sheet to guess the meaning ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD 0.42$ ). The least used component of the strategy was practicing sounds in the target language that are very different from sounds in L1 ( $M = 1.89$ ,  $SD 0.78$ ).

Based on the obtained data, the most frequently used component of cognitive strategies among female students was using material in the answer sheet to guess the meaning ( $M = 4.7$ ,  $SD 0.62$ ). The least used component of the strategy was practicing sounds in the target language that are very different from sounds in their own language to become comfortable with them ( $M = 1.7$ ,  $SD 0.89$ ).

Research question number 2 was to find out if there was any significant relationship between gender and the use of metacognitive strategies in listening comprehension. Metacognitive strategies were divided into 11 items.

### 6. Discussion and Conclusion.

The findings of the study offered a number of conclusions. Firstly, the students most frequently used the item using material in the answer sheet to guess the meaning of cognitive strategies to deal with listening tasks in IELTS. This result suggested that in IELTS listening courses an emphasis should be given to teaching other strategies. One advantage of using material in the answer sheet in IELTS listening tasks is that it reduces dependency on memory (Buck, 2001, p 83). Consequently, for example, in some sections of IELTS Listening, there are a number of items that students would need to have a very good quality of memory to answer the items regarding a single hearing of the text, chiefly for questions where candidates have to fill in the blanks. Therefore, working on the items making guesses about the topic based on what has already been said by expanding their studies on different fields and making a mental summary of information presented in a listening task by working on visual images of the tasks. In fact, these findings imply that Iranian EFL students did not spend more time boosting and working on different listening strategies after class. As a final point, as there was no significant difference between the students' use of cognitive strategies, concentrating on the subcategories of the given strategies would be helpful in extensively working on weak and strong points of Iranian IELTS candidate.

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