

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON LISTENING COMPREHENSION OF ESP LEARNERS

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Abstract

This article focuses on the language learning strategies applied in listening comprehension by students with technical specialization at the Technical University of Košice. The theoretical part of the article presents an overview of learning strategies applied by students studying foreign language in general. The empirical part of the study is based on the survey realized among intermediate students of The Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Informatics (FEI) studying English for specific purposes. The survey was realized in November 2016 and March 2017.

Key Words: language learning strategies, listening, ESP, EFL

Abstrakt

Tento článok je zameraný na učebné stratégie, ktoré používajú vysokoškolskí študenti technických odborov pri výučbe posluchu v cudzom jazyku. Teoretická časť príspevku sa venuje všeobecnému prehľadu učebných stratégií používaných študentmi učiacich sa cudzí jazyk. Druhá časť článku je zameraná na prezentáciu výsledkov prieskumu realizovaného medzi študentmi študujúcimi odborný anglický jazyk na Technickej Univerzite v Košiciach. Prieskum bol realizovaný počas výučby kurzov odborného cudzieho jazyka (angličtiny) pre pokročilých v zimnom semestri 2016 a v letnom semestri 2017.

Kľúčové slová: výučbové stratégie v cudzom jazyku, posluch, ESP, EFL

Introduction

Listening comprehension is a language skill which needs to be developed properly by foreign language learners because it is the way through which the learners receive most of the instructions and information in the target language. When I discuss with my students about their experiences with foreign language learning, they often consider the listening being a skill which seems to be the most difficult to enhance. The students often ask their teachers to help them with effective strategies and techniques for learning a foreign language or improving particular language skill (reading, writing, speaking or listening). All the teachers should be able to recommend them such strategies which take into consideration the individual learning features and differences of their students who learn English as a foreign language (EFL) or for specific purposes (ESP). This seems to be one of important responsibilities of all teachers to train and instruct the learners what

language learning strategy to use, how to use it and in what learning situation at all levels of education.

In the 21st century, the role of the teacher should be changed from general transmission of teacher's knowledge to the position of sharing the knowledge with the learners and providing them appropriate tuition. The EFL learners should be equipped by wide range of language learning strategies which enable them to learn foreign language more effectively according to their individual preferences. For teachers, however, it might be useful to find out what steps, practices or strategies their students already use and apply when learning the target language. The teachers may facilitate the process of training on language learning strategies and hence direct the learners' attention to those language learning strategies which are almost unknown to them and probably more effective. More research on a listening instruction and learning strategies can contribute to better academic results of foreign language learners and it can also increase the learners' ability to learn foreign language more effectively.

For that reason this paper attempts to investigate the steps and strategies which ESP learners use when learning English. The main aim of our investigation was to identify those learning strategies which students use most frequently when trying to improve especially their listening skills. The survey was carried out among students in the field of higher technical education studying English in intermediate ESP courses.

1 Language Learning Strategies and listening comprehension of ESP learners

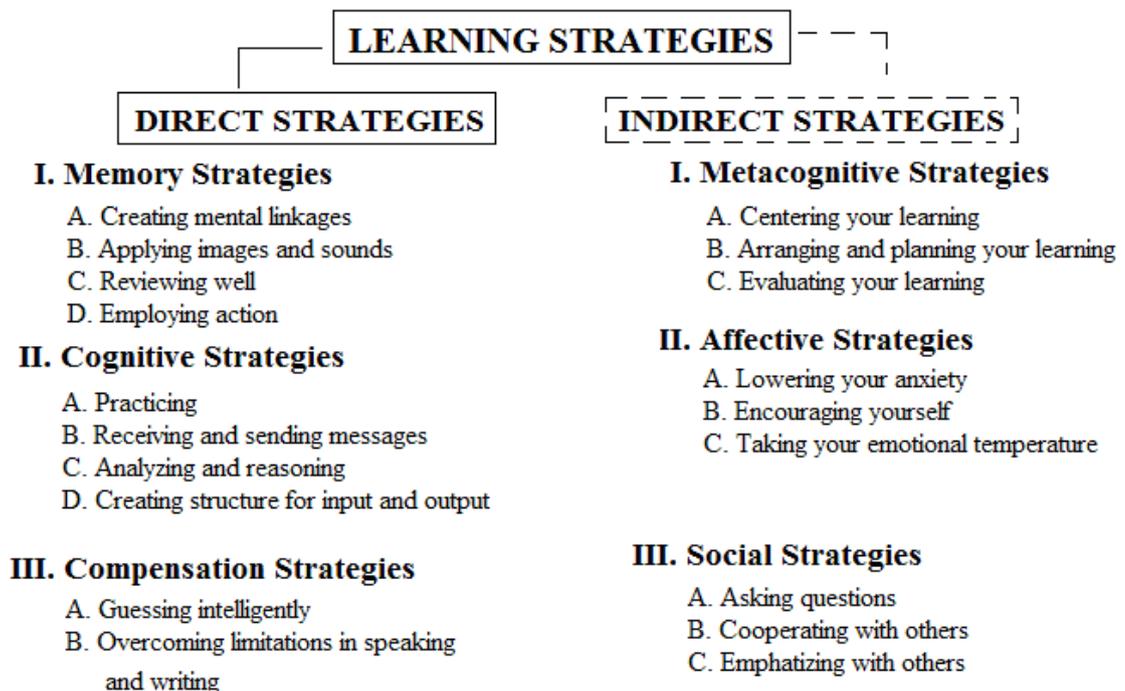
Since most of English language interactions take place among non-native speakers, English as lingua franca is a part of the more general phenomenon of 'English as an international language' or 'World Englishes' (see Jenkins, 2003; Melchers and Shaw, 2003). According to Kecskes (2014) and Chamot (2009), there is a rapid growth in the number of people worldwide who speak more than one language. Moreover, Crystal (2003) claims that approximately one out of every four users of English in the world is a native speaker of the language, thus in most cases, English plays a role as a contact language between interlocutors who share neither a common tongue, nor a common culture. English language plays an important role as a means of communication in IT field, business, science or education. Hence, it seems that English language teachers should help the EFL learners to support their listening skills by particular language learning strategies which enable them overcome some difficulties both in learning the target language and in their academic achievement.

The literature provides several definitions of learning strategies which can be successfully applied by foreign language learners. According to Chamot (2004), learning strategies are "*the conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal*" (Chamot, 2004, p. 14). Oxford (1990) defines them as specific actions taken by learners to facilitate their process of learning and to make their learning process "easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). Similarly,

Cohen (2003) describes language learning strategies as “specific behaviours that learners select in their language learning and use” (Cohen, 2003, p. 279). It is obvious that learning strategies, in general, and listening strategies, in particular, are closely related with foreign language learning. According to Yang (2009), learning strategies enable learners to reply to the learning situation and manage their learning in an appropriate and suitable way. They allow learners to become more autonomous foreign language learners who take more responsibility for their own learning process. There is a large number of various strategies which can be applied by learners. With respect to learners’ individual preferences and learning styles, the learners’ portfolios of strategies can differ a lot. For that reason it is highly important to enable foreign language learners to increase their awareness of their individual priorities, propensities and also weaknesses and strengths that can support the development of their learning autonomy.

In her work, Oxford (1990) provides a complete language learning strategy classification system, in which language learning strategies are divided in two broad classes including direct and indirect strategies. Direct learning strategies deal with the new language and incorporate cognitive, memory and compensation strategies. On the other hand, the indirect learning strategies are focused on management of learning and include metacognitive, affective and social strategies. All learning strategies, their complete classification and structure are presented in Figure 1 (Oxford, 1990; p. 16-17).

Figure 1 Diagram of the strategy system according to Oxford (1990)



Source : Adapted according to Oxford R. L. (1990): LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES. WHAT EVERY TEACHER SHOULD KNOW. Heinle&Heinle Publishers. p. 16-17

According to Oxford (1990), language learning strategies are particular actions taken by EFL learners to control and improve their own learning. She claims that they are keys to greater autonomy and more meaningful learning not only foreign languages but also any specific subject which learners study. However, they are important especially for foreign language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence (ibid.). Since, there is rapidly increasing number of people speaking more than one language, as mentioned above, it is important to emphasize the necessity of language learning strategies used in the field of business and professional communication. This is the reason of why ESP learners should pay their attention to application of appropriate learning strategies when learning English for professional purposes.

Many authors examined the matter of mutual relationship and potential differences between General English and ESP (Hutchinson, Waters, 1987; Strevens, 1988; Dudley-Evans, St. John, 1998; etc.). As Hutchinson and Waters (1987) note, the teaching ESP should be regarded as “*an approach*” rather than “*a product*” (Hutchinson, Waters, 1987, p. 19) and it should not be associated with a specific kind of methodology or language. They call for a systematic needs analysis of all foreign language learners because the process of language learning should be based on learners’ needs and purposes to learn a foreign language (ibid.).

In foreign language environment, even in professional, EFL and ESP learners often have difficulties with comprehending the spoken language, especially in those listening situations where they cannot see the collocutor. These difficulties are usually created by their limited knowledge of language and its systems which is accompanied by weak opportunities to hear natural speech in the target language. For that reason, it is important to have at least some elementary background knowledge of English language in general. This assumption can be supported by Vandergrift and Goh (2012) who point out that background knowledge has an important role in listening because “prior knowledge refers to all the conceptual knowledge and life experiences that language learners have acquired and are available for comprehension purposes” (Vandergrift, Goh, 2012; p. 65). They regard the listening as a complex cognitive skill which must become automatic for listeners to process all information they hear efficiently. Moreover, they consider it as a skill which is similar to a problem-solving activity (ibid.).

Since there is a strong call for shifting the focus of the foreign language learning from a teacher to a learner, much of the responsibility for successful language learning rests with the individual learners and with their ability to take all opportunities to learn. Moreover, Vandergrift and Goh (2012) state that “learners are seldom taught how to approach listening or how to manage their listening when attending to spoken texts or messages” (Vandergrift, Goh, 2012; p. 22). In many cases they are “left to develop their listening abilities on their own” (ibid.) even if their teacher should support them by instructing them how to use efficient learning strategies, especially metacognitive, to achieve their learning goals. Based on the research of many scholars (e.g. O’Malley et al., 1985; Oxford, 1990; Cohen, Macaro, 2007; Chamot, 2009; Vandergrift, Goh, 2012), language learning strategies can be successfully taught to struggling learners and they can profit from them. Moreover, “appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence” (Oxford, 1990; p. 23). However as Oxford (1990) notes,

language learning strategy training is effective only when EFL or ESP learners “learn why and when specific strategies are important, how to use these strategies, and how to transfer them to new situations” (ibid.). For that reason it is important to identify procedures, attitudes and approaches of EFL or ESP learners to the learning process.

2 Survey design

The purpose of our survey was to identify the steps or techniques of learners studying English for specific purposes to improve their listening skills. Many scholars (for example Oxford, 1990; Teng, 1998; Vandergrift, Goh, 2012; Rahimirad, Moini, 2015) based their research on variety of instruments such as Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), a questionnaire of listening comprehension strategies, Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ), or an interview to evaluate opinion and perception of EFL learners. Our intention was to trace the awareness of foreign language learners with their “conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal” (Chamot, 2004, p. 14). For that reason we chose the adapted version of Learning Strategies Questionnaire designed by Chamot (ibid., p. 78).

For the purpose of this paper we analyze only the answers associated with developing listening abilities. The survey was carried out among students of intermediate ESP courses. These courses are attended by learners who had passed their final exam at level B2 according to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), because we had expected that their level of language should have been higher and they would have used larger repertoire of strategies in English language. The survey was designed to answer the following questions:

1. Can ESP learners identify their learning strategies which are important to enhance their listening comprehension and formulate them in written form?
2. Do ESP learners use only one learning strategy or a combination of more learning strategies?

The survey was performed among students of the Technical University of Košice in November 2016 and March 2017. The main aim of our investigation was to identify the learning strategies which students with technical specialisation use most frequently when learning English in higher technical education.

3 Setting, procedure and participants of the survey

The investigation was realized in the middle of winter (group FEI 1) and summer semester (group FEI 2) in 2016 and 2017. We decided to administer the survey in a written form for two main reasons - to lower the level of participants’ stress and anxiety and to obtain large amount of qualitative data. Another reason for written form was to give participants enough time to fill in the questionnaire. All participants received Slovak version of the questionnaire forms and were asked to think about their learning and thinking processes when learning English.

The survey administration lasted 15-20 minutes and it was anonymous in order to answer the questions sincerely. We tried to establish such conditions that participants would not feel forced

to write desirable answers. We marked each questionnaire form by acronyms FEI 1 or FEI 2 to assure a possible comparison of first- and second-graders' answers for the purpose of mutual comparison of language learning strategies applied by ESP learners in the realm of professional vocabulary learning (see Michaleková, Hájik, 2017).

The survey included 74 first-semester students (winter semester in November 2016) and 41 students attending fourth-semester (summer semester in March 2017) of their university study at The Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Informatics (FEI). The participants studied English only one semester (summer or winter) in the field of IT.

4 Results

As stated earlier, only answers concerning learners' listening skills are further analyzed. In relation to the first research question the following data were gathered in the investigation. According to the results, we identified 24 different learning strategies used by all participants where 16 strategies were used by both groups (FEI 1 and FEI 2). We identified 8 other strategies which were used separately either by participants of FEI 1 group (7 additional strategies) or by participants of FEI 2 group (1 additional strategy). All stated learning strategies are specified in Table 1.

Table 1 Language learning strategies used by ESP students to improve their listening skills

Similar Learning Strategies	Different Learning Strategies FEI 1 - 1st semester participants
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I watch films, videos or TV series. • I listen to radio, news or recordings in foreign language. • I play PC games. • I listen to music in foreign language. • I read lyrics in foreign language. • I ask what I do not understand. • I communicate in foreign language /also using SKYPE. • I link the unknown word with specific example. • I watch films with English subtitles. • I watch films with Slovak subtitles. • I note down the unknown words and later I translate them. • I repeat the vocabulary. • I pay attention/ I concentrate and I try to catch main idea or key words as much as possible. • I try to expand my vocabulary. • I ask the conversation partner to repeat the words again and to slow down the speech. • I listen to the recordings several times. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I use a dictionary or mobile application and translate the unknown words immediately. • I practice the accent. • I follow the script. • I pre-learn particular vocabulary before I listen to lecture. • I translate the lyrics. • I watch films with subtitles – language not specified. • I use audio books with translation.
	<p style="text-align: center;">Different Learning Strategies FEI 2 - 4th semester participants</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I listen to lectures in foreign language.

Source: elaborated by the author

The data important to answer the second research question are listed in Table 2 in which we provide the summary of responses with regard to number of learning strategies which are applied by all participants together and with reference to their group type (FEI 1 or FEI 2).

Table 2 Summary of participants' responses according to number of learning strategies used

Number of strategies used to improve listening skills	First-semester FEI 1- 74		Fourth-semester FEI 2- 41		Total number - 115	
	Number of respondents	%	Number of respondents	%	Number of respondents	%
One learning strategy used	38	51.35%	17	41.46%	55	47.83%
Two or more learning strategies used	32	43.24%	22	53.66%	54	46.96%
Not stated	4	5.41%	2	4.88%	6	5.21%
Total	74	100%	41	100%	115	100%

Source: elaborated by the author

According to the results of our investigation 51.35% of first-semester respondents use only one language strategy to improve their listening skills and 43.24% of them identified two or more learning strategies. On the contrary, 41.46% of fourth-semester participants identified only one learning strategy for the same purpose while 53.66% of them apply two or more learning strategies. In total, 47.83% of all survey participants identified only one learning strategy to use in order to enhance their listening and almost the same amount of participants - 46.96% applied two or more of strategies. There were 6 questionnaires (5.21% of total responses) in which the strategy was not stated properly.

Taking into consideration all the responses of the questionnaire concerning the listening skills, there were several strategies which were preferred by both groups of survey participants. The highest score was identified with the strategy 'I watch films, videos or TV series' in both groups. It was stated by 34 FEI 1 participants which is 45.95% of them and by 19 FEI 2 participants which is similarly 46.34% of them. The FEI 1 group identified the strategy 'I pay attention/ I concentrate and I try to catch main idea or key words as much as possible' as important by 12 respondents (16.21%), 'I listen to music in foreign language' as favourite by 11 respondents (14.86%). There are two more strategies in the top five favourite strategies within the FEI 1 group. The strategy 'I watch films with English subtitles' is stated as favourite by 7 respondent (9.46%) and 'I listen to the recordings several times' is marked as important by 6 participants (8.11%) from FEI 1 group. The fourth-semester survey participants prefer the following four strategies in the top five ranking. The strategies 'I watch films with English subtitles' and 'I note down the unknown words and later I translate them' was marked as favourite by 5 respondents (11.11%). Similarly, 4 survey participants (9.76%) from FEI 2 group stated the following strategies as favourite: 'I listen to radio, news or recordings in foreign language', 'I listen to music in foreign language', 'I ask what I do not understand', and 'I pay attention/ I concentrate and I try to catch main idea or key words as much as possible'.

5 Conclusions

As the questionnaire contained open ended questions, it was rather difficult to analyze a huge amount of qualitative data from the answers. However, our assumption to gather as many responses as possible was successful and we have identified huge range of language learning strategies which are applied by ESP learners. We were surprised that only 7 respondents out of 115

noted that they communicate in foreign language either in face-to-face communication or via Skype, or similar application. Moreover, it was surprising that only 1 survey participant mentioned that he/she uses audio books as a source of improving the listening skills.

With regard to the individual responses in the questionnaires, the lack of face-to-face communication among students could be a possible explanation for these results. The students studying ESP in the field of IT seem to be more introverted and they often use various electronic devices for language learning. If the EFL or ESP learners discussed more on the possible ways of language learning, with their teachers or their peers, they would probably expand the possible range of language learning strategies. Regarding the future research on language learning strategies of ESP learners, it would be better to carry out the investigation by means of a closed-ended questionnaire, because it would be more time-efficient to interpret the responses of the respondents.

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