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## TEACHING LISTENING OR TESTING LISTENING?

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### ABSTRACT

Listening is an important skill for communication and for learning yet it is a literacy area that is least taught in the Singapore classrooms. In order to prepare young learners for the demands of learning and communication, ways to teach listening, and not just test it, should be found. This paper focuses on a small scale study from an elementary school in Singapore where learners reported on their strategy use in diaries after listening to various types of English texts. The paper will report on strategy use by examining young learners' responses. The paper will then discuss implications in terms of teaching listening to young learners of different proficiencies and explore how we can help prepare them for the demands of the real world in which a mastery of English and effective communication skills are perceived to be important assets.

**Keywords:** Listening comprehension, young learners, teach listening, metacognitive knowledge, strategy use, pedagogical recommendation

### INTRODUCTION

Listening is an extremely important skill for young learners and it is believed to take up about 50% of their classroom time (Tompkins, 2002). Although it is an essential language and literacy skill, it remains a somewhat neglected and poorly taught aspect in a number of Singapore's primary school classrooms as many young learners are seldom taught specific methods to deal with it. The idea of listening development in these classrooms tend to be focussed on exposure in the form of more and more listening comprehension practices in the hope that young learners will somehow get better at it. Teaching listening can therefore be said to be almost non-existent usually taking the form of exposure to listening comprehension practices. So even though learners are exposed to more listening activities in their classrooms today, they are left to develop their listening abilities on their own with little direct support from the teacher. This, in essence, is not a pedagogically sound approach and is more so testing rather than teaching listening.

Many teachers, however, attempt such an approach because they are unsure of how to go about teaching listening and perhaps feel that by merely providing exposure to listening, the pupils would somehow pick it up along the way. By focusing on the product of listening, every activity attempted then seems to become a test of the learners' listening ability, rather than a means for understanding, developing and using listening skills (Kaur, 2014). This preference teachers have for testing as opposed to a focus on discussing with learners approaches they could possibly use perhaps stems from the fact that many teachers are themselves unsure of how to teach listening (Vandergrift and Goh, 2012). Teachers could possibly be testing rather than teaching due to a lack of knowledge of the receptive skills which in turn leads to them not devoting explicit attention to developing listening, assuming that comprehension will occur on its own (Shrum and Glisan, 1994).

Unfortunately this is how listening is typically taught in our classrooms today, with the tendency to test rather than teach (Vandergrift and Goh, 2012).

Recent research highlights that listening is an active process where listeners select and interpret information in order to define what is going on (Goh, 2008). Listening makes the heaviest processing demands because learners need to store information and at the same time try to comprehend the information coming to them (Kaur, 2014). The notion of listening being an active process emphasizes the role metacognitive knowledge plays as young learners need to be able to draw upon strategies to help them deal with the information coming at them.

Metacognitive discussions in relation to listening tasks and activities are currently neglected in our classrooms perhaps due to the fact that the processes involved in listening are covert and hence not easily observable in young learners; unlike the productive skills of reading and writing where you can actually assess the product the students produce to better understand their abilities in it (Kaur, 2014). Hence, this may be also be another contributing factor that causes teachers to refrain from explicitly teaching listening to young learners.

Although listening success and proficiency cannot be directly linked to metacognition, it can help to explain the processes listeners go through and the strategies they apply as they listen which will help make them more conscious on how they can regulate their listening (Cross, 2010; Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal and Tafaghodtari, 2006). In a review of three decades of listening research, Macaro, Graham, and Vanderplank (2007) concluded that much has yet to be discovered about how listeners cope with the demands of listening in a second language.

Greater attention also has to be paid to young learners who form a considerable proportion of second language learners as the few studies that have been conducted (Goh and Kaur, 2013; Goh and Taib, 2006; Vandergrift, 2002) have showed it to be an area worth looking into. These studies have suggested that young learners are capable of reflecting on and reporting some aspects of their metacognition so valuable information can be obtained directly from them. Moreover, the findings from young learners' metacognition can offer insights into implications for teaching listening which may be different compared to those for adult learners. Implications drawn on the teaching of listening will possibly mean that young learners can be made more conscious of the processes involved as they listen so that they can better understand and monitor their listening abilities in tasks.

### **Metacognition and Metacognitive Knowledge**

Researchers generally agree that metacognition is an individual's ability to stop and think about their own cognitive abilities particularly their ability to monitor, evaluate, and make plans for their learning (Tobias and Everson, 2009). The term "metacognitive knowledge" was first defined by Flavell (1979, p. 906) as "that segment of your (a child's, an adult's) stored world knowledge that has to do with people as cognitive creatures and with their diverse cognitive tasks, goals, actions and experiences". It basically refers to one thinking about one's own cognitive processes. Flavell (1979) identifies 3 categories of metacognitive knowledge in his framework encompassing person, task, and strategic knowledge. In the area of listening comprehension, Flavell's (1979) framework has also been applied to reveal the role metacognitive knowledge plays in a learner's ability to

regulate and deploy appropriate strategies when engaged in listening processes (Goh, 1997; Goh and Taib 2006; Vandergrift, 2002). Flavell's (1979) three dimensions of knowledge are applied to listening by Goh (2008) as shown in Figure 1 below:

**Figure 1. Metacognitive Knowledge about Listening based on Goh (2008, p.198)**

<p><b>Person knowledge</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develops better knowledge of self as an L2 listener:</li> <li>• Examines personal beliefs about self-efficacy and self-concepts with regard to listening in a second language</li> </ul>
<p><b>Task knowledge</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understands the nature of L2 listening and the demands of the task of learning to listen:</li> <li>• Differentiates different types of listening skill (e.g. listening for details, listening for gist, listening to infer information)</li> <li>• Analyses factors that influence listening performance (e.g. speaker, text, interlocutor, strategy)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Strategy knowledge</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understands the role of different kinds of strategies for listening:</li> <li>• Identifies strategies that are appropriate for specific types of listening task and problem.</li> <li>• Demonstrates the use of strategies.</li> <li>• Identifies strategies that may not be appropriate for their learning style or culture.</li> </ul>

The framework above was used in the present study to reveal the metacognitive knowledge young learners had in the three areas identified above. Metacognitive knowledge as a framework was felt to be the ideal approach as an emphasis on person, task, and strategic knowledge development will enable young learners to appraise themselves and to select appropriate approaches for improving their listening performance so as to become more self-directed learners (Cross, 2011; Goh and Taib, 2006). Some studies have reported on the positive effects attained through enhancing metacognitive knowledge in their subjects (Goh, 1997; Goh and Taib, 2006; Vandergrift, 2002). Thus even though listening success cannot be attributed directly to metacognition, it can help explain in part how proficient listeners are more successful in their process of learning to listen which leads to implications drawn on the teaching of listening (Goh and Kaur, 2013).

## THE STUDY

As mentioned earlier, this paper focuses on a small scale study from an elementary school in Singapore where learners reported on their metacognitive knowledge in strategy use after listening to various types of English texts. The study was conducted over a period of six weeks with a group of 12 young language learners aged 10 to 11 from a government funded elementary school in Singapore where English was the medium of instruction. The children were predominantly from non- English speaking homes where vernacular ethnic languages or a non-standard variety of English, or both, were spoken. Being in a bilingual education context meant that these young learners made use of English mostly in the school environment for inter and intra communicative contexts. The participants were first

identified from an intact class of 42 based on their results in a listening test administered by their school before the study. They were randomly selected from the top 30% and bottom 30% of the class listening scores. The study aimed to reveal the types of metacognitive knowledge they exhibited.

### **METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION**

Delayed retrospective analysis through diary reflections was used to collect data as it has been regarded as a good method to elicit from learners what they think they do in a particular context (Cross, 2009) and listening diaries have been used in a study involving young learners prior to this one (Goh and Taib, 2006). In the current study, learners attempted their typical school-based listening tasks and subsequently wrote down in their diaries what they tried to do as they listened. Their school based listening tasks typically involved listening to four to five audio recordings of monologues or conversations between a pair or group of individuals based on genres they were taught in school (information reports, expositions, recounts). The topics in the audio recording would involve matters such as individuals asking for directions, a newscaster reading a news report and other such activities. These learners would listen to the audio clip and select answers to questions that were found on their activity sheets based on what they listened to. Thus their listening activity was listening comprehension based as it would require them to select an answer from a choice of options provided for each question asked. After attempting the listening activity, listeners then reflected in their listening diaries on how they tried to listen and get at the answers. Guiding prompts were provided to these young learners to probe into consciousness their metacognitive knowledge based on the three areas above, namely, person, task and strategic knowledge. Listening diaries were thus used as a way of helping learners to reflect on their listening experiences with guiding questions provided which was used to direct their attention to specific aspects of their person, task and strategy knowledge (Goh, 2010). Although listening diaries are typically used over an extended period of learning, they can also be short reflection pieces as was used in this study to capture the children's thoughts on strategy use and perceptions of challenge (Kaur, 2014). The prompts given to help the learners think of their experience included: What were you thinking when you did the listening activity? What are some of the problems you had? How did you try to solve these problems?

Reflections gathered were coded and analyzed for evidence of metacognitive knowledge in the three areas highlighted in the conceptual framework. The study thus aimed to gain further insights into young learners' listening abilities by eliciting their metacognitive knowledge and strategy use by answering the following questions:

1. What metacognitive knowledge (person, task or strategy knowledge) do young language learners report using when listening to English texts?
2. What types of metacognitive knowledge do these young listeners predominantly have?

This paper will present only some of the key findings on these young learners' strategy use and this will be followed by examining some of the young learners' responses mainly with the intent to identify implications and discuss pedagogical approaches that can be taken for the teaching of listening.

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## **DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS**

The young learners' introspections revealed that they had metacognitive knowledge but this was mostly in the area revolving around the listening tasks that they were dealing with and how to cope with the challenges of those specific listening tasks.

Based on the conceptual framework on metacognitive knowledge used, the following were some of the key findings (as reported in Kaur, 2014):

### **Person Knowledge**

The learners in the study exhibited a limited degree of person knowledge suggesting that these young learners were not aware of themselves as listeners or had little metacognitive knowledge of themselves when it came to listening. What limited person knowledge they did exhibit revolved around their self-knowledge in relation to tasks they were attempting. Learners reported on the importance of listening carefully and for listening attentively, possibly reflecting the typical utterances that would be repeated to them by their teachers in reflection to answers that they may have gotten wrong in previous listening tasks. The teachers' typical post task solution to listening difficulties learners encountered to "listen carefully" seemed to have unwittingly appeared in their self-concepts of themselves as learners. Learners' reflections on person knowledge also included ineffective strategies such as not using any method in getting the correct answer suggesting a possible lack of person knowledge.

### **Task Knowledge**

These young learners generally exhibited a high degree of task knowledge. However the task knowledge displayed mostly involved knowledge learners had on question and answer techniques or knowledge on methods of deriving the correct answer. Basically the young learners reflected on quite a high degree of task knowledge but mainly in answering techniques they used which was aimed at getting the correct answers. This could possibly be attributed to an instructional emphasis by their teacher on test taking procedures to arrive at answers or a focus on instructional tasks as part of their usual classroom listening approach.

### **Strategy Knowledge**

Strategy knowledge the young learners displayed was mainly based on planning for the listening tasks or for reading questions first in order to listen out for the answer, again suggesting that strategy use was driven predominantly by a task emphasis. This was found to be similar to the study by Goh & Taib (2006) which highlighted a limited range of strategy use being reported although the young learners knew quite a great deal of test-taking strategies.

In summary, the young learners in this study were found to have very little person knowledge. The person knowledge they had was mostly their knowledge of self in dealing with listening tasks. The young learners had quite an extensive amount of task knowledge but this was limited in range as it was based on the listening tasks they were exposed to and mainly involved test taking knowledge. Strategy knowledge was also limited to the listening tasks encountered. The findings generally suggest that learners are aware of their metacognitive knowledge but it revolves largely around the listening tasks they

attempted or the methods they employed at deriving answers. The absence of varied forms of metacognitive knowledge could suggest a possible lack of explicit teaching of listening processes and person, task and strategy factors; hence learners are largely metacognitively unaware of themselves as learners.

It has been found that although metacognition is a crucial aspect of learning to listen, it does not have a significant and explicit role in many language classrooms (Vandergrift and Goh, 2012). It can also be said that although listening has gained prominence in language teaching, listening lessons have largely remained text oriented or communication oriented rather than learner oriented (Vandergrift and Goh, 2012). There is hence a need to move learners away from knowledge based solely on listening tasks as young learners need to become more aware of their metacognitive knowledge where listening is concerned (Kaur, 2014).

Based on the findings and the discussion above, this paper suggests taking on a learner oriented approach to teach listening (Goh, 1997, 2008; Vandergrift, 2004, 2007; Vandergrift and Goh, 2012), with an emphasis on metacognitive instruction (Goh and Taib, 2006; Vandergrift and Goh, 2012). An emphasis on metacognitive instruction is felt to be ideal because it is an approach to teaching listening that elicits and enhances learner understanding in learning to listen and at the same time raises their awareness about managing comprehension and overall listening development (Vandergrift and Goh, 2012). The following section will discuss pedagogical implications based on the findings.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

Findings from the study have been used to draw upon implications for teaching listening to young learners through the development of metacognitive knowledge in the three areas of the framework, namely, person, task and strategic knowledge.

The most pertinent factor for listening success to be achieved in class would be that teacher awareness and knowledge needs to be raised where the teaching of listening is concerned. Teacher knowledge is the key factor in raising listening competency. Language teachers need to have a clear understanding of the processes involved in listening and how these processes can manage comprehension so that they can harness the potential for learning in every student and help them achieve success in developing listening. Teacher competency could possibly be enhanced through professional learning communities within the school or teacher professional development courses at both pre-service and in-service levels. In professional learning communities, teachers could come together to discuss how best to teach listening and what to focus on so that they are aware of the metacognitive knowledge and listening processes that can be applied to enhance listening development in young learners. Greater emphasis could also be given in pre-service teacher training courses on how to explicitly teach listening to learners. In-service teachers should also consider attending professional development courses that deal with how listening can be taught explicitly and how metacognitive knowledge of listening can be developed. This leads to implications for training institutions on the need to provide for such professional development avenues.

Such enhancements will allow teachers to be adept in the area of listening instruction and could possibly mean that they will be better informed on how to go about enhancing metacognitive knowledge and teaching listening. Addressing teacher competency will allow for growth in person, task and strategic knowledge as the teacher herself

understands the processes of listening and the role of metacognitive knowledge (Kaur, 2014). Acquiring the depth of knowledge associated with the regulation of listen will mean that teachers can better help their young learners rather than just telling the learners to “Listen carefully” or “Listen harder” (Kaur, 2014).

In considering the possible approaches we can take in teaching listening, this paper will leverage on the objectives for developing metacognitive knowledge emphasized in Vandergrift and Goh (2012) and expand on this in terms of the ways in which pedagogical competence in listening can be raised for person, task and strategic knowledge. **Figure 2** below has only included the objectives deemed to be applicable to the young learners in this study. An expanded category called pedagogical activities has been included to suggest how the categories of metacognitive knowledge from Vandergrift and Goh (2012) can be linked to specific teaching activities. The pedagogical activities reflected here were taken from Kaur 2014.

**Figure 2. Pedagogical activities for the teaching of listening based on Kaur (2014, p.238)**

<p><b>Person knowledge</b></p> <p>Objectives: Identify listening problems, causes, and possible solutions.</p> <p><u>Pedagogical activity:</u></p> <p>Teachers can help person knowledge development through post listening discussions. They can discuss with young learners the difficulties they had in the listening tasks just completed and offer possible solutions to these difficulties. More proficient listeners can share successful approaches with the less proficient learners in these discussions too.</p>
<p><b>Task Knowledge</b></p> <p>Objectives: Differentiate different types of listening skill (e.g. listening for details, listening for global understanding, listening to infer information).</p> <p><u>Pedagogical activity:</u></p> <p>Teachers can help task knowledge development in young learners by providing exposure to varied types of listening tasks that emphasize different listening skills (listening for details, listening to infer information). They can also have discussions on the nature of these listening tasks in the pre-listening activities too.</p>
<p><b>Strategy Knowledge</b></p>

Objectives: Demonstrate use of strategies.

Pedagogical activity:

Teachers can help the development of strategy knowledge in young learners by having focused pre-listening and during listening activities that demonstrate, model and scaffold specific types of strategy use so that young learners are more conscious and aware of it.

## CONCLUSION

This paper provides a description of metacognitive knowledge a group of young learners perceive using as they listen. Knowing what metacognitive knowledge young learners display will perhaps help teacher practitioners to understand the listening process better which may in turn help us improve the way listening is taught. This paper also sheds light on some possible ways in which metacognitive knowledge development for person, task and strategy knowledge can be developed or enhanced through approaches that can be included as part of classroom listening lessons. These include suggestions for pedagogical activities that teachers can incorporate into their classrooms to allow for metacognitive knowledge of person, task and strategy to take place. The main pedagogical recommendation of the paper is for teachers to consider more productive and active ways of teaching listening to young learners as opposed to merely testing it.

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