The Role of Listening Proficiency Level in EFL Learners' Strategic Competence

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Maryam Haghighi[1]
Mojgan Rashtchi[*2]
Parviz Birjandi[3]

Abstract
Examination of language learners' strategy use within the context of language ability may contribute to realizing the role of language knowledge in strategic competence. This study employed mixed methods sequential explanatory design and examined whether the level of listening proficiency as a part of language knowledge affects Iranian EFL learners' cognitive and metacognitive strategy use. The objective was to explore the role of listening proficiency level in EFL learners' strategic competence. Therefore, in the quantitative part of the study, 343 Iranian EFL learners answered a cognitive and metacognitive listening strategy questionnaire (CMLSQ) before and immediately after completing the listening section of a TOEFL test. The results of the MANOVA revealed that the high proficiency group was significantly different from the low proficiency group regarding their strategic knowledge and strategic regulation as the two dimensions of strategic competence. The qualitative data also showed that high proficiency listeners adopted a wider range of strategies than low proficiency listeners. The quantitative and qualitative data analyses proposed that the high proficiency listeners dealt with the test tasks more strategically than the low proficiency ones. The results of the current study suggest that the implementation of strategic competence depends upon the availability of a certain level of linguistic competence in a second language. The findings emphasize the need for a judicious approach to teaching listening, considering both listening skills and listening strategies.

Keywords: listening proficiency, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies**,** strategic knowledge, strategic regulation

* Corresponding Author
[1] PhD in TEFL, Department of English, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran. maryam.haghighi@srbiau.ac.ir
[2] Associate Professor, TEFL Department, North Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran. m_rashtchi@iau-tnb.ac.ir
[3] Professor, Department of English, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran. pbirjand@srbiau.ac.ir

Introduction

A look into various models of language ability (e.g., Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2010; Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980) indicates that although different scholars have incorporated several components into their models, they agree on strategic competence as an indispensable module. Bachman and Palmer (1996, 2010) presented one of the most highly acknowledged and widely referenced models of language ability in L2 research. In their model, "language ability" involves two dimensions: "language knowledge" and "strategic competence." Strategic competence, based on Bachman and Palmer (2010), is described as a "set of metacognitive components or strategies, which can be thought of as higher-order executive processes that provide a cognitive management function in language use, as well as in other cognitive activities" (p. 48). That is to say, learners need to employ both cognitive and metacognitive strategies in successful language performance.

As Phakiti (2008) argued, the notion of strategic competence in Bachman and Palmer's view is similar to metacognition since both concern self-regulation. A review of metacognition research (Flavell, 1985; Paris & Winograd, 1990) reveals the presence of two main components. The first component is *knowledge about cognition,* which involves awareness of one's ability to meet the demands of a cognitive goal. The second one is *regulation of cognition*, which is executive and helps orchestrate cognitive aspects of problem-solving.

Likewise, studies on the second language (L2) strategy use indicate that both knowledge of cognitive and metacognitive strategies and actual use of such strategies establish the basis of strategic competence. Thus, exploring individuals' strategic competence requires a simultaneous examination of both their "knowledge of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in a variety of contexts (strategic knowledge)" and their "reported actual use of the strategies in a specific context (strategic regulation)" (Haghighi et al., 2019b, p. 122).

Examining the role of strategic competence in language performance leads to exploring how to cultivate strategy use of EFL learners and thus promote their communicative language ability. Nevertheless, the problem is that not all language learners use the same language strategies even if they study similar materials, in the same classroom, under identical conditions (Oxford, 1990). Some variables could influence the choice and application of language strategies (Dornyei, 2005). Most studies have indicated that the level of proficiency must be considered when focusing on strategy use (Griffiths, 2008; Griffiths & Incecay, 2016; Yang, 2007). In other words, proficiency is a significant element that determines the choice of a strategy.

The current study deals with the role of listening proficiency level in strategic competence. Even though a plethora of empirical studies have demonstrated that second language proficiency is influential in strategy use, most have used reading tasks to measure language performance (Pan & In'nami, 2015). Moreover, as far as the researchers know, no other research has investigated the effect of listening proficiency level on strategic competence regarding its two components: strategic knowledge and strategic regulation. Following Phakiti (2008), the authors of the current study borrowed *trait* and *state* notions from anxiety research (Spielberger, 1972) as an analogy to

strategic knowledge and strategic regulation, respectively. Therefore, in this study, strategic knowledge represents *trait* cognitive and metacognitive strategies, whereas strategic regulation represents *state* cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

Literature Review
Strategic Competence in Bachman and Palmer's (1996, 2010) Model
Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model is one of the most well-acknowledged and widely referenced models of language ability in L2 research. In this model, language ability has been considered to consist of two dimensions of *language knowledge* and *strategic competence.* Strategic competence, according to Bachman and Palmer (1996), is a "set of metacognitive components or strategies, which can be thought of as higher-order executive processes that provide a cognitive management function in language use, as well as in other cognitive activities" (p. 70).

Subsequently, Bachman and Palmer (2010) introduced the updated model of language use in which cognitive strategies were incorporated. They conceptualized strategic competence as "a set of metacognitive strategies involved in planning, monitoring, and evaluating individuals' problem solving" (p. 49). They further considered cognitive strategies as the ways in which individuals execute the output of metacognitive strategies in actual language use. In their framework, the primary contributor to strategic competence is hypothesized to be language users' metacognitive strategies that "provide a management function in language use" (p. 48). On the other hand, Cognitive strategies are employed when individuals execute plans in a particular language use situation. Thus, both cognitive and metacognitive strategies are involved in Bachman and Palmer's (2010) model. Accordingly, Bachman and Palmer's strategic competence is similar to metacognition in nature. In other words, the concept of metacognition is at the heart of strategic competence.

Metacognition
Metacognition is one of the most reliable factors that may predict learning (Wang et al., 1990). Vandergrift and Goh (2012) conceived of metacognition as "language learners' ability to think about their own thinking and to think about how they process information for a range of purposes and how they manage the way they do it" (p. 83).

A general agreement among metacognitive researchers (e.g., Flavell, 1985; Paris & Winograd, 1990) shows that metacognition involves two fundamental dimensions: "knowledge about cognition" and "regulation of cognition." Knowledge about cognition is conceptualized as one's acquired knowledge about cognitive processes that control and regulate cognitive processes (Schneider, 1988). Regulation of cognition refers to the processes learners use to monitor and control their cognitive practices to achieve desired goals (Flavell, 1985). In other words, it describes how individuals monitor and evaluate their cognitive behavior, which includes knowing how to use and monitor specific strategies for the learning process.

Listening Proficiency and Strategic Competence

Language knowledge is one of the fundamental factors determining the adoption and implementation of language strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). In this regard, Goh (2002) and Vandergrift (2003) explored the strategies employed by second language learners with high and low levels of language proficiency. The results suggested that cognitive strategies were almost equally employed by the groups. However, the learners with a high level of proficiency utilized more metacognitive strategies than the low proficient ones. Similarly, Liu (2008) studied strategy use across different proficiency levels and found that strategy use was positively associated with the students' listening proficiency.

Some studies have explored the role of proficiency level in the listening strategy use of Iranian EFL learners. Mohseny and Raeisi (2009), for instance, explored the strategy use of Iranian EFL learners considering their level of language proficiency. The results showed that strategy use was positively associated with the listening ability of the learners. Also, cognitive strategies were identified to be implemented more frequently than the other strategies.

Moreover, Bidabadi and Yamat (2011) studied the utilization of listening strategies among Iranian EFL learners across their proficiency levels. Listening strategies were found to be positively correlated with the learners' level of proficiency. Additionally, the results revealed that learners with both high and low levels of proficiency utilized metacognitive strategies more frequently than cognitive strategies. Furthermore, Tavakoli et al. (2012) explored the contribution of metacognitive knowledge in the listening test performance of language learners with different levels of listening ability and found that metacognitive knowledge was highly related to listening performance.

However, several other studies yielded controversial results. For instance, Rezaei and Almasian (2007) did not find any significant association between strategy use and language learners' level of proficiency. In another study, Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006) observed that the intermediate-level learners employed more overall strategies than the advanced learners. Also, Vandergrift (2003) reported that the use of cognitive strategies was equally frequent among learners with different proficiency levels.

Reviewing the related literature reveals that researchers have not reached a common consensus regarding the role of the level of proficiency in L2 learners' strategic competence yet. Therefore, it is fair to say that there is still a great need for further research in the area of strategic competence concerning the level of proficiency. Accordingly, the current study investigated the role of the level of listening proficiency in the use of trait and state cognitive and metacognitive strategies by Iranian EFL learners. The researchers postulate that the findings of this study will contribute to clarifying how learners with varying levels of listening proficiency utilize strategies. In other words, the present study aims to offer a more comprehensive picture of the learners' strategic competence vis-à-vis listening proficiency. The following research questions helped the researchers achieve the objectives.

RQ1: Do test-takers with varying levels of listening proficiency use trait cognitive and metacognitive strategies differently?

RQ2: Do test-takers with varying levels of listening proficiency use state cognitive and metacognitive strategies differently?

RQ3: How do EFL learners with varying levels of listening proficiency differ in using cognitive and metacognitive strategies?

Method
Participants

The participants consisted of 343 respondents (227 females and 116 males) in the age range of 19 to 27. The participants were selected non-randomly based on convenience sampling from BA students (juniors and seniors) majoring in English Translation and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) from Islamic Azad University, Shiraz and Dezful Branches. Based on the descriptive statistics of the listening test (mean = 27.17; SD = 9.5), the participants who had scored above +1SD (scores above 36) on the listening section of the TOEFL test formed the high proficiency group (more-proficient listeners), and those who had scored below –1SD (scores below 18) made the low proficiency group (less-proficient listeners). All the participants were native speakers of Persian.

Instruments

A second language listening comprehension test, a self-report listening strategies questionnaire (Haghighi et al., 2019a), and a retrospective interview were employed to obtain data from the EFL learners regarding their use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in listening test performance.

Listening Comprehension Test. The listening section of an actual TOEFL-PBT, already used by ETS in a worldwide test administration in 2002, was administered to measure the participants' listening performance. The test has 50 multiple-choice items, consisting of three subsections of short conversations between two people (30 questions), more extended conversations on general issues (8 questions), and 12 questions about lectures or talks.

Cognitive and Metacognitive Listening Strategies Questionnaire (CMLSQ). The CMLSQ (Haghighi et al., 2019a) measured the participants' implementation of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. This questionnaire consisted of 34 items in two sections, 17 items in cognitive listening strategies (CLS) and 17 items in metacognitive listening strategies (MLS). The total reliability index for the CMLSQ using Cronbach's alpha was 0.88, and for the MLS and CLS sub-sections were 0.86 and 0.90, respectively, which are accepted as high-reliability indices.

Retrospective Interview. The researchers designed a retrospective interview with ten participants to elicit more detailed information and to triangulate the data obtained from the self-report questionnaire. The interviews gathered additional information concerning the last research question. As there was a small number of participants (i.e., five highly successful and five unsuccessful ones), the strategy use patterns extracted from the qualitative data should be considered tentative.

Design

This study applied a mixed methods sequential explanatory design with a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative one. The quantitative stage was a causal-comparative study. The independent variable was the listening proficiency with two levels (high proficiency and low proficiency), and the dependent variables were cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies

Procedure

A total of 365 copies of the CMLSQ were administered through face-to-face contact to measure the participants' application of trait cognitive and metacognitive strategies (i.e., strategic knowledge). Before administering the questionnaires, the researchers tried to assure the respondents that the answers would not be considered right or wrong and that the researchers were only intended to evaluate how learners accomplish comprehension of oral texts. The participants were required to assign a value to each item on a 6-point rating scale ranging from 6 "*Always*" to 1 "*Never*." It took about 15 to 25 minutes to complete the questionnaire. After a two-week interval, the participants took the listening section of a standard version of TOEFL-PBT. Then, the CMLSQ was administered immediately after the listening test. This time, the questionnaire items were in the simple past tense to measure the participants' perceived actual strategy use (i.e., state cognitive and metacognitive) during the listening test. The researchers had to discard 22 cases out of the 365 questionnaires due to missing data and used 343 questionnaires for data analysis*.*

One of the researchers conducted retrospective interviews in Persian. First, the interviewees took the listening section of the TOEFL test in ten minutes to remember how they thought during the test. The test consisted of two short and two long conversations and the related multiple-choice comprehension questions. The interviewer paused on each section to give the respondents some time to think. The purpose of this listening activity was to simulate a test situation. Next, the interviewees talked about the strategies they used before, during, and after listening to the dialogue and when answering comprehension questions. After data collection, the interviews were audio-taped for further analysis and then were transcribed and translated into English. To establish the accuracy of the data, the transcripts were double-checked by the researchers. The purpose of this analysis was to specify how different test-takers with varying listening abilities employed different types of strategies in the listening test. After coding the transcripts, the researchers identified shared patterns of strategy use.

Data Analysis

The data collected from participants' responses to the questionnaire and their listening test scores were entered into SPSS 18. Quantitative as well as qualitative data were examined to answer the research questions. MANOVA (Multivariate Analysis of Variance) was performed to analyze the quantitative data. For qualitative data analysis**,** two general steps were followed. First, the data extracted from the retrospective interviews were transcribed. Then a content analysis of the transcribed data was performed to identify some iterative ideas and then group them into specified coding frames.

Results
Quantitative Phase of the Study

Tables 1 and 2 summarize the descriptive statistics of the listeners' use of trait and state cognitive and metacognitive strategies, respectively. Cognitive strategy factors were composed of inferencing, elaboration, prediction, summarization, and note-taking strategies. Planning, monitoring, and evaluating were metacognitive strategy factors.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Trait Metacognitive and Cognitive Strategies

Variables		Maximum	Minimum	Mean	SD
Metacognitive Strategies	Planning	41	10	27.40	6.32
	Monitoring	24	4	15.84	3.91
	Evaluation	36	13	23.52	5.35
Cognitive Strategies	Inferencing	42	14	30.69	5.99
	Elaboration	12	3	7.64	2.21
	Prediction	24	8	15.10	3.58
	Summarization	12	3	8.61	2.12
	Note-taking	24	2	7.15	4.04

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for State Metacognitive and Cognitive Strategies

Variables		Maximum	Minimum	Mean	SD
Metacognitive Strategies	Planning	40	12	27.26	6.33
	Monitoring	23	4	14.27	3.38
	Evaluation	33	7	22.46	5.17
Cognitive Strategies	Inferencing	41	9	30.46	6.06
	Elaboration	24	3	6.95	1.97
	Prediction	24	5	14.65	3.08
	Summarization	12	2	8.64	1.84
	Note-taking	12	2	5.54	2.91

Next, descriptive statistics were employed to analyze the participants' performances on the listening test. As shown in Table 3, the lowest and highest observed listening scores were 10 and 46, respectively.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of Listening Test

Variables	N	Maximum	Minimum	Mean	SD
Listening	343	46	10	27.17	9.50
Valid N(listwise)	343				

Then, the learners who had scored above +1SD (above 36) on the listening test formed the high group (more-proficient listeners), and those who had scored below –1SD (below 18) on the listening test made the low group (less-proficient listeners). This way, the top 86 high and the low 82 test-takers

were located. Table 4 indicates that the high group performed on the listening test with a minimum of 36 and a maximum of 46, whereas the minimum score for the low group was 10, and the maximum score was 18.

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics of the Low Proficiency and High Proficiency Groups

	Proficiency Level	Mean	SD	N
Trait Cognitive	Low	61.82	11.21	82
	High	72.00	9.77	86
Trait Metacognitive Strategies	Low	58.11	14.23	82
	High	75.07	9.08	86

To answer the first research question, MANOVA was performed. However, before running the MANOVA, Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices was employed to examine the difference in the covariance of the independent variable (listening proficiency with two levels) across the dependent variables (two categories of listening strategies). In this table, the reference level of probability should be .001. As Table 5 shows, the covariance matrices for the dependent variables were not significantly different ($p > 0.05$). Hence, the data enjoyed the homogeneity of variances assumption.

Table 5
Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices

Box's M	153.618
F	1.709
df1	81
df2	16697.611
Sig.	.301

Another essential assumption of the MANOVA is the equality of error variances, verified by examining Leven's Test of Equality of Error Variances. As Table 6 shows, the assumption of the equality of variances was met, $p = .172$, $p = .239$.

Table 6
Test of Equality of Error Variances

Variables	F	df1	df2	Sig.
Metacognitive Strategies	1.04	1	341	.239
Cognitive Strategies	1.04	1	341	.172

Therefore, MANOVA was performed to determine the influence of listening proficiency levels on using trait cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The results showed that high and low proficiency groups were significantly different in using trait cognitive and metacognitive strategies, $F(2, 165) = 50.77$, $p = .001$, Wilks' Lambda = .619, partial Eta squared = .381. Also, the eta squares indicated that the proficiency level explained non-trivial

portions of the variance in the cognitive and metacognitive strategy use (see Table 7).

Table 7
Multivariate Tests of Group Differences in Trait Strategy Use

	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Pillai's Trace	.381	50.77**	2	165	.001	.381
Wilk's Lambda	.619	50.77**	2	165	.001	.381
Hotelling'sTrace	.615	50.77**	2	165	.001	.381
Roy's Largest Root	.615	50.77**	2	165	.001	.381

As shown in Table 7, all four multivariate test statistics are significant. This result implied that less-proficient and more-proficient listeners are not the same regarding their use of trait cognitive and metacognitive strategies. However, it is unclear whether proficiency level was effective in using cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, or both. Therefore, the multivariate tests for each type of strategies were examined individually further to explore the group differences in the trait strategy use. The results indicated that less-proficient listeners were significantly different from more-proficient listeners in both cognitive strategy use, F (1, 341) = 85.64, $p < 0.01$; and metacognitive strategy use, F (1, 341) = 39.36, $p < 0.01$ (see Table 8).

Table 8
Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Trait Strategy Use

	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Trait Cognitive Strategies	12074.11	1	12074.11	85.64**	.001	.340
Trait Metacognitive Strategies	4342.17	1	4342.17	39.36**	.001	.192

An investigation of the mean scores (Table 4) indicated that the high proficiency group employed higher levels of trait cognitive strategies (M = 72.00) and metacognitive strategies (M = 75.07) than the low proficiency group (cognitive M = 61.82 and metacognitive M = 58.11). This finding rejects the null hypothesis stating that no difference exists among test takers with varying listening proficiency levels regarding their use of trait cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

Another MANOVA was performed to answer the second research question. Box's test of homogeneity of variance/covariance matrices (Table 9) and Levene's test of equality of error variances (Table 10) justified the use of the test.

Table 9
Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices

Box's M	218.852
F	2.435
df1	81
df2	16697.611
Sig.	.211

Table 10
Test of Equality of Error Variances

Variables	F	df1	df2	Sig.
State Cognitive Strategies	1.37	1	341	.201
State Metacognitive Strategies	1.10	1	341	.196

Then the MANOVA was conducted to determine the influence of listening proficiency levels on using state cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The results (Table 11) showed that the group with a higher level of proficiency was significantly different from the group with a lower level of proficiency regarding their use of state cognitive and metacognitive strategies, F(2, 165) = 50.770, p < 0.01, Wilks' Lambda = .619, partial Eta squared = .381. Eta squared showed that the proficiency level explained non-trivial portions of the variance in the cognitive and metacognitive strategy use.

Table 11
Multivariate Tests of Group Differences in State Strategy Use

	Value	F	Hypothesis Df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Pillai's Trace	.438	64.38**	2	165	.001	.438
Wilk's Lambda	.562	64.38**	2	165	.001	.438
Hotelling'sTrace						
Roy's Largest Root	.780	64.38**	2	165	.001	.438
	.780	65.38**	2	165	.001	.438

As shown in Table 11, all multivariate test statistics are significant, implying that less-proficient and more-proficient listeners do not use state cognitive and metacognitive strategies equally. However, it is not clear whether proficiency level affects test takers' use of cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, or both. Thus, multivariate tests for each type of strategy were examined individually to investigate the group differences in the state strategy use. The results (Table 12) indicated that more-proficient listeners were significantly different from less-proficient and in their use of cognitive strategies, F(1, 341) = 107.48, p > 0.01; as well as metacognitive strategies, F(1, 341) = 47.19, p > 0.01.

Table 12
Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for State Strategy Use

	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Trait Cognitive Strategies	15239.02	1	15239.02	107.4** .001		.393
Trait Metacognitive Strategies	15239.02	1	15239.02	47.19** .001		.221

An examination of the mean scores (Table 4) indicated that the high proficiency group employed higher levels of state cognitive strategies (M = 69.128) and metacognitive strategies (M= 73.651) than the low-proficiency group (cognitive M = 49.646 and Metacognitive M = 34.598). This finding rejects the null hypothesis stating that no difference exists among test takers with varying listening proficiency levels regarding their use of state cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

Qualitative Phase of the Study
The researchers designed a retrospective interview with ten participants, five highly successful ones from the high proficiency group and five unsuccessful ones from the low proficiency group, to answer the third question. The participants were interviewed individually in Persian. First, they were provided with the listening section of the TOEFL test (consisting of two short and two long conversations and the related multiple-choice comprehension questions) with pauses on each section. After each section, the interviewer asked the participants a series of questions to elicit the strategies they employed before, during, and after listening to the dialogue and the strategies they used to answer the comprehension questions. The interviews were recorded for further analysis. For analyzing the data, the interview responses were transcribed and translated into English. To ensure the accuracy of the transcripts, they were double-checked by the researchers. Afterward, these written transcriptions were meticulously scrutinized to find regularly reported strategies for both groups.

Content analysis revealed the use of different strategy types by test-takers. The reported strategies of high and low proficiency test-takers were classified under seven categories, comprising the three classifications of metacognitive strategies (i.e., planning, evaluating, and monitoring) and four types of cognitive strategies (i.e., inferencing, elaboration, predicting, and note-taking).

The metacognitive strategies reported by the test takers included planning, evaluation, and monitoring.

1. Planning. The first metacognitive category extracted from the responses was planning. When listening to the text, the higher-proficiency listeners tried to direct their attention and decide what to do to understand better. They were likely to be aware of why and how to use a strategy to

complete test tasks. When asked what they did before and while listening to the text, some of them gave the following responses:

"*I set some goals for myself. For example, I decided to understand the main topic by paying attention to some words that I knew."; "I decided to remember some important words or phrases so that I could use them in answering the questions*."

On the other hand, the lower-proficiency listeners could not direct their attention to the sentences they were about to hear as well as higher-proficiency test-takers did. Instead, they concentrated on what they could not listen to previously and relinquished their listening task easily. Due to the lack of proficiency, they had comprehension difficulty and focused on some parts of the text. The followings are some representative extractions:

"I *wanted to understand what the text was about. But when I heard some words I didn't know, I couldn't go further and lost the rest of the conversation. The sentences were too long and hard to understand, and I gave up further listening*."

It appeared that both high and low proficiency groups knew that getting prepared before listening could help in their understanding. Both groups had the knowledge and awareness of such strategies; however, higher-proficiency test-takers used listening strategies more appropriately than lower-proficiency test-takers due to linguistic variables, which facilitated listening comprehension.

2. Evaluation. The second metacognitive category extracted from the responses was evaluation. More proficient test-takers evaluated their performance and the strategies they used. They assessed how well they did the task, commented on the areas in which they had problems, and suggested that this was an experience to be used for future tasks. For example, one student commented:

"*I think I've done well in the listening task, and the strategies I applied were helpful*."

The less-proficient test-takers could articulate their comprehension problems, too. However, they could not evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies they used. In other words, the more proficient test-takers were more capable of assessing their performance and strategy effectiveness than less proficient ones.

3. Monitoring. The last metacognitive category extracted from the responses was monitoring. Some higher-proficiency test-takers implemented monitoring strategies while listening to the text. For example, one student commented:

"*I would get confused if there were many words I didn't know*."

However, the monitoring strategies did not appear to be used among the lower-proficiency test-takers. One of them, for instance, said:

"*When I was listening to the text, all I hoped to do was to understand it. I didn't have time to care whether or not the words I heard were right in the context.*"

The cognitive strategies reported by the test takers included inferencing, prediction, elaboration, and note-taking.

1. Inferencing. The first cognitive category extracted from the responses was inferencing. Some extracts of their responses are:

> "*For me, listening to the main ideas, paying attention to keywords, and making inferences based on my own experience were more practical.*"; "*I paid attention to the relationship between the listeners and speakers in the conversation. This helped me to understand some parts of the conversation.*"

The lower-proficiency students were familiar with these types of strategies and tried to use them while listening to the text. However, they experienced some problems in implementing the strategies because they lacked linguistic knowledge. For example, one of the students noted:

> "*I knew I should look for the keywords, but sometimes I couldn't recognize the keywords in listening.*"

2. Prediction. Both higher and lower proficiency test-takers reported using similar strategies in this category. One of the more proficient test-takers mentioned:

> "*I tried to read the test items to guess the words used in the conversation.*"

Also, one of the less proficient test-takers reported:

> "*When I received the test, I first overviewed it and tried to predict the content of the passage using the test items.*"

However, what differentiated the two groups of test-takers was related to the accuracy of predictions. The more proficient students could predict the text more accurately than the less proficient ones. In other words, the less proficient students made wrong predictions due to the failure to understand the previous sentences, probably because they lacked linguistic knowledge, which led to problems in recognizing words, phrases, and sentences.

3. Elaboration. In this category, both groups of test-takers used the following strategies:

- Using the experience and knowledge to help understand
- Comparing what was understood with what was known about the topic

One of the test-takers, for instance, commented:

> "*My personal experiences were helpful. I had some relevant information about the topic, which helped me guess and understand some parts of the text.*"

It is worth mentioning that less proficient students relied heavily on the background knowledge about the passages to comprehend the text despite their lack of linguistic knowledge.

4. Note-taking. The last cognitive category extracted from the responses was note-taking. Both groups were familiar with note-taking, but not all used this type of strategy. Although some students emphasized the effectiveness of taking notes while listening, some did not believe in its importance. For example, one of the students commented:

> "*I needed to take notes for long and difficult sentences because I forget what was said after listening.*"

However, another one said:

*"Taking notes of keywords was not helpful. I preferred
answering the test items quickly than spending time taking
notes."*

Also, the less proficient participants mentioned that they knew this
type of strategy but did not use it because the speaker was too fast, and they
failed to keep up with the listening text when they were taking notes. In
contrast, the more proficient participants could use note-taking more
effectively. One of them, for instance, reported:

"*I didn't have sufficient time to write down all the main points. I wrote
down the first word of each phrase or sentence.*"

Discussion

The first and second research questions examined the differences
between the two groups of language learners with high and low levels of
listening proficiency regarding their reported use of trait and state cognitive
and metacognitive strategies in listening performance. The findings showed
that high and low listening proficiency groups were significantly different
regarding their use of state and trait cognitive and metacognitive strategies.
The result implied that listening proficiency was a significant factor that
differentiated the two groups regarding their implementation of cognitive and
metacognitive strategies. This finding is in congruence with Goh's (2000),
O'Malley & Chamot's (1990), and Vandergrift's (2003) studies on listening
strategies.

The results also revealed that the high proficiency group had a greater
desire to use metacognitive strategies than the low proficiency group. To put it
another way, learners with a higher level of proficiency utilized metacognitive
strategies more frequently than learners with a lower level of proficiency. This
finding aligns with Goh and Taib's (2006) and Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari's
(2010) studies. The findings are also compatible with studies that
demonstrated a positive association between proficiency level and
metacognitive strategy use (Goh, 2002; Oxford et al., 2004; Vandergrift, 2003).
The results are also congruent with the investigations that examined the impact
of the level of proficiency on using cognitive and metacognitive strategies in
reading test performance (Phakiti, 2003). Following the current research
findings, the researchers propose that a certain level of proficiency is an
essential prerequisite for learners to employ metacognitive strategies. This
finding can be related to the 'threshold hypothesis' proposed by Alderson
(2000) in reading comprehension. According to the threshold hypothesis,
learners can employ language strategies after attaining a certain amount of
language knowledge. The application of metacognitive strategies in listening
performance is presumably sensitive to a threshold level of listening
proficiency.

Regarding cognitive strategy use, the results indicated that listeners
with high level of proficiency used more cognitive strategies than low
proficiency listeners. This result finds support from studies by Baleghizadeh
and Rahimi (2011), Kok (2018), and Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010). The
lower use of cognitive strategies during the listening performance can be

related to the lower and inefficient implementation of metacognitive strategies by low proficiency listeners. Metacognitive strategies perform executive functions over cognitive strategies (Haghighi et al., 2019b; Phakiti, 2008). The researchers suggest that the effective implementation of cognitive strategies depends on the listeners' implementation of metacognitive strategies. Another proposition is that cognitive strategies are knowledge-based, and their implementation depends on the listeners' linguistic competence.

To sum up, the listeners with different listening proficiency levels utilized similar types of strategies in listening test performance. However, they used different proportions of these sources in their strategy use. Therefore, the researchers argue that these listeners share a particular ability, namely 'strategic competence' (Bachman & Palmer, 2010), comprising knowledge of cognition and regulation of cognition. It appears that a higher level of listening proficiency leads to a higher level of strategic competence. Therefore, the implementation of strategic competence depends upon the availability of linguistic competence in the target language. The researchers hypothesize that strategic competence is a function of L2 proficiency. In other words, the findings support the idea that the application of strategic competence needs a certain level of linguistic competence.

The last research question explored the utilization of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in listening test performance among listeners with varying proficiency levels. The qualitative data provided further insight into the role of proficiency level in strategy use. Concerning the metacognitive strategies, the researchers found that more proficient participants utilized a far greater variety of strategies when comprehending different texts. In contrast, the less proficient ones implemented fewer strategy types. In cases where both groups mentioned similar strategies, the more proficient students usually knew how to use them better than the less proficient ones.

Regarding cognitive strategies, both more-proficient and less-proficient listeners actively employed cognitive strategies including inferencing, prediction, elaboration, and note-taking to comprehend the oral passages. What differentiated the two groups, however, was the accuracy with which the strategies were utilized. In other words, more proficient students used the strategies more accurately than less proficient ones. This difference might be due to the lack of 'linguistic knowledge' in less proficient students and their problems in recognizing words, phrases, and sentences, leading to making wrong inferences and predictions.

These findings are in line with the studies by Graham and Macaro (2008), Park (2010), and Vandergrift (2005), which indicated qualitative differences in L2 learners' use of strategies concerning their level of listening proficiency. According to Goh (2002), the plausible explanation for the distinction of more proficient and less proficient listeners in using cognitive and metacognitive strategies might be that less-proficient listeners are often preoccupied with unfamiliar words or expressions and have a limited range of strategic knowledge. On the other hand, as Vandergrift (2003) argued, more-proficient listeners are involved in a greater depth of interaction with the text by employing different strategies, resulting in more successful comprehension.

In conclusion, both quantitative and qualitative data analyses demonstrated that the high proficiency listeners performed the test tasks more strategically than the low proficiency ones. These findings suggest that even if listeners know different types of strategies, they cannot achieve intended performance if they lack the necessary linguistic knowledge relevant to that task. This result is consistent with different language ability models, including Bachman and Palmer (1996, 2010), Canale (1983), and Canale and Swain (1980), indicating that language knowledge plays a determining role in language performance.

Conclusion and Implications

This study examined the differences among the learners with high and low levels of listening proficiency regarding their use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The objective was to investigate the role of listening proficiency level in students' use of strategies. The quantitative results revealed that the learners with a higher level of proficiency were significantly different from learners with a lower level of proficiency in using cognitive and metacognitive strategies. This finding leads to the conclusion that listening proficiency is an important indicator of the difference in using cognitive and metacognitive strategies among different test-takers in listening performance. The results also showed that high proficiency group used cognitive and metacognitive strategies more frequently than low proficiency group. In conclusion, the results proposed that listeners with different listening proficiency levels utilize similar types of strategies (i.e., cognitive and metacognitive strategies) in listening performance. However, they use different proportions of these sources.

Moreover, the qualitative data shed more light on the role of the level of listening proficiency in using cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The qualitative results were in line with quantitative analysis findings in that the students with different listening proficiency levels used cognitive and metacognitive strategies differently. In sum, the outcome of quantitative and qualitative data analyses implied that the high proficiency listeners dealt with the test tasks more strategically than the low proficiency ones. Therefore, the findings support the idea that the implementation of strategic competence depends upon the availability of a certain amount of linguistic competence in the target language.

The present study contributed to the literature by indicating that a difference in EFL learners' level of listening proficiency as a part of language knowledge would affect their strategy use. It is usually recommended to have strategy instruction for beginner-level students to improve their language learning. However, the results of this study proposed that learners need to attain a certain amount of language knowledge before strategy instruction.

The findings of the previous studies (e.g., Cross, 2009; Goh & Taib, 2006; Graham & Macaro, 2008; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010) revealed that implementing cognitive and metacognitive strategies leads to better listening performance. On the other hand, the present study showed that higher listening proficiency leads to more frequent and appropriate strategy use. Presumably, there is a reciprocal relationship between strategy use and level of listening

proficiency. Accordingly, the pedagogical implication is the need for a prudent approach to listening instruction, which requires attention to listening skills and listening strategies. By integrating strategy instruction into skill-focused listening practice, EFL teachers help their students utilize both resources to support and enhance their listening ability.

This study employed a cross-sectional assessment of learners' strategy use that might have limited generalizability. Therefore, future studies can be conducted mainly to investigate consistency in using cognitive and metacognitive strategies use over time in listening performance. In addition, the instruments used to obtain data from the participants on their use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies were restricted to Likert-scale questionnaires. Although the factor structure of the questionnaire has been analyzed thoroughly, it cannot be claimed that self-report data directly reflect mental processing. Further studies can employ other qualitative instruments, such as think-aloud protocols, to provide a better understanding of the strategic processing. Moreover, the researchers failed to control the moderating effect of gender as the number of female participants was almost twice the number of male ones. Future studies can use a more proportionate ratio of male and female participants, which would produce more dependable data.

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