Analysis of the Use of Metacognitive Strategies during Listening Lessons with Young Learners

Johanna Chaves Agüero
Escuela San Pedro, Costa Rica
jchaves72@live.com

Beatriz Gamboa Sánchez
Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica
beatriz.gamboa.sanchez@una.ac.cr

Resumen

La instrucción sobre el uso de estrategias metacognitivas al aprender una segunda lengua permite a los estudiantes asumir un papel más activo, tomando control de los procesos cognitivos propuestos en clase. El uso de estrategias metacognitivas inicia con determinar cómo se llevará acabo la tarea de aprendizaje, monitorear la comprensión durante la realización de la misma, y finalmente, evaluar el proceso. Conocer sobre este proceso les permite a los estudiantes auto-dirigir su aprendizaje. Los niños pueden beneficiarse de este tipo de instrucción explicita ya que su desarrollo cognitivo aun no les permite adoptar múltiples perspectivas. Más allá de aprender contenido, los estudiantes deben ser guiados para que logran convertirse en aprendices de por vida, es decir, deben aprender a aprender. Poca investigación se ha realizado hasta ahora en este campo en Costa Rica. Considerando el énfasis que es dada a la habilidad de escucha durante la educación primaria, un estudio de caso se realizó para analizar cómo se utilizan las estrategias metacognitivas durante las lecciones de escucha en una escuela pública con niños de segundo ciclo y su docente de inglés. El estudio de caso incluyó 30 observaciones registradas en un diario de campo, una guía de observación estructurada, y un análisis de artefactos utilizados. Este estudio reveló que los estudiantes no reciben mucha exposición a estrategias metacognitivas, dando paso a una propuesta con ejercicios de escucha acompañada de sugerencias sobre como incluir la enseñanza de estrategias metacognitivas al trabajar con este tipo de población.

Palabras clave: estrategias metacognitivas, estudiante joven, habilidad de escucha, enseñanza de estrategias metacognitivas

Abstract: The instruction of metacognitive strategies, when learning a second language, allows learners to assume a more active role by taking control of the cognitive process proposed in class. Using metacognitive strategies starts by planning the way that the learning task will be approached, monitoring comprehension as the task is carried out, and finally evaluating the progress. Through metacognitive awareness, students can self-direct their learning. Young learners could benefit from explicit instruction in this area since their cognitive development makes them still unable to adopt multiple perspectives. More than learning content, students should be guided on how to become life-learners, that is, they must learn to learn. Little research has been done in this field within the Costa Rican context up to now. Taking into consideration the emphasis that the listening skill receives during

the elementary school years, a case study was carried out to analyze how metacognitive strategies are applied during listening lessons in a public school with second cycle students and their English teacher. The case study included a total of 30 classroom observations recorded through a researcher's log, a structured observation guide, and a collection of artifacts analysis. The study revealed that students do not receive much exposure to metacognitive strategies giving way to the proposal of listening tasks accompanied with suggestions on how to approach metacognitive strategy instruction when working with young learners.

Keywords: metacognitive strategies, Young learners, listening skill, metacognitive instruction

1. Introduction

Metacognitive strategies help students self-direct their learning. By using these types of strategies, learners becomes aware of what they already know and what they still lack learning. These types of strategies can help language learners become more independent. They can understand what they need to learn for a certain task and how to use the current knowledge they have in order to succeed. However, this ability does not always come naturally to all people, so teachers are encouraged to guide students in this sense. Particularly, young language learners can benefit from instruction in this area because their cognitive development is still limited and needs to be developed due to their age and little experience as L2 learners. Goh and Taib (2006) considered that children need more guidance from their teachers than older L2 students because they are still not capable of understanding that not all tasks can be approached the same way, and thus a strategy that is appropriate for one task is not necessarily effective for another (p. 230). Metacognitive instruction for approaching listening tasks can provide students with tools on how to carry out the assignment, troubleshoot difficulties they encounter along the way, and make them feel more in control of their learning.

Considering that metacognitive instruction can make a difference in young learners' performance, that there is not much research in this field within the Costa Rican context, and that the Ministry of Education entails emphasis be given to listening during the primary school years, a case study was carried out to analyze how metacognitive strategies are applied during listening lessons in a public school. The qualitative study sought to answer the question: How are metacognitive strategies approached in class during the listening lessons? The study was carried out in a public elementary school with 128 school children and their English teacher. There were two groups of fourth, two of fifth and three of sixth graders that were observed for a total of 30 English lessons. These lessons were recorded through a researcher's log (see Appendix 1), and when a listening lesson took place, other instruments like a structured observation guide (see Appendix 2), and an artifact collection analysis (see Appendix 3) were used to collect data to describe how metacognitive strategies were put into practice for the task students were assigned.

2. Literature Review

The teaching of the listening skill has received more attention in recent years causing in its path changes in regard to how it should be approached in the language classroom. Listening is now accepted as a complex and active skill whose teaching should implicate guiding students in becoming autonomous life learners. Exposing students to language learning strategies is not enough. They need to be aware of what strategies can be used and in what circumstances. This means teachers need to raise awareness of strategy use. However, this awareness must to go beyond simply exposing learners to these. Learners should reflect on their own learning, that is, to think about thinking through metacognitive strategies. Young learners can benefit from this kind of instruction from a very early stage in the language learning process. Aspects like the importance of strategy awareness, metacognition and young learners, and metacognitive instruction are regarded in this paper.

2.1. Importance of raising student awareness of strategy use

As students try to face the challenge of improving their listening skill, they might experience anxiety and discomfort due to the little control they can have of the input heard. This is why language teachers must carefully plan and carry out the listening lessons, taking into account the processes involved in the teaching of this skill. As students acquire linguistic knowledge, they must also be equipped with tools like language learning strategies to overcome the difficulties encountered when tackling the learning process. Three basic listening comprehension strategies were proposed by O'Malley and Chamot based on cognitive theory: metacognitive (which deal with awareness of learning), cognitive (which allows students to manipulate or transform the target language) and socio-affective (which aid leaners in controlling their emotions and attitudes during a task) (as cited in Serri, Boroujeni and Hesabi, 2012, p. 844). Explicitly raising awareness of these strategies can benefit students, making them more strategic learners. With previous instruction in this area, students can make wiser decisions on which strategy to use depending on their needs or the demands of the assigned exercise.

When students analyze and reflect on their learning, they become more effective learners because they do not only acquire and retain knowledge. Most importantly, they discover how to control and evaluate their listening development. Becoming aware about one's own learning is exactly what metacognitive strategies intend. Oxford (1990), explained that this specific type of strategy implies centering, arranging, planning and evaluating ones performance in order to coordinate and control the learning process (p. 135). Thus, when a teacher activates and promotes these strategies, they are engaging in metacognitive instruction. Through time and constant practice, strategies will come to be used automatically and even unconsciously by students (Zhang, 2007, p. 72). Raising students' awareness of strategies can lead to skillful and more independent learners.

2.2. Metacognition and Young learners

Metacognition is considered a higher order of thinking because it includes planning, monitoring and evaluating the cognitive processes engaged in learning. Actively controlling ones learning plays a crucial role in achieving success. Metacognition involves control and executive aspects when employing metacognitive strategies, and knowledge about cognitive states and process. Flavell categorized three types of knowledge as follows:

- *Person knowledge* makes reference to judgments in regard to the individual and universal traits that directly impact learning.

- *Task knowledge* consists on knowing the purpose, demands, and nature of learning tasks as well as being capable of considering factors that might contribute to the difficulty in carrying out the task.

- *Strategy knowledge* refers to choosing the appropriate strategies to be able to achieve the learning goals (as cited by Goh and Taib, 2006, p. 223).

By developing knowledge in these three areas, learners will be able to regulate and manage their learning due to the metacognitive awareness they gain so they can adapt and apply strategies according to the task requirements.

The ability to monitor and control ones learning will expand as young learners grow older and have more learning experiences. Kuhn explained that, early in childhood, children can develop aspects like meta-knowing and theory of mind, but other aspects like meta-strategic knowledge takes more time to develop. Young children can learn some memory or other cognitive strategies, but it is unlikely that they can use them spontaneously. Using ones metacognitive knowledge implies monitoring the performance and deciding which strategy to use, then evaluating its effect. Children will come to accomplish this through experience, practice and support (as cited in Larkin, 2010, p.37). It is in this sense that metacognitive instruction is highlighted. Even though this instruction will take time, the outcome will be learners with a sound metacognitive knowledge base.

2.3. Metacognitive Instruction to develop the listening skill

Metacognitive instruction during a listening lesson provides students with direction on how to manage their listening comprehension. It provides guidance and opportunities for students to reflect on themselves as language learners and the demands of listening in that language. This type of instruction has been qualified as more important than activating cognitive knowledge or teaching strategies, "because using metacognitive knowledge is the bases for selecting and activating the strategy that is necessary when it is necessary" (Paran and Sercu, 2010, p. 102). From this perspective, listening development avoids merely assessing listening comprehension or learning cognitive strategies. It focuses on other variables like cognitive and social processes that do not always come naturally to leaners. Through metacognitive instruction learners engage in self-appraisal and self-management activities guided by the teacher.

Young learners can benefit from metacognitive instruction as much as adults. Vandergrift researched the benefits young learners could have when they are asked to reflect on the processes of listening by having them make predictions and evaluate their performance. He concluded that "the activities sensitized the learners to listening processes and developed their metacognitive knowledge" (as cited in Goh and Taib, 2006, p. 224). Different ways to approach metacognitive instruction have been proposed. Vandergrift and Goh (2012) designed a metacognitive pedagogical sequence for teachers to carry out with well-planned listening lessons. It takes into account activities students should engage in before, while and after listening:

- Pre-listening stage: the teacher provides learners with enough context about the listening text they will encounter. This includes information such as the topic, text genre, and relevant cultural information. The main purpose during this stage is for students to use this information provided by the teacher to make predictions about the text they will hear. For this to be possible, the text must be appropriate for the students' age level and life experience, providing the opportunity to make logical predictions based on their background knowledge.

- Verification stage: It consists of three moments for students to monitor, evaluate, plan and problem-solve as they listen. During the *first listening* students verify predictions and write down additional information. These notes are shared with another classmate to discuss discrepancies in their understanding. During the *second listening* learners monitor the discrepancies found, make corrections and write down additional details. This information is shared in a class discussion to reconstruct main points and details. The *third listening* is to verify the information discussed in class. It is also suggested to provide students with a text transcript to verify particular sound symbol relationships they had not noticed before.

- Reflection and Goal Setting Stage: After having listened to the aural text, students are asked to reflect on the listening experience and to set goals for future listening activities. At this point in the lesson, the teacher encourages learners to evaluate their approach to the listening task, identify the difficulties encountered and rate their success (Vandergrift and Goh, pp. 109-111).

By following these key metacognitive processes for listening instruction, learners can plan, monitor and evaluate while working on a listening activity. The stages of the process can be carried out with guides or worksheets or even without prompts. Following these steps can facilitate the development of the listening skill and gradually lead learners in taking control of their listening development.

3.   Research Findings

To learn about how metacognitive strategies were approached in class during the listening lessons with young learners, a total of 30 lessons were observed. It is important to point out that only four of the 30 lessons were directed to the development of the listening skill. Even though the English syllabus clearly indicates that listening and speaking should be a priority, this was not evident in the case analyzed. As an overview, pre-listening and while listening stages where carried out, but no post listening took place. Thus, metacognitive strategies were only employed during those two stages. This demonstrates how little attention is given to the listening skill and it also indicates that students are not given the opportunity to evaluate their performance after answering the comprehension tasks. Thus the teaching of listening is focused on testing listening comprehension not on developing skilled, independent learners.

The structured observation guide contemplated aspects like student attention, awareness of goals and objectives to be reached, identification of the purpose of the listening task, as well as overviewing and linking with already known material. However, during the lessons observed only the strategies of paying attention and overviewing/ linking with already known material were applied. These two strategies were used in all of the four listening lessons that listening took place, and were initiated mostly by the teacher during the pre-listening or while-listening stages. Through the researcher's log, it was possible to highlight that it was necessary for the teacher to ask for the student's attention at different times during the lesson, particularly in the pre-listening stage. However, during the while-listening stage, the whole group would cooperate and listen attentively while the teacher was providing the information in order to answer the exercises. It was possible to observe that students paid directed attention, which is to concentrate on the task, and selective attention, which is to focus on particular information (Oxford, 1990, p. 154). This stage was the peak point where students were silent and concentrated on the activity and the teacher's input.

During the pre-listening stage, the teacher's main focus was on overviewing and linking the new vocabulary to what had been introduced in previous lessons. An example of this was reported in the researcher's log, when the teacher asked students to look in their notebooks to a specific exercise where they had written down information about ways to greet in different countries (see Figure 1). Later, they used the information they had just recalled to solve the listening exercise proposed for the while-listening stage.

In another lesson, the overviewing took place with posters or images that had been studied in previous lessons (see Figure 2). Here, the teacher would explicitly remind students that the vocabulary had been studied before. For the other two lessons, the drawings made on the board by the teacher also served the purpose of overviewing.

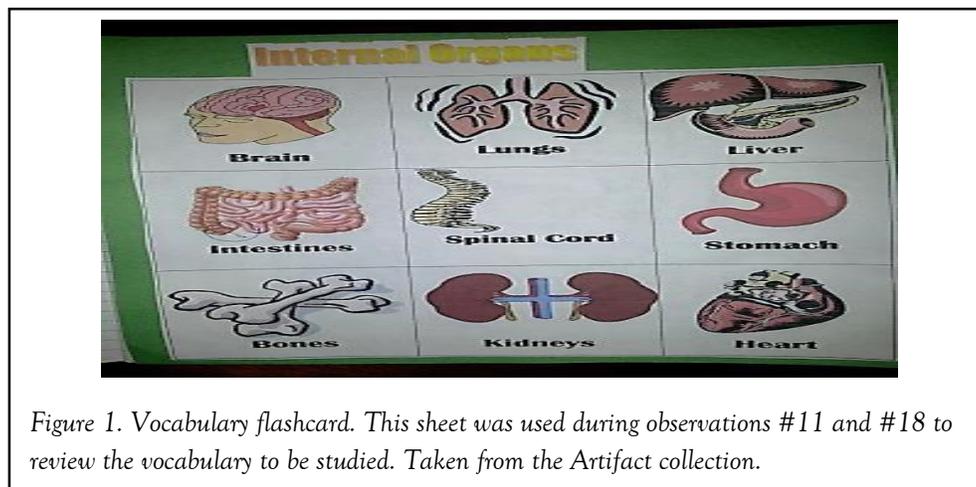*Figure 1.* Student's notebook. Picture made during observation #2 as part of the Artifact Collection.

Figure 1. Vocabulary flashcard. This sheet was used during observations #11 and #18 to review the vocabulary to be studied. Taken from the Artifact collection.

The absence of strategies that guide student's learning, such as setting goals and objectives or identifying the purpose of the study, was noted through the information gathered in the structured observation guide and in the artifacts collected. These sorts of strategies provide a compass for students to direct their own learning, but even though the teaching process is carefully planned out before entering the classroom, the teacher never provided students with this type of information. It was found that some of the handouts given to students only gave instructions on how to answer the exercise; no further information about the reason for listening was included. Goh and Taib (2006) assured that YL can benefit from metacognitive strategy, they require explicit teaching of these strategies, "Young learners will [...] need more guidance from their teachers in mediating their perceptions about strategies and task demands," this is due to their cognitive development which makes them still unable to adopt multiple perspectives (p. 230). Teachers can help students plan, monitor and evaluate their learning throughout each of the listening stages.

4. Conclusions

With regard to the strategies that were used, there was not much variation in the type of activities students were asked to perform in order to use the strategy; thus, the same strategy was repeated several times throughout the different listening tasks or even during the same lesson. Also, it was the teacher who initiated or suggested the activity where a strategy was put in practice. There were only a few occasions in which a learner made it explicitly evident that he or she was applying a learning strategy. This revealed that the role students acquired with regard to the use of strategies was passive and no self-evaluation or monitoring was encouraged

The two metacognitive strategies applied in class were paying attention and overviewing and linking with already known words. Overall, it is possible to state that students paid attention in class, especially while they were receiving the information with which they had to complete the exercises. At other times during the lesson, the teacher called their attention when it was necessary. On the other hand, overviewing was used mostly in the pre-listening stage because the activities performed included reviewing vocabulary words from previous lessons. They were not told either what was expected from them or where their learning experience was heading. Having students know what is required from them can be useful because their cognitive development limits their ability to figure out by themselves why they are doing a particular activity or what is expected from them once the lesson is over. If students are aware of the objectives they must reach, they can also self-evaluate their progress and become protagonists of their learning.

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Appendix 1: Researcher's Log

**UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL
SEDE REGIONAL BRUNCA**

Research topic: Listening Instruction of Second Cycle EFL Students

Program: Applied Linguistics Licentiate Program

Researchers: Licda. Johanna Chaves Agüero, M.Sc. Beatriz Gamboa Sánchez

Background: This instrument records all activities carried out during the English lessons, no matter what skill is developed.

Purpose: To record the activities carried out during the English lesson to collect information that the researcher considers relevant for the research.

Researcher: _____ **Date:** _____

Time: _____ **Amount of Lessons:** _____

Grade Level: ☐ Fourth Grade   ☐ Fifth Grade   ☐ Sixth Grade

Section: _____ **Observation Number:** _____

Amount of students that attended class: _____

Instructions: Write down the activities observed during the lesson, as well as any comment considered relevant such as teacher's or students' reactions or expressions during the class.

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Appendix 2: Structured Observation Guide

**UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL
SEDE REGIONAL BRUNCA**

Research topic: Listening Instruction of Second Cycle EFL Students

Program: Applied Linguistics Licentiate Program

Researchers: Licda. Johanna Chaves Agüero, M.Sc. Beatriz Gamboa Sánchez

Background: This structured observation guide permits the observer to detect the listening strategies being applied. With this instrument, it will be possible to identify the metacognitive strategies facilitated by the teacher to aid students through the listening exercise and observe students reaction to the strategies. Not all the activities developed during the lesson will be noted in this instrument because the English syllabus requires teachers to develop all four skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking), and the listening skill will be the sole focus here.

Purposes:

To identify the listening strategies being put into practice during an English class.

To describe particular characteristics of how the listening instruction process takes place.

Observer: _____ **Number of students observed:** _____

Date: _____

Length of Observation: ☐ 40 minutes   ☐ 80 minutes

Grade observed: ☐ Fourth Grade   ☐ Fifth Grade   ☐ Sixth Grade

Materials used for listening activities: _____

Instructions: Check on the event that takes place when developing a listening activity during the English lesson.

Strategy performed in class	Initiated by	Listening Stage
Metacognitive strategies ☐ Paying attention ☐ Set goals and objectives ☐ Identify the purpose of the study ☐ Overviewing and linking with already known material	☐ Teacher ☐ Student	☐ Pre-listening ☐ While listening ☐ Post-listening

Appendix 3: Artifact Collection Analysis

**UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL
SEDE REGIONAL BRUNCA**

Research topic: Listening Instruction of Second Cycle EFL Students

Program: Applied Linguistics Licentiate Program

Researchers: Licda. Johanna Chaves Agüero, M.Sc. Beatriz Gamboa Sánchez

Background: This instrument aims at analyzing whether the written material facilitated to the students (textbooks, photocopies, notebooks, board) includes metacognitive strategies to aid in the development of the listening skill. The analysis will take place ONLY when working on listening exercises.

Purpose: To identify language learning strategies in the materials students use to carry out listening exercises.

Coder: _____ **Date:** _____

Type of material: _____

Material for grade level: ☐ Fourth Grade   ☐ Fifth Grade   ☐ Sixth Grade

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Instructions: Please write a check mark (✓) next to the strategy that is present in the material given to students. More than one option can be picked.

The written material:

Metacognitive Strategies	Observations
1. Gives information about the purpose of the task	
2. Allows over viewing and linking with already known material based on the topic and type of text before listening (Students make predictions on the type of information and possible words they will encounter)	
3. Allows students to monitor their understanding	
4. Promotes self-evaluation on the students' performance.	