

# 9 Metacognitive awareness in L2 listening: a transition from doing listening to teaching it

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## Abstract

Second language listening (L2 listening) is taken for granted in the language classroom. The time allocated to it is often minimal, and it does not always aim at developing listening skills. It serves other purposes, such as testing comprehension and/or introducing a different activity. Graham (2017) noted that L2 listening is done in the language classroom, but it is not always taught. This paper shows that it is relatively uncomplicated to teach learners how to listen in the language classroom. It presents the results of an intervention study that incorporated guided discussions and reflections into an activity that consisted of playing an audio recording and answering comprehension questions. The results support previous findings regarding the effectiveness of guided discussions and reflections in developing listening skills (Goh & Taib, 2006) and show that it is possible to help learners address L2 listening more strategically.

**Keywords:** listening comprehension, L2 listening, metacognitive awareness, instruction in L2 listening, teaching listening, learning to listen.

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## 1. Introduction

L2 listening is regarded as the Cinderella of language skills (Nunan, 2002). The amount of time allocated to developing this skill is minimal in comparison to the

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amount of time assigned to other class activities. L2 listening does occur in the language classroom, but it often serves purposes such as testing comprehension, introducing vocabulary, or providing input for another language skill, rather than developing L2 listening skills. In this regard, [Graham \(2017\)](#) noted that instructors do listening in the language classroom, but rarely teach it.

Over the years, instruction in L2 listening has followed standard procedures such as pre-listening activities, intensive and extensive listening, and post listening activities. These procedures provide guidance to instructors on how to develop their listening lessons. However, when looking at L2 listening from the learners' perspective, these procedures do not necessarily provide learners with guidance on how to tackle L2 listening more effectively. This paper presents the results of an intervention study that incorporated guided discussions and reflections to a listening exercise that consisted of playing an audio recording and answering comprehension questions. This paper shows that it is possible to help learners address L2 listening in a more strategic way and to actually teach learners how to listen in the language classroom.

## **2. The study**

### **2.1. Overview**

Recent findings in L2 listening instruction indicate that teaching individual and isolated strategies does not impact L2 listening as positively and substantially as instruction that focuses on clusters of cognitive and metacognitive strategies ([Graham & Macaro, 2008](#)). Furthermore, listening instruction that fosters metacognitive knowledge and regulatory skills has been found to improve listening performance significantly ([Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010](#)). Similarly, metacognitive awareness has been found to impact L2 listening positively. In this regard, it has been observed that discussions and reflections are effective ways to develop L2 listening skills in the language classroom. In fact, [Goh and Taib \(2006\)](#) observed that combining guided discussions and reflections proves to be beneficial to learners. This study brings empirical evidence regarding the

effectiveness of incorporating guided discussions and reflections in listening activities. It supports the notion that metacognitive awareness impacts L2 listening positively (Goh, 1997) and adds to the few intervention studies in the field (Macaro, Graham, & Vanderplank, 2007).

The learners in this study participated in several listening sessions which systematically implemented small group discussions of metacognitive factors associated with successful L2 listening (Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal, & Tafaghodtari, 2006), as well as individual reflection about the listening experience.

## **2.2. Details of the study**

This intervention study was conducted throughout a semester in two classes of Spanish as a foreign language at a large university in North America. There were 44 undergraduate students in these two beginner classes; however only 32 learners were included in the analysis. This was because some participants missed one or more intervention sessions and/or did not consent to participate.

Data for this study was collected before the intervention at pre-test and after the intervention at post-test. The test employed at pre-test and post-test was the same. This was the listening section of a DELE (Diploma de Español como Lengua Extranjera – Diploma of Spanish as a Foreign Language) practice test designed to measure proficiency at the A1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference. There were 30 questions in this test but after conducting an item difficulty analysis with a different cohort of participants, the number of questions went down to 25 as some items were found to be either too difficult or too easy. To analyze this data, a paired samples t-test was run.

Also, a final reflection was collected at the end of the study. This final reflection was a summary of all the individual reflections written at the end of every listening session (see more details below). That is, participants were asked to read all the reflections written during the intervention and summarize them into one final reflection.

As for the intervention, this consisted of eight listening sessions. They were carried out once a week throughout the semester and were delivered in the classroom during regular classes. These short listening sessions lasted for approximately 23 minutes and followed the procedure described below.

- At the beginning of every listening session, participants were given a slip of paper with discussion questions. These discussion questions were in the native language of the learners (i.e. English) and were taken from the Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) (Vandergrift et al., 2006). This questionnaire has 21 items and all of them are statements. For the purpose of this study, these statements were transformed into questions and regrouped into the five factors of the questionnaire (i.e. direct attention, mental translation, problem-solving, planning and evaluation, and person knowledge). After handing out the slips of paper with the discussion questions, participants were asked to form groups and generate a discussion around these questions.
- After this group discussion, the topic of the audio was written on the board and a brief explanation of the topic was given.
- Then, the audio was played for the first time.
- After this first exposure to the audio, the learners received a set of five comprehension questions. They were given time to get familiar with these multiple-choice questions, and they were encouraged to ask for clarifications if the comprehension questions were not clear enough.
- Subsequently, the audio was played for the second time. This time the learners were asked to provide answers to the comprehension questions. They could write their answers during the audio play or at the end of it.
- Once the learners had finished answering the comprehension questions, the answers were written on the board and the instructor clarified any doubt concerning the answers to the comprehension questions.

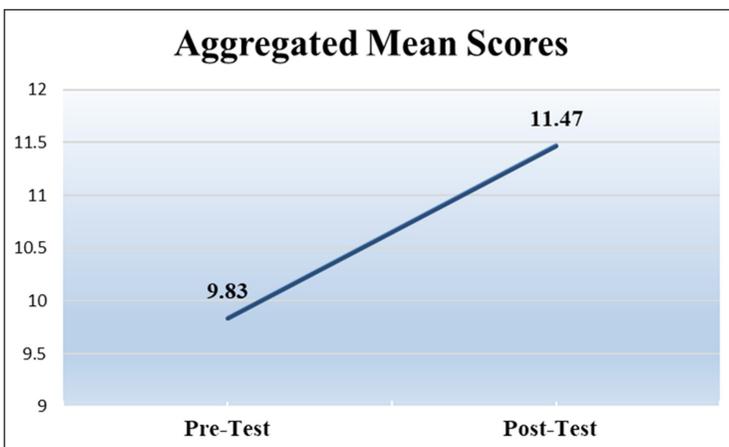
- Then, at the end of the listening session, the learners were asked to reflect on their listening experience. The learners could reflect on any aspect of the listening session or could simply respond to the question: *what could you do differently the next time you listen to an audio text in class? If there is nothing you can do differently, describe what you do when listening.*

This procedure was conducted consistently throughout the eight listening sessions. The instructor did not participate in the discussions and/or reflections. The instructor mainly guided the listening sessions and used a checklist to make sure every session followed the same procedure.

### 3. Results and discussion

An examination of the learners' scores indicated an increase in L2 listening performance. The learners in the two intact classes improved from pre-test ( $M=9.83$ ,  $SD=2.56$ ) to post-test ( $M=11.47$ ,  $SD=3.87$ ), as can be observed in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Aggregated mean scores of pre-test and post-test



This improvement indicates that the intervention had a positive impact on L2 listening. After confirming statistical assumptions, removing two outliers (N=30), and running a paired samples t-test, the results showed a statistically significant increase in L2 listening performance (i.e.  $t(29)=2.66, p<0.05$ ). These statistically significant results suggest that the guided discussions and reflections had a substantial effect on L2 listening such that listening performance improved significantly.

Although the absence of a control group poses a limitation to this intervention study, the results do provide empirical support to instruction that fosters metacognitive awareness (Goh & Taib, 2006). Providing opportunities to reflect on and talk about aspects associated with L2 listening (MALQ factor) helps learners to engage in thought and find ways to address L2 listening more effectively. As Goh (2008) noted, reflections “draw out learners’ implicit knowledge about L2 listening and at the same time encourage them to construct new knowledge as they make sense of their own listening experiences” (p. 200). By discussing and reflecting on aspects associated with L2 listening, these learners constructed knowledge about themselves, the task, and the challenges of L2 listening, and ultimately learned to tackle L2 listening in a more effective manner. It is indeed remarkable how the learners in this study constructed knowledge to help them address L2 listening more effectively. This was observed consistently in the reflections of the participants, as can be seen below.

“Don’t listen for each word. Listen for main ideas, key words and ignore words you don’t know so you don’t get stumped. Read the questions beforehand [comprehension questions in the task/test]. Pay attention to which questions the audio is for. Necesito relajarme. Listen diligently. Don’t zone out or get distracted easily. Be careful. Go with your gut. You need to listen for the significance, the overall significance, don’t need to understand the significance of all the words. Pay attention! Watch for sarcasm. Don’t focus on certain words for too long”.

The activities carried out during the intervention provided regular opportunities for learners to experience the challenges and demands of L2 listening. From the

first listening session to the last one, learners were exposed to different audio texts which posed different challenges. While it is difficult to tease apart which audio text presented more challenges, it is clear that by the end of the intervention, the learners felt satisfied with their progress. This was also observed consistently in their final reflections, as can be seen below.

“For me listening remains as one of the hardest aspects of learning a new language. After reading my reflections I have concluded that although the listening portions got harder I improved significantly. In my opinion, I believe that one learning a new language cannot capture everything being said in an audio clip. You hear words here and there and through practice you may put these words together. However, learning a new language is not easy for most. But I believe that with struggle comes growth. I struggled a lot in the beginning from the first audio but I learned from my mistakes. Also Spanish speakers speak very fast, sometimes too fast”.

Giving learners opportunities to experience the challenges and demands of L2 listening is an important aspect in developing listening skills in the language classroom. This exposure, however, needs to be guided and process-oriented so that learners can build on their experiences and generate ways to help themselves cope with the challenging aspects of L2 listening.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This intervention study incorporated guided discussions and reflections into a listening activity that had essentially consisted of playing an audio recording and answering comprehension questions. This activity is perhaps an example of doing listening in the language classroom but not teaching it (Graham, 2017). However, by incorporating guided discussions and reflections within the activity, it offered a more meaningful cognitive experience to the learners. The guided discussions, for instance, promoted learners’ involvement in and awareness of factors that affect L2 listening, such as attention, translation,

planning, context, and so forth. Also, the reflections provided learners with an opportunity to talk to themselves and to find the best ways to tackle L2 listening in a particular way that aligned with their personalities, linguistic and background knowledge, and with the type of task.

The main implication of this study is that for instruction in L2 listening to be more effective, it needs to give learners opportunities to interact with their peers and to reflect on their listening experience. It also needs to be regular and systematic so that learners can construct and connect knowledge about L2 listening. Finally, as shown in this study, developing listening skills in the language classroom is uncomplicated and does not take more than 25 minutes a week.

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