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THE USE OF METACOGNITIVE LISTENING STRATEGIES BY ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract:
The aim of this study is to determine the use of metacognitive listening strategies by EFL (English as a foreign language) learners in the Republic of North Macedonia. The participants in the study were two groups of EFL learners at two stages of language development: intermediate and advanced, in order to determine if the use of listening strategies changes with the development of language proficiency. The instrument used in the study is the MALQ questionnaire that investigates five groups of strategies: problem-solving, planning and evaluation, mental translation, person knowledge and directed attention. The results of the study showed that the students reported having a moderate amount of metacognition with an overall mean of 4.18 for high school students and 4.26 for university students. The Directed Attention, Person knowledge and Problem-solving strategies had higher scores and indicated a high level of awareness of these strategies for both groups, while Mental translation and Planning and evaluation showed an average level of awareness. The results provide valuable information to language teachers about the types of metacognitive listening strategies used by language learners so that they can make the necessary adjustments in their teaching methodology and strategy training of their students.

Keywords: language learning, listening, metacognitive strategies, strategy training

1. Introduction

In their everyday life, people spend more time listening than speaking, reading and writing. Infants develop their listening skills before they start speaking. During their first year of life, they are able to distinguish between different sounds, utterances as well as different speakers and in a period of a few years they develop their full capacity for listening and interacting with people around them. When acquiring a second language,

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listening and reading are essential for receiving language input and developing language proficiency. However, despite its importance, teaching listening skills in the classroom was neglected for a long time. It was considered that language learners would develop their listening skills simply by being exposed to the language while focusing on other language areas. Nunan says that listening is the *Cinderella* skill in second language learning as "*all too often, it has been overlooked by its elder sister: speaking*" (2002, p. 238). He states that unlike speaking and writing, which are considered as primary skills and indicators of one's knowledge of a second language, listening and reading are regarded as secondary skills and are often treated as "*means to other ends, rather than ends in themselves*".

The development of cognitive psychology and the introduction of several concepts related to listening and reading such as schema, prior knowledge, and bottom-up and top-down processing, brought about a shift in the way listening was viewed and treated in the classroom. It became obvious that listening is not a passive process and that listeners actively construct meaning by using their prior knowledge and the information from the text as well as by decoding the sounds, words and phrases they hear. Rost (2001) states that "*in the late 1960s and early 1970s, applied linguists recognised that listening was the primary channel by which the learner gains access to L2 `data', and that it, therefore, serves as the trigger for acquisition*".

Fields (2008) points out that even today when there is a wide range of listening materials that can be used in the classroom, listening is still undervalued. When there is not enough time, the listening part is often left out, the listening skills of learners are rarely assessed and their problems with listening are not properly diagnosed (p. 12). The author states that one of the reasons for neglecting to listen is that it is difficult to teach and difficult to measure as it takes place in the "*hidden reaches of the learner's mind*" (p. 1). In addition, there is a belief that since infants develop their listening skills simply by being exposed to the language, second-language learners will transfer the skill from the first to the second language and will be able to develop listening skills in the target language without much intervention on the part of the teacher.

Oxford states that "*listening is the most frequently used language skill. Of the total time devoted to communicating, 45% is spent listening, 30% speaking, 16% reading, and 9% writing*" (1993, p. 206). The author points out that despite the fact that listening is the most fundamental language skill that develops faster than speaking and often influences the development of reading and writing ability in the new language, it is often treated "*like a neglected stepchild*" (p. 205). Therefore, it should have a prominent place in the language classroom and should receive direct instructional attention like the other three skills.

1.1 Metacognition

What is metacognition? If we try to analyse the meaning, we will come across two terms, cognition and metacognition. Cognition is our conscious thinking, while metacognition is the "*cognition about cognition*" or thinking about our own thinking (Carell, 1998). The term metacognition was first coined by Flavell (1976) who defines it as "*one's knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them*" (p. 232). The

purpose of metacognition is to become aware of your own thinking, and of the knowledge you possess. Metacognition is a self-regulatory mechanism of an active student in his approach to do the learning task, which includes checking the outcome when trying to solve a problem, planning the next step, monitoring the effectiveness of the attempted action, assessing, reviewing and testing the strategies for learning (Baker & Brown, 1980).

When students learn to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning, the possibilities for successful language acquisition are bigger. Therefore, metacognition plays a very important role in language instruction. If we want to understand the concept of metacognition better, we must understand what it is composed of. Researchers agree on two aspects of metacognition, knowledge about cognition and regulation of cognition. Brown (cited in Abromitis, 1994) explains that the first aspect is related to the knowledge student possess of their own cognitive resources and the second aspect is related to the regulation of the person's thought processes as well as to the strategies and actions that the person undertakes to identify and overcome difficulties. Metacognitive strategies, as Oxford (1990) points out, are indirect learning strategies and their purpose is to find the focus of learning, to organize, plan and evaluate one's learning. The organization and planning of learning include the determination of the learning purpose of a certain task, planning the completion of the learning task, creating the best opportunities for efficient learning to take place, etc. The evaluation of learning is related to awareness of one's own mistakes and progress which will contribute to more successful language acquisition.

According to Vandergrift et al. (2006), "*metacognition is both self-reflection and self-direction. Reflecting on our thinking as we engage in learning a language, for example, can help us to adopt appropriate ways to learn it more effectively*". The authors state that success in language learning depends greatly on metacognition and that it is positively linked to motivation and self-efficacy. Successful language learners are not only "*aware of their own learning processes and perceptive of the demands of their learning tasks, they also have at their disposal a range of strategies that they apply and adapt in order to meet the requirements of different situations*" (p. 435).

Discussing the importance of metacognition, Goh and Hu (2013) state that it has a very important role in cognitive and language development in children and that it is "*a powerful predictor of learning, accounting for approximately 17% of variance in learning, compared to 10% that is accounted for by intelligence*" (p. 1).

1.1.1 Metacognitive strategies and listening comprehension

According to Oxford (1990), "*metacognitive strategies are actions which go beyond purely cognitive devices, and which provide a way for learners to coordinate their own learning process*" (p. 136). Some of these strategies can help learners increase their understanding of the listening text by paying attention and linking what they hear with already-known material. Other strategies, that belong to the group of arranging and planning one's learning, can help learners set goals and objectives, identify the purpose of the task, and organize and plan their language learning in an effective way. The third group includes

metacognitive strategies of self-monitoring and self-evaluation that help learners monitor their errors and learn how to evaluate their progress.

Metacognitive strategies are involved in the development of all four language skills. As listening comprehension is considered the most difficult skill to acquire (Rahimi & Abedi, 2014), metacognitive awareness and metacognitive strategies play a crucial role in the successful development of this skill. Li (2013) points out that metacognitive strategies are important for each phase of listening comprehension. Before they start listening to the text, learners make predictions, set goals and select appropriate strategies depending on the task, such as identifying the main idea or finding specific information in the text, so that they can focus their attention accordingly. During the listening phase, they monitor their listening process and they may change the strategy if they think that it is ineffective. After the listening, they evaluate the effectiveness of the listening strategies they used during the listening. By raising metacognitive awareness, learners become more aware of the learning process and the strategies they use in order to improve their listening comprehension.

Vandergrift et al. (2006) state that initial research on listening strategies investigated the use of metacognitive strategies for coping with difficulties and facilitating comprehension, but recent studies have focused on learners' cognitive appraisal of their metacognitive knowledge. In these studies, using mostly diaries, interviews and questionnaires, "*listeners are asked to explicitly report their perceptions about themselves, their understanding of listening demands, their cognitive goals, their approach to the task, and their strategies*" (p. 436). The results of the studies show that learners possess knowledge about the listening process to varying degrees and that metacognitive instruction can have a positive effect on learners; performance, confidence and motivation.

2. Literature Review

In order to find out the beliefs and knowledge second language learners have about their listening, Goh (1997) conducted a diary study with 40 ESL learners that revealed that "*many of them had clear ideas about three aspects of listening: their own role and performance as second language listeners, the demands and procedures of second language listening, and strategies for listening*" (p. 361). In another study in which Goh administered a questionnaire in order to investigate learners' strategy knowledge and their perceived use of listening strategies, she found that "*the more skilled listeners demonstrated a higher degree of awareness of their listening problems*" (cited in Vandergrift et al., 2006, p. 437).

Vandergrift et al. (2006) report on three studies conducted by Vandegrift. The aim of the first two studies was to determine if learners can develop metacognitive knowledge by using a teaching sequence that guides learners in the use of prediction, individual planning, peer discussions, and post-listening reflections. The participants in the first study were beginner-level elementary school students, while in the second they were beginner-level university students of French. The participants found this approach motivating and "*commented on the power of predictions for successful listening, the importance*

of collaboration with a partner for monitoring, and the confidence-building role of this approach for enhancing listening comprehension ability" (p. 438). In the third study, in which listening test scores were correlated with student-reported levels of motivation and student-reported use of cognitive and metacognitive listening strategies, the results showed increasingly higher correlations among the three levels of motivation (amotivation, extrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation) and reported use of metacognitive strategies.

Goh and Hu (2013) investigated the relationship between metacognitive awareness and listening performance. The participants were 113 English as a second language (ESL) Chinese learners. The instruments used were the Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) and an official sample IELTS listening test. The results showed a significant positive relationship between learners' metacognitive awareness scores and listening performance and that their metacognitive awareness accounted for 22% of the variance in listening performance. The overall mean was 3.96, which indicated that the participants had a moderate level of strategy use and confidence regarding listening, while the scores for each group of strategies were as follows: Directed attention 4.54, Mental translation 3.06, Person knowledge 3.22, Problem-solving 4.41 and Planning and evaluation 3.68. Analysis of individual factors showed a significant relationship between listening performance and the strategies of directed attention and problem-solving. The authors concluded that "*the participants who reported a lower degree of difficulty and anxiety and greater use of problem-solving strategies and, to a less extent, strategies for directing attention possessed greater L2 listening proficiency*". The most significant predictor was person knowledge, followed by problem-solving and directed attention.

Li (2013) investigated non-English majors' metacognitive awareness in English listening and the relationship between metacognitive awareness and listening comprehension performance. The instruments used in the study were the MALQ questionnaire developed by Vandergrift et al. (2006), an interview and a listening comprehension test. The results of MALQ showed that the participants got higher scores on Problem-solving (4.27) and Directed attention (4.13) strategies, lower scores on Planning and evaluation (3.47) and Mental translation strategies (3.23), and the lowest scores on Person Knowledge (2.48). The mean score for all strategies was 3.65. Based on the results of the listening comprehension test, the participants were divided into a high-score and low-score group, and the analysis showed that the participants with a higher level of metacognitive awareness scored higher on the listening test and that the highest correlation was between the Planning and evaluation strategies and listening comprehension.

Ölmezer Öztürk (2021) conducted a study with 112 freshman students in a university context. The aim was to examine learners' metacognitive listening strategies and their listening anxiety and the relationship between them, for which purpose the Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) and the Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) were used. The results showed that the most frequently used strategies were Problem-solving strategies (3.91), followed by Directed attention

strategies (3.33), Planning and evaluation (3.21) and Person Knowledge strategies (3.19), while the lowest use was observed for Mental translation (2.71). The findings also demonstrated a moderate level of foreign language listening anxiety and a low positive relationship between the participants' listening anxiety and their listening strategy use.
In the study carried out by Altuwairesh (2017), 82 female Saudi students completed the Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire. The results showed that the participants use Problem-solving (3.22) and Directed attention strategies (2.92) more often than the other metacognitive listening strategies; the least used strategies by the participants were Mental translation and Person knowledge strategies.

Taheri and Zade (2018) examined the effect of metacognitive strategy training on English as a Foreign Language learners' listening comprehension performance. The 57 participants were divided into an experimental and a control group. All participants did the Preliminary English Test (PET) as a pretest and filled in the Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ), after which the participants in the experimental group received five sessions of listening practice and metacognitive strategy training. The participants in the control group did not receive any instruction about strategies. In the end, both groups took another version of the PET as their posttest, and the experimental group filled in the MALQ again. The results showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the listening tasks and that the experimental group's metacognitive awareness improved dramatically after the strategy training. The scores for the Planning and evaluation strategies increased from 3.79 to 4.74, Directed attention strategies increased from 3.90 to 4.75, Person knowledge strategies from 3.46 to 4.80, Mental translation from 3.98 to 5.13, and the awareness of Problem-solving strategies increased from 4.16 to 4.93.

Wallace (2021) investigated the relationship among second language listening comprehension, metacognition, and vocabulary knowledge. The participants were 76 high school EFL learners in Japan and the instruments included the listening section of the TOEFL Junior test, the Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ), and the Listening Vocabulary Levels Test. The overall score on MALQ was 3.90. The highest score was for Directed attention strategies (4.40), followed by Problem-solving (4.08), Mental translation (3.94) and Person knowledge (3.92), while the least confidence was shown for Planned and evaluation strategies (3.26). The regression analysis showed that vocabulary knowledge and metacognition overall predicted listening performance. Regarding the five groups of metacognitive strategies, only Person knowledge predicted comprehension. The author concludes that "*metacognition was important for listening comprehension after accounting for vocabulary knowledge*" (p. 187).

Rahimi and Katal (2012) investigated metacognitive listening strategies awareness among Iranian university and high school students learning English as a foreign language. The participants in the study were 122 university students and 116 high-school students who filled in the Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ). The average score on MALQ was 4.14, implying that the participants had a medium level of metacognitive listening strategies awareness. The highest level of metacognitive awareness was demonstrated for Problems solving strategies (4.44) and the lowest level

of awareness for Person knowledge strategies (2.56). The scores for the other groups of strategies were Planning and evaluation 4.09, Mental translation 3.37 and Directed attention 3.96. In order to compare university and high school participants' scores, an independent-samples t-test was conducted which showed that high-school students were more aware of their metacognitive listening strategies in terms of Person knowledge and Mental translation.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Research Questions

The aim of this study is to answer the following research questions:

a) To what extent are English language learners aware of the listening process and the strategies they use to improve their listening comprehension?
b) Is there any difference between the metacognitive listening strategies used by high school and university students?

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were two groups of English language learners whose native language was Macedonian. The first group were 50 high school students in the first and second year of high school education in North Macedonia. They had been studying English for eight-nine years in elementary school and were 15-16 years old. The second group were 43 English major university students in the first and second year of their studies in North Macedonia who had been studying English for twelve-thirteen years and were 19-20 years old. Both groups had been taught with Communicative Language Teaching approaches with equal emphasis on the four language skills as well as grammar and vocabulary.

3.3 Instruments

The Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) developed by Vandergrift et al. (2006) was used in this study. The instrument can be used by researchers and teachers "*to assess the extent to which language learners are aware of and can regulate the process of L2 listening comprehension*", but it can also be used "*as a self-assessment instrument that learners can use to appraise their awareness of the listening process and to reflect on their strategy use when listening to texts in the L2*" (p. 432). The questionnaire consists of 21 statements on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* (6), *agree* (5), *partially agree* (4) to *partially disagree* (3), *disagree* (2), and *strongly disagree* (1). Six of the statements (3, 4, 8, 11, 16, 18) are worded negatively, so the scoring of these items was reversed. The interpretation of the scale is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Interpretation of the 6-point Likert scale

Scale	Options	Score Range	Level
6	Strongly Agree	5.17 – 6.00	Very High
5	Agree	4.33 – 5.16	High
4	Partially Agree	3.49 – 4.32	Average
3	Partially Disagree	2.67 - 3.50	Average
2	Disagree	1.83 – 2.66	Low
1	Strongly Disagree	1.00 – 1.82	Very Low

The instrument explores five factors connected to learners' metacognitive knowledge and skills: problem-solving (6 items), planning and evaluation (5 items), mental translation (3 items), person knowledge (3 items), and directed attention (4 items) (Table 2).

Table 2: The five-factor model of MALQ

Factors	Description of factors	Statements
Problem-solving	Strategies used by listeners to inference (guess at what they do not understand) and to monitor these inferences.	5. I use the words I understand to guess the meaning of the words I don't understand. 7. As I listen, I compare what I understand with what I know about the topic. 9. I use my experience and knowledge to help me understand. 13. As I listen, I quickly adjust my interpretation if I realize that it is not correct. 17. I use the general idea of the text to help me guess the meaning of the words that I don't understand. 19. When I guess the meaning of a word, I think back to everything else that I have heard, to see if my guess makes sense.
Planning-evaluation	Strategies listeners use to prepare themselves for listening, and to evaluate the results of their listening efforts.	1. Before I start to listen, I have a plan in my head for how I am going to listen. 10. Before listening, I think of similar texts that I may have listened to. 14. After listening, I think back to how I listened, and about what I might do differently next time. 20. As I listen, I periodically ask myself if I am satisfied with my level of comprehension. 21. I have a goal in mind as I listen.
Mental translation	Strategies that listeners must learn to avoid if they are to become skilled listeners	4. I translate in my head as I listen. 11. I translate keywords as I listen. 18. I translate word by word, as I listen.
Person knowledge	Listeners' perceptions concerning the difficulty presented by L2 listening and their self-efficacy in L2 listening	3. I find that listening in English is more difficult than reading, speaking, or writing in English. 8. I feel that listening comprehension in English is a challenge for me. 15. I don't feel nervous when I listen to English.
Directed attention	Strategies that listeners use to	2. I focus harder on the text when I have trouble understanding it.

	concentrate and to stay on task.	6. When my mind wanders, I recover my concentration right away. 12. I try to get back on track when I lose concentration. 16. When I have difficulty understanding what I hear, I give up and stop listening.

The problem-solving factor "*represents a group of strategies used by listeners to inference (guess at what they do not understand) and to monitor these inferences*" (p. 450). The strategies in this group include guessing the meaning of unknown words by using the known words, using the general idea of the text as well as previous experience and knowledge, monitoring and adjusting the interpretation of the text on the basis of the information in the text and their knowledge of the topic. The planning and evaluation factor "*represents the strategies listeners use to prepare themselves for listening, and to evaluate the results of their listening efforts*" (ibid.). The strategies include having a plan and a goal for listening, thinking about similar texts, checking their satisfaction with understanding the text and evaluating the effectiveness of the listening strategies. The mental translation factor "*represents strategies that listeners must learn to avoid if they are to become skilled listeners*" (ibid.) such as translating keywords or word for word while listening. The person knowledge factor "*represents listeners' perceptions concerning the difficulty presented by L2 listening and their self-efficacy in L2 listening*" (p. 451). The strategies in this group include strategies that assess their attitude toward listening compared to the other skills, their confidence and the level of anxiety in L2 listening. And the last factor, directed attention, "*represents strategies that listeners use to concentrate and to stay on task*" (ibid.) such as making more effort or not giving up when experiencing difficulty in understanding as well as recovering concentration quickly.

3.4 Procedure

The participants were introduced to the aim of the study and were asked if they would agree to take part in it. The questionnaire was administered during their regular classes, which took about 10 minutes. In order to avoid any problems with understanding the statements, the questionnaire was translated into Macedonian.

4. Results and Discussion

The overall mean on the Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) of high school students was 4.18 which means that the students reported having a moderate amount of metacognition.

The Directed Attention, Person knowledge and Problem-solving variables were the most frequently reported on the MALQ. This means that they focus harder when they experience difficulty while listening and manage to recover concentration if their mind wanders and they lose concentration, and they do not have a high level of anxiety when confronted with listening tasks. In addition, they use their previous experience and knowledge to understand the text and try to guess the meaning of the new words from

the context. Directed attention and Problem-solving strategies were the most frequently used strategies by participants in the studies conducted by Goh and Hu (2013), Li (2013), Ölmezer Öztürk (2021), Altuwairesh (2017), Taheri and Zade (2018) and Wallace (2021), which indicates that the majority of language learners use these strategies more often in order to cope with the demands of listening tasks. Regarding the Person knowledge variable, there are some variations across studies. For example, in the studies carried out by Goh and Hu (2013), Li (2013), Ölmezer Öztürk (2021), Altuwairesh (2017), Taheri and Zade (2018) and Rahimi and Katal (2012) this variable had the lowest scores, while in other studies (Wallace, 2021, Ölmezer Öztürk, 2021) it had higher scores. This indicates that compared to other language learners, the high school participants in this study have a more positive attitude toward L2 listening and are more relaxed during listening tasks. Having in mind the findings by Goh and Hu (2013) that a high level of awareness of these three groups of strategies is positively correlated with L2 listening proficiency, we can conclude that the participants in this study are aware of and use strategies that make them skilled listeners.

In the present study, the variables of Mental translation and Planning and evaluation had the lowest scores. The results indicate that the participants in this study often use translation as a tool to understand the text and do not plan ahead and set goals in listening, and do not monitor and evaluate their performance during and after listening. Wallace (2021) also reported the lowest scores for this variable, which suggests that they are unskilled listeners who "*run the risk of continuing to struggle with listening tasks because they come into the listening event cold and they may miss key details of the speech while familiarizing themselves with what is being discussed*".

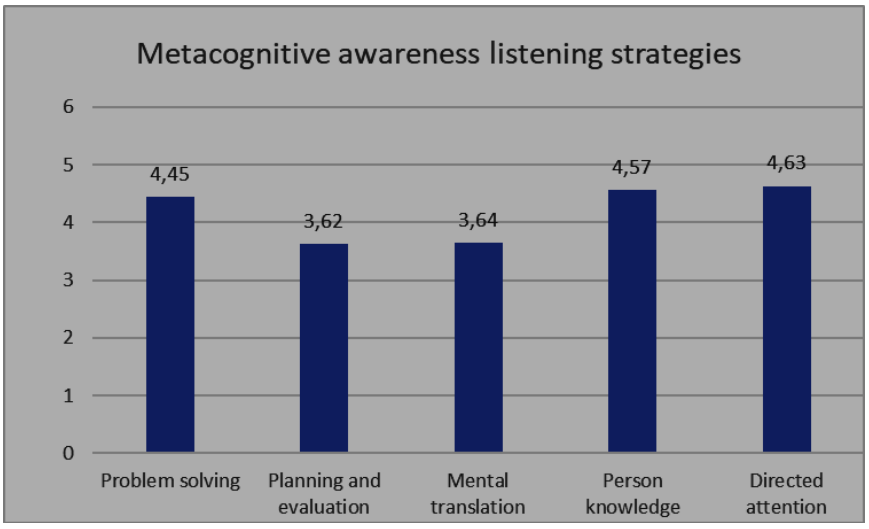

Figure 1: Metacognitive awareness listening strategies reported by high school students

The results of MALQ for the group of university students showed similar results with a slightly higher overall mean of 4.26 due to the higher scores for the Directed attention and Person knowledge variables. Interestingly, the order of the use of the five groups of strategies was the same for both groups of participants, with the Planning and evaluation strategies as the least used strategies by these learners.

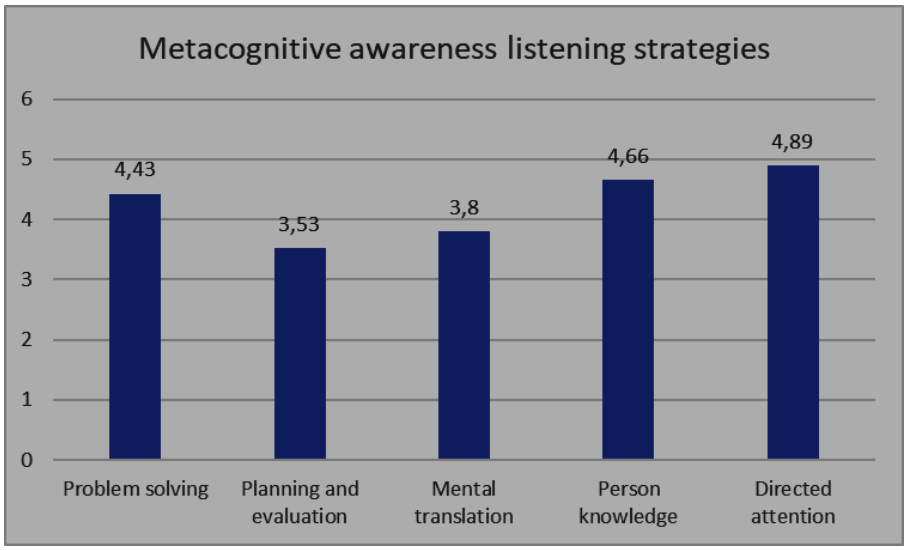

Figure 2: Metacognitive awareness listening strategies reported by university students

Rahimi and Katal (2012) also compared the metacognitive listening strategies awareness between high school and university students and found that "*high-school students were more aware of their metacognitive listening strategies in terms of Person knowledge and Mental translation*", which was not the case in the present study.

In summary, high school and university students in North Macedonia demonstrate a moderate use of metacognitive listening strategies with a high level of awareness of Directed attention, Person knowledge and Problem-solving strategies, and average awareness of Mental translation and Planning and evaluation strategies. However, we need to point out that 31% of the responses belonged to the options 'partially disagree' and 'partially agree', which shows a high level of uncertainty regarding the awareness and use of metacognitive strategies.

5. Conclusion

The results of the Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire revealed that English language learners are aware of some of the strategies that are important for listening comprehension such as guessing the meaning of unknown words from context, using their previous knowledge and experience or directing their attention, which make them effective listeners. On the other hand, they lack the awareness and knowledge of equally important strategies from the group of planning and evaluation, which point to ineffective listeners.

As Vandergrift et al. (2006) suggest, the questionnaire can be used "*as a diagnostic or consciousness-raising tool*" (p. 453). On the one hand, learners can use it for self-assessment purposes. On the other hand, teachers can use it to diagnose learners' awareness of and use of listening strategies, so that if, for example, they discover that the learners are underusing planning strategies they can place more emphasis on predicting and goal setting before the listening task. The authors point out that teachers usually assume that learners know how to listen effectively, so they pay little attention to teaching

students listening strategies. So, in an effective L2 programme, "*listening assessment and listening instruction must be integrated*" (p. 453). Several studies (Goh and Hu, 2013; Li, 2013; Taheri and Zade, 2018) that examined the effect of metacognitive strategy training on English language learners' listening comprehension performance have found that listening comprehension and metacognitive awareness increased after incorporating metacognitive strategy training in language instruction.

Therefore, by making students aware of the strategies they can use in order to improve their listening comprehension and incorporating strategy training through discussions and practical applications of the various strategies, learners will gain confidence and "*develop the metacognitive knowledge critical to the development of self-regulated listening*" (Vandergrift et al., 2006, p.437). This will help students to be more autonomous learners, will increase their interest in learning the language and will help them in the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary through comprehensible input and in the development of other language skills.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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