



# Measuring latent listening strategies: Development and validation of the EFL listening strategy inventory



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## ABSTRACT

The present research identified the structure of latent trait listening strategy use by developing and validating an inventory of EFL listening strategic knowledge. Results of factor analysis and multi-dimensional item response theory (MIRT) analysis utilizing responses from 315 subjects identified and confirmed a two-dimensional structure composed of top–down and bottom–up processing strategy types. These constructs are shown to have robust correlations with listening comprehension and also exhibit robust inter-correlation, providing empirical support for the formal model of interactive processing. It was revealed that bottom–up strategies do not exert direct effects on listening comprehension, but must be mediated by top–down strategies. Results are discussed in light of extant strategy effect studies. Future research to test the generalizability of the inventory across cultural contexts and to gauge its feasibility in pedagogical applications is suggested.

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## 1. Introduction

There is no dearth of research on both language learning strategies and listening strategies. Both strands of research have witnessed steady activity for decades since Rebecca Oxford's Strategic Inventory for Language Learning (SILL: 1990) and J. R. Anderson's cognitive model of language processing (1995) first gained wide traction within the field of second language acquisition (SLA). Since then, the SILL has become the most widely used instrument for surveying language learning strategy use (Grainger, 1997; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). Review of SILL-based studies by Gao (2004) identifies 18 separate research projects between 1989 and 2003, and more studies continually appear in print. Meanwhile, the prototypical cognitive processing model of *perception*, *parsing* and *utilization* and similarly conceptualized variants such as Rost's (2005) stages of *decoding*, *comprehending* and *interpreting*, have formed the theoretical bases of numerous L2 listening studies to date.

Weaving these two strands of research has yielded significant strides in assembling a patchwork understanding of L2 listening learning. Research of listening strategies relying on taxonomies derived from general language strategy frameworks such as the SILL or O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) tripartite classification (cognitive, metacognitive, socio-affective) scheme have attempted to catalog and classify learners' strategic repertoires or endeavored to modify strategic repertoires through training regimens.

At the fore stands Vandergrift (1997) who proposed a bi-level interactive schematic of listening processing which melds the now canonical tripartite scheme of O'Malley and Chamot (1990) with a three-stage cognitive process of listening. The

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three stages of listening are divided into “high” and “low” level processing, i.e., perception and parsing of discrete elements is low level, while comprehension and utilization of parsed information is high level, and when applied across both processing levels, function as a secondary facet to a simple, but comprehensive framework. Such a framework appears advantageous due to its simplicity and versatility, and other researchers espouse the bi-level interactive model as well (Buck, 2001; Graham & Macaro, 2008; O’rii-Akita, 2014; Richards, 2008; Tsui & Fullilove, 1998).

Subsequent investigations of the effectiveness of strategic training interventions relying on ad hoc instrumentation adapted from the SILL, the tripartite classification, or the bi-level processing model have yielded mixed results, leading scholars to speculate that increased strategy use inevitably corresponds with improvements in listening ability, but the manner of interaction is still ambiguous. The presence of mixed effects of strategy use indicates the construct is more complex than a single continuum. If researchers are to advance a complete theory of L2 listening acquisition explicating the manner in which strategy use yields or fails to yield improvements, they must first develop instrumentation to specifically and objectively measure the trait variable of listening strategy use and identify the dimensional structure. Trait strategy use differs from state strategy use as the former represents experiential memory of habitual strategic use, a stable long-term memory also known as strategic knowledge (Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal, & Tafagodhtari, 2006), while the latter is idiosyncratic with specific language tasks and often investigated in treatment studies.

The extant taxonomies are extensive and tend toward increasing granularity, but the archetypal strategies implicit in the psyches of learners must be known to understand how changes in this mindset affect learning. The lacuna in understanding learners’ strategy use exists not because of lack of strategic taxonomies, but because scholars lack insight into the learners’ mental classifications of these strategies. To wit, contemporary taxonomies represent researchers’ classifications based on discrete elemental commonalities of listening filtered through cognitive processing theories and although faithful to the hypotheses of erudite researchers, they are not necessarily ordered along archetypal dimensions as perceived by the target population, i.e. L2 learners who lack introspection of their own language acquisition processes. Hsiao and Oxford (2002) evidence as such, noting incongruences between the five SILL categories and O’Malley and Chamot’s (1990) tripartite classification. They assert Oxford’s label of compensation strategy overlaps with O’Malley and Chamot’s cognitive inference strategy, due to the putative intent: listeners must cognitively infer elements when compensating for perception or parsing gaps. When researchers’ labels clash, which one essentially defines the construct? According to Reckase (2009), construct dimensionality is “dependent on the sample of people that is of interest” (p. 3), therefore, L2 learners’ apperceptions of trait strategy use potentially follow continua dissimilar to researchers’ cogitations.

Currently, research adopts strategic frameworks in an ad hoc fashion with insufficient regard to the psychometric qualities of the instrumentation, often generalizing trait strategy use from state strategy use. The present study aims to build a foundation for investigation of the trait variable by constructing a prototype listening strategy use inventory with demonstrable psychometric qualities, meaning that item responses reflect variance in the learners’ implicit construct of strategy use, i.e., a stable trait. As such, it describes the creation and validation of a measurement model of L2 listening strategy use intended for future research to incorporate into comprehensive structural models which empirically test L2 listening theories.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The listening process

Numerous scholars (See Goh, 2000; Nunan, 2002; O’Malley, Chamot, & Küpper, 1989; Sun, 2002) have adopted a three-stage process of listening loosely based on J.R. Anderson’s process of perception, parsing and utilization which ground a wide swathe of extant L2 listening research. However, the three-step listening comprehension process is limited to one-way listening, while listening is frequently a two-way interaction; i.e., it is part of interpersonal communication involving real-time, attentive listening to an interlocutor. Seminal listening comprehension and L2 proficiency research recognized the need for a response phase with verbal or non-verbal cues to indicate the listener’s comprehension of the message (Feyten, 1991). Rost (2005) echoes this idea by succinctly combining these notions, suggesting that the listening process consists of three simultaneous and parallel processing phases: *decoding*, *comprehension*, and *interpretation*, accompanied by a final *listener response* phase. In social constructivist strands of research, *listener response* is crucial for discourse and negotiation, while in constructivist-based research, it is the sine-qua-non, as there can be no measurement of listening comprehension without selection of answer options based on *interpretation/utilization* of the aural stimuli. Thus in the present study, listening is hypothesized as a simultaneous mixture of high and low levels of aural processing, culminating in a mental response.

### 2.2. L2 listening strategies

Listening strategies are methods of managing personal mental and observable behavior to accomplish a listening task (Goh & Taib, 2006; Graham & Macaro, 2008; Macaro, 2006; Richards, 2008). Listening strategies may be quasi-automatic like general language strategies, and just as recalled strategies are presumed to illustrate certain aspects of language processing (Chamot, 2005), listening strategies describe the mental operations involved in listening comprehension. Listening strategy research requires recollection and consideration of strategy use, thereby uncovering parcels of the usually hidden listening process. Research adopting verbal protocols (Cross, 2009; Graham & Macaro, 2008; Park, 2010) discovers state listening strategy use, meanwhile large-scale survey research (Vandergrift, et al., 2006) assays trait listening strategy use.

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