

**AN INVESTIGATION OF THE USE OF LISTENING STRATEGIES  
AND LISTENING PERFORMANCE OF PROFICIENT AND NON-  
PROFICIENT LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

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**Abstract**

This study was an attempt to investigate how proficient and non-proficient learners used listening strategies to complete a listening task. 65 third-year Chulalongkorn University Commerce and Accountancy students participated in the first stage of the quantitative data collection. 18 students were randomly selected from the group for more in-depth data. The instruments included the strategy questionnaire adapted from Oxford's (1990) and listening tasks. Descriptive statistics, the independent *t*-test and the think-aloud technique were used to analyze the data. The findings showed a significant difference between the two groups' report of their use of the strategies in certain areas. Also, they revealed the proficient students' appropriate use of the strategies.

**Keywords:** listening strategies, learning strategies, listening skills

## **Introduction**

### **The importance of the listening skill**

The listening skill is viewed as important for various reasons. Firstly, listening is a means to access various sources of knowledge. It is also considered an element that determines whether an adult learner possesses competent language performance. In fact, its importance is influenced by the overwhelming amount of listening input in everyday life. This is supported by the numbers reported by the Learning Assistance Center of City College of San Francisco (2005). The report said students at school spend about 20 percent of all school-related hours just listening. If television watching and conversations are included, listening accounts for approximately 50 percent of their waking hours. The significance of listening, however, is not only restricted to the classroom or a learning environment. Kreutanu (1998) mentioned in her work that for company staff at all levels, the problems arising at work are mostly related to poor listening skills. The study conducted by Wolvin and Coakley (1991) also supported the claim of listening's importance. The researchers surveyed the leaders of Fortune 500 companies in the United States, asking for their opinions towards the skill that was important for one's career growth. Their answer was, overwhelmingly, listening comprehension, since it is considered a necessary skill in communication at every level.

Despite its importance, listening is not an easy skill to master, especially listening in the ESL or EFL contexts. Teachers have, therefore, sought methods to enhance their students' listening proficiency. Researchers and educators have long believed that learning strategies are essential for one to be a successful language learner. Studies on learning strategies have, thus, been conducted widely, especially to identify which strategies should be used to enhance each particular language skill.

### **Learning strategies: How they help improve students' listening proficiency**

There have been various studies and observations of how good language learners use strategies. For example, Rubin (1975) reported the strategies good language learners used to make them successful language learners. Paying attention to language patterns and analyzing them, willing to make mistakes, and trying to make accurate guesses were some of the strategies they used. Chamot, Küpper and Impink-Hernandez (1988) found that effective learners used a wider range of strategies, made more appropriate choices of strategies, seemed more goal-oriented and employed more use of both background and linguistic knowledge. Later, the work of Mangubhai (1991) showed the high proficiency group used more of the memory strategies than the low proficiency group. The latter used the translation strategy more and practiced less than the former group. Griffiths (2003) reported differences in the frequency of learning strategy use by higher-level students as compared to lower-level students. These included such strategies as starting conversations in English, reading for pleasure in English, trying to find patterns in English, and looking for similar words in their own language.

There have also been studies of listening strategies in the Thai context. Piamsai (2005) studied the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies by Thai university students during a listening test, using a listening strategies framework that was adopted from Oxford (1990). The study uncovered significant differences in the use of the strategies by the high-proficiency and the low-proficiency groups. The high listening ability group used both cognitive and metacognitive strategies significantly more than the low listening ability group. Pawapatcharodom (2007) also employed the same learning strategies framework to investigate how Thai university students use learning strategies. She found a moderate use of the strategies by the participants. Another study conducted by Naresuan University International College (NUIC) on the listening strategies that Thai students use to enhance their comprehension when listening to lectures showed that first-year students struggled when English was

used as a medium of teaching in class. Also, there was an inverse relationship between students' language proficiency level and their use of a translation strategy. In addition, this study found students' limited and inconsistent use of strategies which agree with the results of Pawapatcharaudom (2007).

### **The use of strategies to enhance the listening skill**

Regarding the use of learning strategies to enhance the listening process of a learner, in a study conducted by Piamsai (2005), the data and the interviews with the students showed that the high listening ability group used more cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Their choices of strategies were also more appropriate. They included (as opposed to translating) rule-applying strategy, note-taking strategy, and planning strategy. In another study, a group of researchers (Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal and Tafaghodtari, 2006) also reported the importance of the use of metacognitive strategies when students are engaged in listening tasks. They investigated learners' metacognitive awareness and their use of strategies when students were performing listening tasks. The strategies included prediction, monitoring, evaluating and problem solving, which are believed to enhance the development of students' self-regulated listening. These studies indicate that learning strategies have a strong association with successful learning; however, the results vary according to contexts, participants and observed skills. Also, the learning strategies involved in processing the listening input, compared to the strategies engaged in performing a reading task, are less investigated, although they are considered a foundation for language learning.

### **Listening strategies framework**

The study of the strategies good learners use when they work on a listening task will enhance classroom teaching and learning, and the benefits will reach beyond the classroom. Although it is still unclear whose classification best presents learning strategies, and should be adopted, in this study Oxford's 6-factor learning strategy

taxonomy (1990) is used. Hsiao and Oxford (2002) found that despite its failure to provide a complete fit for the data, Oxford's taxonomy, in comparison to Rubin's (1981) or O'Malley and Chamot's (1990), can best describe learners' strategy use. Her taxonomy, also known as Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), is divided into direct strategies, which are the strategies directly involving the target language, i.e. memory, cognitive and compensation strategies, and indirect strategies, which give indirect support for language learning, i.e. metacognitive, affective and social strategies. In addition, Oxford claimed that all strategies mutually support one another, and help enhance language performance. This study, therefore, will investigate all of the direct and indirect strategies proposed in Oxford's taxonomy with a focus on the listening strategies, which good language learners use while performing a listening task.

### **Research questions**

1. Are there any differences in the reported listening strategy use by the high listening ability and the low listening ability groups?
2. Are there any differences in the actual use of listening strategies by the high listening ability and the low listening ability groups when they are performing a listening task?

### **Methodology**

#### **Population and samples**

The population was 580 third-year students from the Faculty of Commerce and Accountancy, Chulalongkorn University. The data were collected in the second semester of the academic year 2007. The students took the Business English Oral Communication course in the first semester, and were about to complete the Advanced English Business Oral Communication course in the second semester.

There were 2 stages of population sampling. The first stage involved dividing the students into groups based on their proficiency by considering the following criteria: their grades from the Business English Oral Communication course, their listening scores on the

mid-term and the final examinations of the Business English Oral Communication course, and their listening scores on the mid-term exam of the Advanced Business English Oral Communication course. The high listening ability group was determined by their scores of at or above 1 SD, while the low listening ability group's scores were set at or below -1SD. This was to ensure that these two groups possessed significantly different listening proficiency. There were 34 high listening ability students and 31 low listening ability students. In the second stage, the random sampling technique was used to select students from the 2 groups to participate in the verbal protocol data collection. There were 11 students from the high listening ability group and 7 students from the low listening ability group. The difference in student numbers was due to the absence of the students on the day of the data collection and their misunderstanding of the instructions.

For the quantitative part, since the number of the students in the two groups was different, Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was used to assess the equality of variances (Table 1). No significant difference between the scores of the high listening ability group and the low listening ability group was found.

**Table 1:** Levene's Test for Equality of Variances of the Two Sample Groups

	F	Sig.	t	d
Equal variances assumed	1.356	.249	3.552	63

### Research Instruments

There were two main instruments in this research study. They were the listening strategies questionnaire and the listening tasks (lectures).

1. *The listening strategy questionnaire* was developed based on the SILL questionnaire proposed by Oxford (1990). The questionnaire

was constructed under the direct and indirect strategies framework, and only the questions related to the listening strategies were included. There were 36 questions divided into 6 parts: (1) the strategies used to have exposure to English, (2) the strategies used to help the students become familiar with English pronunciation, (3) the strategies used to reduce anxiety, (4) the strategies used to prepare them before listening tasks, (5) the strategies used when listening to listening excerpts, and (6) the strategies used when they do not understand the listening input (See Appendix 1).

However, only the strategies relating to the listening skill were represented in the questionnaire (See Appendix 2). The questionnaire was validated by three experts to assure face validity and construct validity. After revision, the questionnaire was tested with a comparable group of 46 students. Cronbach Alpha was used to evaluate its reliability. The result showed a high reliability of .93.

2. *The listening task* referred to the task that the students performed so that their use of the listening strategies could be elicited through a verbal protocol technique. The students were asked to listen to lectures and summarize what they heard after the pauses. There were 3 lectures representing 3 main stages of the task: example, trial and main. The students were required to listen to 3 listening excerpts, and give details about their use of strategies. After they heard the speaker say pause, they had to (1) summarize what they heard, (2) talk about the strategies that they used to complete the task, and (3) describe how they managed to understand what they heard when they encountered problems in listening. The excerpts were adapted from the TOEFL listening exam scripts. The chosen excerpts were approved by three experienced language teachers in terms of their length, topics, level of difficulty and appropriateness of pauses. The questions on the task were also validated by the same group of experts to they matched the objectives, as well as being able to draw forth students' listening strategies. The summarizing tasks were used because they are considered difficult tasks (Anderson & Lynch, 1988), requiring advanced knowledge and skills, including

both bottom-up and top-down knowledge. They should, therefore, be able to elicit various types of strategies.

### **Data Collection**

The data were collected via the listening strategies questionnaire and the verbal protocols.

1. With regard to the listening strategies questionnaire, the students' use of direct and indirect listening strategies was obtained. There were questions related to how the students employed the six types of listening strategies. The data were collected from 65 students (34 high listening ability and 31 low listening ability students).

2. The second phase of data collection dealt with the students' verbatim transcription obtained from their reflection on what they had heard. The think-aloud technique was used to call forth the strategies that the students used. Firstly, the students were asked to listen to a short lecture. The lecture was paused after every unit of thought. Then, the students had to give details based on the prompts, as mentioned earlier. This was to ensure that they still had fresh memories of the strategies they had just used. The teacher showed them how to express their opinions and talk about the strategies that they used. They were then asked to try out the second lecture, and followed the same process for further practice. When they were more familiar with the task, they repeated the same steps with the last lecture. The whole process was conducted on the computer, where their protocols were also recorded. Only the protocols from the last lecture were analyzed.

### **Data Analysis**

To answer the two research questions, the following methods of data analysis were employed.

1. Regarding the first objective, descriptive statistics was used to explore the students' report on their use of the listening strategies

on the questionnaire. To compare the mean scores of the two groups' strategy use, the Independent t-test was used to determine if there were any differences in the reported listening strategies employed by the high listening ability and the low listening ability groups.

2. The students' verbatim obtained from the think-aloud protocols were transcribed and analyzed by the researcher and another expert based on the Oxford framework. The analyses were compared, and further discussion was undertaken if disagreements occurred.

## Results

1. The data obtained from the questionnaire showed that there was a significant difference in the high and the low listening ability groups' report on their strategy use. (The strategy numbers presented below correspond with the numbers on the questionnaire (Appendix 2)).

On the questionnaire part 1, "the strategies that the students used to have exposure to English", the results revealed significantly more attempts to be exposed to English by the high listening ability group than their counterparts, as follows:

- participating in other activities outside class that give them opportunities to practice the language (strategy no. 1;  $t = 2.712^*$ )
- trying to find opportunities to listen to the radio, watch English TV programs or watch English soundtrack movies (strategy no. 2;  $t = 6.293^*$ )
- paying attention when overhearing English conversations, and trying to capture what the interlocutors are saying (strategy no. 3;  $t = 2.425^*$ )
- always practicing the English listening skill (strategy no. 5;  $t = 4.351^*$ )
- practicing listening to real-life listening excerpts like weather

forecasts (strategy no. 6;  $t = 3.668^*$ )

Regarding Part 2, which concerns the strategies that help familiarize the students with English pronunciation, no significant differences in the use of the strategies between the two groups were found.

In Part 3, “the strategies used to reduce anxiety”, there was a significant difference in how both groups of students encouraged each other. The low listening ability students reported that they encouraged themselves through compliments or gifts when they did well in their studies or on an exam (strategy no. 11;  $t = -2.188^*$ ).

Part 4 concerns the strategies students used to prepare themselves before listening tasks. There was a significant difference in both groups' use of predicting strategies. The high listening ability group said they predicted what was going to be said next by using the information previously heard (strategy no. 15;  $t = 2.383^*$ ).

Part 5 shows the strategies used when listening to listening excerpts. The high listening ability group reported their use of the following strategies significantly more than the low listening ability group:

- capturing keywords that convey the main idea of the listening input (strategy no. 18;  $t = 4.165^*$ )
- trying to understand what they are listening to, but not translating word by word (strategy no. 22;  $t = 5.444^*$ )
- trying to understand the context of the listening input (strategy no. 24;  $t = 2.922^*$ )
- listening to the details for more understanding or to prepare to answer questions (strategy no. 25;  $t = 2.221^*$ )
- noting only keywords rather than writing down every single word they heard (strategy no. 26;  $t = 2.920^*$ )
- linking new information to their background knowledge or information they already have (strategy no. 27;  $t = 3.578^*$ )

- visualizing or using their imagination concerning the topics they are listening to (strategy no. 28;  $t = 4.219^*$ )

However, there was also a significantly greater use of the translating strategy by the low listening group. They said while listening, they translated what they heard into Thai (strategy no. 23;  $t = -2.911^*$ ).

Part 6 on the questionnaire dealt with the strategies used when students do not understand the listening input. The high listening ability group used significantly more of the following strategies than the lower ability group:

- asking for clarification when they did not understand (strategy no. 32;  $t = 1.999^*$ ) – making an educated guess based on the clues that they had e.g. guessing from vocabulary they heard (strategy no. 34;  $t = 2.647^*$ )
- using background knowledge to enhance comprehension (strategy no. 35;  $t = 2.625^*$ ) – observing speakers' gestures for better understanding (strategy no. 36;  $t = 2.735^*$ )

2. The think-aloud technique was used to investigate the high listening ability and the low listening ability groups' actual use of the listening strategies in a listening-to-lecture task. The results are shown in Table 2 below.

**Table 2:** Report on the Frequency of the Listening Strategy Use by the High Listening Ability (HLA) and the Low Listening Ability (LLA) Groups (Only the parts related to the listening-to-lecture task are shown in the table.)

<b>The strategies used to prepare myself before listening to English excerpts</b>	<b>HLA (Average Use)</b>	<b>LLA (Average Use)</b>
14. I pay attention to language elements e.g. pronunciation, intonation, etc.	-	-
15. I try to make a prediction of what is going to be said next by using the information I heard earlier.	.09	-
16. I preview related information to what I am going to listen to if I know what it is going to be about.	-	-
17. I clearly identify the purpose of the language activities before listening.	.09	.42
<b>The strategies used when I am listening to an English excerpt</b>		
18. I listen for key words to get the main idea.	3.27	4.42
19. I use memory strategies to retrieve the information I heard.	1.18	-
20. I pay attention to word and sentence stresses to enhance my understanding.	.36	1
21. I capture the main idea and drop the details that are not important.	4.9	1.7
22. I try to understand without translating word-for-word.	3.64	.86
23. I translate English listening inputs into Thai.	.27	5
24. I try to understand the context that is being mentioned.	1.09	1.14
25. I listen for details for better comprehension and for questions.	-	.86
26. I note down only the key words instead of noting down every word.	1.45	2.71
27. I relate new information to what I know.	.73	-

<b>The strategies used when I am listening to an English excerpts</b>	<b>HLA (Average Use)</b>	<b>LLA (Average Use)</b>
28. I visualize the information being said while listening.	.55	.29
29. I make notes systematically by organizing according to relationships, topics, etc.	.27	-
<b>The strategies used when I do not understand</b>		
30. I ask for a repetition when I do not understand or cannot clearly hear the speaker.	-	
31. I ask the speaker to slow down when he speaks too fast.	-	
32. I ask the speaker to clarify when I do not understand.	-	
33. I pay attention to the tone of the speaker to help me understand better.	-	
34. I make good guesses by using clues.	.55	.14
35. I use my background knowledge to help me understand better.	.09	
36. I pay attention to physical gestures of the speakers for better understanding.	-	

According to Table 2, the average use of the strategies showed that getting the main idea (strategy no. 21) is the strategy that the high proficiency students used the most ( $x = 4.9$ ), followed by avoiding translating word-for-word (strategy no. 22;  $x = 3.64$ ), and capturing key words (strategy no. 18;  $x = 3.27$ ). The students' average use of note-taking (strategy no. 26), memorizing information (strategy no. 19) and context clues (strategy no. 24) were 1.45, 1.18 and 1.09, respectively. The strategies which were not greatly used, on average, were linking new information to their existing knowledge (strategy no. 27;  $x = .73$ ), imagining what was being said (strategy no. 28;  $x = .55$ ), making accurate/intelligent guesses (strategy no. 34;  $x = .55$ ), paying attention to stress as a linguistic clue (strategy no. 20;  $x = .36$ ), translating into Thai (strategy no. 23;  $x = .27$ ), and systematically taking notes (strategy no. 29;  $x = .27$ ). The other three strategies reported to be used by the students were guessing by using previous

information (strategy no. 15), identifying the purpose of the task (strategy no. 17), and using their background knowledge to enhance their understanding (strategy no. 35). These strategies were used only .09 on average.

Table 2 also showed that the low ability group used the strategies while they listened to the lecture more than strategies used for preparation and for when they did not understand. When considering the average use of strategies per student, it can be seen that the translating strategy (strategy no. 23) was the most popular among them, with an average of 5. The keyword capturing strategy (strategy no. 18) was also greatly used, with an average of 4.42. The average use of the note-taking (strategy no. 26) and the main idea getting strategies (strategy no. 21) were 2.71 and 1.7, respectively. The average use of context clues (strategy no. 24), paying attention to stress as a linguistic clue (strategy no. 20), avoiding translating word for word (strategy no. 22), and listening for details (strategy no. 25) were not shown in great number. The average numbers were 1.14, 1, and .86, respectively. The rest of the strategies that the students reported that they used, namely identifying the purpose of the task (strategy no. 17), imagining what was being said (strategy no. 28), and making accurate/intelligent guesses (strategy no. 34), were .42, .49 and .14 on average.

When comparing the average use of the two groups, the figures clearly show that the high proficiency group used the main idea getting strategy (strategy no. 21) the most while the other group relied on the translating strategy (strategy no. 23). In addition, there were also differences in their frequent use of other strategies. The high ability group avoided translating word-for-word (strategy no. 22) and tried to capture keywords (strategy no. 18). These strategies were ranked in the top three strategies that they used. Regarding the low ability group, they reported as their top three strategies their use of the capturing the keywords strategy (strategy no. 18) as well as their use of the note-taking strategy (strategy no. 26).

## Discussion

1. Overall, the high listening ability students reported more use of strategies than the low listening ability group. The findings corresponded with numerous strategy-related studies like in Chamot, Kupper and Impink-Hernandez (1988), Griffiths (2003), Liu (2004), and Piamsai (2005). The data obtained from the questionnaire, which asks students' general use of the listening strategies, clearly illustrated that good learners tried to find opportunities to expose themselves to the target language and paid attention to the language elements, including structures, pronunciation or lexis, more than their counterparts. Some research studies, such as those conducted by Rubin (1975) and Griffiths (2003), also discussed how good language learners attempted to look for language patterns and analyze them. In Mangubhai (1991), it was found that the low ability learners practiced less than the high ability learners. For Wenden's study (1987), similar results were found. Good language learners practice, take a course, think in the target language, have positive attitudes, are mentally active and can bear mistakes that they make. It is always true that the more learners practice and are exposed to the target language, the better users of the language they will become.

However, for the strategies that they employed to reduce their anxiety, there were no significant differences in most of the methods used, except for the compliments and the rewards that the low listening ability group reported that they gave themselves. This might be because the high listening ability group, with sufficient knowledge in the target language, gained more confidence in using the language, which resulted in no emphasis on the reduction of anxiety or the self-presentation of rewards.

The other strategy used during listening, which the low listening ability group employed more than the high listening ability group, was the translation strategy which the high listening ability group rarely used, especially word-for-word translation. Piamsai (2005) explained that the use of this strategy negatively affected the students' performance perhaps because, as Duzer (1997) said, the listening processes occurred in a simultaneous and rapid manner,

and translation, especially word-for-word, will slow the decoding process. Vandergrift (2003) and Mangubhai (1991) also reported the greater use of the translation strategy by the non-advanced group as compared to that of the advanced group. Vandergrift (2003) emphasized that the strategy was not popular among the advanced learners, and they tended not to depend on it. Moreover, the strategies that the high listening ability group used before and during the listening task corresponded with the skills that language learners need to master or that are taught in language classrooms. They are making predictions, listening for the main idea, using context clues, listening for details, taking notes, using background knowledge about the topic, and picturing what is being listened to. There is, therefore, no doubt why a good language learner who can master the use of these strategies will be able to perform well on a listening task. Regarding the use of background knowledge, numerous studies on the use of background knowledge have shown positive results. Many researchers found that it helps facilitate understanding, especially the background knowledge concerning the content of the text (Kreutanu, 1998 and Sadighi and Zare, 2006). Others such as Chiang and Dunkel (1992) reported that familiarizing learners with the topics they are going to listen to will benefit not only the advanced language learners, but also the non-advanced ones.

Also, for the strategies that are used to assist when students have problems understanding, the findings clearly showed that the advanced group was more strategic in seeking help. They reported more use of clarification, guessing vocabulary from context, using background knowledge and observing speakers' gestures than the non-advanced group. This reflected their appropriate use of the strategies.

2. It can be concluded that the high listening ability group had an insight into what the purpose of the task was. Since the question asked was to summarize what they listened to, they chose to capture the main idea of the lecture instead of the details and to listen to the key words that would help them understand it. Successful language learners were reported to be able to use the strategies appropriately

for the task that they were engaging in, since different types of tasks require different types of strategies (Najar, 2004). The strategies they used were appropriate, as they concentrated on the purpose of the task. Piamsai (2005), and Chamot, Küpper and Impink-Hernandez (1988) also reported on the high level students' appropriate use of strategies and how they were goal-oriented. The translation strategy was, therefore, avoided with most high ability students making comments as follows:

*Student 1 (high listening ability group):* "...I took notes and considered the context. I did not translate into Thai. I understood it immediately..."

*Student 3 (high listening ability group):* "...The strategy that I used was trying not to translate word-for-word. I didn't translate it into Thai because I was afraid not to be able to catch up with the rest of the content...I listened to key words and took notes..."

*Student 5 (high listening ability group):* "...I paid attention to what I was listening to. I didn't translate every word. I tried to capture the main idea and important key words..."

*Student 6 (high listening ability group):* "...I listened for the main idea and tried to take in what I was listening to in English...I didn't translate it into Thai..."

*Student 11 (high listening ability group):* "...I memorized what had been said...I didn't translate into Thai because it would create confusion..."

This might be because they possessed enough linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge to process the listening input automatically as the listening process is rather automatic (Duzer, 1997).

When they encountered problems, they tended to find more help by using additional strategies, such as guessing from the context or linking what they were listening to what had already been said.

*Student 9 (high listening ability group):* "...I tried not to concentrate too much and not to translate into Thai. There were some words I did not know. I guessed their meaning from the context...The strategy I used was to listen and try to digest the information. I linked what I had just listened to the information I kept from the beginning..."

*Student 11 (high listening ability group):* "...I made an attempt to guess the meaning of the vocabulary I did not know. I linked the information I just took in to what I knew, and to the information I listened to at first..."

This showed that they were quite careful when making guesses. This result corresponded with Rubin's (1975) remark that good language learners try to make accurate guesses.

Regarding the low listening ability group, despite the low listening ability group's use of the same strategies (i.e. capturing the main idea and key words) as the high listening group, they also used a lot of translation strategy, which showed inappropriate combination of choosing strategies.

*Student 1 (low listening ability group):* "...The strategies that I used were listening for key words and translated what I listened to into Thai so that I could memorize the content...I translated into Thai first, and then looked at the context..."

*Student 3 (low listening ability group):* "...I tried to catch the key words and translated what I listened to into Thai. Then, I thought along what the speaker was saying...I listened to the key words, and paid attention to the stress. After that I translated what I had heard into Thai..."

Many researchers such as Jianling (2005) and Mangubhai (1991) agree that this is a wrong choice for strategy use. They explained that the low ability group made use of this strategy more

than the high ability group, and as Jianling (2005) emphasized, it negatively affected their performance. However, when compared to the high ability group, the low ability group did not report on capturing the main idea and the key words as frequently as the high ability group as many studies, including Piamsai (2005), revealed more frequent use of appropriate strategies by the high ability group than the low ability one.

According to Brindley (1997) and Yi'an (1989), both linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge are required for one to understand a listening input. This accounted for the reason why the low listening ability group could not understand the lecture as much as their counterparts did. In spite of their reported use of strategies, it seemed that the main factor that obstructed them from understanding the lecture was their vocabulary knowledge.

*Student 4 (low listening ability group):* "...I had the same problem again. I could not follow the lecture, and I did not know the vocabulary. I made guesses..."

*Student 6 (low listening ability group):* "...My problem was that I could not keep up with what the speaker was saying and I didn't know the vocabulary...I could not capture the main idea..."

Moreover, when faced with a problem, they did not make an intelligent guess, unlike the high ability group.

*Student 1 (low listening ability group):* "...The problem was I did not understand what was said, so I simply guessed..."

*Student 7 (low listening ability group):* "...The problem repeated itself. I could not follow the lecture. I did not know the vocabulary. I solved the problem by making guesses..."

According to the findings, there were several factors that both

groups mentioned as barriers to their understanding. These factors included speed.

*Student 3 (low listening ability group):* “...In this part of the listening, I found that the problem was the speaker spoke too fast for me to follow... (He repeated the same problem several times.)”

*Student 5 (high listening ability group):* “...Sometimes the speaker spoke too quickly. I would like to listen to that part again...”

This was supported by the work conducted by Griffiths (1992). He found that speakers' speed did affect learners' comprehension, especially the low listening ability group.

The other factor that was mentioned, as was in Brownell (2002), was the length of the input that they were listening to. When they had to listen to longer units of thought, even the high listening ability group complained that it affected their ability to comprehend the lecture. *Student 2 (high listening ability group):* “...The problem I found was this part was too long. I could not capture all of the information. So, I tried to get the overall idea...”

*Student 4 (high listening ability group):* “...This part of the lecture was rather long, so I should focus on the main idea...”

*Student 8 (high listening ability group):* “...This part made me confused since it was quite lengthy. I could not capture the main idea. I tried to guess from the information I had...”

Other factors were anxiety and concentration, which were internal factors that could affect listening comprehension as well.

*Student 2 (high listening ability group):* “...When I did not concentrate much, I was lost and could not understand anything. The strategies I used to help me were to focus on the main idea, not to translate, link the new

information to what I previously knew or heard...”

*Student 7 (low listening ability group):* “...I was anxious when I was listening to the lecture because I did not know when the lecture would be paused...The sentences were longer and longer, which drove me crazy. I could not concentrate. I was too nervous...”

### **Implication**

According to the findings, this study confirmed that students with high proficiency in second language listening use more strategies as compared to the low proficiency ones, corresponding to many previous research studies e.g. Chamot, Küpper and Impink-Hernandez (1988), Griffiths (2003), Liu (2004) and Piamsai (2005). Good language learners also take more responsibility for their learning. For example, they practice more; they try to find opportunities to be exposed to the language; they find ways to deal with problems in communication, etc., which is similar to what was found in other studies such as those done by Rubin (1975), Wenden (1987), and Griffiths (2003). Moreover, the high ability students know which strategies are helpful. In other words, they know how to use them appropriately. They know that they have to make predictions, capture the main idea, use context clues, take good notes, make intelligent guesses etc. Moreover, they are more goal-oriented, leading them to success, because they can choose appropriate strategies.

On the other hand, low ability students are still not able to process listening input automatically. They, therefore, depend heavily on the word-for-word translation strategy to help them gain comprehension. This strategy is not considered a great help for them when performing a listening task, especially a long one, since the listening processes occurs in a simultaneous and rapid manner (Duzer, 1997).

Should teachers train students to use listening strategies? Training students to use listening strategies would be of great help as suggested by Carrier (2003) and Coskun (2010); however, strategy

training alone might not lead to real improvement in one's comprehension. Language teachers also have to enhance learners' linguistic knowledge or the knowledge of the language e.g. structures, vocabulary, etc. Both linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge is required for one to understand a listening input (Brindley, 1997; Yi'an, 1989).

### **Conclusion and recommendation**

This study was an attempt to investigate how proficient and non-proficient language learners used their strategies while completing a listening task. Both quantitative and qualitative methods used to collect the data showed that they needed both the knowledge of the language in every aspect, and that of the strategies. They must also know how to use them appropriately. The findings confirmed those of the previous studies in that the proficient and the non-proficient language learners used strategies differently. The data obtained from the proficient students suggest that it is very important that language teachers put emphasis on teaching linguistic knowledge, such as grammar and vocabulary as this will help enhance students' comprehension. The knowledge of language that the students need is that of vocabulary and grammatical structures. At the same time, students should be trained about how to effectively use listening strategies. The more strategies they know, the more beneficial it will be for them. They also have to know how to opt for appropriate strategies, which teachers may achieve by coaching them to use a particular strategy for a particular task, as the proficient students are usually aware of the purpose of the task they are dealing with.

Teaching them how to use appropriate listening strategies is also important. For example, the translation strategy should be employed with care, as word-for-word translation can interrupt the flow of the listening process. Moreover, as background knowledge is one of the keys to success, teachers can also expose their students to a wide variety of topics and vocabulary related to various topics, which can help improve their understanding. Furthermore, as

listening to lectures usually involves listening for main ideas, guessing the meaning of vocabulary from context clues, listening for details, taking notes effectively and systematically, and picturing what is being listened to, getting the students to practice these skills in class will enhance their comprehension. Building up their confidence and having them practice concentrating on listening content will also be advantageous.

In the future, as different tasks, contexts, populations and other factors can affect students' strategy use, it may be beneficial if more studies on the listening strategies are conducted in relation to those aspects.

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**Appendix 1**  
**Details of the Direct and Indirect Strategies**  
**(Oxford, 1990)**

**Direct Strategies**

**1. Memory Strategies:** Learners use memory strategies to keep and recall the listening information. When they listen to a message, they will use this strategy to store important information and retrieve it when it is needed. Memory strategies include the following sub-strategies.

1.1 creating mental linkage

1.1.1 associating/elaborating: Learners use this strategy to link new information they hear to familiar concepts stored in their memory. This strategy promotes comprehension and helps them remember new information more easily. For example, a student hears the word “billboard”, and then associates it to the word “board” that she already knows. This enables her to understand the word and remember it quickly.

1.2 applying images and sounds

1.2.1 using imagery: Learners create mental images about what they hear when using this strategy. For example, with an attempt to memorize a set of household chores, a learner makes a mental image of the situations related to the chores.

1.2.2 semantic mapping: Learners, when using this strategy, create a semantic map on paper by arranging concepts and relationships in diagrams, columns, etc.

1.3 using memory strategies for retrieval

1.3.1 using memory strategies for retrieval: Learners make use of memory strategies to retrieve the information they hear so that they can employ the information in communication.

**2. Cognitive Strategies:** Generally, researchers define cognitive strategies as ‘actions or behaviors’ that learners invoke during language learning, language use or language testing. They include:

2.1 practicing

2.1.1 repeating: Learners repeatedly listen to any type of listening input delivered by native speakers of English. For example, a learner listens to weather reports every day until he is familiar with the terms used in this kind of news.

2.1.2 formally practicing with sounds: Learners practice pronunciation of English sounds. This strategy focuses more on the perceptions of sounds than comprehension of meaning. For example, a learner listens to the letters “ough” in various words such as “through”, “though”, “tough” and “trough”, and then creates his or her own spelling of the words such as “throo”, “thow”, “tuff” and “troff”, respectively.

2.1.3 practicing naturalistically: Learners practice listening to authentic listening materials such as news reports, weather forecasts, etc.

2.2 receiving and sending messages

2.2.1 getting the idea quickly: Learners effectively use the skimming and the scanning strategies to focus on the main idea or the details of what they heard. For example, a learner has to get the main idea of a talk on American architecture while the other has to listen for details concerning ages, names and professions of three visitors from South America.

2.3 analyzing and reasoning

2.3.1 translating: Learners employ this strategy to help them understand what they hear in the new language based on their first language. However, this strategy must be used with care, since word-for-word translation can lead to wrong interpretation of what is heard.

## 2.4 creating structure for input and output

2.4.1 taking notes: Taking notes is an important strategy which is not generally taught in class. Learners can take notes in both their mother tongue and their target language at the same time. Taking notes on the key points should be more effective than jotting down every word they hear like what they do in a dictation exercise.

**3. Compensation Strategies:** Compensation strategies are claimed to help learners, especially beginning and intermediate learners, deal with difficult tasks beyond their knowledge. They are also helpful for advanced students when they come across the same situation.

### 3.1 guessing intelligently

3.1.1 using linguistic clues: Learners use English knowledge previously learned to promote their comprehension. Linguistic clues are the clues taken purely from knowledge of the target language, including knowledge concerning grammar, vocabulary, stress patterns, etc. For example, a learner hears the words “shovel”, “grass”, “mower” and “lawn”. So, he guesses that the talk must be about gardening.

3.1.2 using other clues: Learners use clues that come from other sources that are not from knowledge of the target language. For example, observation of nonverbal behavior such as tone, facial expression, emphasis, body language, and background noise is a way to use non-linguistic clues to promote comprehension.

## **Indirect Strategies**

**4. Metacognitive Strategies:** Metacognitive strategies are considered self-management. Theoretically, they have a certain influence on or govern cognitive strategies. According to Oxford (1990), metacognitive strategies are as follows:

### 4.1 centering your learning

4.1.1 overviewing and linking with already known material: Learners

use this strategy to preview the new information received and link it with what they know. For instance, a learner looks over vocabulary concerning what he/she is going to listen to, and adds more relevant words to the list.

- 4.1.2 paying attention: Paying attention consists of two modes: directed attention and selective attention. For direct attention, learners focus or concentrate on what they are listening to and avoid all distractors, while selective attention involves their attempts to focus on particular details. For instance, a learner directs his attention back to a talk that he has to listen to. As he realizes that the talk is about catching a plane at the airport, he chooses to concentrate on listening to the announcements about times of arrival and departure. This also includes students' selective attention to certain elements of English such as pronunciation, style, etc.

#### 4.2 arranging and planning your learning

- 4.2.1 identifying the purpose of a language task: Learners try to figure out the purpose of the listening task they are dealing with to gear them in the right direction.
- 4.2.2 seeking practice opportunities: Learners seek out or create opportunities to practice their English. This includes the opportunities to do so outside classrooms since practicing in the classroom alone is still insufficient. For instance, a learner may choose to practice her listening skill by listening to English songs.

**5. Affective Strategies:** Affective strategies refer to the strategies that learners use to control factors such as emotions, attitudes, motivations, and values.

#### 5.1 lowering your anxiety

- 5.1.1 using progressive relaxation, deep breathing or meditation: Learners try to reduce their anxiety via the stated methods.

## 5.2 encouraging yourself

5.2.1 making positive statements or rewarding yourself: Learners encourage themselves by making positive statements about their learning process or promising to reward themselves when they do a good job in learning a language or taking an English test. The rewards can be either tangible or intangible ones, varying from one person to another.

## 5.3 taking your emotional temperature

5.3.1 writing a language learning diary: Learners keep journals or diaries expressing their feelings, attitudes, and perceptions towards their English learning. They can also write about the strategies that they use based on their effectiveness.

5.3.2 discussing your feelings with someone: Instead of writing in their journals, some learners choose to discuss their feelings, attitudes and perceptions towards their learning process by sharing them with others. These people include their friends, parents, native speakers, etc. This strategy can show learners the way to be better language learners.

## **6. Social Strategies:**

### 6.1 asking questions

6.1.1 asking for clarification or verification: Learners ask the other interlocutor, usually the more proficient speaker, to slow down, repeat, simplify, or explain what they do not understand to assure their comprehension of the messages conveyed.

### 6.2 empathizing with others

6.2.1 developing cultural understanding: Learners study the culture of the speakers of English to ease their language learning process, and help themselves gain more insights into what they listen to.

## Appendix 2

### Listening Strategy Questionnaire

**Directions:** This questionnaire will be used to collect your use of listening strategies. Please complete your personal information in the first part and answer the questions in part 2. The information will be used only for a research purpose.

#### Part I

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Date: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_
3. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female
5. Tel: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Mother tongue: \_\_\_\_\_
7. Language(s) you speak at home \_\_\_\_\_
8. How long have you been studying the language listed in #7?  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. In your opinion, which of the following descriptions matches your English ability *when compared to others in class*?  
Very good      Good      Fair      Needs improvement
10. In your opinion, which of the following descriptions matches your English ability *when compared to native speakers of English*?  
Very good      Good      Fair      Needs improvement
11. In your opinion, how important is it to know how to use English?  
Very important      Important      Not important

12. You would like to study English because \_\_\_\_\_ (There can be more than one answers.) \_\_\_\_\_ you are interested in English.

\_\_\_\_\_ you are interested in English-speaking culture.

\_\_\_\_\_ you have friends who speak English.

\_\_\_\_\_ you need to study English because it is a requirement in the program you are studying.

\_\_\_\_\_ it is important for your future career.

\_\_\_\_\_ it is important for traveling.

\_\_\_\_\_ other reasons: \_\_\_\_\_

13. You like to study foreign languages      YES      NO

14. Apart from English, the language(s) that you study is/are

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15. Favorite experiences in learning English

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**Part II**

Put an X in the box that shows the response (1, 2, 3, 4 or 5) that tells how true the statement is. Numbers 1-5 refer to the following answers.

1. Never or almost never true of me
2. Generally not true of me
3. Somewhat true of me
4. Generally true of me
5. Always or almost always true of me

<b>The strategies used to expose myself to English</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
1. I attend and participate in out-of-class events where English is					
2. I watch TV shows or movies or listen to the radio in English.					
3. I pay attention when someone is speaking English.					
4. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.					
5. I practice the English listening skill regularly.					
6. I practice listening to real life listening input like weather					
<b>The strategies used to make myself familiar with English</b>					
7. I practice the English sounds that are different from those in					
8. I create associations between new English words and familiar					
9. I ask native speakers when I encounter new words.					
<b>The strategies used to reduce anxiety</b>					
10. I try to relax by taking a deep breath, calming my nerves etc.					
11. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.					
12. I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.					
13. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning					
<b>The strategies used to prepare myself before listening to English excerpts</b>					
14. I pay attention to language elements e.g. pronunciation, intonation, etc.					
15. I try to make a prediction of what is going to be said next by using the information I heard earlier.					

16. I preview information related to what I am going to listen to if I know what it is going to be about.					
17. I clearly identify the purpose of the language activities before listening.					
<b>The strategies used when I am listening to an English</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
18. I listen for keywords to get the main idea.					
19. I use memory strategies to retrieve the information I heard.					
20. I pay attention to word and sentence stresses to enhance my understanding.					
21. I capture the main idea and drop the details that are not					
22. I try to understand without translating word-for-word.					
23. I translate English listening input into Thai.					
24. I try to understand the context that is being mentioned.					
25. I listen for details for better comprehension and for					
26. I note down only the key words instead of noting down every					
27. I relate new information to what I know.					
28. I visualize the information being said while listening.					
29. I make notes systematically by organizing according to relationships, topics, etc.					
<b>The strategies used when I do not understand</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
30. I ask for a repetition when I do not understand or cannot clearly hear the speaker.					
31. I ask the speaker to slow down when he/she speaks too fast.					
32. I ask the speaker to clarify when I do not understand.					
33. I pay attention to the tone of the speaker to help me understand better.					
34. I make good guesses by using clues					
35. I use my background knowledge to help me understand					
36. I pay attention to the physical gestures of the speakers for better understanding.					

**Thank you for your cooperation**

