

## **First-year university students' agency as a mechanism to improve listening skills in English as a Foreign Language**

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### **Abstract**

This paper addresses the question, 'What is the agency of first-year English as Foreign Language (EFL) students in acquiring listening skills at universities?' Few studies have paid attention to this topic and this paper contributes knowledge to narrow this gap. It draws from a study that explored the influence of the English Listening course of Ethiopian universities on first-year EFL students' listening skills. A total of 35 first-year students from three universities participated in the focus-group interview, and four instructors from the three universities participated in the individual-based interview. Thematic data analysis was followed, using ATLAS.ti7 to guide the process. Findings indicate selectivity and decision-making as key agential concepts that promote the use of different strategies to learn listening skills in the EFL context. Recommendations are made on how students can break the barriers to listening in EFL classrooms through different agential initiatives.

**Keywords:** agency, listening strategies, listening skills, selectivity, decision-making

### **Introduction**

Higher education research has identified a number of general challenges that first-year students encounter at universities. These challenges include access to and engagement with the university in relation to academic and non-academic programmes (Kift 2015; Pather et al. 2017). There is also abundant studies on how first-year students can be supported to access education and knowledge and to engage fully in universities. To engage in the discussions about student support in this regard, Kift, Nelson, and Clarke (2010) use the concept of transition pedagogy as involving an engaging curriculum that is "embedded, integrated and coordinated with institutional practices". In this paper, we contribute to these discussions by focusing on the practices, experiences and challenges of first-year students in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in developing listening skills. We argue that such students face more difficulties than

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others: while they experience similar challenges to other first-year students, they also have to listen to and comprehend lessons delivered in a foreign language.

Research has shown that listening in EFL affects comprehension for first-year students, and that comprehension marks the difference between successful and struggling learners in language learning (Gilakjani and Sabouri 2016). As such, Kralova et al. (2017) argue that many studies on foreign language teaching and learning in the second half of the twentieth century were about the “feeling of worry, nervousness, and apprehension when learning a foreign language” (Hwang et al. 2016, 27). These feelings affect listening and comprehension abilities. Even listening to recorded materials can be a challenge for first-year students because of unfamiliar vocabulary, speed and length of listening content and the quality of recording (Gilakjani and Sabouri 2016).

While these challenges about listening in EFL have been recorded, many African universities use English as a medium of instruction. This situation makes relevant the question about how the challenge of listening and comprehension should be addressed in such contexts. The literature provides different perspectives in responding to this question. Among others, there is an assumption that teachers or instructors should be the main drivers of learning in EFL classrooms to address the listening and other general challenges related to learning, particularly for first-year students. For example, Liao and Wang (2015) blame instructors’ focus on content rather than on practical activities as a problem for Taiwanese EFL students. Some EFL students have been found to depend on teachers, expecting the teachers to summarise lectures, solve the problems and award credit for effort rather than to take responsibility for their own learning (Weimer 2017). They believe that the teachers should always provide study guides and give effortless assessments.

There is, however, still limited research on how students can use their agency to learn listening for comprehension. Even the researchers that acknowledge the role of students’ motivation and self-directedness in learning still place teachers at the driving position of this practice. For example, Weimer (2017) indicates that students’ motivation and self-directedness increase when teachers prompt students to do a variety of listening activities and if they empower students to assume responsibility for learning different listening strategies for activities. In this paper we agree that teachers have a huge role in encouraging and facilitating

different kinds of learning in EFL classrooms. However, we argue that the students' agency in learning the listening skills is also crucial and should form part of the debates in the field. As such, we developed this paper from a qualitative research project that analysed the influence of the English Listening course on the students' listening skills at three universities in Ethiopia. Students' agency was among the themes that emerged from that project.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: first, we provide the context or background of the research site for orientation purposes. Following this orientation, we present the theories of agency and relate them to learning. We then review literature that relates to listening in EFL classrooms, and explain the methodology we followed to collect and analyse data. Next, we present and discuss the research findings. The paper ends with the conclusions drawn from the research.

## **Context**

The research was conducted in Ethiopia where the majority of the populace does not speak English; some not even on a limited scale. The widely spoken languages in Ethiopia include Amharic and Aphan Oromo, but in the research sites, teaching was done in English. In the EFL courses, students were receiving lectures and seminars with dense information that demanded concentrated listening. This constituted a problem because many students had limited command of English, having attended schools where the mother tongue dominated instruction. Some of them had illiterate parents and family members, thus they spoke only their indigenous languages at home and in their surroundings. Furthermore, before entering these universities, some of these students rarely read English. These are conditions that could demotivate students from enrolling in the English courses, but those who did indeed decide to enrol in the courses could make efforts to address the challenges.

## **Agency and learning**

We approach this paper with a framework that understands first-year students in EFL classrooms not just as actors in learning, but also agents. We take this stance with no ignorance of the contested nature and multiplicity of understandings of the concept of agency, but ours adopts Karp's (1986) differentiation between actors and agents. According to Karp, actors are engaged in actions that are "governed or oriented", while agents exercise power to constitute effects and to realise their potential. Thus, as actors, the students would just follow specified rules on how

they should approach learning to listen in the classrooms and act as helpless conformers to the structural conditions. However, as agents they would take decisions that challenge the status quo and the situations they encounter about listening. Agency, therefore, is “the mediation between conscious intention and embodied habit uses ... It is about people having desires that grow out of their own structures of life” (Ortner 2001,p 81). Cochran (1990, 1991, 1997) and Cochran and Laub (1994) also define agency as a combination of human intentions and actions to make things happen. Cochran (1997,p 28) explains: “Action is an exercise of human agency, a person's power to act.”

Bandura (2006) identified four functions through which human agency is exercised. The first function is intentionality. Intentionality refers to meaning making, meaning interpretation, and meaning application (Chen 2002). In the context of students in the EFL classrooms, making meaning could mean listening and associating the spoken words with prior knowledge and then attempting to use the words in the activities. This association relates to the second function suggested by Bandura: the temporal extension of agency through forethought. People set themselves goals and foresee likely outcomes of prospective actions to guide and motivate their efforts anticipatorily. The third agential function is self-reactiveness. Chen (2002) states that self-reactiveness enables the self to regulate behaviour and to act according to a plan. The fourth agentic function is self-reflectiveness: people are self-examiners of their own functioning. Through functional self-awareness, they reflect on their personal efficacy, the soundness of their thoughts and actions and the meaning of their pursuits, and they make corrective adjustments if necessary.

These attributes suggest that students in EFL classrooms can make agential decisions on the strategies that we presented above and choose those that enable them to make, interpret, project, and apply meanings from listening texts. Decision-making is a core aspect of agency. For example, writing about agency of doctoral candidates, Botelho de Magalhães, Cotterall, and Mideros (2019) argue that agency involves deciding on the selection of literature and theories and people to consult. In this way, learning is heuristic and intentional. The use of strategies in a proper way could also help students to set goals and foresee outcomes that can guide and motivate them for further learning. They could also be self-reactive and self-reflective learners who take responsibility for their learning.

According to Ahearn (2001), an interest in human agency became more prominent among scholars in the late 1980s and early 1990s in response to transformation agendas in societies. Scholars began to question “how practices can either reproduce or transform the very structures that shape them” (Ahearn 2001,p110). In other words, research started to shift from structuralism to acknowledging the existence of multiple possibilities that include people’s agency in practice. In this paper we contribute to those views by presenting first-year students in EFL classrooms as agents to learning to listen.

### **Listening in English as a Foreign Language classrooms**

Listening is one of the most challenging skills to learn and to teach due to both internal and external factors (Hedge 2000; Hamouda 2013;Siegel 2014). Internal factors include students’ feelings of anxiety and insecurity when confronted with EFL listening activities (Field 2008), lack of motivation or interest towards the topic, and negative attitudes towards the foreign language (Hedge 2000). While teachers may assist students in dealing with these challenges, students may also take personal decisions to address them because the challenges are internal.

Hedge (2000) identified four external challenges to learning listening in EFL classrooms. The first one is inexplicitness of the English speaker, the teacher in this case. The English speakers may either be too fast or articulate words unclearly to the EFL students. The second external challenge, according to Hedge, may be environmental obstructions, such as noise. If there is a distracting noise in and around the classroom, students may not be able to make meaning and understand what they are listening to. In cases where teaching is done through devices, the voice or sound of recording may be unclear. This could be a third challenge while the fourth could be lack of visual support to assist listening through association. In light of these internal and external challenges to learning listening, we extended our literature review to understand the options that students and teachers in EFL contexts have to address them.

#### ***Students’ strategies to improve listening***

The literature identifies a variety of meta-cognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective strategies that may be followed to attain the required listening skills (Weinstein et al. 2004; Allison and Harklau 2010; Anderson 2005; Harris and Gasper 2001; Kumaravadivelu 2001). In different ways, these skills may assist EFL students in making meaning of the listening activities. First, the meta-cognitive strategies involve students’

identification of the aims of a task and application of specific features of the aural language input that make it easy to understand, such as planning, monitoring and evaluating to enable students to think about the process of learning (Serri, Boroujeni, and Hesabi 2012). Students who use meta-cognitive strategies can learn fast and outstandingly integrate the new knowledge to the existing. They can develop self-confidence to get help from partners, teachers, or family, and can observe and assess themselves (Gilakjani and Sabouri 2016). This suggests that learning can be easier where students stay with English speakers, which was not the case with the participants of this research project.

Second, the cognitive strategies are problem-solving methods that enable students to understand and gather input in short- or long-term memory (Gilakjani and Sabouri 2016). They have different sets, such as voice inference, paralinguistic or kinesics inference, extra linguistic inference and inference between parts (Vandergrift and Goh 2012). The inference strategies help learners to guess the meaning of unknown words or actions by linking them to the known ones. For example, voice inference strategy helps students to guess meaning using the tone of voice as a means while kinesis inferencing strategy helps them to guess the meaning of unknown words by referring to paralinguistic clues – expressions on face and actions. These two strategies, therefore, have little to do with what a student may read from texts later on, but more about listening and observing for comprehension. On the other hand, the extra-linguistic inferencing strategy assists students in guessing meaning in a text, while with the inferencing between parts strategy students can make use of certain words in the text that may not be related to the activity (Vandergrift and Goh 2012). In other words, these last two strategies are relevant when the listening lesson is conducted concurrently with reading.

Within the cognitive strategies is also what Vandergrift and Goh (2012) refer to as the elaborative strategy set. The elaboration strategy set helps students to use their prior knowledge about the social context in order to make meaning from the conversation or the listening text.

The other strategies to learning listening are the socio-affective group strategies where students can cooperate with others to enhance their learning and encourage themselves to continue learning (Flowerdew and Miller 2005); the comprehension monitoring which students use to check their understanding through re-reading or questioning, and the auditory monitoring which they use to identify whether something sounds right or

not (Serri et al. 2012; Vandergrift and Goh 2012). There are also various elaboration strategies that students may use to enhance their listening skills. For example, there is a performance evaluation strategy where students evaluate their performance in tasks and attempt to identify obstacles, personal elaboration where students can use prior personal experience to comprehend the listening activities, and world elaboration where students use their world knowledge to comprehend the activities. The strategies in the elaboration strategy set are crucial for EFL listening students of the universities of Ethiopia because these strategies could help students to activate their prior knowledge about the text and to relate it to the listening text. That is the combination of prior knowledge and knowledge of the text which determines students' achievement in making meaning from listening texts.

Dimassi (2017) identified summarisation, translation and note-taking as among the cognitive strategies that are used in the general teaching in EFL. Through summarisation, students can make a mental or written summary of what they listen to whereas by using translation strategy students can translate what they listen to from the first to the second language. Transfer strategy is also a cognitive strategy through which students use knowledge about their first language to facilitate listening to the second language. Repetition and grouping strategies also fall within the cognitive strategy group. Repetition strategy would enable listening students to become familiar with the sounds of the target language. Grouping strategy could help students to group words together based on common attributes (Flowerdew and Miller 2005). In the cognitive strategy group, strategies such as summarisation, transfer, repetition and grouping might be crucial for EFL listening students of the universities of Ethiopia. Most of the students seemed to be challenged to make a mental summary of what they listen to, to repeat unfamiliar words, and to group words on the basis of their characteristics.

Note-taking strategy, deduction/induction strategy, and substitution strategy also fall within the cognitive strategy group. Note-taking strategy would enable students to write notes as they follow some spoken text. Deductive strategy would enable them to apply rules they have already learned, whereas inductive strategy would enable them to develop rules by themselves that would enable them to follow a text. Substitution strategy also helps learners to substitute words they know to fill in gaps, and to see if their overall comprehension makes sense (Flowerdew and Miller 2005).



Agency is implied in many of the strategies and it was interesting to find this concept emerging from the analysis of our data.

## **Methodology**

The research project was conducted at three universities in Ethiopia, which were selected for the reasons of convenience or proximity to the author who worked at a place located between University B and University C. The research followed a qualitative case study design, conducted from a population of 88 first-year EFL students from the three universities. There were 38 students at University A, 24 at University B and 26 at University C who enrolled for a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree in English language during the study period. All these students were invited to participate in the study. In total, 35 students volunteered to participate: 15 from University A, 10 from University B, and 10 from University C. Classroom observations, focus-group interviews and semi-structured interviews were followed to collect data. Seven focus-group interviews were conducted, three at university A, two at university B, and two at university C, each consisting of about five participants. Four instructors (1 at University A, 2 at University B, and 1 at University C), who were teaching listening courses at the time, also participated in the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the instructors. Data were analysed thematically, after Friese (2014), using ATLAS.ti7 to develop codes, categories and themes. All the requirements concerning ethical clearance and informed consent were followed prior to the commencement of the research project.

## **Research findings**

During the focus group interviews, the student participants were asked what problems they encountered in the listening courses. The answers pointed to a variety of problems, including lack of clarity due to unfamiliarity with the language. Some of the answers are presented below.

First, the teacher reads the topic, we listen and respond to the questions. But the (texts) the teacher reads to us are not clear and many students cannot do the pre-listening questions correctly (Student 13 (S13), Group 3 of University A).

The same participant added,



The main problem during the native speakers' speech is pronunciation. They pronounce in the way we do not understand.

Concurring on the issue of pronunciation, S15 added the "speed of speech" as one of the problems.

These responses suggested that the students were blaming the teachers for their poor listening skills. As such, the follow-up questions were intended to understand what the students did to attend to the problems. Two themes that were found to speak to the students' agency were selectivity and decision-making, and motivated agency.

### *Selectivity and decision-making as agency*

Selectivity (meaning the choice of the best action) and decision-making may be seen as inevitable aspects in the definition of agency. However, in this study it was interesting to find a deeper meaning to these agential concepts. For example, it was observed that in the EFL classrooms students took down notes without the instructors telling them to. During the interviews, students were asked why they were taking notes during the lessons. Their responses indicated that note-taking was selective and intentional, based on three aspects: prediction of what the instructors were going to say, guessing meanings of unknown words and phrases, and deciding to write down the guesses and the constructed meanings. The participants indicated that the intention to write these words and phrases was to keep reading them and reminding themselves about how to use and pronounce them. This finding emphasised the close relationship between listening, writing and reading for comprehension.

The students indicated that when listening to the teaching devices (the cassettes), they predicted what the speakers were going to say based on clues in the activities. They were asked what their perspectives were on the use of cassettes in learning listening. The following were some of the responses: "... [to minimise] the necessity to keep rewinding, my strategy when I listen to this tape is to use abbreviations" (S8, University B).

This student had decided to make 'codes', which he referred to as abbreviations, to represent the full words and sentences (for example, morning would be mng). This would shift the focus to listening rather than note-taking, while the required notes would also be available for listening afterwards. The student indicated, "I have my strategy; I memorise and I write some notes of what I hear ..." (S7, University B).

These were interesting comments because, for example, memorisation is often regarded as a low-order strategy for short-term learning. However,

in this case, the student regarded memorisation as a better way to learn the listening skill in the EFL lesson.

In addition, one participant at University A posited that “an effective listener does not summarise all main points that the speaker says”. As such, most students at the three universities, except for one group at University A, indicated that they had decided to select texts that would help their focus on acquiring English pronunciation skills more than on understanding meanings in such texts. The reason for this decision was that “listening [in English] in the first semester is difficult because of unfamiliar pronunciation and unclear lectures” (S1, University A). While the understanding of meaning is crucial, these students decided to prioritise other skills that they assumed would lead to an even better acquisition of meaning-making skills in the long term. From their comments, it was clear that they took lead in choosing texts that would help them with learning pronunciation. These were their own decisions and strategies, and not the requirement from the instructors. Therefore, this was a clear indication that through their agency, students were able to make decisions and apply selectivity skills in their learning process.

Students were given guidelines of strategies to follow when doing listening tests. However, some students would decide to follow their own strategies. For example, S15 (in University 3) stated,

It depends on each student. In my case when I took an exam or test, I did not give any place to effective listeners’ strategy [as provided by the instructor]. I simply did exams or tests on the basis of my own way.

This comment indicates that agency created independence, which helped the student to learn and to do better in the listening assessments. In the same group, S12 stated, “I also did not apply the ways of effective listeners. Since the exams or tests were difficult, I thought of the complexity of the questions rather than the ways or strategies of doing the questions.” Similarly, S14 commented, “I also did the exams or tests in my own way [because] when the instructor read the listening text, I would be frightened to try to answer the questions. My frustration hindered me not only from doing the questions correctly but also from using the strategies of effective listeners.”

These students took initiative to find ways of dealing with the problem rather than depending on the set guidelines which they did not

understand. A follow-up to these comments indicated that the students did well in the tests through the use of their own strategies.

### **Motivated agency**

While many students indicated that they took decisions to find own ways of learning to listen in EFL, it was also found that some instructors were instrumental in such decision-making. For example, the instructor at University A reported that he encouraged the students to create their own strategies and to listen attentively while enhancing their learning listening skills. Similarly, instructor 1 at University B said that he encouraged his students to use knowledge of grammar and knowledge of the world in addition to listening attentively during the EFL lessons. Instructor 2 at University B also encouraged the use of the mother tongue to relate to what they were listening.

In these instances, students were not obligated to accept the instructors' suggestions; it was their agency to either follow the suggestions or not. The point is that those who followed the suggestions added to their own strategies (as indicated earlier) to enhance those that were suggested by the instructors. In addition, Group III students at University A indicated that they used the strategy of working in groups to facilitate their acquisition of listening skills. From working as a group, they would observe each other and learn about what works better for the individuals. Then each would decide to select and follow the best strategies from the group. We interpreted this situation as socialised agency, within the motivated agency.

### **Discussion of findings**

Our findings indicate that in these Ethiopian universities, the first-year students in EFL classrooms acted against the norm. The literature, such as Liao and Wang (2015), identifies shortcomings on teachers' pedagogical practices for students' listening problems. In the current study, the students took it up to themselves to learn the skill. This situation was also contrary to Weimer's (2017) observation that students rely on teachers' guides in such classes. Also, the students in our study showed resistance to the lack of motivation, anxiety and insecurity, which the literature identifies as internal challenges to learning listening in the EFL contexts (Field 2008; Hedge, 2000). Instead they decided to add to the strategies that their instructors had provided to make listening easier for them.

The findings therefore confirm that meta-cognitively, the students set themselves goals to learn the listening skills related to the language that was foreign to them, learning from and expanding on the instructors' instructions (Gilakjani and Sabouri 2016). In addition, in what we refer to as motivated agency, it became clear that the socio-affective group strategies helped students to learn in groups to enhance their learning of EFL (Flowerdew and Miller 2005). Note-taking was clearly the participants' preferred learning strategy for listening in the foreign language.

## Conclusions

Two main conclusions were drawn from this study. First, while teachers have a crucial role in supporting students to learn listening in EFL classrooms, students use their agency and responsibility to break through the barrier to learn the listening skill in those classrooms. It can therefore be said that learning the skill of listening in EFL classrooms is more of an internal act than an external one. Students in this study demonstrated this conclusion by either defying or extending on the instructors' guidelines to develop their own strategies to learn the skill of listening. Second, agency can be triggered or motivated. In the case of this study, some students were assisted by the initial suggestions from the instructors. From those suggestions they thought through the issue and found better ways of learning the skill of listening.

Therefore, it can be concluded that for the first-year students to enhance their skill of listening in EFL classrooms, they should elevate themselves beyond being actors who merely receive from their instructors, and be agents of their own learning. They should exercise their internal power to explore their potential beyond the instructors' guidelines (Karp 1986). These conclusions are drawn from the findings that in this research, students did not just follow the specified rules on how to learn listening, but they took decisions that were informed by their desire to learn (Ortner 2001). Thus, we confirm that decision-making and selectivity are core aspects of agency that lead to success.

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