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Effects of bilingualism and gender on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension and listening strategy use

Fatemeh Poorebrahim*
(corresponding author)
Assistant Professor in TEFL English Department University of Maragheh, Maragheh,
Email: poorebrahim@maragheh.ac.ir

Nazanin Shadman**
Assistant Professor in Translation Studies English Department University of Maragheh, Maragheh
Email: n.shadman@maragheh.ac.ir

ABSTRACT
This study aims at comparing bilinguals and monolinguals across gender in terms of listening comprehension and listening strategy use. The correlation between listening strategies and listening comprehension was also explored. To this end, 112 monolinguals (67 males and 45 females) and 120 bilinguals (61 males and 59 females) were selected to participate in the study. They filled out a listening strategies use questionnaire (LSUQ) and then took a listening comprehension test (LCT). The results of data analysis using a series of ANOVAs as well as Pearson correlational analysis revealed that there was a significant difference between monolinguals and bilinguals, in favor of the latter group, in terms of listening comprehension and the use of listening strategies. Moreover, the effect of gender on listening comprehension and listening-strategy use was not significant. Finally, a significantly positive correlation was found between listening comprehension and listening strategy use. This research carries essential implications for syllabus designers and material developers.

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* Fatemeh Poorebrahim is an assistant professor of applied linguistics at University of Maragheh, Iran. Iran. Her current research interests cover bilingualism, written corrective feedback, EFL learning strategies, material development.

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Introduction

Listening comprehension is considered an active process through which humans elicit meaning from passages and associate the information which they listen to with existing knowledge. For English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' mastery in learning a foreign language, the development of listening comprehension is an important step. Thus, it is essential to discover and use suitable and useful strategies for teaching/learning listening comprehension to help foster it (Abedi, Keshmirshekan, & Namaziandost, 2019).

Learning strategies have been conceptualized and defined by different EFL scholars. Learning strategies include five psycholinguistic processes which develop the inter-language system. Learning strategies are "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). Numerous researchers have provided different taxonomies of learning strategies. Learning strategies are divided into three main types: cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-emotional (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Oxford (2011) presents a taxonomy of four strategy categories: memory strategies (e.g., grouping, representing sounds in memory), cognitive strategies (e.g., repeating, analyzing, getting the idea quickly, and taking notes), compensation strategies (e.g., switching to the mother tongue, using other clues), metacognitive strategies (e.g., linking new information with already known one, planning, and self-monitoring), affective strategies (lowering anxiety by use of music, encouraging oneself and discussing feelings with others) and social strategies (asking for clarification, cooperating with others and developing cultural understanding).

There is evidence that numerous variables affect the selection of learning strategies, such as gender, age, motivation for language learning, cognitive learning style, maturity level, previous experience in language learning, learner's beliefs, and other factors. Therefore, Cohen and Dörnyei (2002) believe that one of the most important traits differentiating individuals is gender, which affects how individuals orient toward a second language (L2).

This study aims to bring together the three important areas of language learning strategies, listening comprehension, and gender. It investigates the probable interface between these factors among the monolingual and bilingual participants. As previous studies have not accounted for the role of linguality, it is worth investigating whether the linguistic background of the individuals plays a determining role in how they use language strategies and perform in listening comprehension. In this study, bilingualism is considered as the ability to speak two languages fluently. The following research questions were formulated:

Literature review

So far, a wealth of studies has explored the effect of bilingualism on the development of different aspects of a foreign language. Meanwhile, variations that may exist in the use of learning strategies between monolinguals and bilinguals have been investigated (e.g., Hong- Nam & Leavell, 2007; Tuncer, 2009; Wharton, 2000). Wharton (2000) examined the relationship between learners' previous language experience and their use of learning strategies. He found that bilingual learners used more social, affective, metacognitive, and cognitive strategies than monolingual learners. Similarly, Hong- Nam and Leavell (2007) found that monolingual Korean and bilingual Chinese-Korean EFL learners use a variety of language learning strategies, but bilingual learners have greater strategy knowledge than monolinguals. A similar observation was made by Tuncer (2009) who asserted that bilinguals display a greater use of listening strategy than monolinguals.

Bilingualism literature includes studies on the advantages of bilingualism in learning L2 aspects in general and listening comprehension, in particular (e.g., Gorjian

& Mahmoudi, 2012; Legac, 2007; Shabani & Najafisarem, 2009). However, the advantages associated with bilingualism are tentative, as further studies should be conducted to reach robust and conclusive evidence. A study by Legac (2007) reported that bilinguals outperformed in listening comprehension tests compared with monolinguals. Similar findings were reported by Gorjian and Mahmoudi (2012) who studied Arab-Persian bilingual and Persian monolingual students. Along similar lines, Shabani and Najafisarem's (2009) examined the relationship between bi/monolingual students' learning strategies. They reported no noteworthy difference between the two groups in their strategy use.

Apart from bilingualism, a further influential factor contributing to the language learning process is gender. There is a consensus that women learn the second language better than males. However, ample studies are needed to make such claims with certainty. Oxford (2011) found that female respondents used general learning strategies more often, and authentic strategies, strategies of getting and communicating meaning, as well as self-direction strategies were more frequently deployed by female respondents. Kaylani (1996) found that female students use memory, cognitive, compensation and affective strategies more frequently than male students. Dongyue (2004) argued that females are better at managing and controlling their emotions than their male counterparts

There have been a number of studies addressing the relationship between language learning strategies and gender (Dongyue, 2004; Kaylani, 1996; Oxford,1989). In the study by Oxford (1989) on a sample of 78 adult learners, including students and professors at the faculties of philological studies. It was shown that female respondents used general learning strategies more often, and authentic strategies, strategies of getting and communicating meaning, as well as self-direction strategies were more frequently deployed by female respondents. The research carried out by Zimmerman and Pons (1990, in Lee & Oxford, 2008) has found that females use metacognitive strategies like planning and monitoring strategies more frequently. More use of learning strategies by females was corroborated in some other studies (e.g., Alfarwan, 2021; Ansyari and Rahmi, 2018; Okyar, 2021) as well.

While there is ample research on the interaction between gender and the learning strategies employed for different aspects of L2, when it comes to strategies used for fostering listening skills, the research is scarce. Rahimi and Katal (2011) examined the level of Iranian university students' metacognitive listening strategies awareness in learning English among university students of different majors. It was revealed that girls and boys were not different with regard to their general metacognitive awareness of listening strategies. However, girls' awareness in directed attention was significantly higher than boys' awareness. Given the scarcity of research on the learning strategies employed in improving listening comprehension, a question that may arise is that whether learning strategies applied for fostering different language skills may have similar effects on boosting listening comprehension. Moreover, it investigates the role of linguality as well as gender as factors that may yield differential effects in fostering listening comprehension.

RQ 1#Are Persian monolinguals and Turkish-Persian bilinguals significantly different in their use of listening strategies?

RQ 2# Is there a significant difference between Persian monolinguals and Turkish-Persian bilinguals in listening comprehension performance?

RQ 3# Is there any effect of gender on the use of listening strategies and listening comprehension performance of Iranian bilingual and monolingual EFL learners?

RQ 4 # Is there a significant relationship between Iranian bilingual and monolingual EFL learners' listening comprehension ability and listening strategy use?

Methodology

Participants

The participants of this study were chosen from two provinces of Iran. Monolingual participants were selected from some English institutes in Sabzevar, Khorasan Razavi, where people speak Farsi. Bilingual participants were selected from some institutes in Tabriz, East Azarbaijan, where the first language of people is Turkish and they speak Farsi as L2. A total of 300 participants took part in this study, all of whom were selected from Intermediate level classes. However, considering some criteria like English language learning experience and the number of background languages, and based on the background questionnaire and also teachers' evaluations of each student's language skills, the data obtained from some participants were not used in the data analysis step. Moreover, the data related to the participants who missed a noticeable number of questions (5 or more questions) in the listening strategy use questionnaire (LSUQ) and listening comprehension test (LCT) were not used. Outliers were omitted, too. The final sample included 232 participants, 112 monolinguals (67 males and 45 females) and 120 bilinguals (61 males and 59 females). The age range of the participants was 13-17.

Instruments

The following four instruments were employed for the purpose of data collection:

Background questionnaire

To obtain demographic and background information, the researchers used a questionnaire that was previously designed by Afsharrad & Sadeghi Benis (2017). It was used to obtain information about learners' age, gender, background language(s), English learning experience, etc.

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Listening strategies questionnaire

Listening strategies use questionnaire (LSUQ). To elicit strategies (cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective) that participants used, a listening comprehension strategy questionnaire developed by Chen (2010) was administered. The questionnaire was translated into Persian by the researcher and distributed among the participants. It included 32 questions, and the participants were required to answer on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = "strongly agree" to 5 = "strongly disagree"). The internal consistency reliability of the LSUQ was checked by Cronbach's alpha coefficient, yielding an acceptable value (r = .81).

Listening comprehension test (LCT)

An LCT containing 30 multiple-choice items was extracted from Test of English as a Foreign Language (Sharpe, 2001). As the listening skill has many subskills, it is important to mention that the main focus of the pre-test was on "listening for details". The LCT enjoyed acceptable internal consistency reliability, as shown by the Cronbach alpha coefficients of .79.

Procedure

The first step in doing this research was getting participants' consent. They filled out a written consent form, and they were assured that the data would remain confidential and would be used only for research purposes. Then, the LCT was administered, followed by the listening strategies questionnaire. The data obtained at this stage were submitted to SPSS, version 22, for analysis.

Design

The aim of this study was to compare the bilinguals and monolinguals across gender in terms of listening comprehension and listening strategy use. It also examined the correlation between listening strategy use and listening comprehension. There were two dependent variables (listening strategy use and listening comprehension) and two independent variables, each with two levels [gender (female and male) and linguality (bilingual and monolingual)]. To find answers to research questions 1, 2, and 3,

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two 2 × 2 factorial ANOVAs were run to compare female and male bilinguals and monolinguals in terms of their use of listening strategies and listening comprehension. To examine whether listening comprehension and listening strategy use were correlated, the Pearson correlation was used. Prior to data analysis, data screening was conducted to ensure that the data satisfied the underlying assumptions of parametric tests. The results of all these analyses are presented in the following sections.

Results

Before running the parametric test, Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests were run to ensure that the data met the assumption of normality. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Tests of Normality for Listening Strategy Use and LCT Scores

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Listening Strategies	.050	232	.200*	.995	232	.605
Listening Score	.042	232	.200*	.989	232	.069

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

As shown in Table 1, *p* values for both LSUQ and LCT are above the critical value of .05, suggesting that data are normally distributed.

LCT results

Descriptive statistics for LCT are presented in Table 2. Based on the table, bilinguals and females had a better performance than monolinguals and males, respectively.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for the LCT

Linguality	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Monolingual	Male	58.3081	11.43402	67
	Female	58.7911	18.93938	45
	Total	58.5021	14.83171	112
Bilingual	Male	68.0351	12.41445	61
	female	75.1669	17.44175	59
	Total	71.5416	15.45311	120
Total	Male	62.9436	12.82737	128
	female	68.0813	19.77379	104
	Total	65.2467	16.47307	232

To examine whether differences between males/females as well as bilinguals/ monolinguals in LCT were statistically significant, a two-way factorial ANOVA was performed on the LCT scores. The results of the ANOVA are provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Listening Comprehension

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	11381.604[a]	3	3793.868	16.861	.000	.182
Intercept	961221.912	1	961221.912	4271.847	.000	.949
Linguality	9666.016	1	9666.016	42.958	.000	.159
Gender	822.625	1	822.625	3.656	.057	.016

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Linguality * Gender	627.133	1	627.133	2.787	.096	.012
Error	51303.002	228	225.013			
Total	1050338.624	232				
Corrected Total	62684.606	231				

As shown in Table 3, with the critical value of p set at .025 (Bonferroni adjustment) for this study, linguality made a significant difference in listening comprehension ability. In other words, the difference between bilinguals (M = 71.54) and monolinguals (M = 58.50) was statistical. However, gender made no significant difference in listening comprehension, nor did the interaction between gender and linguality.

LSUQ results

Descriptive statistics for LSUQ scores use are presented in Table 4, which shows that in monolingual groups, men used more strategies in comparison with women. However, female bilinguals used more listening strategies than their male counterparts. It can be argued that, all in all, compared to females, men used more strategies.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for the LSUQ

Linguality	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Monolingual	Male	3.7208	.37310	67
	female	3.3580	.52995	45
	Total	3.5750	.47541	112
Bilingual	Male	3.6829	.45463	61
	female	3.8898	.57238	59
	Total	3.7846	.52410	120
Total	Male	3.7027	.41273	128
	female	3.6597	.61201	104
	Total	3.6834	.51100	232

A further 2 × 2 factorial ANOVA was conducted on the LSUQ data. The results are given in Table 5.

Table 5. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for the LSUQ

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	7.372[a]	3	2.457	10.582	.000	.122
Intercept	3045.326	1	3045.326	13113.602	.000	.983
Linguality	3.461	1	3.461	14.904	.000	.061
Gender	.345	1	.345	1.485	.224	.006
Linguality * Gender	4.604	1	4.604	19.825	.200	.080
Error	52.948	228	.232			
Total	3208.027	232				
Corrected Total	60.320	231				

The number of background languages, according to Table 5, made a significant difference in the number of listening strategies used by the participants, i.e. bilinguals of this study used significantly more strategies than monolinguals did (P < .05). The partial eta squared statistic for

linguality (.061) indicated a moderate effect size (partial eta squared = .061).

With regard to gender, the main effect of gender on listening strategy use was not significant. Though males (M=3.70) had a slightly higher mean than females (M = 3.66), the difference did not reach the level of significance (P > .05). The interaction effect of linguality and gender was not significant (P > .05), too.

Relationship between Listening Comprehension and Listening Strategies

To answer research question 4, a Pearson correlation was run. The results, (Table 6) showed a significant positive relationship between listening comprehension and listening strategy. In other words, more use of listening strategies resulted in higher LCT scores.

Table 6. Correlations between Listening Comprehension and Listening Strategies

		Listening Strategies	Listening Score
Listening Strategies	Pearson Correlation	1	.368**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	232	232
Listening Score	Pearson Correlation	.368**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	232	232

Discussion

This study found that bilinguals used more listening strategies than monolinguals. They also performed better in listening comprehension. Moreover, the participants' gender did not significantly affect the use of listening strategies nor their performance in LCT. The findings of this research are in line with those studies that proved bilingualism as merit in the language learning field (e.g., Bialystok, 2001; Grundy & Timmer, 2017; Poorebrahim, Tahririan, & Azali, 2017; Raguenaud, 2009; Ratiu & Azuma, 2015).

For bilinguals, the linguistic aspects of encoding and retrieval can occur in one or two languages (Schroeder & Marian, 2012), and bilingualism differentially affects various cognitive and linguistic processes involved in learning a language. According to Bialystok (2001), due to two distinct linguistic systems available, each system may process a chunk of information, and hence the imposed burden on working memory is decreased which, in turn, leads bilinguals to show enhanced memory in certain situations.

It was found that bilinguals outperformed monolinguals in the use of listening strategies. This is in line with the findings of some studies (e.g., Gorjian and Mahmoudi, 2012; Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2007; Kostic-Bobanovic & Bobanovic, 2011; Truncer, 2009; Wharton, 2000). These studies provided evidence for the frequent use of language learning strategies and more use of all or certain listening strategies by bilinguals. It seems likely that the language learning expertise of the bilingual students allowed them to surpass monolinguals in using a wide range of listening strategies.

The results of this study showed no significant difference between males and females in either listening comprehension or the use of listening strategies. The results of previous research on gender differences are inconclusive. Although some studies have found that females have better language learning abilities than males (Kaylani, 1996; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Oxford & Green, 1995; Gu, 2002; Fayyaz & Kmal, 2014). In the meantime, in some other studies, men used more listening strategies than females (Tran, 1988; Terchanlioglu, 2004). Other studies have reported no significant difference between the two groups (e.g.,

Bacon, 1992; Ansyari & Rahmi, 2016). In an early study of Chinese college learners, Boyle (1987) found that, though females were superior in general language proficiency, males had higher mean scores in listening vocabulary. Kilani (1996) indicated that women are more likely to use language learning strategies than men. Oxford and Nikos (1989) in a study of 1,200 students found that females use language strategies more than males. Green and Oxford (1995) conducted a similar study of 374 students. The results of this study, in line with the research of Oxford and Nikos (1989), showed that females use language strategies more frequently than males. Gu (2002) also found that females performed better than males in the use of vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary size test. Fayyaz and Kmal (2014) reported that gender was the most significant factor influencing metacognitive listening abilities. In his study women outscored men in a majority of metacognitive listening abilities. Although it seems that in most studies related to the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and gender, females perform better than males, Tran (1988) found different results. The findings indicated that Vietnamese females use fewer language learning strategies than males. Terchanliklu (2004), who focused on six language learning strategies, concluded that females performed better than males only in the "emotion management" strategy. However, in the other five strategies, males performed better than females. The results of a recent study by Yu (2021) conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic also suggest that males use more learning strategies and have more technical knowledge than females. Some other studies (Milla & Gutierrez-Mangado, 2019) have examined the role of language learners' gender in the use of language learning strategies in relation to their level of language proficiency. In this study, it was found that in the basic levels of language learning, males use more language strategies than females. This, however, disappears at advanced levels of language learning.

Finally, the results revealed that there is a significant positive relationship between listening comprehension and listening strategy use. This finding is not surprising as the learners who have more learning strategies at their disposal are likely to perform better in language-learning tests. This finding corroborates that of Kassem (2014) who reported that listening strategies correlated significantly with both listening comprehension and self-efficacy. Except for socio-affective strategies, participants with more strategy use, cognitive strategies, and metacognitive strategies outperformed their counterparts in both listening comprehension and self-efficacy. In addition, Goh and Yusnita (2006) highlighted the positive effect of listening strategies on the learners' listening performance. Also, Yang (2009) emphasized the significant role of metacognitive strategies in helping learners to undertake the listening activity more effectively and to distinguish successful listeners from unsuccessful ones.

Conclusion

This study found positive effects of bilingualism on the use of listening strategies and performance in the listening test. Teachers, material designers, and syllabus writers are suggested to take benefit from diverse linguistic backgrounds of learners, orienting limited English proficient students to develop language skills in their native (non-English) language. Skills in students' native language may facilitate their development of skills in English. Moreover, Bilingual education supports cultural inclusion and diversity. Furthermore, given the lack of significant gender differences between males and females in listening comprehension or the use of listening strategies, which is a relatively new finding compared to previous researches, it may be possible to de-emphasize the gender differences and its direct relationship to learners' performance. Better yet, researchers focus on other language learning

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