

How Strategies Are Used to Solve Listening Difficulties: Listening Proficiency and Text Level Effect

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The present study investigates the way Korean secondary learners of English use strategies to solve listening difficulties and any differences in the way, depending on the learners' listening proficiency and text difficulty. Twenty learners with two levels of listening proficiency provided both think-aloud and retrospective reports while listening to four spoken texts of two different levels of difficulty. There were five patterns, in which the learners utilized strategies to tackle listening difficulties. The more proficient learners made a more successful use of the strategies. They also used strategies not essential to solving the difficulties, but meaningful in terms of their listening experiences. The less proficient learners' use of strategies targeted difficulties to some extent, but theirs was characterized by a deficiency despite the presence of the difficulties. The learners, regardless of their proficiency levels, employed strategies to resolve difficulties at hand and made more successful uses of the strategies when dealing with the more difficult texts.

I. INTRODUCTION

Making a departure from the prevailing notion that successful language learning is a matter of language aptitude, good language learner studies (Naiman, Frohlick, Stern & Todesco, 1978; Rubin, 1975, 1981; Stern, 1975) claim that the differing success of language learners can be attributed to the different behaviours adopted in the process of tackling learning tasks. Instead of bemoaning what they cannot do much about, language teachers attempt to identify the specific learning behaviours of successful learners and impart the information to poor learners who have not had a chance to find it on their own. The subsequent decades have witnessed three major improvements on this incipient attempt to incorporate the new construct into second and foreign language literature. They are: 1) the provision of theoretical frameworks for language learning strategies, 2) clearer definitions of strategies and the identification of those applied to serve specific purposes and skills, as opposed to the totality of language skills, and 3) the investigation of the

effects of numerous factors on strategy choice.

Canale and Swain (1980), Bialystok (1978), and O'Malley and Chamot (1990) secure the role of strategy in second language acquisition. Although different in their theoretical approach, they assign a different status to strategy, categorize strategy types in a different way, and provide a different explanation for strategy selection. Canale and Swain's strategic competence appears to be widely accepted, but it is not clearly defined. Bialystok defines strategy in linguistic terms, that is, strategy use is part of the learners' language base. O'Malley and Chamot's approach is cognition-based, therefore treats language learning strategies as cognitive skills, which share the same underlying mental processes with the first language, second and foreign languages, or other content areas. Bialystok and O'Malley and Chamot provide clues to learners' strategy use or selection. They do not, however, make it clear how to define the strategy and how to judge certain behaviour as a thought-out strategic choice.

Two main approaches to clarifying the construct of strategy are either defining the concept of strategy or categorizing it. In Bialystok (1990), the first is referred to as a definitional and the second as a taxonomic approach. The definitional approach is concerned with defining the term itself by separating it from other related phenomena, in particular, process (Bialystok, 1978; Blum & Levenston, 1978; Selinker, 1972). A variety of terms are suggested to delineate the construct: plan (Færch & Kasper, 1983), technique (Stern, 1983), tactic (Seliger, 1984), move (Sarig, 1987), and learning process (Cohen, 1990, 1998). It is unanimously agreed that strategy use is intended to enhance long-term learning or to cope with the learning tasks at hand. However, there exists a considerable disparity in the range a strategy can cover, from the learners' broad approach to learning (Rigney, 1978; Weinstein & Mayer, 1986) to more specific actions or techniques (Sarig, 1987; Seliger, 1984), or to both (Chamot, 1987). Strategy use can be observable (Stern, 1983) or mental, or both (Cohen, 1990, 1998; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Sarig, 1987; Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). It is related to the conscious control of learners (Cohen, 1990, 1998; Færch & Kasper, 1983; Stern, 1983) or to problematity (Corder, 1983; Færch & Kasper, 1983). Bialystok (1985, 1990) proposes goal-orientedness, consciousness, and problematity as three essential but controversial features that any strategy must include in order to be qualified as a strategy. As a tool for distinguishing the strategic from the non-strategic behaviours of language learners, the definitional approach is a problematic one. None of the features of this approach emerge as a unanimously dominant characteristic of the strategy. There is no way of knowing how many of the features should be considered.

The taxonomic approach is concerned with describing strategies in terms of a structured list of their exemplars. This approach operates on two levels. The first level is concerned with identifying and classifying strategies into broad categories according to their intended functions: strategies for learning, communication, social interaction, production, reception,

etc. The second level of approach documents a list of strategies with the same function under a structured taxonomy: classifications of learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1981), communication (Tarone, 1980), social strategies (Wong-Fillmore, 1979), etc. The taxonomic approach is not an ideal tool for judging a certain action as strategic. Decisions about learners' strategy use are made by researchers based on their own data, therefore, an indefinite number of strategy types unique to a particular study can be produced. It is difficult to reach an agreement, between different taxonomies, on the definition of each specific strategy and its label.

Preferring the taxonomic approach over the definitional one, most of the research studies on language learners' use of listening strategies so far have been concerned with the effects of various factors, especially listening proficiency, on the frequency or types of strategies used. In general, the more proficient listeners applied a greater deal of strategies to aid in their comprehension (Chien & Li, 1998; Fujita, 1984; Goh, 1998; Murphy, 1985; Vandergrift, 1992; Young, 1996). Their processing is more automatized and they can process a larger chunk of input (Vandergrift, 1992) with fewer playbacks (DeFilippis, 1980). They are more mentally prepared, more flexible, confident, and have a more positive attitude to listening (Bacon, 1992a; Fujita, 1984). They can combine a variety of strategies in the course of deriving meanings from the input (Bacon, 1992a; Chien & Li, 1998; Goh, 1998; Murphy, 1985; O'Malley, Chamot & Küpper, 1989). They view the text as a whole (Murphy, 1985), interacting more actively with the aural stimulus (Vandergrift, 1992). Less successful listeners focus more on individual words (Bacon, 1992b; Fujita, 1984; Murphy, 1985; O'Malley, et al., 1989). Their strategy use is limited to surface level processing (Vandergrift, 1992), as is evidenced by their heavy reliance on translation (Fujita, 1984) and transfer (Vandergrift, 1992). As for the relationship between text difficulty and strategy use, Fujita's subjects tended to translate when the input was inaccessible. When it was comprehensible, they adopted a top-down approach in their strategy use (Bacon, 1992c). The difference between more successful and less successful listeners became nonsignificant when the content of the input was familiar (Young, 1996).

Some researchers (Chamot & Küpper, 1989; O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Küpper & Russo, 1985; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989) talk about the effectiveness, appropriateness, or success of strategy use. Rabinowiz and Chi (1989) claim that the language learners' performances are influenced by the efficiency of their strategy use. Bialystok (1983), Chamot and Küpper (1989), and Sarig (1987) report that the more proficient learners were more deliberate and effective in their strategy use, while the less proficient counterparts are characterised by the frequent use of strategies inappropriate to the tasks. The studies, however, do not clarify the question why a certain strategy was claimed to be purposeful, effective, or inappropriate. For example, if indeed a strategy employed to solve the problem at hand worked, then the use of that strategy could be regarded as effective, appropriate, or successful. None of the studies, at least, on language learners' use of

listening strategies (Chien & Li, 1998; Goh, 1998; Laviosa, 1991; Vandergrift, 1992; Young, 1996) looked at strategies in this light.

Filling the void in the literature, the present study attempts a one-to-one match between a listening difficulty and a strategy(ies) employed to tackle that difficulty. Strategies are usually defined as useful actions or techniques to enhance learning. We do not, therefore, agree with the claim that a strategy itself is either effective or ineffective. Every strategy is useful but its success depends on how it is used. I argue that the success of a strategy should be judged by whether it fulfills the role it is initially utilised to serve. In this study, a strategy will be viewed in relation to a listening difficulty it is tackling. Its success will be judged by whether or not the difficulty has been solved as a result of the utilized strategy. Such information will be invaluable to Korean teachers teaching large classes, who can take only limited remedial action and, therefore, requires that their students be self-sufficient listeners through effective strategy use.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study investigates the way in which Korean high school learners of English utilize strategies in response to their listening difficulties. What can be anticipated are differences between learners of different listening proficiency levels and those between texts with different levels of difficulty in the way the difficulties interact with the strategies. This study, therefore, addresses the following research questions:

1. In what ways do Korean high school learners of English use strategies to solve their listening difficulties?
2. Are there any differences between learners with different levels of listening proficiency in the way strategies are used to solve listening difficulties?
3. Are there any differences between texts of different levels of difficulty in the way strategies are used to solve listening difficulties?

III. METHOD

1. Subjects

A class of thirty second-year high school students in Korea initially participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 16 to 17, with the average being 16.8. At the time of the research, they had been studying English for approximately 4.5 years. They received a total of eight hours of English classes per week: four hours of general English classes, where they learned reading and grammar, two hours of conversation classes, where they carried

out speaking tasks in pairs or in groups, and two hours of intensive listening classes, where they were involved in transcribing the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) tapes.

The subjects' listening proficiency was determined by conducting the standardized SLEP (Secondary Level English Proficiency) test, the widely known language proficiency test designed for admission and placement of students from grades seven to twelve, whose first language is not English. It consists of two sections, listening and reading, with seventy-five four-option multiple-choice questions in each section. The subjects' performances on the listening comprehension section were only considered when selecting the two groups of subjects with two different levels of listening proficiency. The ten subjects in the class of thirty (33.3%) whose overall scores ranged from 58 to 67 out of 75 questions (a group average of 62) made up the more proficient group, while the bottom ten (33.3%) whose overall scores ranged from 44 to 50 were placed in the less proficient group (a group average of 47.9). On the language proficiency scale provided in the test manual, these two groups were allocated to high intermediate and low intermediate proficiency levels respectively.

2. Listening Materials

Subjects listened to four texts with two levels of difficulty (two for each level). As Bremner (1999, p. 193) points out, text difficulty can be only determined at a vague level at best, thus, selecting texts of two different levels of difficulty was a most daunting task in this study. From an information processing point of view, language learners have a limited capacity of processors (McLaughlin, Rossman & McLeod, 1983). Therefore, the degree of text difficulty depends on how much processing capacity is required as well as on how much linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge learners can bring to the task performance. In other words, so called listenability includes not only a text but learner characteristics such as memory capacity, attention, strategy selection, and so on. Lynch (1996) is of the opinion that the most accurate information about text difficulty could only be obtained from the learners. Following Lynch, the text difficulty was judged first by ten learners and then confirmed by a class of fifty students.

The four texts used in the present study were:

More Difficult	Less Difficult
Fear of Spiders (Source: <i>Listening 1</i> (Duff & Becket, 1991))	False Beliefs about Animals (Source: <i>Korean High School English Textbook</i>)
Selma's Self-Introduction (Source: www.englishlistening.com)	First Car Drive Alone (Source: www.englishlistening.com)

'Fear of Spiders' was a conversation between a female expert on spiders and a male

interviewer. The interviewer asked short, leading questions on people's fear of spiders and the interviewee gave relatively long responses to them, crammed with expert knowledge about spiders. The passage was delivered at 155 words per minute (WPM) (257 words/1'40"). 'Selma's Self-Introduction' was from the internet, where students could choose texts suitable to their levels and practice listening. It was about a retired housewife talking about herself, her part-time job in a car leasing company, her family, and the community within which she lived. This selection was delivered at 136 WPM (222 words/1'38"). 'False Beliefs about Animals' was taken from one of the high school English textbooks used in the previous sixth national curriculum in Korea and was, therefore, unavailable to the subjects.¹ The content was about commonly-held but incorrect ideas that people, in general, have about various animals. It was spoken by a male speaker, at 145 WPM (379 words/2'37"). 'First Car Drive Alone' was taken from the same internet site as 'Selma's Self-Introduction'. This passage, among the four, was considered the most natural, with lots of false starts, hesitations, repetitions, and paralinguistic features. It was a narration by a girl who happened to lose her mother's car in a fire on the first day of driving on her own. It was delivered at 148 WPM (391 words/2'38").

3. Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

The subjects were asked to report what went through their minds while listening to the four recordings. They were not told the reasons for the listening, the titles, or the topics beforehand. They were just asked to listen to them to the best of their ability by relistening as many times as they felt necessary for comprehension. The subjects randomly selected one from the four cassette tapes lying on their desk. Their reports were recorded onto another cassette tape along with the original text and the investigator's prompts. Immediately following the verbal-report session, they reflected on the processing difficulties that they had encountered while listening to their respective passages.

Twenty sets of protocols containing the original texts, both the think-aloud and retrospective reports on them, and the investigator's occasional prompts were transcribed verbatim. The protocols were qualitatively analyzed in order to identify the listening difficulties encountered, strategies used, and the patterns in which strategies interacted with the listening difficulties.

The listening difficulties were coded without reference to any pre-existing taxonomy. First, all the cases were identified, where the subjects experienced comprehension difficulties and each difficulty was described in detail. Then those of a similar nature were grouped together. Finally, suitable names to every listening comprehension breakdown detected were labelled, regardless of the subjects' awareness of its presence. A total of

¹ The English textbook that the subjects used was published under the seventh national curriculum.

twenty-three types of listening difficulties were identified (see Hwang, 2004).

The subjects' strategic behaviours were judged adopting the taxonomic approach, that is, on the basis of the definitions and examples given in previous language learning strategy taxonomies.² Vandergrift's taxonomy of listening strategies (1992, 1997) served as a useful reference with some modifications, depending on the presence or absence of examples in the protocols elicited in the present study. Twenty categories of listening strategies were finally decided on and used for coding the protocols.

After all of the listening difficulties and strategies were coded, every strategy (or combination of strategies) employed was matched up with a difficulty it (they) was (were) used to tackle. There were five different patterns of listening difficulties linked with a strategy(ies). Each of the patterns had a variety of sub-patterns, which were not considered in the present study. After all the incidences of the five patterns had been categorized and quantified, statistical analyses were carried out on the frequency of each of these patterns used by the subjects across the two types of text.³ Any effects of the listening proficiency and text difficulty on the frequency of each of these difficulty-strategy interaction patterns were checked by conducting 2×2 Mixed ANOVA statistical tests with listening proficiency as a between-subjects factor and text difficulty as a within-subjects factor.

IV. RESULTS

1. Listening Difficulty-strategy Use Interaction Patterns

The following are the five main patterns⁴, in which the subjects used strategies to tackle listening difficulties. Each pattern is first defined and relevant examples are given from the subjects' protocols. A probable explanation of each example follows.

² In general, previous studies on second/foreign language learners' listening strategy use did not set out precise criteria for distinguishing the learners' strategic behaviours from their non-strategic behaviours. Vandergrift (1992) introduced problematicity as a criterion for strategy use in the second phase of his three-phase study, indicating that identification of strategies in the other two phases was based on the taxonomic approach.

³ The length of the four texts listened to was different. In order to rule out the possibility of the frequency of individual listening difficulty-strategy interaction patterns interacting with the differences in the length of the text, I converted the raw frequency of each difficulty/strategy type reported by each subject into a score for the number of the difficulty/strategy type per 100 words listened to.

⁴ When all the logical combinations of this scheme were considered, there were at least eight possibilities. In addition to the five patterns presented in this section, there were the following three possible combinations: 1) No difficulty→No strategy use→Comprehension, 2) No difficulty→No strategy→No comprehension, and 3) Difficulty→No strategy→Comprehension. These three patterns were ignored, simply because their examples were impossible to identify.

*Pattern 1: No difficulty → Strategy use → Comprehension*⁵

The subjects employed strategies in the absence of any obvious difficulty (Example 1) or in anticipation of a difficulty, as in Examples 2 and 3.

Example 1. *It mainly consists of answering the phone, doing some typing, paying some bills, and now I'm learning to work the computer. The computer is a wonderful thing and I'm finding it very, very interesting to do. The car leasing business is an unusually/*⁶

(TA==(Tell me what you are thinking now.)==<She> is learning the computer and <she> said it was a marvellous thing. I was thinking that I didn't know how to use the computer but this seventy-year-old grandma was learning the computer. And what I haven't got, what is it supposed to mean? And I heard <she> went to work twice a week and there she usually answered the phone.)

Example 2. (Before listening to the text 'First Car Drive Alone')

(TA--The first sentence is always important, so I mustn't miss it.)

Example 3. *Many people seem to like this idea and it has really caught on. I'm also a homemaker. I have a husband, I have two married daughters and two grandchildren.*

(TA--This grandma seems to be faithful to her family. The grandpa seems to be doing nothing at home. That's why she has to work outside. This grandma will talk more about her grandchildren. I have to listen further.)

In the absence of any obvious difficulties, the subjects in the examples above, respectively employed elaboration, selective attention, and prediction.

*Pattern 2: No difficulty → Strategy use → Difficulty → (Strategy use) → (No comprehension)*⁷

⁵ The subjects' *comprehension* was judged by whether they reached a meaning that native speakers would agree on.

⁶ The following keys are applicable to excerpts from the protocols:

- Italics are the original texts the subjects listened to.
- '–' indicates omitted parts of the texts or the subjects' reports.
- Bold face indicates a point under discussion.
- '/' indicates the point at which the subjects stopped the tape for reporting.
- Brackets below the original text contain the subjects' verbal reports translated from Korean.
- 'TA' marks the subjects' think-aloud report.
- 'RE' marks the subjects' retrospective report.
- Brackets preceding and following == contain the investigator's prompts.
- " " contains the subjects' original English.
- < > contains the investigator's additions to make the subjects' reports comprehensible.
- Underlines indicate listening difficulty-strategy interactions under discussion.
- <LATER> indicates the subjects' reports on the same problem/strategy at a later stage.

⁷ Parentheses indicate optional processing.

The subjects applied strategies in the absence of a difficulty, which created a new difficulty. They sometimes used another strategy to tackle the difficulty created by their strategy use, as shown in Example 6.

Example 4. *~In Thailand and India, elephants are often used as a means of transportation. Elephants are easily tamed and are known to be intelligent. There is a common belief that an elephant never forgets. Again this is not true. An elephant does have a good memory, though. For example, it can remember someone who has done harm to it even after many years.*

(TA---This part. I remember reading this in English somewhere. So I hardly missed it. I remember reading a book which says elephants had a good memory and could easily trace their route. By the way, while I was thinking of this, I missed the <other> part.)

Example 5. *Hi, my name is Selma; I'm seventy years old and retired. I have a **part time** job for car leasing company.*

(RE---~<She said> "I have a part time job", which I heard as "found". You see, there aren't many jobs available for the elderly if they want one. So, considering <the situation in> our country and "seventy", "I have a part time job" was heard as "I have found a job." ~)

Example 6. *We live in a retirement community. The retirement community has tennis courts, swimming pools, a golf course and a club house. The **club house** consists of a building with a number of rooms where we take classes and courses.*

(TA---<She> is explaining a "club". <She> said <it> had rooms, where <she> could enjoy herself. What else was I thinking? Yes, <she> lives with all the ardour of youth. I'm not sure whether it's in America, anyway they have better facilities there than in our country.

RE---The "clubhouse" here seems to be different from what I'm thinking of.==(What do you mean?)==I thought of a "club" as a place where people danced and had fun, like <it is> in our country. But "room" and people "take classes and courses" next - to which I didn't attend. I thought it was unimportant. I missed that part, so I kept thinking <the clubhouse> was a place where we had fun.)

By utilizing elaboration, the subjects in Examples 4, 5, and 6 respectively failed to recognize sequences of words, misheard *part time* as *found*, and failed to grasp the meaning of *take classes and courses*. In Example 6, the subject, in an attempt to solve her difficulties, activated another strategy, real-time assessment of the input, which did not work.

Pattern 3: Difficulty → No strategy use → No comprehension

The subjects, in the face of a difficulty, did not make any effort to solve it. They were sometimes aware of their difficulties as shown in Examples 7 and 8.

Example 7. *Have you ever heard of the saying as blind as a bat?*

(TA--- I haven't got a clue to what it is all about.)

Example 8. *B: I don't know - It's strange. People are frightened of spiders and they are frightened of snakes and well obviously some spiders and some snakes really are poisonous. But most snakes are harmless and it's really strange that people are so frightened of spiders because//*

(TA---Difficult.)

In Examples 7 and 8, the subjects could not utilize any strategy when faced with the difficulties of recognizing sequences of words.

Pattern 4: Difficulty → Strategy use → No comprehension

The subjects, when beset with a difficulty (earlier or current), applied a strategy(ies), which resulted in non-comprehension.

Example 9. *I parked it in the lot. And she washed my hair and she er... put it up in clips on my head and cut my hair while I had a **smock** on.*

(TA---Ah, <she> shampooed her hair, had her haircut and smoked while having a hair cut...==(What are you thinking?)==Just thinking of a hair shop where people have their haircut and this woman smoking.)

Example 10. *And the policeman explained to her that there was...that was caused by some loose **wires** in the trunk.*

(TA---The fire started when "wires" became loose in the "trunk". What is a "wire"? I once asked my dad and he said it was a wiper or something. Well, I don't know what it is. All I know is that a fire started in the "trunk".)

Example 11. *Many people say that the crocodile is a **hypocrite**//*

(TA---"Hip, hip, hip, hip", well, people think of something like this, but what is the word supposed to be?)

The subject in Example 9 tried to infer the meaning of *smock*, based on *smoke* whose sound information is similar to *smock*. In Example 10, the subject tried to infer the meaning of the word unknown to her, *wire* by recollecting her personal experiences. In Example 11, the subject attempted to recognize the unknown word *hipocrite* by repeating

it several times. All these attempts ended up in failure.

Pattern 5: Difficulty → Strategy use → Comprehension

The subjects, when beset with difficulties (earlier or current), applied a strategy(ies) which resulted in comprehension as in the following examples.

Example 12. *– I’m also a homemaker. I have a husband, I have two married daughters and two grandchildren.*

(TA---<She> has a husband and married sisters or brothers. Earlier, I confused “seventeen” with “seventy”, but now I know.)

Example 13. *All they can do is give you a small bite, but it’s not poisonous.*

(TA---It, it just bites people. It bites, so is the tarantula something similar to a spider?)

Example 14. *We usually **compare** something big and heavy to an elephant.*

(TA---“Compare”? What does it mean? We usually “compare”?)

<LATER>

(TA---We usually “compare”? Doesn’t it mean making a comparison? To compare to the elephant. –)

The subject in Example 12, by relistening, got *seventy* right, which had been misheard as *seventeen*. In Example 13, the subject could infer the meaning of *tarantula*, based on *bite*, the word whose meaning was familiar to her. The subject in Example 14 grasped the meaning of *compare* by relistening to the same part of the text.

2. Differences in the Listening Difficulty-strategy Use Interaction Patterns Depending on Listening Proficiency and Text Difficulty

The frequency of each of the patterns used by the subjects across the two types of text is displayed in Table 1.

From Table 1, we see that the subjects used slightly less than half of the strategies to solve their listening difficulties (Patterns 4 and 5). The more proficient subjects used Pattern 1 more than any other pattern. On some occasions, they did not use any strategies even in the face of an obvious difficulty (Pattern 3). This tendency, however, was not so pronounced with them as with their less proficient counterparts. The less proficient subjects used Pattern 4 most frequently, indicating that they were goal-oriented to some extent in their use of strategies. In comparison with their more proficient counterparts, they made more frequent use of Pattern 3. This suggests that their strategy use was less purposeful and less effective. They often employed strategies in the absence of or in

anticipation of a difficulty (Pattern 1), though not as frequently as the more proficient group did. The less proficient group also used Pattern 2, where a strategy employed created another listening difficulty, a little more than their more proficient counterpart did.

TABLE 1
Five Patterns of Interaction between Listening Difficulty and Strategy

Patterns	More proficient		Less proficient	
	More difficult	Less difficult	More difficult	Less difficult
	Mean frequency (SD)	Mean frequency (SD)	Mean frequency (SD)	Mean frequency (SD)
Pattern 1	5.16 (1.59) 38.95 %	4.95 (1.63) 47.11 %	2.86 (1.78) 18.62 %	3.43 (1.04) 25.97 %
Pattern 2	.06 (.10) .49 %	.05 (.09) .48 %	.10 (.18) .77 %	.14 (.13) 1.13 %
Pattern 3	1.90 (1.41) 13.76 %	1.18 (.74) 10.37 %	4.41 (1.28) 31.35 %	3.96 (1.79) 28.47 %
Pattern 4	5.11 (1.87) 37.66 %	4.04 (1.42) 36.95 %	6.83 (2.64) 46.15 %	5.69 (1.71) 41.48 %
Pattern 5	1.17 (.41) 9.13 %	.53 (.17) 5.09 %	.46 (.26) 3.11 %	.44 (.32) 2.96 %
Total	13.40 100 %	10.75 100 %	14.66 100 %	13.66 % 100 %

Statistical significance of the listening proficiency and text difficulty effects on the frequency of each of these listening difficulty-strategy use interaction patterns is summarised in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Main Effects of Listening Proficiency and Text Difficulty in the Frequency of Listening Strategy Use Patterns

	Listening proficiency		Text difficulty	
	F	Sig.	F	Sig.
Pattern 1	10.227	.005	.280	.603
Pattern 2	2.822	.110	.109	.745
Pattern 3	28.649	<.001	2.690	.118
Pattern 4	4.569	.047	7.957	.011
Pattern 5	12.269	.003	21.192	<.001

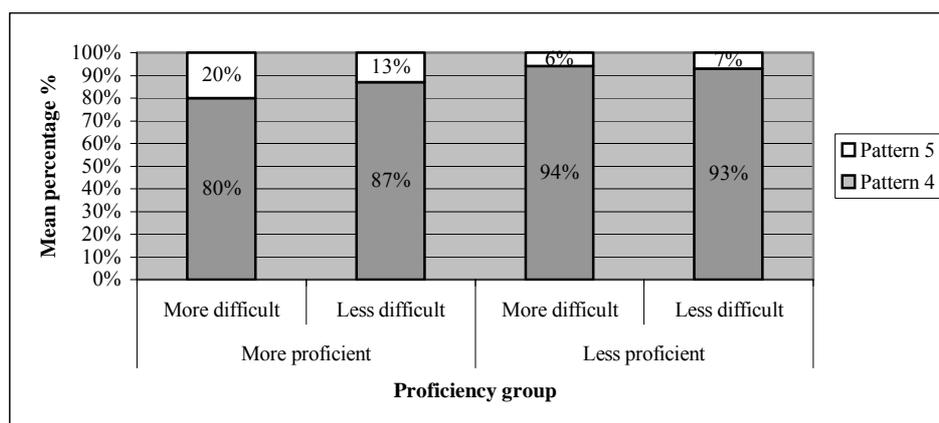
At the p-value of less than .05, there were significant listening proficiency effects on the frequency of Pattern 1 ($F(1,18)=10.227, p=.005$), Pattern 3 ($F(1,18)=28.649, p<.001$), and Pattern 5 ($F(1,18)=12.269, p=.003$). Significant text difficulty main effects were found on the frequency of Pattern 4 ($F(1,18)=7.957, p=.011$) and Pattern 5 ($F(1,18)=21.192, p<.001$).

A close scrutiny of the means of each pattern in the two types of text (see Table 1)

reveals that the more proficient subjects, irrespective of text difficulty, applied Patterns 1 and 5 significantly more than did their less proficient counterparts. The latter used Pattern 3 significantly more than the former. In other words, the more proficient subjects applied a strategy(ies) in the absence or in anticipation of a difficulty significantly more than their less proficient counterparts did (Pattern 1). When they applied a strategy(ies) in response to a listening difficulty, their strategy use was significantly more successful (Pattern 5). The less proficient subjects, on the other hand, when faced with difficulties, were significantly less likely to employ strategies (Pattern 3). Both groups of subjects activated their strategies to tackle difficulties (Patterns 4 and 5) significantly more when they listened to the more challenging texts as opposed to the less challenging texts.

In order to highlight the success rates of the strategies used, scores for Patterns 4 and 5 were added and a percentage score for each pattern was computed. Figure 1 illustrates the mean percentage of the two patterns.

FIGURE 1
Percentage Score for Patterns 4 and 5



Overall, the more proficient subjects' use of strategy was more successful than that of their less proficient counterparts'. It was more successful when they dealt with the more difficult texts than the less difficult ones. There was almost no difference in the success rates of the strategies used by the less proficient subjects across the two types of text.

Statistical significance of the proportion of the two patterns is summarized in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Main Effects of Listening Proficiency and Text Difficulty
in the Success Rates of the Strategies Used

Source of variation	F	Sig.
Listening proficiency	17.201	.001
Text difficulty	6.183	.023

According to Table 3, there were significant main effects of listening proficiency ($F(1,18)=17.201, P=.001$) and text difficulty ($F(1, 18)=6.183, p=.023$) on the success rates of the strategies applied. A further observation of the means (see Table 1) indicates that the more proficient subjects' strategy use was significantly more successful than that of the less proficient subjects. The strategies used by both groups were significantly more successful when they listened to the more difficult texts.

V. DISCUSSION

An important issue in the present study was whether, when, and how strategies were used rather than whether they were already represented in the learners' memory. The findings of this study demonstrated that, first, the subjects' ability to make optimal use of the strategies accessed had that much more to do with their listening proficiency. The significantly frequent use of Patterns 1 and 5 by the more proficient subjects across the two types of text and the significantly higher success rates of the strategies used by the more proficient subjects suggest that they were better language learners with more cognitive resources. When faced with a difficulty, they deliberately used strategies, which brought about more successful results. They could afford to apply strategies in the absence or in anticipation of any processing difficulty. Our less proficient subjects' strategy use was goal-oriented to some extent. As with the weak learners in Rabinowitz and Chi (1987), however, their strategy use was characterised by a deficiency in their choice of strategy. They could not utilize any strategies when faced with processing difficulties. Strategies accessed were more likely to be relegated to another processing difficulty which prompted even more difficulties.

We do not agree with the assumption that the less proficient learners may not have stored in their memory as wide a strategy repertoire as their more proficient counterparts. The strategy types used to judge the subjects' strategic behaviour were cognitively defined: the strategy classification in the present study is mainly based on Vandergrift (1992, 1997), which was in turn based on O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) in terms of labels and definitions. If our argument holds true, the availability of strategies in the repertoire did not guarantee that the learners would use the strategies when faced with processing difficulties. This interpretation is supported by O'Malley et al. (1989) and Chien and Li (1998), who argue that the use of some strategies entails a basic understanding of the input. Another assumption is the difference in the types of listening difficulties that the two proficiency learners had to resolve with strategy use. The less proficient learners may have encountered a significantly higher frequency of such difficulties which used up all of their cognitive processing resources. This left no room for the employment of strategies. This assumption needs further confirmation by a qualitative analysis of the protocols, linking an individual

difficulty type to a strategy(ies) applied to solve the difficulty.

If listening proficiency is a precondition for the actual application of strategies and for their success, as in the present study, the possession of strategies will not be a cure-all remedy, as once claimed in good language learner studies. A strategy may, therefore, have to be redefined as a tool for facilitating language processing but its actual access and its success varies to a considerable extent, depending on the learners' proficiency.

Second, the significantly frequent use of Patterns 4 and 5 with the more difficult texts and the significantly higher success rates of the strategies applied in the more difficult texts demonstrate that the subjects may have altered their use of strategies to the difficulty of the texts. When faced with more difficult processing, their strategies targeted the problem at that time. When they dealt with the less difficult texts, they could afford to employ strategies not essential to solving the problem at hand but only meaningful in terms of their listening experiences.

Third, when the subjects' strategic behavior was judged by the taxonomic approach rather than by the definitional one, problematicity was not necessarily a defining feature of a strategy. This study looks simultaneously at listening difficulties and the strategies employed to tackle the difficulties, therefore, one can argue that some clue can be found to the issue of problematicity as a defining characteristic of a strategy. When the ways in which strategies interacted with listening difficulties were dissected into five broad patterns, three of the patterns rebuffed the argument for problematicity as a defining feature of strategy. Most of the time, the subjects recruited strategies to assist in their processing, with either successful or unsuccessful results (Patterns 4 and 5). However, the presence of difficulties did not necessarily warrant the subjects' strategy use (Pattern 3). The subjects sometimes employed a strategy(ies) in the absence of any obvious difficulty (Pattern 1). Færch and Kasper (1983) argue that the strategy use in this case targets potential problems. Their argument was only true for a limited range of strategies such as planning, selective attention, prediction, etc., whose apparent target is the input yet to come. Another argument for this problem-strategy interaction pattern would be that the strategies alone were left over after the problems had all been resolved. The present study did not show any evidence supporting this argument. Though rare, the subjects' strategy use sometimes created another listening difficulty. This strategy-turned-difficulty is in direct opposition to the claim that any strategy used is inherently good.

VI. CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the way in which Korean high school learners of English use strategies in response to listening difficulties and any effects of listening proficiency and text difficulty on the way the learners resolve the difficulties through the use of the

strategies. There were broadly five different patterns of listening difficulties linked with a strategy(ies). The more proficient subjects applied a strategy(ies) in the absence or in anticipation of a difficulty significantly more than their less proficient counterparts did. When they applied strategies in response to a listening difficulty, their strategy use was significantly more successful. The less proficient subjects, when faced with difficulties, were significantly less likely to employ strategies. Strategy use by both groups of the subjects was significantly more successful when they dealt with the more difficult texts.

Prior to generalizing these findings, the following limitations must be mentioned. First, the listening setting, in which the subjects were placed, lacked the face validity of real-life one-way listening, since the subjects were not told the purpose for their listening and were allowed to relisten. Second, the subjects' listening proficiency assessed by the SLEP test may be different from their real-time listening ability. Third, think-aloud and retrospection, as data gathering tools, have limitations in eliciting all the information about the subjects' real-time listening behaviour. Finally, the listening difficulties and strategies were identified and categorized by the investigator from the protocols, regardless of the subjects' awareness or confirmation of them.

Our findings suggest that the following three remedial actions should be taken up in English classrooms in high schools in Korea. First, learners' listening proficiency should be weighed more heavily than strategy training. In order to have free access to some strategies, our subjects needed to reach a certain level of understanding of the input or meet the cognitive demands that were made necessary in the access to the strategies. Success of the strategies accessed depended on the amount and the precision with which the subjects processed the input. This finding is a particularly important issue in relation to the typically large English classes which are the norm in Korea, where the teachers' remedial instruction is bound to be limited and where the learners' self-sufficiency through strategy use is crucial. Thus, the most challenging task that confronts English teachers in Korea is to equip learners with a basic listening proficiency so as to provide survival skills that "will [not only] be necessary through their listening, but also give them confidence in tackling the rest of the course" (Mendelsohn, 1998, p. 70).

Second, teachers may have to apply different instructional treatments to learners of different proficiencies. With the less proficient learners, teachers should aim to increase the proficiency level of the learners to the point that their strategy repertoires can be easily accessed and the appropriate strategies are selected. Until then, teachers should implement such measures as presenting easier input, implementing pre-listening sessions, etc., by which even less proficient learners can fully exploit their strategic resources. Or, perhaps, teachers should introduce "strategies that are likely to be effective in achieving immediate understanding and are more likely to lead learners towards understanding more of the target language as a system", as suggested by Rost and Ross (1991, p. 263). With learners who have easy access to their strategy repertoires, focus should be on how to use the

strategies appropriately in relation to a particular text or task. In addition, learners should be taught how to more successfully use a strategy by combining it with other strategies.

Third, it is important to present input that is comprehensible to the learners. Input beyond the subjects' comprehension was found to limit their listening experiences to sorting out processing difficulties at hand. While listening to the easier texts, they utilized strategies that were not directly relevant to the difficulties, but that made their listening experiences more personal and meaningful. For the less proficient learners, in particular, the easier input will be a prerequisite for their full utilization of their strategic resources, such as those presupposing a basic understanding of the input or involving interaction with the input. Boosting the learners' "process motivation" (learners' capability to meet the demands of a particular task) (Field, 2000, p. 186) through the use of easier texts will be particularly important in large English classes in Korea.

The present study leads to the following directions to be explored in the future. First, the present study may be one of the first that has investigated the way the learners utilize strategies to solve their listening difficulties. Therefore, it will be essential to replicate this study and validate its findings, possibly with a pool of subjects larger than that used in the present study and with different backgrounds in terms of proficiency, course level, and so on. Second, most studies on listening strategy use have focused on the differences in the frequency of the strategies employed, depending on the learners' listening proficiency. The present study has repeatedly confirmed that mere frequency checks of the strategies applied do not have much to do with learners' successful comprehension and, therefore, have limited pedagogical value. Future studies on listening strategies should put more emphasis on the accessibility of strategies and the success of the strategies accessed rather than the availability of strategies. Third, due to the limited space, all the sub-patterns under the five broad patterns of listening difficulty-strategy(ies) interaction were not fully described. If all of the sub-patterns were to be considered, a comprehensive problem-strategy interaction model could be developed.

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