

Fostering Criticality Through Academic Listening

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Abstract

With lectures being the dominant mode of instruction in higher education (HE), proficiency in listening comprehension is essential for academic success. This skill, however, may pose significant challenges for students from traditional, rote-based educational backgrounds—such as those examined in this study—when transitioning to degree programs at international universities. In these educational contexts, listening instruction is often limited to assessing comprehension without fostering critical engagement with the audio material. In contrast, students at international universities are typically expected to critically engage with the content. This discrepancy presents a challenge for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) professionals, who aim to equip students with effective learning strategies to cultivate a more critical approach to academic listening and facilitate their integration into the academic discourse community. This paper examines the implementation of metacognitive strategy-based instruction to teaching academic listening in EAP classes at British University Vietnam, where most students have been educated in traditional Vietnamese schools and whose listening strategies in their second language tend to be influenced by exam-oriented learning. The adoption of this instructional approach aims to scaffold students' ability to critically engage with academic listening materials and support their transition to university-level study. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, incorporating quantitative data from students' diagnostic, formative, and summative listening assessments, alongside qualitative analysis of both scaffolded and unguided student reflections on their learning experiences. Preliminary findings indicate that metacognitive strategy has a positive impact on both students' academic listening skills and their ability to engage critically with audio content.

Keywords: EAP, critical thinking, academic listening, metacognitive listening strategies

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Introduction

While the globalisation of education has strengthened the position of English as the main medium of instruction (EMI) in HE (J. Huang, 2005; L. Huang, 2010; Miller, 2014), the process has not been homogeneous in Asia. Countries such as Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore seem to have fully integrated English in teaching at both secondary and tertiary levels (Miller, 2014); South Korea, China, and Japan are increasing the focus on English within their high school and university curricula (Miller, 2014). Vietnam, however, maintains a strong tradition of delivering the national curriculum in Vietnamese. With the recent top-down policy to improve English proficiency in Vietnam (Sahan et al., 2022), the popularity of International English Language Testing System (IELTS) cannot be underestimated. The test has become mandatory for both school and university graduates, which has reflected on the approaches to teaching and learning English. As a result, there has been evidence of IELTS negative washback on both students' motivation to learn English (Nguyen, 2023) and their language skills development.

The teaching context of the current study includes an international university, providing British degree programmes in Vietnam, where student demographics is mostly Vietnamese students coming from traditional, often rote-based educational backgrounds with no or limited prior experience of studying through EMI. The new university learning environment often includes novel engaging classroom teaching approaches, students might not be familiar with, as well as expectations to complete tasks targeting higher order thinking skills and critically engage with the content. It also involves longer talks in English in the context of unfamiliar academic genres – such as lectures, seminars and tutorials. This creates a clash of learning cultures and previous learning experiences with new expectations, forming a gap in skills that is usually left for EAP lecturers to bridge.

Academic Listening in Higher Education: Nature and Challenges

Although lecture is by far the most common means of university instruction throughout the world (Gomez & Fortuno, 2005; Lynch, 2011; Malavska, 2016; Rahimirad & Monini, 2015), academic listening is yet the least researched of the four macro skills (Lynch, 2011; Miller, 2014), which could potentially be due to both the complex nature of the skill itself and the complexities of the context, where it is realised, i.e. academic discourse. The challenges associated with transitioning from monolingual L1-based secondary education to the tertiary level with EMI are not limited to progressing from listening comprehension in L2 to critical engagement with the content in L2, they also involve constructing new schemata for genres students have not been exposed to previously.

When writing about academic listening comprehension through L2, Lynch (2011) identifies *listener-related* (e.g. distractions, emotional response to the speaker etc); *speaker-related* (e.g. accent, cultural references etc) and *content-related* (e.g. unfamiliar content, new expressions etc) difficulties. They all seem to be intensified by in the context of academic discourse that may involve genres, task types and expectations students are not familiar with.

Regardless of whether the communication is in L1 or L2 and the type of context it is realised in, the process of listening includes four overlapping types of listening processing - *neurological, linguistic, semantic and pragmatic* (Rost, 2013). *Neurological processing* involves attention initiation, meaning construction and memory; it is the attention that differentiates listening from hearing (Rost, 2013). *Linguistic processing* requires input from a

linguistic source (Rost, 2013) such as prosodic features of speech, differentiation between formal and informal register, genre and text features, discourse and stance markers etc. Lack of such linguistic awareness might cause lapses in comprehension, which becomes particularly important in the context of academic listening through L2. *Semantic processing* integrates prior experience into understanding events (Rost, 2013); listeners' schemata are activated and even if there is a linguistic challenge, they are still able to construct the meaning because of their background knowledge or previous experience. Schemata, that are key to top-down processing, are, however, culture specific (Minsky, 1975; Tannen, 1993) which could either interfere or contribute to meaning construction. In academic discourse schemata may support or hinder the process of navigation of the novel genres by students. For example, those who have been previously exposed to critical thinking task types are more likely to complete them despite the linguistic challenge. *Pragmatic processing* occurs when a listener takes an active role in identifying relevant factors in verbal and non-verbal input and injects their own intentions into the process of constructing meaning (Rost, 2013), this prompts critical engagement with the content, inference and understanding perspectives and the stance of a speaker.

Lecture, as the core oral academic genre, is characterised by “intertextuality”, that is references to multiple texts along with texts created by the lecturer (Malavska, 2016), which could potentially support or interfere with semantic processing. To perform its communicative purpose of explaining and delivering new information to a large number of students, this genre also combines features of both spoken and written discourse as well as its own structural patterns (Gomez & Fortuno, 2005). Not only may these factors lead to lack of comprehension but also hinder students' critical engagement with its content.

Critical Thinking in Higher Education

The ability to develop an argument and make sound judgements is crucial for academic success as well as for future employability (Andrews, 2015; Bagheri, 2015; Davies & Barnett, 2015). It has, therefore, become a “goal of modern education” as it equips students with the skills necessary to adapt to the fast-changing world (Ku, 2009). Thus, a particularly strong emphasis is placed on critical thinking development in western HE (Moore, 2013; Wilson, 2016) with expectations for students to demonstrate the ability to read and write critically (Wilson, 2016).

The problem of critical thinking definition, identification of its composites and ways of its measurement has been a long focus of research, as a result, three different perspectives- philosophical, psychological and educational (Lai, 2011) have been identified. For educational purposes, Bloom et al. (1964) divided critical thinking skills into higher- and lower-order thinking skills; this approach was revised in 2001 and reflected the order of skills in the well-known Bloom's taxonomy pyramid (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), which has been widely used by educators.

Ennis (1985) added reflecting thinking to the domain for critical thinking and then identified critical thinking dispositions and abilities (Ennis, 2015). Summarising the existing approaches, Davies and Barnett (2015) classify critical thinking skills into -lower level, higher level, complex and metacognitive thinking skills. To link theory and practice, Thomas and Lok (2015) developed an operational framework of Disposition-Skills-Knowledge for teaching critical thinking. It has eventually become apparent that critical thinking goes beyond just cognitive ability. Thus, in the context of HE, a broader term- criticality (Davies

& Barnett, 2015) seems more appropriate as it encompasses critical thinking, critical reflection and critical action; it does not limit the role of HE to only demonstration of critical thinking but stimulates students to develop a stance and their critical orientation in the society and the world (Davies & Barnett, 2015).

In the context of current study, it is important to mention that links have been previously made to criticality and culture (Atkinson, 1997) and the ability or inability of students of certain cultures to critically engage in classes. Some researchers (Bali, 2015; Floyd, 2011), however, believe that it is rather expressing critical thinking through L2 that presents a challenge than a student's culture. That brings criticality into the scope of EAP, a supporting discipline, assisting students from various cultural backgrounds with their study through L2 and takes it beyond the acquisition of the four macro skills - reading, writing, listening and speaking-by incorporating criticality. In response to the changing role of EAP in the globalisation context, Benesch (2009) makes a case for critical EAP - critical teaching and learning in a broader sociopolitical context.

Criticality in Academic Listening in EAP Classes: Problems and Strategies

Traditionally, academic listening tasks have been limited to comprehension checking questions, which only target lower order thinking skills, that is understanding of an audio text, and do not promote critical engagement with it (Gyenes & Santos, 2021; Xu et al., 2021). It is, however, high-order thinking skills of analysing, synthesising, predicting and complex thinking skills of inference, evaluation, reason and problem-solving, alongside metacognitive skills (Davies & Barnett, 2015) that students at university level are expected to demonstrate, especially in the context of western HE traditions.

Gyenes and Santos (2021) present an integrated model of employing top-down and bottom up listening and critical thinking processes to enable criticality in academic talks, where criticality is not seen as a separate task that is performed after comprehension tasks but rather is integrated into all of the processes following a similar bottom-up and top-down path. This model could be transferred onto other oral academic genres explored in EAP classes and scaffold better preparation for a broader context such as discipline-specific lectures.

The problem potentially associated with the approach application, is that EAP students come from different educational backgrounds with already developed metacognitive listening strategies in L2. These strategies involve managing the learning process, planning, concentrating (O'Malley et al., 1989) and presumably are shaped by students previous learning experience and environment. Some students might have experienced an exam preparation negative backwash, especially in countries where international proficiency tests are mandatory such as IELTS Academic module in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2023) and therefore, have only been exposed to comprehension-based listening instruction (Xu et al., 2021), which only involves listening for the correct answer without open discussion questions or any interpretations involved. Some international proficiency tests include only a certain number of comprehension question types e.g. 10 question types of IELTS, which in the context of exam negative backwash influence the development of students metacognitive listening strategies that would be shaped by these comprehension questions only. Such teaching-for-exam practices may also lead to students not forming relevant schemata for approaching different task types, such as inference or other critical engagement with the content.

The metacognitive strategy-based instruction (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021), however, incorporates higher-order, complex and metacognitive thinking skills of reflection, evaluation, problem solving and not only does it promote learner autonomy (Xu et al., 2021) but also fosters criticality. It also supports the shift of focus from teachers and teaching to learners and learning, a crucial step in modern higher education (Bagheri, 2015). Metacognitive strategies provide a context for interpretation and, therefore, assist listeners with goals selection, supervise their improvement, and assess learning results, as well as considerably facilitate and accelerate listening performance or develop self-regulated learning (Rahimirad & Moini, 2015).

For the purpose of fostering criticality through academic listening in EAP classes, metacognitive strategy-based instruction appears to be the most effective as it allows room for facilitating bottom-up and top-down processing and prompts higher order thinking skills of *predicting*, *analysing*, *synthesising*; complex thinking skills- *inferring* (meaning, attitude), *evaluating* (arguments), *identifying* a stance/perspective, key and supporting ideas, *reasoning* (justifying), *problem solving* and metacognitive thinking skills - *reflecting* on their learning experience.

Context and Methodology of the Research

The need for the current research stems from the analysis of EAP students' diagnostic test results from 2021-2024 at British University Vietnam. This period coincides with IELTS becoming mandatory for high school and university students in Vietnam and, therefore, the shift of the entire EFL industry nationwide to test preparation.

The EAP diagnostic listening test results consistently identified successful completion of the comprehension checking section but lack of responses to open questions or questions involving inference. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed to investigate the situation and the reasons behind such performance. Quantitative analysis involved diagnostic, ongoing and summative assessment results in academic listening and quantitative incorporated students' questionnaires as well as their guided and unguided reflections.

Quantitative Analysis Results: Diagnostic Listening Tests

The analysis of students' diagnostic test in academic listening from 2021-2024 has identified task types that appeared to be particularly challenging for EAP students. These task types could be grouped as follows:

- **identifying a reason** (e.g. *Why did they research?*);
- **inference** (e.g. *According to the speaker, is this trend likely to continue in the future?*);
- **identifying a stance** (e.g. *Does the speaker support the trend?*);
- **identifying a perspective** (e.g. *Which perspective does the speaker present?*);
- **comparing and contrasting** (e.g. *How does the concept of the American Dream compare to how people in your country feel about achievement and success?*);
- **identifying relations between concepts** (e.g. *How does the theory of gatekeeping in media relate to the example made about marketing?*);
- **identifying main and supporting arguments** (e.g. *What is the key point identified in the research?*)

- **evaluation** (e.g. *To what extent can we trust the media to provide us with unbiased news?*).

These question types are classified according to the skill they are targeting and as can be noticed, they all belong to the domain of higher order thinking skill.

Qualitative Analysis: Identifying the Reasons

The next step of the research was to offer students a questionnaire with the questions from the listening test, asking them to reflect on the reasons why they found these particular questions difficult. The most common responses were that they did not hear the “correct answer” or that they had never done such tasks before or that they did not know “how to answer the question”. There was also a significant number of comments stating that the tasks were different from IELTS listening questions.

To support students in developing their critical thinking skill through academic listening tasks and mitigate the effects of IELTS negative backwash, the following steps were introduced to EAP teaching:

- evaluation of current teaching materials;
- development classroom strategies for fostering criticality through academic listening;
- gathering qualitative and quantitative data for preliminary results.

Evaluation of the Teaching Materials

Alongside the in-house materials, Oxford University Press EAP series (Chazal & McCarter, 2012) are used as the main textbook for EAP classes, particularly at the B2 level. From the perspective of critical thinking development, the listening sections consistently feature tasks fostering metacognitive strategies, for example a foreword on the importance of prediction when listening to a lecture and stating the aims for the class, which helps manage students’ expectations and activate metacognitive skills of reflection on their learning. Prediction is also employed at the pre-listening stage, often through visual prompts, which initiates top-down processing and activates students’ schemata. It also engages a higher order thinking skill of *prediction* and a complex skill of *inference* when they need to infer meaning from a visual.

There are also tasks explicitly stating “critical thinking” that also contributes to students’ metacognitive skills development; however, those could have been integrated into the comprehension task for a more natural process of engagement with audio content.

Another important strategy is that after each listening task in the textbook students are invited to compare their answers in pairs, which is in line with Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory that sees learning as an outcome of dialogic interaction or scaffolding.

There are, however, areas for better integration of critical thinking-focused tasks into listening comprehension sections. For example, certain tasks create conditions for development of higher order thinking skills (e.g. tick the words you might hear in the lecture) but do not provide space for students’ own ideas, which would involve such complex skills as *reasoning* and *evaluation*. The dominance of tasks targeting lower order thinking skills (*understanding* the content, *applying* the information from the content). The language content

of the listening sections creates multiple opportunities for bottom-up processing but those do not seem to always be fully explored.

Material analysis has demonstrated that adaptations needed to be made to the existing resources and new classroom strategies needed to be implemented to support students with critical thinking development through academic listening.

Classroom Strategies to Fostering Criticality Through EAP Listening

The literature review, analysis of teaching materials, students' tests and questionnaires prompted the development of the following strategies to be applied to planning and delivery of academic listening lessons to foster critical thinking:

- 1) facilitation of **bottom -up processing** (*signposting phrases, stance markers, language of perspective, key vocabulary etc*);
- 2) creation of opportunities for **top-down processing** (*schemata activation- e.g. tasks like prediction at the pre-listening stage*);
- 3) introduction of tasks targeting **higher-order thinking skills** (*predicting, analysing, synthesising, comparing and contrasting*);
- 4) introduction of tasks aiming at **complex thinking skills** (*inference, evaluation, reasoning, problem solving*);
- 5) providing “*delicate scaffolding*” (Wilson, 2016) assistance with higher-order and complex thinking skills-oriented tasks throughout the sequence of steps;
- 6) involving **metacognitive skills** (*reflection on the learning experience*), when students are invited to reflect on their task completion and on their overall listening performance after each lesson. They start with guided reflections and as the course progresses, they gradually begin to reflect without prompts, evaluate their progress in class and the course and identify potential areas for improvement. Their reflections are submitted through the class page on the Learning Management System, which allows students to return to their previous submissions and reflect on the overall progress.

Preliminary Results

Although the research is still in progress and the suggested scheme of work would need to be tested on a larger population of students, some preliminary findings are already available. The quantitative data of ongoing and final assessment results have demonstrated improvements in students' performance in certain task types, particularly in tasks targeting higher- order thinking skills as well as some tasks aiming at complex thinking skills, mainly inference and some evaluation.

The analysis of guided and unguided student reflections has revealed a few important points for future adaptations of the strategies. Firstly, students find useful tasks facilitating bottom-up processing such as introduction of signposting language to support with audio content navigation, or hedging device to help identify the stance of the speaker. Prediction and scaffolding tasks have also been identified as crucial for effective listening assignments completion. Additionally, students' reflections have confirmed that the critical thinking tasks are perceived as less challenging when scaffolding stages are included and bottom-up is utilised.

As part of the metacognitive listening strategies development, students were invited to reflect on their reflection practices and, interestingly, most stated that planning how they would approach a task before doing a listening task helps them complete the task more effectively. Most have also emphasised that guided reflections are more helpful than autonomous ones.

Conclusions

With the growing popularity of the IELTS test, most students starting degree programmes through EMI experience negative washback, as their previous learning experience is often limited to test-specific strategies rather than broader cognitive development. This results in a lack of prior exposure to tasks that require higher-order thinking skills, reinforcing a reliance on comprehension-based strategies that primarily target lower-order thinking (*understanding, applying*) in the EAP contexts.

To facilitate critical engagement with academic audio content, a metacognitive strategy-based approach to teaching academic listening has been developed. The introduced scheme of work incorporates bottom-up and top-down processing as well as metacognitive listening strategies.

This allows learners to focus on decoding linguistic elements that scaffold meaning construction as well as interpret information within broader contexts using schemata activation (top-down processing). Metacognitive strategies of self-evaluation and self-reflection were incorporated to support the process of development of critical thinking through academic listening. Although the research is still at its early stage, some preliminary findings prove that the approach fosters deeper cognitive engagement with the content and equips students with the critical thinking skills necessary for academic success beyond standardised test performance.

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