# COGNITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS TO YOUNG EFL LEARNERS' LISTENING COMPREHENSION PERFORMANCES

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The study discusses a longitudinal project on the development of listening comprehension and the role of individual differences (IDs) in this process in an early language learning (ELL) context. It has been long recognized that listening comprehension is a cornerstone of ELL, therefore, the development of listening is vital to achieve communicative competence (*Dunkel*, 1986; *Mordaunt* & *Olson*, 2010). ID variables influence success and student achievement to different degrees.

In this study we investigated how aptitude, a decisive cognitive variable (*Dörnyei*, 2006, 2009; *Gardner* & *MacIntyre*, 1992, 1993; *Kiss* & *Nikolov*, 2005), contributes to learners' listening comprehension performance and how aptitude is related to learners' strategy use.

Participants were 150 fifth and sixth graders (79 boys and 71 girls) of 10 school classes. (1) Pretests and posttests (*Nikolov* & *Józsa*, 2003) of listening comprehension were administered along with questionnaires on (2) language aptitude (*Kiss* & *Nikolov*, 2005) and (3) strategies of listening comprehension (*Vandergrift*, 2005, 2006). We used (4) interviews and (5) think-aloud protocols to gain insight into listening comprehension.



The 4 areas in the aptitude test explained nearly equal shares of the variance. Word memorization contributed less to the variance than the other factors. This cohort was found to be most successful in the area of word memorization (M=71.9%), with fairly developed analogical thinking (M=64.4%). The results in sound-symbol association and listening comprehension run parallel to the achievement curve. Grammatical thinking was found to be less developed at this age. Language aptitude explained 39% of the variance in listening performance in which 20.2% was explained by the language analysis; the sound-symbol association showed the second highest (9.6%) impact on listening performances. Analyzing data of listening comprehension strategies, we found that directed attention, the strategy of focusing on keywords, scored high in both assessments, and this factor ($r_{pretest}$=.230, p<.01; $r_{posttest}$= .222, p<.05) along with problem solving ($r_{pretest}$=.112, n.s.; $r_{posttest}$=.225, p<.05) correlates with aptitude and listening comprehension results (directed attention: $r_{pretest}$=.229, p<.01; $r_{posttest}$= .283, p<.01; problem solving: $r_{pretest}$=.194, p<.05; $r_{posttest}$= .282, p<.01). Thinking aloud findings confirmed the quantitative results: when the text became more difficult for the students to comprehend, they inclined to pay attention to keywords and tried to conclude meaning by evoking their prior or background knowledge on the topic.

Our results confirmed prior research findings in that language aptitude is a significant predictor of the achievement of early language learners and that listening comprehension is no exception. Also, they suggest that the strengths of students, with special respect to their abilities and strategy use, should be taken into consideration when providing instructions.