

## Listen Well To Score Better

Aiza Johari  
[aiza@sarawak.uitm.edu.my](mailto:aiza@sarawak.uitm.edu.my)  
Academy of Language Studies  
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak

Norseha Unin  
Academy of Language Studies  
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak

Ch'ng Looi Chin  
Academy of Language Studies  
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak

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### ABSTRACT

*Many language students face difficulties when listening to a second language. For English as a Second Language (ESL) students, listening is not usually a significant part of their lessons. Educators usually pay more attention to reading, writing and speaking skills, resulting in listening anxiety among students. Additionally, listening activities are often carried out only to test the students' abilities, which may also lead to anxiety and apprehension (Vandergrift, 1999). According to Young (1992), anxiety is one of the key elements for poor listening abilities. Effective listening requires students to apply certain mental steps to address their listening anxiety or challenges. Goh (2000) stated that teaching listening strategies to the students is very helpful for developing students' comprehension. In this study, 100 participants were selected to examine the influence of metacognitive awareness strategies on their listening comprehension. The study was conducted in two stages of Pre-test and Post-test for MCQ (listening comprehension) and Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ), adopted from Vandergrift et al. (2006). In general, based on the MCQ scores, the findings showed an increase in the percentage of correct answers. As such, the metacognitive strategy awareness has positively influenced the test scores. Future studies are recommended to explore how metacognitive strategies can impact the students' listening performance.*

**Keywords:** Listening comprehension. Metacognitive awareness. Strategies

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✉ Aiza Johari  
Academy of Language Studies  
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak, Malaysia  
E-mail: [aiza@sarawak.uitm.edu.my](mailto:aiza@sarawak.uitm.edu.my)

## INTRODUCTION

Metacognitive awareness can be a useful learning strategy for listening comprehension. Metacognition is a process in which the learners are actively monitoring, controlling, and arranging the cognitive process (Flavell, 1976) and evaluating and changing strategies (Hacker et al., 2009) to meet their learning needs and attain cognitive goals. In relation to listening skill, such awareness can help students to improve their listening comprehension that require a great deal of mental activity (Vandergrift, 1999).

The awareness strategies provide students with the cognitive, efficiency, utility, and affective advantage (Gary, 1975 as cited in Vandergrift, 1999) for listening comprehension. As reading, writing and speaking skills are given priority in ESL classrooms, listening is not always a vital part of the lessons. In addition, listening activities are often carried out as assessments to evaluate the students' abilities. There are many reasons why students do not perform well in their listening tests or tasks. They could be many different internal and external barriers associated with listening activities, which may give negative impacts on the students' performances. According to Hargie (2011), the barriers of listening often exist at any stage of listening process such as receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating and responding to speech. They can be affected by various factors such as environment, physical, cognitive and personal factors, bad practices, lack of listening preparations, bad messages from speakers and prejudice etc. In Chang's (2013) study, the findings of the study illustrate that most EFL learners experience a range of listening problems and the students identified a number of factors that contribute to listening difficulties: listening text issues, the speaker, lacking motivation and interest, presentation of the spoken text, and factors relating to the students themselves.

Due to these barriers, listening anxiety may occur in which Young (1992) affirmed that listening anxiety among students is one of the key elements for poor listening abilities. When students face problems in listening tasks, their anxiety and apprehension may cause high failure rates. Despite the barriers in listening activities, metacognitive awareness strategies could be useful for students to accomplish their listening tasks. The strategies prepare students to apply certain mental steps in listening to overcome their listening comprehension difficulties. These are mental strategies to assist the learners in achieving a reasonable listening comprehension (Goh, 2002). However, not many learners are aware of how this mental mechanism functions and the appropriate coping strategies needed to accomplish the listening tasks especially in ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms. Without such understanding, students may face limitations in completing their listening tasks and thus, affecting their performances in language learning. In addition, the learners may have limited success in listening due to the challenges in constructing meaning of words. Therefore, a study on listening strategies can be useful for educators to address the problems of listening comprehension. In fact, Metacognitive awareness strategies have been used to support and improve students' listening comprehension (Vandergrift, 2002; Vandergrift, et. al. 2006; Selamat & Sidhu, 2011; and Rahimi & Katal, 2012). This study is designed to identify the students' levels of Metacognitive Awareness Strategies for performing their listening tasks and to examine the influence of the strategies on their test scores.

### **Metacognitive Awareness as Strategies to Listen Well**

Metacognitive awareness strategies activate the learners' thinking and help them to enhance their listening performance in general (Anderson 2002). With these strategies, students are aware of their learning needs, select the suitable learning strategies, monitor and evaluate the efficiency of the selected strategies, and lastly, they are able to correct errors and change their behaviors to improve listening comprehension (Ridley et al., 1992). Thus, metacognition can act as a guiding process to learning; in which the learner is using strategies to plan, monitor and evaluate language use and language learning (Harris, 2003). In fact, metacognitive strategies can be taught to enhance listening comprehension (Vandergrift, 1999).

As metacognitive awareness strategies involve three processes of planning, monitoring, and evaluating, the strategies can be the step-by-step guiding process to enhance listening skills (Vandergrift, 1999). Firstly, when planning for listening activities, teachers should prepare students for what they will hear and what they are expected to do. As such, students can make predictions to anticipate what they might hear. Subsequently, students who are prepared with selective attention can focus their attention on meaning while listening. Secondly, during the actual listening activity, students will monitor their comprehension by interpreting the oral text based on their inferencing abilities. Finally, after the listening activity, a reflection process helps to stimulate the strategy of evaluation. Teachers can encourage reflection by asking the students to assess the effectiveness of the strategies used.

Metacognitive processes like prediction, planning, monitoring, evaluating and problem-solving were utilized by Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) for an experimental group of 59 French students in which the experimental group successfully outperformed the control group. Moreover, studies by Abdullah Coşkun (2010) on some beginner preparatory school learners at a university in Turkey and another study conducted by Birjandi and Rahimi (2012) on Iranian EFL university students also indicated some encouraging impacts of metacognitive strategy instruction on the participants' levels of listening comprehension. In addition, other studies have also shown that students can be taught these strategies to enhance their performance on listening tasks. For example, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) concluded that strategy instruction for academic listening could be effective in enhancing initial learning when teachers pair the learning strategy instruction with listening tasks.

Instruction on strategies can also help students to improve their performance on listening tasks. A study by Thompson and Rubin (1996) on the listening comprehension performance of university students learning Russian, demonstrated that the students who received strategy instruction in listening to audio-recorded texts improved significantly over those who had received no instruction.

### **Previous Studies on Metacognitive Listening Awareness**

In relation to metacognitive listening awareness, few relevant studies were reviewed. Firstly, the results in Tavakoli, Shahraki and Rezazadeh (2012) suggested that the listeners' metacognitive awareness had a positive relationship with the participants' listening test performances, while in Rahimi and Katal (2012), the use of metacognitive strategies allows students to plan, control, and

evaluate their own learning that eventually helps them gain higher achievement and better learning outcome- in both face to face and online learning. These findings are also consistent with other existing literature that students of different proficiency levels have significantly different metacognitive listening strategies awareness (Goh, 1998 and Vandergrift, 2003) and different learning styles (Liu, 2008 and Shirani Bidabadi & Yamat ,2010) .In another study to pursue a better understanding of how pre-university students process a listening task, Nair et. al. (2014) employed a qualitative method of verbal protocol analysis on Malaysian college students. This study employed a think aloud procedure as the main methodology to explore the listening processes, which involved six students from semester two of a diploma program. The results showed a wide range of listening processes occurred in the students' verbal reports. During listening, the students were found to evaluate, infer, interpret, predict, and pay selective attention. The findings are useful for teachers to create awareness about the variety of strategies that students use to improve listening comprehension. To allow for critical listening to occur, the integration of listening processes and strategies can shift the learners' focus from the product of listening to the various processes.

In addition, a prior study by Goh (1997) discovered that when students become fully aware of their listening processes, they become more autonomous listeners. The ten students in the study were enrolled for an intensive English program at an institute in Singapore. These 19-year-old students were from the People's Republic of China. Using the listening diary as a self-reporting procedure, students were asked to record their observations, reactions, and perceptions on the listening processes. The study was conducted half-way through the six months program. Each student submitted one entry per week and this was done for ten weeks. All in all, forty entries were analyzed for the study. It was reported that the students had a high degree of metacognitive awareness as demonstrated by the listening diaries. According to Goh (1997), the students could observe cognitive processes in their listening because keeping a diary provided them with the right stimulus to reflect on their listening.

In sum, the described studies offer insights on the impact of metacognitive strategies on listening comprehension. The present study using Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) by Vandergrift et al. (2006), provides a way to develop the questionnaire items. While, Rahimi and Katal's (2012) study expands the method to identify the levels of Metacognitive Awareness Strategies and to examine the influence of the strategies on the test scores. The outcomes from the mentioned studies help to shape the research objectives for this present study in which the research objectives will provide a better understanding on how the use of metacognitive awareness strategies can enhance the participants' understanding of the listening tasks and examine the impacts of such strategies on their listening assessments.

## RESEARCH METHOD

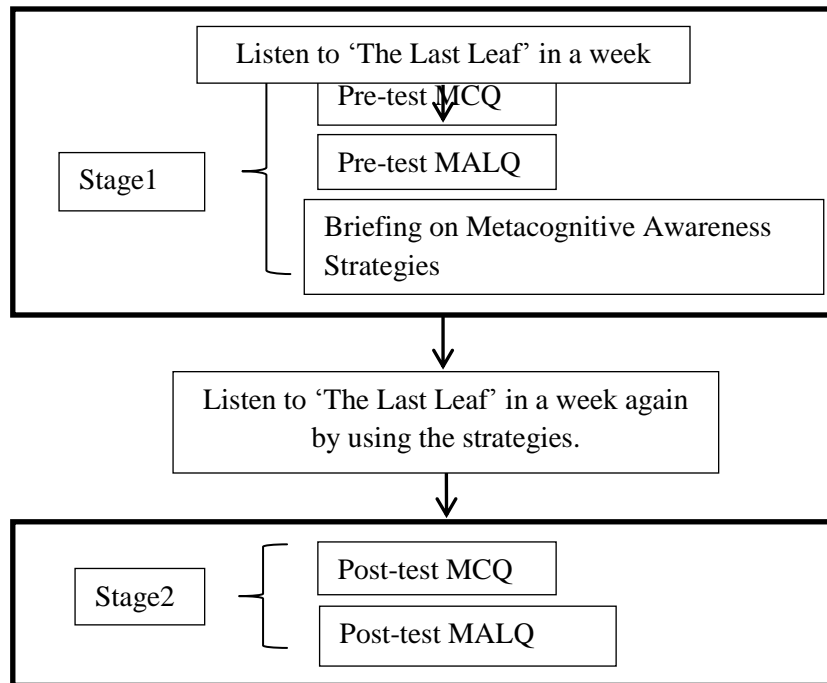


Figure 1: Data collection framework

Based on Figure 1, this quantitative study involved two stages of Pre-test and Post-test for Multiple Choice Questions (MCQ) and Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ). A total of 100 1<sup>st</sup> semester Diploma students who had registered the introductory English course, ELC121 Integrated Language Skills: Listening participated in this study. This course mainly grooms the first-year diploma students' listening skills. The course has 2 main assessment components that concentrate on listening skills, namely listening logs (LIRA) and listening tests. "Listening logs" or LIRA is a test component which is carried out 3 times in a semester. Each time, the students are required to listen to one of the pre-determined set of stories on their own as many times as they wish in a week's time. They need to listen and achieve listening comprehension without the interruption of the lecturer. For this study, only one out of five pre-determined stories for LIRA was selected to check the students' progress of listening comprehension where they could apply metacognitive awareness strategies that they were exposed to for the remaining stories for LIRA assessments.

### ***Pre-Test: MCQ and MALQ***

Students were asked to listen to a story entitled *The Last Leaf* in their own time (as many times as possible within one week). After a week, they were given half an hour in class to complete a set of Pre-test questions. These self-designed 20 MCQ were set according to 5 main literature components: Characters, Setting and Plot and Point of Views and Moral Values (Refer to

Appendix 1: MCQ). Before distributing the questions to the participants, the question items were given to 4 lecturers who were teaching the same course for 2 semesters, to check the validity and reliability of the question items. To note, the MCQ were not part of the requirement of the syllabus, but they were used in this study to examine the students' levels of comprehension before and after they applied metacognitive awareness strategies as well as to aid their understanding of the listening task. To get an overall picture on how metacognitive awareness can help the students to comprehend the main 5 literary components for the story, the findings from the MCQ were not presented according to the question items.

After submitting their Pre-test, they were required to complete a metacognitive awareness survey. Developed by Vandergrift et al. (2006), this MALQ survey consists of 21 items that includes five elements: problem solving (6 items), planning and evaluation (5 items), mental translation (3 items), person knowledge (3 items), and directed attention (4 items). This 6-point Likert scale MALQ was conducted to identify the level of metacognitive awareness for listening comprehension and as a way to encourage students to reflect and evaluate themselves upon completing the listening comprehension task.

The following week, the students were orally briefed on the metacognitive awareness strategies and the benefits that metacognitive awareness could provide for improving their listening comprehension. Notes were also given to the students to enhance their understanding on the strategies as in Table 1.

Table 1: Metacognitive awareness strategies and perceptions

Metacognitive Awareness Strategies	Strategy or belief/perception
Planning/Evaluation	1. Before I start to listen, I have a plan in my head for how I am going to listen.
Direct Attention	2. I focus harder on the text when I have trouble understanding.
Person Knowledge	3. I find that listening is more difficult than reading, speaking, or writing in English.
Mental Translation	4. I translate in my head as I listen.
Problem Solving	5. I use the words I understand to guess the meaning of the words I don't understand.
Direct Attention	6. When my mind wanders, I recover my concentration right away.
Problem Solving	7. As I listen, I compare what I understand with what I know about the topic.
Person Knowledge	8. I feel that listening comprehension in English is very difficult for me.
Problem Solving	9. I use my experience and knowledge to help me understand.
Planning/Evaluation	10. Before listening, I think of similar contexts that I may have listened to/experience with.
Mental Translation	11. I translate key words as I listen.
Direct Attention	12. I try to get back on track when I lose concentration.
Problem Solving	13. As I listen, I quickly adjust my interpretation if I realize that it is not correct.
Planning/Evaluation	14. After listening, I think back to how I listened, and about what I might do differently next time.
Person Knowledge	15. I don't feel nervous when I listen to English.
Direct Attention	16. When I have difficulty understanding what I hear, I give up and stop listening.
Problem Solving	17. I use the general idea of the text to help me guess the meaning of the words that I don't understand.
Mental Translation	18. I translate word by word, as I listen.
Problem Solving	19. When I guess the meaning of a word, I think back to everything else that I have heard, to see if my guess makes sense.
Planning/Evaluation	20. As I listen, I periodically ask myself if I am satisfied with my level of comprehension.
Planning/Evaluation	21. I have a goal in mind as I listen.

**Post-Test: MCQ and MALQ**

Students were asked to listen to the same story in their own time for another week. They were encouraged to analyze the story based on the four literary components from the MCQ Pre-test. After a week of Self Learning Time, the students were asked to complete a similar 20 MCQ. The post-test was given to examine the impact of MALQ on their listening comprehension for the short story. Upon completion of the Post-test, they were asked to complete the MALQ to re-examine their level of metacognitive awareness for listening comprehension.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

Both Pre-test and Post-test correct scores were compared and analyzed. In addition, the overall responses to the Likert Scales for MALQ (Pre and Post-tests) were compared and analyzed to identify the levels of metacognitive Awareness for completing the listening comprehension task. Then, the detailed percentage of the Likert Scale responses of each MALQ categories (problem solving, planning and evaluation, mental translation, person knowledge, and directed attention) were compared and analyzed to examine the influence of metacognitive awareness on their listening comprehension scores.

**RESULTS OF FINDINGS**

The findings are shown by the two figures below. Figure 2 shows the results for MCQ test scores and Figure 3 shows the survey responses for MALQ strategies.

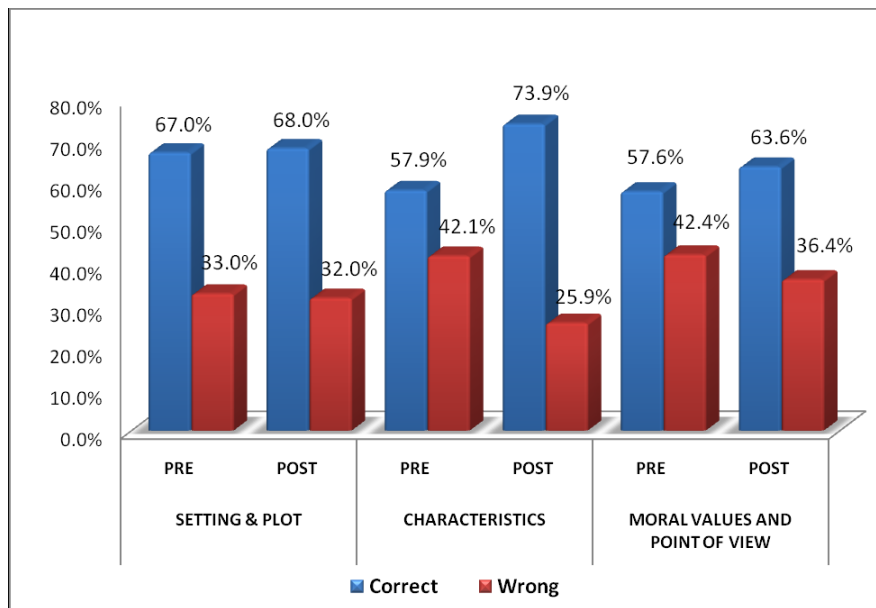


Figure 2: MCQ - Pre and Post Tests

In Figure 2, the percentage of correct answers for test scores are shown in blue vertical bars and the percentage of wrong answers are shown as red vertical bars. Overall, the findings show an increase in the percentage of correct answers for the listening comprehension task,

based on the MCQ given. The MCQ for pre and post tests are categorized into three aspects: setting and plot; characteristics; and also moral values and point of view. The objective question items were constructed to have only 1 answer for each question. Thus, it would be very clear to know how the students perform before and after they have gained the awareness of metacognitive strategies, through itemized checking.

For setting and plot, the increase in the percentage of correct answers is from 67% (Pre Test) to 68% (Post Test). As for characteristics, the increase is from 57.9% to 73.9%. Additionally, the increase in percentage for moral values and point of view is from 57.6% to 63.3%. The increases in the percentage from pre-test to post-test indicate that the participants responded positively to the MALQ strategies. The MALQ strategies were not applied at the pre-test, but were employed during the post-test. The findings reveal that the MALQ strategies helped the participants to improve their test scores. Therefore, the MALQ strategies have positive influence on the MCQ test scores.

In Figure 3, the blue vertical bars indicate the percentages of Strongly Agree, Partly Agree and Agree. The red vertical bars indicate the percentages for Strongly Disagree, Disagree and Slightly Disagree.

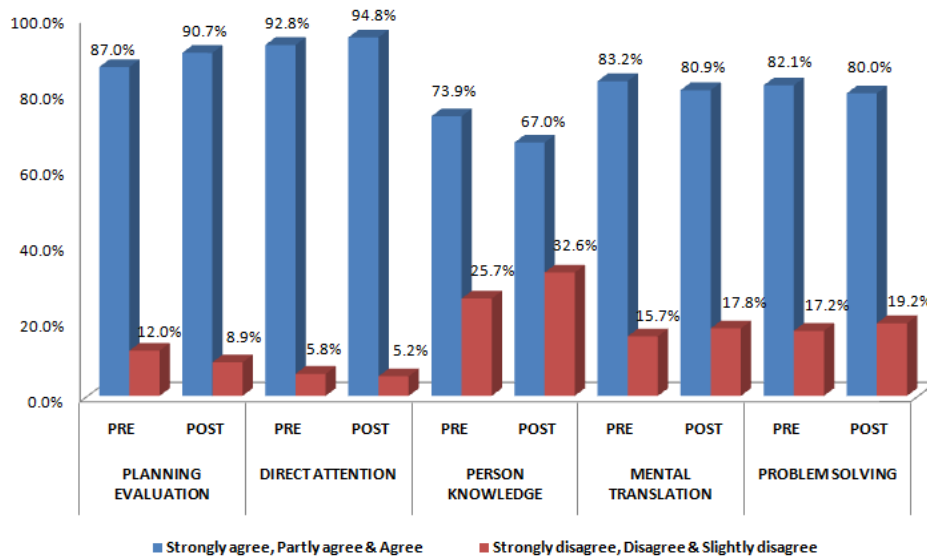


Figure 3: MALQ - Pre and Post Survey

Based on Figure 3 above, the percentages of strongly agree, partly agree and agree are positively reflected in the two MALQ strategies for planning and evaluation (from 87.0% to 90.7%) and direct attention (from 92.8% to 94.8%). The positive increase indicates that the participants have better awareness towards the MALQ strategies related to planning and



evaluation, as well as, direct attention. These increased levels of awareness contributed to the respondents' understanding of the story 'The last leaf'. Therefore, the awareness strategies have encouraging influence on their MCQ test scores, as shown in Figure 3. The negative statements for 'Person Knowledge', 'Mental Translation' and 'Problem Solving' indicate that the increase in percentages for strongly disagree, disagree and slightly disagree have positive connotations on the findings for MALQ strategies. For example: the increase from 25.7% to 32.6% for 'Person Knowledge', 15.7% to 17.8% for 'Mental Translation', and 17.2% to 19.2% for 'Problem Solving' show that the respondents are positively influenced by the strategies employed. Hence, their test scores are positively impacted by their awareness strategies.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Notably, based on the MCQ scores (5 main literary components), the findings indicate an increase in the percentage of correct answers. The results illustrate that metacognitive strategy awareness show constructive effect on students' test scores, which is parallel to the findings by Vandergrift et al.(2006), Rahimi and Katal (2012) and Nair (2014). Students can conduct self-learning and become more competent in their listening tasks by achieving certain levels of metacognitive awareness. According to Vandergrift (2002), metacognitive strategies provide language learners with the knowledge and tools to understand authentic texts outside of the classroom. The increase in the students' metacognitive awareness levels allow them to insightfully deal with listening tasks, purposefully plan for appropriate strategies and carefully monitor their own learning.

Although this study sheds some light on the usefulness of metacognitive awareness strategies to enhance the students' listening comprehension, the findings cannot be generalized to all ESL listening components in other ESL courses. Therefore, further studies could explore the effectiveness of metacognitive strategies for other listening contexts or genres. Comprehensive research on different variables such as participants' proficiency levels, learning styles, age and cultural background is necessary. Another future research is to study on how metacognitive strategies give impact on the students' listening performance, as well as to conduct interventions that will encourage metacognitive awareness. To add, it is recommended that ESL educators can enhance the use of metacognitive strategies (planning and evaluation, direct attention and personal knowledge) among students to improvise classroom instructions for listening activities.

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### About the Authors

**Aiza Johari** is currently attached to Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak. She is an English lecturer under Academy of Language Studies, teaching Diploma and Degree students. She obtained her Masters in TESL (Hons) from Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia and TESOL degree (Hons) from University College of Chichester, United Kingdom.

**Dr. Norseha Unin** has been lecturing English at UiTM Sarawak for the past 26 years. She graduated from Northern Illinois University with a B.A. in English and M.S.Ed. in Secondary Education. Her PhD in the field of Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education was obtained from Michigan State University, USA.

**Ch'ng Looi-Chin** is a lecturer at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak. She holds a .Sc. (TESL) degree and M.A.(Applied Linguistics) degree. She involves in research pertaining to language assessment and ELT teaching methodologies.

**Appendix 1: MCQ**  
LISTENING COMPREHENSION FOR “THE LAST LEAF”

- 1 Where does the story take place?
  - A. Maine
  - B. Greenwich
  - C. California
  - D. Italy
  
- 2 ALL the following statements are TRUE about Johnsy, except
  - A. She has a man in her life.
  - B. She is very sick and weak.
  - C. Sue is her housemate.
  - D. Joana is her real name.
  
- 3 Johnsy starts counting the falling leaves outside the window because
  - A. She believes that her life would end when the last leaf falls.
  - B. She believes that the falling leaves are blessing for her to recover faster.
  - C. She is bored of lying on her bed and counting the falling leaves to entertain herself.
  - D. She is counting the day for the ivy to shed of its leaves.
  
- 4 What disease does Johnsy have?
  - A. Autism
  - B. Cancer
  - C. Pneumonia
  - D. Depression
  
- 5 Who is Mister Behrman?
  - A. He is a successful painter.
  - B. He is an old miner.
  - C. He is Johnsy’s neighbour.
  - D. He is a doctor.
  
- 6 Which of the following statement is TRUE about Sue?
  - A. Sue is a young artist.
  - B. Sue is Johnsy’s sister.
  - C. Sue is suffering from pneumonia.
  - D. Sue hopes to paint the Bay of Naples in Italy
  
- 11 Which is the best theme for “The Last Leaf”?
  - A. It is better to die for a dream than to live without hope.
  - B. Life can be sustained when a desire to live exists in the heart.
  - C. Every artist must paint a masterpiece before dying.
  - D. Between life and death, one must choose death without hesitation.
  
- 12 Why do you think that Johnsy loses her courage to live?
  - A. She has lost her beloved friend in life.
  - B. She has not much hope on the current technology of medicine.
  - C. She has no chance to survive since many people had been killed by pneumonia.
  - D. She could not paint what she really wanted in her life, the paint of the Bay of Naples.
  
- 13 Johnsy rejects to drink the soup prepared by Sue because
  - A. There are only 4 leaves left on the old ivy vine.
  - B. She is worried over what would happen to the old ivy vine when the last leaf falls.
  - C. She wants to observe the fall of the last leaf before her death that night.
  - D. She is sad over the falling leaves of an old ivy vine.
  
- 14 Why is Sue so determined to complete her drawings?
  - A. She wants to be famous through her artistic drawings.
  - B. She wants to earn more money to support their living.
  - C. She wants to earn more money to move out from the village.
  - D. She wants to draw pictures for the magazine stories.
  
- 15 Why do you think that Sue begs Johnsy not to look at the falling leaf?
  - A. She needs to complete all her drawings by that night.
  - B. She does not want Johnsy to distract her when she is drawing.
  - C. She needs Johnsy to imagine the fall of the leaves as a method to rest her eyes.
  - D. She does not want Johnsy to keep being pessimistic.
  
- 16 Mr. Behrman is angry when Sue tells him about Johnsy’s belief. Which of the following is not true about Mr. Behrman’s belief?

someday.

- 7 What makes Johnsy has only one chance to survive out of ten?  
A. She is too ill to be further treated  
B. Medicine is too expensive  
C. The medicine is not effective  
D. She has no will to live
- 8 Which attribute describes Johnsy the best  
A. determined  
B. ignorant  
C. timid  
D. hopeless
- 9 Which of the following statement is TRUE?  
A. The doctor lives on the first floor of the apartment building.  
B. Mr Behrman lives on the ground floor of the apartment building.  
C. Sue and Johnsy are neighbours.  
D. Mr Behrman lives next door to the doctor.
- 10 How did Mr Behrman die?  
A. Old age  
B. Accident  
C. Heart attack  
D. Pneumonia
- A. He believes that we should not give up easily.  
B. He believes that if there is a will there is a way.  
C. He believes that we should not disappoint our loved ones.  
D. He believes that we should have hope for tomorrow.
- 17 Why does Mr. Behrman paints the ivy leaf on the wall?  
A. He wants to create hope for Johnsy to carry on with her life.  
B. He wants to seek the attention from the villagers with his master piece.  
C. He wants to Johnsy to regret over her silly thought..  
D. He wants to encourage Sue to take good care of Johnsy.
- 18 Based on the story, what is the virtue that Mr. Behrman shows?  
A Be kind to people around you.  
B Willing to sacrifice for the sake of others.  
C Never give up your dreams until the last breath.  
D Appreciate people's good deed.
- 19 The following principles are Sue's, except:  
A Love and patience are the key to success  
B A friend in need is a friend indeed.  
C Waiting is the best solution to solve a problem.  
D Appreciate and value the relationship with others.
- 20 What is the value that Johnsy should learn from this lesson?  
A Never disregard a person's capability.  
B Never believe in myth.  
C Never surrender one's dreams.  
D Never give up hope.