



## LISTENING PROBLEMS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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### ABSTRACT

*These days it is widely believed that listening is the most important skill in language learning. While listening, most learners may face problems with comprehending the intended meaning of the listening input. The present article features several factors that create learners' listening comprehension difficulties. Also, teachers ignore the importance of listening comprehension skill in their teaching classroom and focus more on teaching other skills of their learners. To prevent possible listening problems, this paper reviews some causes of the issue and offers three types of strategies to develop listeners' comprehension abilities.*

### Introduction

In Foreign Language Acquisition, listening is considered to be one of the most significant sub-skills. According to Mendelsohn (1994), listening makes up 40-50 per cent of total communication which means more time is spent on listening than speaking, reading and writing. Despite its importance, teaching listening is still ignored in most language classrooms. Most language learners have serious difficulties in English listening comprehension since most teachers pay more attention to reading, grammar and vocabulary in their language teaching process.

What listening problems do language learners face while acquiring a second language? How can these difficulties be minimized? What strategies are recommended for language teachers to develop learner's listening comprehension? This review attempts to find plausible

answers to these research questions and provides an overview of the concepts of listening and listening comprehension. Most importantly, the paper explores listening comprehension difficulties and the strategies of listening comprehension. Based on the previous studies the researchers reviewed the studies of listening, the importance of listening comprehension, major difficulties with listening comprehension and listening comprehension strategies. The review of literature found that awareness of learner's listening comprehension difficulties can enable teachers to implement listening strategies in teaching their students and deal with listening problems and finally enhance listening comprehension abilities. Findings from this research paper are crucial and will be helpful to formulate language learners' listening skill.



## Definition of Listening

Listening is the most common skill in language learning, and many researchers have defined the term listening differently. Chastain (1971) views listening as the ability to comprehend the authentic conversation at normal speed in a spontaneous condition. Goss (1982) states that listening is a reasonable case in which listeners attempt to create meaning from the obtained aural input. According to Underwood (1989), listening is a task which is aimed at obtaining a meaning from what we listen to. O'Malley et al. (1989), Purdy (1997), Rost (2002) and Steinberg (2007) view listening as a complex situation, enabling one listener to perceive another through sense and aural organs, and establishing meaning through applying cues based on the listening source and previous knowledge. A competent listener is able to decipher the speaker's intention together with other abilities, for instance, processing linguistic forms, comprehending the gist of the whole spoken text without understanding each word (Mendelsohn, 1994).

Osada (2004) mentions that listening has not been believed as an active skill while Nunan (1998) argues that listening is an active process of comprehending and constructing meaning from verbal and non-verbal contexts. Thus, listening is the ability to match a perceived meaning with intended meaning.

## The importance of Listening Comprehension

In the language learning for communicative purposes, the importance of listening comprehension is great due to the fact that it allows the students to learn pronunciation, intonation, and accent. Morley (1999) and Scarcella & Oxford

(1992) assert listening is one of commonly used language skills. A study conducted by Bird (1953) showed that female students spent forty per cent of their verbal communication time on listening; twenty-five per cent on speaking; fifteen per cent on reading, and eighteen per cent on writing. This finding was confirmed by Barker, Edwards, Gaines, Gladney and Holley (1980) through their study with college students. However, Gilbert (1988) states learners of kindergarten and high school spend 65-90 % of the total time on listening. Moreover, the significance of listening comprehension both in and out of the classroom, and throughout all levels of educational settings was revealed in the studies of scholars (Wolvin & Coakley, 1988; Coakley & Wolvin, 1997; Feyten, 1991; Wing, 1986; Ferris, 1998; Murphy, 1991; Vogely, 1998; Ferris & Tag, 1996; Truesdale, 1990). Thus, it is clear from the review above, listening comprehension is much more critical for language learners than the other skills used to reach academic goals; therefore more attention should be paid to develop efficient listening abilities.

## Major Difficulties with Listening Comprehension

Barnes (1984) states listening comprehension can be a problem-solving activity, and while performing this activity, second language learners may encounter a number of challenges. Azmi et al. (2014) have identified the following possible listening problems:

1. *The quality of recorded materials.* In spite of technological advances, some teachers still use inferior recorded materials. The sound system quality has an effect on the learner's listening comprehension.



2. *Cultural differences.* Familiarity with the cultural insight of the target language can have a vital impact on the listeners' comprehension. When learners are involved in completely different cultural listening materials, they may have serious problems in their comprehension. For this reason, teachers should provide prior insight about the topic beforehand.

3. *Accent.* The speech with different accent might lead to a great decline in comprehension. Unfamiliar accents pose critical challenges in listening comprehension, and knowing various accents enables listeners to comprehend spoken input efficiently. In order to prevent potential problems teachers are recommended to teach different forms of accents in their teaching practice.

4. *Unfamiliar vocabulary.* Listening materials with familiar words can be easier for learners to comprehend and this increases their learning interest. Yet, many words in English may possess more meanings, which may often cause learners to get confused.

5. *Long and fast speech.* The levels of learners should be taken into account while listening long oral texts and storing them in mind. For instance, listening more than three minutes and then performing assigned tasks are difficult for low level students whereas short listening texts increase the level of comprehension and prevent boredom, maintain learners' concentration. Another problem that makes listening difficult is the speed. Fast speech may have difficulties to comprehend target words.

6. *Physical condition.* Even inconvenience of classrooms such as too hot or too cold temperature and sitting positions can be a

contributor that makes listening comprehension difficult.

7. *Lack of concentration.* Learners' concentration affects the level of listening comprehension. Even the tiniest break in concentration might reduce comprehension to a certain extent.

Underwood (1989) mentions several challenges to effective listening comprehension. Firstly, most listeners cannot control fast speech. He reports "Many English language learners believe that the greatest difficulty listening comprehension is that the listeners cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks" (p. 16). Secondly, learners do not have the chance to repeat the words and this may result in serious problems. Mostly, teachers can decide whether listening passages are repeated, yet teachers may not be sure whether their learners have comprehended assigned listening input.

According to Graham (2006), other factors may also cause listening difficulties such as lack of vocabulary, poor grammar and misinterpretations about listening tasks. Walker (2014) and Bloomfield et al. (2010) emphasize the pronunciation of words that differ from the way they are in written form can be one of the serious listening comprehension problems. As the oral texts differ from written forms, identifying words that constitute the oral speech may lead to several problems for listeners. Listening texts occurs on the spot and should be proceeded quickly, making this skill more complicated than reading (Vandergrift, 2004 and Walker, 2014). Hasan (2000) and Buck (2001) indicate numerous difficulties in listening tasks, for example, unknown vocabulary and topics, difficult grammatical structures, high speed rate and the duration of the spoken texts as



the most vital causes that create difficulties for learners' listening aptitude.

On the other hand, Boyle (1984), Yagang (1994) and Teng (2002) mention four sources related to the text, the speaker, the listener and environmental reasons as the primary elements that influence learners' listening comprehension. In turn, language teachers should raise awareness of listening problems cited above and minimize them by creating positive atmosphere.

### **Strategies of Listening Comprehension.**

Goh (2000) states teaching listening strategies to listeners is of great importance, however, this will be useless if learners' vocabulary, grammar and phonology are not improved beforehand. Developing strategies is important for the listening training, and most research studies indicate the following three types (Conrad, 1989; Rost & Ross, 1991; Azmil et al. 2014; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990):

1. *Strategies involving cognition.* These strategies can be used for understanding and obtain certain information lasting long or short in memory in order to use it later (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). According to Derry and Murphy (1986), these strategies are considered to be problem-solving ways which learners apply for developing competence. Two kinds of cognitive strategies including bottom-up and top-down are well-known in listening. Bottom-up ones are word-by-word translation whilst through top-down strategies learners forecast, guess, explain listening context. High level learners prefer top-down strategies more compared with low levels (Conrad, 1989; Tsui & Fullilove, 1998; Azmil et al. 2014; 1989; Abdalhamid, 2012).

2. *Metacognitive strategies.* By the help of metacognitive strategies, learners can plan, check, assess and change their learning. Baker and Brown (1984)) notes two kinds of these strategies that are cognitive knowledge and cognitive regulation. In the former, the learners' attention of what is happening is on the focus, and being concerned with what learners should do to listen efficiently is in the latter.

3. *Socio-affective strategies.* Vandergrift (2003) emphasizes this type of strategies are critical techniques which learners apply to collaborate with other individuals in an effort to lower anxiety. By this strategy students can reduce their anxiety, become confident in the process of aural activities, and get motivated to enhance listening skill (Habte-Gabr, 2006). Thus, it is clear from the review above, listening comprehension is more critical for language learners than the other skills used to reach academic goals; therefore more attention should be paid to develop efficient listening abilities.

### **Conclusion**

Through reviewing previous studies mentioned above, the researchers have identified a number of factors that create potential problems for language learners. However, these listening comprehension difficulties can be minimized or prevented by language instructors by establishing appropriate atmosphere. Another finding is that teaching listening strategies will assist learners to comprehend listening input and attain greater success in English language learning. Thus, one can concluded that the researchers could find plausible answers to the inquiry questions assigned above. Beyond this, the review recommends that teachers should cater various opportunities aiming at training listening



skills and making learners be actively involved in the listening process. Hopefully, the findings of this study will help the

improvement of teaching and learning listening comprehension skills.

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