LEARNERS' DIFFICULTIES & STRATEGIES IN LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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Abstract
Listening plays a vital role in daily lives. Everyday people listen for different purposes such as entertainmnet, academic purposes or obtaining necessary information. It is essential for learning languages since they enable to acquire insights and information, and to achieve success in communicating with others. But many students fail to seize them because of some learning difficulties in listening class. Teachers should be aware of students' learning difficulties. Understanding students' learning difficulties may enable EFL teachers to help students develop effective learning strategies and ultimately improve their English listening abilities. This paper focuses on how teachers enhance their positive attitude; train them to be responsive by giving the suitable strategies that will enable them to develop their listening skills.

Keywords: listening skills, difficulties, strategies.

Introduction

Listening plays an important role in communication as it is said that, of the total time spent on communicating, listening takes up 40-50%; speaking, 25-30%; reading, 11-16%; and writing, about 9% (Gilakjani and Ahmadi, 2011). According to Devine (1982), listening is the primary means by which incoming ideas and information are taken in. Gilbert (1988), on the other hand, noted that students from kindergarten through high school were expected to listen 65-90 percent of the time. Wolvin and Coakley (1988) concluded that, both in and out of the classroom, listening consumes more of daily communication time than other forms of verbal communication. Listening is central to the lives of students throughout all levels of educational development (Coakley & Wolvin, 1997). Listening is the most frequently used language skill in the classroom (Ferris, 1998; Murphy, 1991; Vogely, 1998). Both instructors (Ferris & Tagg, 1996) and students (Ferris, 1998) acknowledge the importance of listening comprehension for success in academic settings. Numerous studies indicated that efficient listening skills were more important than reading skills as a factor contributing to academic success (Coakley & Wolvin, 1997). Nevertheless, it is evident that listening is more important for the lives of students since listening is used as a primary medium of learning at all stages of education.

EFL learners have serious problems in English listening comprehension due to the fact that universities pay more attention to English grammar, reading and vocabulary. Listening and speaking skills are not important parts of many course books or curricula and teachers do not seem to pay attention to these skills while designing their lessons. Most teachers take it for granted and believe that it will develop naturally within the process of language learning. Persulessy (1988:50) states that one of the reasons for the opinion that listening is a skill that tends to be neglected is the feeling among language teachers that this skill is automatically acquired by the learner as

he learns to speak the language. Most teachers also assume listening is synonymous to breathing— automatic (Ina Thomas and Brian Dyer, 2007). In addition to this, Nobuko Osada, 2004 reported that listening has not drawn much attention of both teachers and learners, they are generally less aware of its importance. In classrooms, teachers seem to test, not to teach listening. Meanwhile, students seem to learn listening, not listening comprehension. As a result, it remains the most neglected and the least understood aspect of language teaching (Glisan, 1985). In fact, listening is a complex mental process that involves perception, attention, cognition, and memory. Comprehending speech in a foreign language is a quite difficult task for language learners. When listening to a foreign language, many language learners face difficulties. In order to help students improve their listening ability, language teachers have to understand students' listening difficulties in comprehending spoken texts, and instruct effective listening strategies to help students solve their listening difficulties

In this paper, the researchers reviewed the strategies of listening comprehension and then identified the learners' listening comprehension problems when listening to oral texts. This paper intended to increase teachers' consciousness of these difficult areas in listening so that suitable and effective actions can be adopted.

Definition of Listening

According to Rost (2009), listening helps us to understand the world around us and is one of the necessary elements in creating successful communication. Thomlison's (1984) listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This process involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, the speaker's grammar and vocabulary, and comprehension of meaning. An able listener is capable of doing these four things simultaneously.

Definition of Listening Comprehension

The term "listening comprehension" has been defined by different authors. According to Rost (2002), listening comprehension is regarded as a complex, interactive process in which listeners are involved in a dynamic construction of meaning. Listeners understand the oral input from sound discrimination, prior knowledge of vocabulary, grammatical structures, stress and intonation, as well as other use linguistic, paralinguistic, or even non-linguistic clues in contextual utterance. Brown and Yule (1983), listening comprehension means that a person understands what he/she has heard. If he/she learns the text through hearing it, he/she will understand it. Rost (2002) and Hamouda (2013) defined listening comprehension as an interactive process in which listeners are involved in constructing meaning. Listeners comprehend the oral input through sound discrimination, previous knowledge, grammatical structures, stress and intonation, and the other linguistic or non-linguistic clues.

Literature Review Related to Listening Comprehension Problems

During the process of listening comprehension, various factors may affect learner listening ability. Lists of general factors have been identified (Hayati, 2010; Flowerdew and Miller, 1992) while the role of specific factors has also been examined. Some factors that have been the focus of research include speech rate (Conrad, 1989; Blau, 1990; Griffths, 1992; Zhao, 1997), lexis (rost, 1992), phonological features and background knowledge (Long, 1990;

Chiang and Dunkel, 1992). Other issues have also been related to listener difficulties. These range from text structure and syntax to personal factors such as insufficient exposure to the target language, and a lack of interest and motivation. Brown (1995) acknowledged the relevance of all these issues, and further argued that listener difficulties are also related to the levels of cognitive demands made by the content of the texts. Buck (2001) identifies numerous difficulties which can be confronted in listening tasks such as unknown vocabularies, unfamiliar topics, fast speech rate, and unfamiliar accents. A considerable number of difficulties learners face in listening comprehension are discussed in literature (Underwood, 1989; Ur, 1984).

Higgins (1995) studied Omani students' problems in listening comprehension and found that the factors which facilitate or hinder listening are speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation. After examining 81 Arabic speakers learning English as a foreign language for academic purposes and their perceived LC problems, a study conducted by Hasan (2000) shows that 'unfamiliar words', 'difficult grammatical structures', and 'the length of the spoken text' are the most important message factors for listening problems. In terms of speaker factor, it was revealed that 'clarity' was the main cause of EFL listening difficulties. As to listener factor, 'lack of interest' 'the demand for full and complete answers to listening comprehension questions' were the two main difficulties encountered by EFL students. Yagang (1994) attributes the difficulty of listening comprehension to four sources: the message, the speaker, the listener and the physical setting.

Boyle (1984) also classified the factors influencing listening comprehension and directly related to EFL listening into four inter-relating categories: listener, speaker, medium and environment factors. Aside from these, Chang, Chang, & Kuo (1995) discovered five major listening difficulties: speed, a cluster of sounds difficult for segmentation, obsession with the Chinese translation, association of sounds with words and meanings, and idiomatic expressions. Teng (2002) identified four listening factors, which were similar to Boyle's (1984) classification; they were listener factors, speaker factors, stimulus factors, and context factors. She indicated that "EFL proficiency" was the most important listener factor for EFL listening problems. It implies that students' difficulties may directly result from their deficient linguistic knowledge. However, Goh (2000) indicated that the most common problem was "quickly forget what is heard (parsing)." Similarly, in Sun's study (2002), the most difficulty in listening for Taiwan's students was "forget the meaning of the word (perception)." Theoretical explanations of listening comprehension provide us with clues about the problems which learners face when they listen to a spoken text. These insights cannot, however, account for exhaustive explanation of these problems. As Vogely (1995: 41) states, 'We still need research that documents empirically the relationship between what theory says and what learners actually know and more importantly do'. To locate the sources of listening comprehension, we need to consider the discourse itself in the context of the classroom.

Major Problems that Learners Face with Listening Comprehension

According to Azmi Bingol, Celik, Yidliz, and Tugrul Mart (2014), there are a lot of difficulties that learners mayencounter in the listening

comprehension processes and the purpose is to be aware of these problems and try to solve them. Some of these problems are as follows:

1) Quality of Recorded Materials

In some classes, teachers use some recorded materials that do not have high quality. The quality of sound system can impact the comprehending of learners' listening (Azmi Bingol, Celik, Yidliz, & Tugrul Mart, 2014).

2) Cultural Differences

Learners should be familiar with the cultural knowledge of language that has a significant effect on the learners' understanding. If the listening task involves completely different cultural materials then the learners may have critical problems in their comprehension. It is the responsibility of teachers to give background knowledge about the listening activities in advance (Azmi, Celik, Yidliz, & Tugrul, 2014).

3) Accent

Munro and Derwing (1999) expressed that too many accented speech can lead to an important reduction in comprehension. According to Goh (1999), 66% of learners mentioned a speaker's accent as one of the most significant factors that affect listener comprehension. Unfamiliar accents both native and non-native can cause serious problems in listening comprehension and familiarity with an accent helps learners' listening comprehension. Buck (2001) indicated that when listeners hear an unfamiliar accent such as Indian English for the first time after studying only American English will encounter critical difficulties in listening. This will certainly interrupt the whole listening comprehension process and at the same time an unfamiliar accent makes comprehension impossible for the listeners.

4) Unfamiliar Vocabulary

According to Azmi Bingol, Celik, Yidliz, and Tugrul Mart (2014),

when listening texts contain known words it would be very easy for students to them. If students know the meaning of words this can arouse their interest and motivation and can have a positive impact on the students' listening comprehension ability. A lot of words have more than one meaning and if they are not used appropriately in their appropriate contexts students will get confused.

5) Length and Speed of Listening

Azmi Bingol, Celik, Yidliz, and Tugrul Mart (2014) stated that the level of students can have a significant role when they listen to long parts and keep all information in their mind. It is very difficult for lower level students to listen more than three minutes long and complete the listening tasks. Short listening passages make easy listening comprehension for learners and reduce their tiredness. According to Underwood (1989), speed can make listening passage difficult. If the speakers speak too fast students may have serious problems to understand L2 words. In this situation, listeners are not able to control the speed of speakers and this can create critical problems with listening comprehension. According to Underwood (1989), there are some barriers to effective listening comprehension process. First, listeners cannot control the speed of speech. The biggest problem with listening comprehension is that listeners are not able to control how quickly speakers talk. Second, listeners cannot have words repeated and this can cause critical difficulties for them. Students cannot replay a recording section. Teachers decide what and when to repeat listening texts and it is very difficult for teachers to know whether or not their learners understood what they have heard. Third, listeners do not have high vocabulary knowledge. Speakers may select words that listeners do not know them.

Listeners may face an unfamiliar word which can stop them and think about the meaning of that word for a while and miss the next part of the speech. Fourth, listeners may lack contextual knowledge. Mutual knowledge and familiar texts can make communication easier for listeners. Listeners can sometimes comprehend the surface meaning of a passage but they can have substantial problems in understanding the whole meaning of a passage unless they are familiar with it. Fifth, it is not very easy for listeners to concentrate on the listening text. Sometimes a shortest break in attention can prevent comprehension. If the listening passage is interesting for listeners, concentration will be easy for them. Graham (2006) said that there are some other factors that increase learners' listening comprehension problems such as restricted vocabulary, poor grammar, and misinterpretations about listening tasks.

According to Seferoglu and Uzakgoren (2004), some other listening comprehension problems are related to the kind of listening materials. The researchers emphasized that listening is not of great importance and teachers do not teach listening strategies to their learners. Bloomfield et al. (2010) and Walker (2014) expressed that one of the serious problems of listening comprehension is related to the pronunciation of words that is different from the way they appear in print. Due to the fact that the spoken language varies to the form of the written language, the recognition of words that make the oral speech can create some difficulties for students. According to Vandergrift (2007) and Walker (2014), in addition to identify the words despite their unfamiliar pronunciation, students should try to decide which linguistic part belongs to which word. Prosodic features of spoken language like where the stress falls, weak forms and strong forms of words, and intonation also impact the comprehension of oral text.

Vandergrift (2004) and Walker (2014) indicated that oral passages exist in real time and should be processed rapidly and when the passage is over, only a mental representation remains. Listening needs immediate processing to access the spoken input again, making the skill more complex than reading. Students' cultural background knowledge can have an important role in their listening comprehension. A general understanding of the country's culture and its history can facilitate listening processes. Vandergrift (2007) and Walker (2014) declared that listeners can use pragmatic knowledge to make inferences and identify speakers' implied meaning that these should be specifically considered by teachers when teaching listening comprehension. Bloomfield et al. (2010) told that regional accents can impact the spoken message that is understood by the listeners and familiar accents are easier to understand than unfamiliar accents. Buck (2001) mentioned a lot of problems in listening activities like unknown vocabularies, unfamiliar topics, fast speech rate, and unfamiliar accents.

Hasan (2000) indicated that unfamiliar words, difficult grammatical structures, and the length of the spoken passages are the most important factors that cause problems for learners' listening comprehension. He continued that clarity, lack of interest, and the demand for complete answers to listening comprehension questions are the serious difficulties of students' listening comprehension. Yagang (1994) said that there are four sources for listening comprehension problems. They are the message, the speaker, the listener, and the physical environment.

Boyle (1984) stated that listener, speaker, medium, and environment factors are the main components that

affect listening comprehension. According to Teng (2002), there are four factors called listener factors, speaker factors, stimulus factors, and context factors that impact students' listening comprehension.

Previous Studies about Listening Strategies

Different studies about the use of listening strategies by learners have been carried out. Vandergrift (1999) said that metacognitive strategies lead to listening achievement when they deal with cognitive strategies. Less efficient learners utilized cognitive and memory strategies most frequently and social strategies least frequently. The more efficient learners often applied strategies. They used top-down and metacognitive strategies which are related to the learners' listening skill. The less efficient didn't use top-down strategies but utilized bottom-up strategies (Graham, Santos, & Vanderplank, 2008; Shang, 2008). Chulim (2008) performed a study about exploring the utilization of listening strategies by students in five Mexican universities. The findings indicated that the most frequent use of strategies was emphasizing on particular information, while taking notes and previous knowledge were the least strategies. There weren't any significant differences across universities in the use of listening strategies.

A structured interview was done by Vandergrift (1997) to examine the listening strategies of high school French students at different course levels. Students at all levels used metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective strategies. The results obtained from this study indicated that cognitive strategies were the largest percentage of strategies followed by metacognitive strategies which increased by proficiency level. Females were more interested in

metacognitive strategies than males. Socio-affective strategies also increased by level course. The importance of metacognitive awareness in listening comprehension has been repeatedly emphasized. According to Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal, and Tafaghodtari (2006) and Al-Alwan, Asassfeh, and Al-Shboul (2013), students with high levels of metacognitive consciousness are better at processing and keeping new information and learners can practice and strengthen what they have learned. Anderson (1991) stated that metacognitive strategies have a substantial role in developing learners' skills. Anderson (2003) and Al-Alwan, Asassfeh, and Al-Shboul (2013) represented that metacognitive strategies activate thinking and can guide and improve the learners' learning performance.

Goh and Yusnita (2006) and Al-Alwan, Asassfeh, and Al-Shboul (2013), emphasized the positive effect of listening strategies on the learners' listening performance. Yang (2009) and Al-Alwan, Asassfeh, and Al-Shboul (2013) stressed the significant role of metacognitive strategies in helping learners to undertake the listening activity more effectively and to distinguish successful listeners from unsuccessful ones. Coskun (2010) and Al-Alwan, Asassfeh, and Al-Shboul (2013) performed a study to investigate the effect of metacognitive listening strategy training program on listening comprehension. The findings represented that the experimental group had a significantly higher performance and metacognitive strategy training can be used in the listening classes to further the listening process. Twenty-eight Iranian EFL listeners participated in a strategy-based approach. It was utilized to four listening lessons to improve listeners' comprehension of IELTS listening texts. The results displayed that

less-skilled listeners indicate higher improvement than more-skilled ones on the IELTS listening tests. This shows the significant role of metacognitive instruction to help learners to consolidate their listening comprehension skill (Bozorgian, 2012).

According to Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) and Al-Alwan, Asassfeh, and Al-Shboul (2013), metacognitive strategies are used to plan and perform suitable actions to get a specific aim. They continued that metacognitive strategies manage the whole learning process. Yesilyurt (2013) declared that metacognitive strategies are strong predictors of L2 proficiency. According to Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal, and Tafaghodtari (2006), metacognitive strategies help language learners to understand the awareness levels of strategies and to organize and manage the listening comprehension processes. Vandergrift (2003) stated that the use of metacognitive strategies results in better listening performance. Goh (2002) stressed that more skilled listeners showed a higher level of consciousness of their listening difficulties. Vandergrift (2007) found an important relationship between metacognitive instruction and listening performance. Lui (2008) examined the relationship between the use of listening strategy and listening ability of Taiwanese university students. The results indicated a significant and positive relationship between strategy use and listening proficiency. Proficient listeners had higher metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective awareness.

A study was done by Mohseny and Raeisi (2009) about the relationship between language proficiency of Iranian EFL learners and their listening strategy use. Statistical analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between proficiency level and listening strategy

use. Cognitive strategies were the most frequent among learners.

A study was carried out by Tavakoli, Shahraki, and Rezazadeh (2012) about the relationship between metacognitive awareness of proficient and less proficient Iranian learners and their performance on the listening part of IELTS. The findings showed that metacognitive awareness had a positive relationship with the learners' listening performance. The impact of metacognitive instruction on learners' awareness of listening strategies, listening comprehension, and oral proficiency was examined by Rahimi and Katal (2012). According to the obtained results, learners who had proposed metacognitive instruction obtained higher gains in metacognitive awareness and speaking proficiency than those who received conventional listening instruction without strategy training.

How Can Teachers Help their Student Overcome their Listening Comprehension Problems?

Not all the problems described above can be overcome. Certain features of the message and the speaker, for instance, are inevitable. But this does not mean that the teacher can do nothing about them. S/he can at least provide the students with suitable listening materials, background and linguistic knowledge, enabling skills, pleasant classroom conditions, and useful exercises to help them discover effective listening strategies. Here are a few helpful ideas (Hamouda, 2013):

1. Adapting and Improving Listening Materials.

It is obvious that students differ in their learning styles and ability, therefore, teachers should adopt and adapt listening materials that match their students' interest and background since the listening materials only become

stimulating and motivating them when they are slightly challenging to what they have already known and suit their interest.

2. Activating your Students' Vocabulary.

From the investigation, one of the great causes for the students in listening comprehension is their lack of vocabulary. The majority of all the students report not to have sufficient vocabulary in listening comprehension and a small number complains that their vocabulary is too poor to understand. It is, therefore necessary for teachers to equip students with certain key words needed for listening comprehension since lack of vocabulary becomes a great obstacle to them in listening comprehension, which is also realized by Underwood (1989) and Higgin (1995). However, it is better to activate students' vocabulary by asking them to guess the meaning of words used in the listening context before explaining the meaning to them, since whenever students are able to relate what they have already known to what they are supposed to listen for, they are likely to listen better or more effectively.

3. Using Different Kinds of Input.

The teacher should also provide students with different kinds of input, such as lectures, radio news, films, TV plays, announcements, everyday conversation, interviews, storytelling, English songs, and so on.

4. Using Visual Aids.

Teacher exploit visual aids or draw pictures and diagrams related to the listening topics to aid students to guess and imagine actively. Visual aids draw learners' attentions, increase their motivation on the topic and help them relate to content of the spoken text, thus listener overcome difficulties such as unknown words, minimal pairs of words.

5. Accents.

Make students aware of different native-speaker accents. Of course, strong regional accents are not suitable for training in listening, but in spontaneous conversation native speakers do have certain accents. Moreover, the American accent is quite different from the British and Australian. Therefore, it is necessary to let students deal with different accents, especially in extensive listening.

6. Pronunciation.

The findings in the study show that incorrect pronunciation hinders at least many students from listening comprehension, so teachers need to help students expose themselves and get familiar with precise pronunciation of native speakers. By doing that the students' pronunciation capacity is much more improved, which will help students find listening to native speakers effective and efficient. Many teachers suppose that students' accurate pronunciation is of great help for them in listening acquisition. They also believe that one of the ultimate results of listening acquisition is to train students to produce accurate pronunciation.

7. Connected Speech.

Connected speech is characterized by weak forms, contractions, elision, and assimilation (Anne Anderson & Tony Lynch, 1988), which are considered the big obstacle for beginning EFL learners in spoken English acquisition. Thus, the task of teachers is to inform their students about these distinctive features of spoken language at any time convenient so that the students do not feel stressful and surprised when they listen to authentic listening materials.

8. Activating rr Building Students' Prior Topical and Linguistic Knowledge.

Activate the schemata by encouraging the learners to think about and discuss what they already know about the content of the listening text.

Teachers can also provide the background needed for them to understand the text, and it can help them focus attention on what to listen for. Consequently, students begin to predict what they might hear and make connections with what they already know, increasing the relevance of the information.

9. Arousing Interest and Motivating Students to Attend to the Spoken Message.

Students will be more willing to listen actively to what the speaker says if they are able to relate the listening experience to their own lives. Besides, teachers can create an environment conductive to listening and encourage effective listening behaviors that are necessary lifelong skills.

10. Encouraging Prediction.

This technique can be employed in the pre-listening or while-listening stages. Students are asked to predict what the text is about or what the speaker is going to say next. In order encourage students to imagine and predict what they are going to hear, teacher may tell something about the topic of the listening text or something about the speaker(s). Besides, students can be asked to predict the grammar structures that are likely to be used in the listening text or make a list of words, phrases that relate to the topic and may appear in the listening text. By this way, they can familiarize students with key concepts and vocabulary before listening to spoken text. When students have certain vocabulary in mind, they will be more self-confident and thus ready to listen effectively.

11. Using Slow Rate of Speech.

It has been a common belief in L2 teaching that a slower rate of speech would facilitate listening comprehension (Griffiths [10]). Lecturers need to be advised to slow their speech rate down to a level that suits their students.

12. Providing and trying to Gain as Much Feedback as Possible.

During the course, the teacher should fill the gap between inputs and students' reply and between the teacher's feedback and students' reaction so as to make listening purposeful. This not only promotes error correction but gives encouragements as well. It can aid students to heighten their confidence in their ability to tackle listening problems. Students' feedback can assist the teacher to judge where the class is going and how it should be instructed.

13. Improving the Learning Environment of Listening Skill.

Learning environment for listening skill, which is listening laboratory besides cassettes tapes, tape recorders and written listening texts, is a vital key affecting the quality of both learning and teaching listening skill. However, the findings of this study show that the students are not satisfied with the recent learning environment. Students argue that it still lacks well-equipped listening laboratory; consequently, the students find hard and challenging to concentrate while listening. It is, therefore, essential to upgrade the recent laboratory so that all of the students have equal and much chance to study listening skill in such a motivating environment for improving their listening skills.

Conclusion

Listening is important not only in language learning but also in daily communication. However, the students seem to have problems with listening. Many problems, such as the time they spend on studying themselves is too little to improve the skill, the inappropriate strategies of learner, and also the listening material itself. The students should have much more exposure to variety of listening, and learn the tips or strategies through each of their learning

themselves. There is no an ideal method that fits all types of English classes. Here, the teachers play an important role how to select the suitable listening strategies and how to apply them into the listening task. Listening activities should be arranged from basic to more complex as the learners gain in English language.

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