

Learners' Listening Comprehension Difficulties in English Language Learning: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Listening is one of the most important skills in English language learning. When students listen to English language, they face a lot of listening difficulties. Students have critical difficulties in listening comprehension because universities and schools pay more attention to writing, reading, and vocabulary. Listening is not an important part of many course books and most teachers do not pay attention to this important skill in their classes. In this paper, the researchers reviewed the terms listening, listening comprehension, listening comprehension strategies, and listening difficulties. The review of literature indicated that when teachers are aware of students' learning difficulties they can help them develop effective listening strategies and finally solve their difficulties in listening and improve their listening comprehension abilities.

Keywords: listening, listening comprehension, strategies, difficulties

1. Introduction

There are a lot of definitions of the term "listening". Chastain (1971) stated that the goal of listening comprehension is to comprehend the language at normal speed in an automatic condition. Hamouda (2013) said that listening skill is very important in acquiring understandable input. Learning does not occur if there will not be any input. Pourhosein Gilakjani and Mohammadreza Ahmadi (2011) expressed that listening has an important role in the communication process. According to Pourhosein Gilakjani and Seyedeh Masoumeh Ahmadi (2011), out the four main areas of communication skills called listening, speaking, reading, and writing, listening is the most important of all. Goss (1982) said that in listening comprehension listeners try to construct a meaning when they get the information from the listening source.

Steinberg (2007) and Azmi Bingol, Celik, Yidliz, and Tugrul Mart (2014) defined listening comprehension as one's ability to recognize another through sense, aural organs and allocate a meaning to the message to understand it. According to Richards, John Platt, and Heidi Platt (2000) and Pourhosein Gilakjani and Seyedeh Masoumeh Ahmadi (2011), listening comprehension is the process of understanding speech and it concentrates on role of linguistic units such as phonemes, words, and grammatical structures and the role of listener's anticipations, the situation and context, previous knowledge, and the subject. Osada (2004) expressed that listening skill didn't receive sufficient acceptance in its own right but rather has been considered as a passive skill that will develop without help. According to Morley (2001) and Rost (2001), listening is the most important skill for language learning because it can be mostly used in normal daily life and develops faster than the other language skills which indicates that it makes easy the development of the other language skills.

According to Hamouda (2013), EFL learners have crucial problems in listening comprehension because universities pay attention to grammar, reading, and vocabulary. Listening and speaking skills are not significant parts of many books and teachers do not consider these skills in their classes. Osada (2004) stated that listening is not very important for both teachers and learners and teachers test not to teach listening and learners learn listening not listening comprehension. Consequently, it remains the most neglected aspect of language teaching. Hamouda (2013) emphasized that comprehending speech is a very difficult activity for students. Learners face a lot of problems when they listen to a language. If teachers are expected to assist learners to improve their listening comprehension, they should comprehend their listening difficulties in understanding spoken passages

and teach them effective listening comprehension strategies to be able to solve their listening comprehension problems.

In this review 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 comprehension so that suitable and effective actions can be adopted. It is hoped that the findings of this review paper provide good views for the teaching and learning of listening comprehension for both teachers and learners.

2. Definition of Listening

Listening has been defined by many researchers. Chastain (1971) defined listening as the ability to understand native speech at normal speed. Morley (1972) said listening involves auditory discrimination, aural grammar, selecting necessary information, remembering it, and connecting it to the process between sound and form of meaning. According to Postovsky (1975), listening differs in meaning from sound discrimination to aural comprehension. Goss (1982) defined listening as a process of understanding what is heard and organizing it into lexical elements to which meaning can be allocated. Bowen, Madsen, and Hilferty (1985) demonstrated that listening is understanding the oral language. Students hear oral speech, divide sounds, classify them into lexical and syntactic units, and comprehend the message. Listening is a process of receiving what the speaker says, making and showing meaning, negotiating meaning with the speaker and answering, and creating meaning by participation, creativity, and empathy.

According to Purdy (1997), listening is the process of receiving, making meaning from, and answering to spoken and/or nonverbal messages. Rost (2002) defined listening as a complex process of interpretation in which listeners match what they hear with what they already know. According to Rost (2009), listening helps us to understand the world around us and is one of the necessary elements in creating successful communication. Jafari and Hashim (2015) emphasized that listening is a channel for comprehensible input and more than 50 percent of the time learners spend in learning a foreign language is devoted to listening.

3. Definition of Listening Comprehension

The term "listening comprehension" has been defined by different authors. According to 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. Dirven and Oakeshott-Taylor (1984) defined listening comprehension as the product of teaching methodology and is matched by terms such as speech understanding, spoken language understanding, speech recognition, and speech perception. 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. According to Nadig (2013), listening comprehension is the various processes of understanding and making sense of spoken language. These involve knowing speech sounds, comprehending the meaning of individual words, and understanding the syntax of sentences.

4. Listening Comprehension Strategies

Goh (2000) said that it is very important to teach listening strategies to students and before doing this, teachers should increase learners' knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and phonology. According to Vandergrift (1999), the development of strategy is significant for the training of listening and learners can guide and assess their own understanding and answers. Many researchers such as Conrad (1985), O'Malley and Chamot (1990), and Rost and Ross (1991) and Azmi Bingol, Celik, Yidliz, and Tugrul Mart (2014) expressed that there are three types of strategies in listening comprehension. They are cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective. These strategies can change based on the level of learners.

4.1 Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies are related to understanding and gathering input in short term memory or long-term memory for later use. Comprehension begins with the received data that is examined as consecutive levels of formation and a process of decoding. Cognitive strategy is a problem-solving method that learners apply to deal with the learning activity and facilitate the learning of knowledge (Azmi Bingol, Celik, Yidliz, & Tugrul Mart, 2014). Derry and Murphy (1986) defined cognitive strategies as problem-solving techniques that learners use for the acquisition of knowledge or skill. Brown and Palincsar (1982) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Abdalhamid (2012) expressed that cognitive strategies are related to the learning activities and include direct utilization or change of the learning materials. According to Goh (1998), learners utilize cognitive strategies to assist them process, keep, and remember new information.

There are two kinds of cognitive strategies in listening: bottom-up and top-down. Bottom-up strategies are word-for-word translation, arranging the rate of speech, repeating the oral text, and concentrating on prosodic characteristics of the text. Top-down strategies involve forecasting, guessing, explaining, and visualization. Advanced learners use more top-down strategies than beginners (Conrad, 1985; Tsui & Fullilove, 1998; O'Malley, Chamot, & Kupper, 1989; Abdalhamid, 2012). A think-aloud procedure was used to examine the listening strategies of university students learning Spanish. The results of quantitative study showed that participants utilized more cognitive than metacognitive strategies and that females applied more metacognitive strategies than males. The findings of qualitative study indicated that success in listening was related to factors like the application of many strategies, ability and flexibility in modifying strategies, stimulation, self-control, and sufficient use of prior knowledge (Abdalhamid, 2012).

4.2 Metacognitive Strategies

According to Rubin (1988), metacognitive strategies are management techniques used by learners to control their learning through planning, checking, assessing, and changing. For instance, for metacognitive planning strategies, listeners clear the aims of a listening task and apply specific features of the aural language input that make easy the understanding of aural input. Holden (2004) and Azmi Bingol, Celik, Yidliz, and Tugrul Mart (2014) stated that in this strategy students are aware when listening to the text. In this strategy, learners learn how to plan, monitor, and evaluate the collected information from the listening part. According to Wenden (1998), learners who use metacognitive strategies can learn faster and integrate the knowledge outstandingly, can be constant receivers and deal with all situations, have self-confidence to get help from partners, teachers, or family, and can observe and assess themselves. Salataci (2002) indicated that the use of metacognitive strategy in the listening process increases learners' self-confidence, motivation, and ability to complete the activities.

According to Baker and Brown (1984) and Abdalhamid (2012), there are two kinds of metacognitive skill: knowledge of cognition and regulation of cognition. Knowledge of cognition deals with the learners' consciousness of what is going on, and regulation of cognition deals with what learners should do to listen effectively. Bacon (1992), O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Goh (2000), Vandergrift (2003), and Abdalhamid (2012) indicated that the difference between skilled and less skilled listeners can be understood through their application of metacognitive strategies. O'Malley et al. (1989) demonstrated that skilled listeners utilize more repair strategies to redirect their attention back to the activity when there is a comprehension failure, while less skilled listeners cease listening. Vandergrift (2003) and Abdalhamid (2012) showed that skilled listeners applied twice as many metacognitive strategies as their less-skilled learners. According to Henner Stanchina (1987), metacognitive strategies played an important role in listening comprehension. She mentioned that skilled listeners can permanently explain and what they hear through (1) utilizing their prior knowledge and predictions to create theories on the text; (2) connecting new information with their continuing predictions; (3) making deductions to fill comprehension breaks; (4) assessing their predictions; (5) improving their theories. Henner Stanchina (1987) continued skilled listeners can identify failure in understanding and activate their background knowledge to get better comprehension.

4.3 Socio-affective Strategies

Vandergrift (2003) and Abdalhamid (2012) expressed that socio-affective strategies are techniques that listeners use to cooperate with others, to check their comprehension, and to reduce their apprehension. Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) said that affective strategies are very significant because the learning situation and learners' social-psychological factors are closely related to each other. There is a significant relationship between low anxiety and high listening performance: that is, the use of affective strategies makes easy and improve listening (Aneiro, 1989). O'Malley and Chamot (1987) represented that among the four strategies of listening comprehension, social and affective strategies had the most effect on the learning context. Wilson (2003) said that socio-affective strategies are related to students' interaction with other speakers and their reactions towards learning. Habte-Gabr (2006) said that in socio-affective strategy, students should know how to decrease anxiety, feel confident during listening activities, and raise motivation in improving listening skill.

5. 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 Bidabadi and Yamat (2011) about the relationship between listening strategies used by 92 Iranian EFL students and their listening proficiency. Learners used metacognitive strategies more often, followed by cognitive and socio-affective strategies. A significant positive relationship was found between learners' listening strategies and their listening proficiency. Tavakoli, Shahraki, and Rezazadeh (2012) examined 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.

6. 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 may encounter 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:

6.1 *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).

6.2 *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).

6.3 *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.

6.4 *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.

6.5 *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.

7. What Are the Useful Suggestions for Overcoming Students' Listening Comprehension Difficulties?

There are some suggestions that are beneficial to students to overcome some of their listening comprehension problems. They are as follows:

- a. Listening activities should be provided based on the students' needs and teachers should provide authentic listening materials for students that help them understand better the natural speech uttered by native speakers.
- b. Teachers should design listening tasks that arouse students' interest and help them learn listening skills and strategies. These tasks not only test the students' listening comprehension but also motivate them to use various types of listening strategies in order to gain the maximum benefits in doing their activities.
- c. Teachers should provide students with different types of input like lectures, radio news, films, TV plays, announcements, everyday conversation, and interviews.
- d. Teachers should familiarize their students with the rules of pronunciation in order to help them hear the different forms of rapid natural speech and ask them to imitate native speakers' pronunciation.
- e. Teachers should help their students to be familiar with the accents of different native speakers. Due to the fact that native speakers have specific accents it is necessary for students to recognize the differences between American and British accents.
- f. Listening activities should be presented according to their level of complexities; that is, listening activities should be provided from the very simple texts to the lower level students and moved to the very complicated authentic materials to the advanced students.
- g. Teachers should provide background knowledge and linguistic knowledge to their students while listening to different listening materials.
- h. Teachers should give their students the necessary feedback on their performance because it can promote their error correction and increase their motivation, and help them to develop their confidence in listening exercises.
- i. Teachers should help their students to develop the necessary skills of listening comprehension like listening for understanding particular information, listening for the main ideas, explanation and inference, listening for intended meaning through providing different tasks and activities at different levels.
- j. Teachers should use body language such as pointing and facial expressions to reinforce oral messages in their students.

k. Teachers should provide opportunities for developing top-down and bottom-up processing skills because top-down activities motivate students to discuss what they already know about a topic and bottom-up activities give confidence in the understanding of the components of the language such as sounds, words, intonation, and grammatical structures.

l. Teachers should encourage their students to develop listening strategies. Predicting, asking for clarification, and using non-verbal cues are some examples of these strategies that improve learners' listening comprehension ability.

m. Teachers should be appropriately trained in speaking skills. Listening is related to good pronunciation; therefore, teachers should have good and acceptable pronunciation which can help learners to become better listeners.

n. Teachers should ask their learners to always listen to music, documentaries, and news on the radio and television, talk to native speakers face to face or on the Internet so that they can create and reinforce a good habit of listening in themselves.

8. Conclusion

Listening comprehension has been ignored in many English language programs. Listening comprehension is a complex process. The strategies of listening comprehension must be used simultaneously. We must understand the text as we listen to it, keep the information in memory, combine it with what follows and adjust our comprehending of what we hear through previous knowledge and next information. Teachers should teach the students suitable listening strategies. There is no an ideal method that fits all types of English classes. Listening activities should be arranged from basic to more complex as the learners gain in English language. This review of literature indicated the factors that caused some serious problems for learners' listening comprehension and also offered some useful suggestions for teachers and students to improve their listening comprehension ability. It is hoped that the findings of this study contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning in listening comprehension.

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