

A STUDY OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION PROBLEMS FACED BY ESL LEARNERS AT UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL IN SOUTH PUNJAB

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Abstract

Listening is one of the most important skills in English language learning. Aim of this study was to identify the listening comprehension problems faced by ESL learners at undergraduate level in a developing district of south Punjab and found different techniques and strategies that can be adopted by the students to improve their listening skill. The study was quantitative and the population was ESL students of a developing district of south Punjab. Random sampling technique was used for sampling. There were 100 students who participated in this research. The instrument of this research was questionnaire. Questionnaire consisted of two sections i.e. about the students' response towards the importance of listening skill, and listening comprehension problems. This study revealed that these problems were related to the listener, and the speaker, listening material, linguistic aspects, lack of concentration, and physical setting. Data were analyzed through SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) software. The average percentage and positive mean values of each questionnaire item was calculated. Results of this study indicate that the learners faced most of the problems in listening comprehension due to un-clear pronunciation, lack of concentration on the listener's side, rate of speech delivery, unfamiliar words and topic.

Keywords: ESL learners, listening comprehension, listening strategies, L2 listening comprehension problems

1. Introduction

Listening is among the four important language abilities that allow people to communicate in a foreign language. We place a high value on listening while learning a second or foreign language since it is a fundamental skill in language acquisition. Students can grasp the information of a given language by listening. Students can just obtain meaningful learning if learning takes occurred. Listening skills are extremely important in the education since they provide feedback towards the students. Listening skills are extremely important in education since they provide feedback to the students. As a result, we may conclude that listening is a basic language ability that is absolutely crucial for ESL learners. It is not only vital for intercultural context, even though it is a tool for enhancing English proficiency.

Several researchers have examined listening comprehension issues between ESL students as a result of sophisticated developing trends in listening comprehension studies (Hamouda, 2012). S/he spends much of her/his time studying vocabulary and grammar instead of listening. This earlier research solely focused upon listening issues, however the current study took a new approach to the problem of listening comprehension and the many approaches and techniques that learners should employ to enhance their listening skills.

1.1. Listening

According to Rost (2002) "Listening is a basic cognitive skill and one of the main mediums through which we might perceive and engage with our general surroundings' ". Listening, in this sense, is defined as a mental ability for decoding signals, comprehending them, and successfully exchanging them with those around. Bowen and Madsen (1985) stated that listeners can comprehend oral skills. Students listen to verbal communication, split the signals into lexico-grammatical elements, and grasp the meaning. Hearing what the individual is saying, producing and exhibiting interpretation, articulating and responding meaning with the presenter, and generating sense via involvement, innovation, and understanding are all steps in the listening process.

1.2. Listening Comprehension

Various writers have described the term "listening comprehension." Listening comprehension, as per Brown and Yule (1983), indicates that the individual comprehends whatever he or she has listened to. He will comprehend the message if he understands it through listening. Listening comprehension refers to the different mechanisms of comprehending and creating meaning from spoken information. Understanding words sound, grasping the meaning of the terms, and understanding the structure of sentences are all part of listening comprehension defined by Nadig (2013).

1.3. Listening Strategies

Goh (2000) stated that it is important to teach students listening skills before using it. Educators must improve students' vocabulary, syntax, and phonological knowledge. Several scholars Conrad (1985), Chamot (1990), Rost and Ross (1991) have stated that there are three different types of students' listening Strategies that are cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective. Depending upon the students' level, these techniques may be used.

1.3.1. Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies are related to understanding and gathering data in short- or long-term memory for following use. Cognitive strategies are problem solving techniques that learners employ to acquire information or competence Derry and Murphy (1986). In hearing, there are two kinds of cognitive strategies: bottom-up and top-down. Word-by-word interpretation, modifying the speed of speech, reproducing the oral speech, and concentrating on phonetic aspects of the text are all instances of bottom-up methods. Guessing, forecasting, relating, and visualization are the part of top-down strategies. Most beginners' learners adopt top-down methods for learning listening skills.

1.3.2. Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive strategies are administrative techniques used by students to regulate their knowledge by organizing, monitoring, evaluating, and modifying, as defined by Rubin (1988). Listeners, for example, for metacognitive scheduling, describe the aims of a listening activity and use specific features of acoustic linguistic input that help auditory input understanding. According to Holden (2004), Azmi, Celik, Yildiz, and Tugrul (2014) students are alert while listening towards the material learners will know how to prepare, analyze, and process the data gathered during the listening

session using this method. Baker and Brown (1984) and Abdalhamid (2012) stated that there are two types of metacognitive competence: cognitive information and cognitive regulating. Learners' awareness about what is happening is dealt with by cognitive information, and what they were doing to listen successfully is the regulation of cognition.

1.3.3. Socio-affective strategies

Listeners employ socio-affective methods to interact with others, verify their comprehension and lessen overall fear, according to Vandergrift (2003) and Abdalhamid (2012). Affective techniques are important since the learning context and students' social-psychological variables are intertwined as suggested by Gardner and MacIntyre (1993). There is a link between low emotional intelligence and excellent listening efficiency. Use of emotional techniques makes listening easier and more effective (Aneiro, 1989). According to O'Malley and Chamot (1987) social and emotional techniques had been most effective on the learning environment of all listening strategies.

1.4. Statement of the Problems

According to Yagang (1993) Listening is important in both teaching and learning contexts. Learners attach more importance to diverse listening strategies and love to listen by utilizing multiple approaches to get a better grasp of a specific language. Listening is influenced by four factors, the ear, the communicator, the environmental characteristics or location and the communication. As a result, there are several issues with hearing, and it is hard to pinpoint what produced difficulties.

Listening comprehension difficulties can be caused by a variety of reasons, including listening content, language characteristics, and lack of attention. This article examines some of the elements that influence ESL learners' listening comprehension.

1.5. Research Questions

1. What kinds of listening issues are faced by English learning students at the master level in South Punjab?
2. What are the different techniques and strategies that can be adopted by the students to improve listening skill at Masters Level in the districts of South Punjab?

2. Literature Review

Listening comprehension problems afflicted Second or Foreign language students in various ways. Several surveys focused on a variety of issues that ESL students face when it comes to listening difficulties (Goh, 2000; Liu, 2002). Some research works that looked further into difficulties that ESL students have with listening comprehension are listed below.

Underwood (1989) in his study categorizes the following as the most significant listening problems:

- Loss of control over speaker speed,
- Being not able to complete tasks in the same way twice
- Limited vocabulary of the listener
- Inability to understand "signals"
- Perception difficulties
- Lack of focus
- Learning habits that have developed

In another study Hassan (2000) performed an EFL setting using a questionnaire to evaluate students' self-perceived listening difficulties. "Missing portions of the content, not identifiable

phrases, difficulties stemming from poor pronunciation, and fast speaking speed" were among the issues noted (Vandergrift, 2007, p. 194).

Recognition, utilization and comprehension are the three main stages of listening difficulties. These different levels include all of the problems that students have encountered (Anderson, 1995; Goh, 2000 and Vandergrift, 2003).

The majority of ESL listening research focuses on teaching listening techniques to the language students to address their listening problems (Goh, 2000; Liu, 2002). However, it is important to note that even before teaching the students about processes, we must first understand the problems that these techniques entail. Consequently, insufficient study has been done on learners' listening issues and techniques.

Goh (2000) conducted research on online listening difficulties of Chinese ESL learners using journal articles and semi-organized meetings. She employed the Anderson (1995) cognitive model on listening skills. She discovers that the issues she encountered were connected to three stages: parsing, utilization and perception as shown by another research. In perception stage, she found identifying speech, chunking, eliminating the beginning of the utterance, and recognition that were the major issues. In perception, she found instant neglecting of whatever was spoken to and inability to understand the intellectual representation of the text. In utilization, she found that learners can comprehend the word but unable to suggest the message.

Similarly, Liu (2002) conducted a field study through quasi interviews, complete recording and observation to evaluate electronic difficulties in understanding, comprehension and the function of compensatory schema usage in their solutions. Unforeseen words, auditory segment, vocabulary knowledge, and an over-reliance on perceptual signals were among the issues which the respondents faced. For L2 learners, the pace of speech is also a key issue (Goh, 1999; Flowerdew & Miller, 1992). In Goh's (1999) study, seventy-eight percent of the respondents and nearly every one of the Flowerdew and Miller's respondents through surveys and journals also stated that rapid English proficiency speed was their primary issue.

A study performed by Juan and Abidin (2013) on Chinese foreign students at University Sains Malaysia (USM) on potential Listening problems in 2013. The study stated that inadequate understanding of Vocabulary knowledge created substantial issues in their students' listening technique. And then there was the problem of accent which they had to deal with because indigenous accents make it difficult for students to understand the language.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The present study is quantitative in its nature because we collected the data through a close-ended questionnaire with the help of a Likert scale. The present study was conducted in a sub-campus of a public sector university in a developing district of the south Punjab and 100 MA English students (60 female and 40 male) were selected randomly. As for their age, respondents ranged from 20 to 23 years.

3.2. Instrument

Instrument that is used for this study to collect data is Questionnaire and it is adapted from English listening comprehension problems from the study of Hamouda (2013). These questionnaires were appropriate to this study because of similar issues faced by the sub campus of a public sector

university in a developing district of south Punjab. There were total 20 questions and it consisted of 2 sections.

Section one dealt with the learner's view towards the significance of listening skill and comprehension. Section two was further categorized into 3 levels focusing on the listening problems or factors which were causing difficulties by the ESL learners during listening. These 3 levels are related to the speaker, the listener and the text being listened.

3.3. Data collection and Analysis

After designing the questionnaire and having a pilot testing of the questions, the first author started to collect the data personally. Questionnaires that consisted of 20 question items were distributed to the respondents and they were briefly informed about the research objectives for the clarification of questions. Respondents answered the questions within 20 to 25 minutes with honest responses.

Their responses were analyzed later through SPSS (Statistical package for social sciences version 20) using frequencies, percentage standard deviations, and arithmetic means to portray the attitude and problems towards English Listening comprehension.

4. Data Analysis

The data was analyzed through SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) and the results are given below:

Table 1 Descriptive statistic of learners' attitude towards listening comprehension skill (N=100)

No	Items	Frequency	Percentage	Means	SD
1	I am more aware of the importance of English listening skill.	71	71.0	1.38	.07
2	I find that listening comprehension is difficult.	24	24.0	2.83	1.24
3	I find that listening comprehension is boring and not interesting.	9	9.0	3.36	1.03
4	I never heard about listening strategy.	23	23.0	3.16	1.37

*Mean values 1-2.4 (low), 2.5-3.4 (moderate); and 3.5-5 (high) levels

Table one investigates the learner's attitude towards listening skill and listening comprehension in the setting of this study. Question 1 that was about the awareness of English listening skill shows the 1.38 means value and .07 SD. Frequencies and percentage of the first question show that most learners know about the importance of English listening skill. Question 2, 3 and 4 were about the listening comprehension and listening strategy show the high mean value in this table that comes under the moderate level.

Results of this table clarify that respondents' attitude towards listening comprehension was not satisfactory. Because most students admit that listening comprehension is difficult, boring and uninteresting. They had not heard about any strategy that helped in listening comprehension.

Results showed that learners need a comfortable strategy that helps them to comprehend the listening skill.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of listening problems related to Listening Text (N= 100)

No	Items	Frequency	Percentage	Means	SD
5	I find it difficult to understand listening texts in which there are too many unfamiliar words including jargon and idioms.	40	40.0	2.43	1.26
6	Complex grammatical structures interfere with my listening comprehension.	38	38.0	2.21	1.18
7	I find it difficult to get a general understanding of the spoken text from the first listening.	30	30.0	2.34	1.18
8	I find it difficult to interpret the meaning of a long spoken text.	36	36.0	2.48	1.33
9	I use my experience and background knowledge of the topic to understand the spoken text.	46	46.0	1.85	1.01

Table 2 analyzed the listening comprehension problems that are related to the listening of the text. It indicates that question no 8 "I find it difficult to interpret the meaning of a long spoken text" was one of the most important problems related to text listening. It was shown through its mean value i.e. 2.48. There was low mean value on question no 9 "I use my experience and background knowledge of the topic to understand the spoken text" that shows that respondents do not need to utilize their contextual understanding and experience to comprehend the oral text.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics of Listening Problems related to Speaker (N= 100)

No	Items	Frequency	Percentage	Means	SD
10	I find it difficult to understand reduced forms.	26	26.0	2.56	1.18
11	I find it difficult to recognize the signals which indicate that the speaker is moving from one point to another.	28	28.0	2.70	1.36
12	I found it difficult to recognize the words I know because of the way they are pronounced.	28	28.0	2.58	1.30
13	I find it difficult to understand the meaning of words which are not pronounced clearly.	41	41.0	2.21	1.19
14	I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak with a variety of accents.	34	34.0	2.34	1.24

Table no 3 shows the descriptive statistics of listening problems that are related to speakers. There are five statements which are related to the problems the respondent faced due to the speakers. Among these problems were contracted forms, speaker's physical movement and the way s/he pronounced the word. These problems were represented by questions 10, 11 and 12. 41% respondent agree that unclear pronunciation of the words also caused problems and 34% respondents agree that they faced problems in listening when speakers used different accents.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of listening problems related to Listener (N= 100)

No	Items	Percentage	Frequency	Means	SD
15	I find it difficult to infer the meaning of an unknown word while listening.	39	39.0	2.10	1.05
16	When encountering an unknown word, I stop listening and think about the meaning of the word.	32	32.0	2.26	1.12
17	At the time of listening I find it difficult to predict what would come next.	29	29.0	2.57	1.28
18	I find it quickly to remember words or phrases I have just heard.	26	26.0	2.57	1.28
19	I find it difficult when listening to English without a transcript.	32	32.0	2.43	1.25
20	I find the pronunciation familiar but cannot recognize the words.	33	33.0	2.65	1.41

Table 4 analysis shows that the listener her/himself caused problems during listening. Listening difficulties related to the listener were divided into six questions (mentioned above). Question 20 i.e. "I find the pronunciation familiar but cannot recognize the words" show the major problem that respondent faced (mean value 2.65). The second main problem that is shown through 2.57 mean value through question 17 for the respondent related to difficulties in prediction of spoken text and remembering just those words that they heard recently. Results of this table clearly demonstrate the high level listening problems among respondents belong to inability to recognize familiar words during listening.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Discussion

Listening skill is important in education at any level. It is generally founded that listening skill is the commonly used language skill among the four language skills. Scholars also indicate the significance of this skill in comprehension, communication and education. It is also important for understanding because when a new learner faces problems while listening, it shows how to listen carefully and which strategy should learners adopt for better understanding. This study also highlights the difficulties that new students encountered while listening to comprehend.

Results of the present paper indicate that there are different listening difficulties related to different categories that ESL learners faced while encountering listening comprehension. These categories related to general facts about the respondent attitude headed for listening comprehension skill and strategy if they used any. It was related to listening text, speakers and listener as well.

This study reached at that point that listening is one of the most ignored skills at master level. The students of south Punjab faced many listening problems. The major problems that are faced by students are following:

(a) Listening problem related to listening text

Most of the participants agree that listening text causes a listening problem. Unfamiliar words, idioms and complex grammatical structure caused a difficulty to understand listening text for participants. Sometimes learners used their background knowledge to understand the listening text. Findings related to this topic show that mostly learners' face problems when unknown words come during listening (Underwood, 1989).

(b) Listening problem related to the speaker

Findings regarding this aspect indicate that the speaker also caused problem understanding the listening text. According to the findings, learners face problems in listening comprehension when speakers change their physical setting and pronounce words with their own accent rather than following standard pronunciation as Juan and Abidin (2013) found in their study. Therefore it is difficult for the learners to comprehend at that time when the speaker communicates fast and speaks with a different variety of accent. Some participants feel difficulty when the speaker speaks full of hesitation and with pauses.

(c) Listening problem related to listener

Most of the respondents are not sure what mostly affected them during listening. 30% participants feel it difficult when they understand the text for the first time. Most participants did not understand text without a transcript. The findings also show that learners also have vocabulary issues because without having much vocabulary learners cannot understand the meaning of particular words that come during listening. Insufficient background knowledge regarding particular topics also caused problems in listening comprehension. Present findings also support the finding of (Goh, 2000, Vandergrift, 2007) that found the same problems in their studies.

Results of this study show the same problems that were founded by previous researchers. The respondents agree that lack of listening practices caused a major problem that decreases their listening skill. Listening material aspects show that learners face difficulties when spoken text includes unknown words and are difficult to comprehend when the text is too long. This study also shows that lack of devotion, mental causes; physical situation of the speaker and learners also caused problems for the learners.

Generally, findings of the present study demonstrate that there are different types of listening comprehension problems that ESL learners face that are also presented in previous studies (Anderson, 1995; Goh, 2000 & Vandergrift, 2003 etc).

There are following major problems that learners faced:

- (i) Output Problems (related to listener background knowledge, physical condition, and insufficient vocabulary items).
- (ii) Input Problems (related to speakers for example speaker physical condition, variety of accent, pronunciation, hesitation and pauses).

5.2. Recommendation

Findings of this study demonstrate that undergraduate students of a developing district of south Punjab face several difficulties in listening comprehension; therefore these difficulties need to have some solutions. On the basis of the results obtained from this research, there are some recommendations that could be suggested to be taken into consideration:

- (1) Students should also motivate themselves to be experts in listening comprehension and to learn more about listening strategies that improve their understanding in listening to the text.
- (2) Teachers should also improve their teaching method to improve students' listening comprehension.

They could use schema models in educating about listening to ESL learners. These models help the learners to increase their previous understanding about listening text; it also helps the listener to develop meaning by using contextual guessing that activates and refreshes their previous knowledge rather than processing and getting gist.

- (3) In teaching listening skills, teachers should adopt different listening strategies and task based approaches to perform various listening activities related to listening in order to improve the student's ability to accept the listening task with no complications.
- (4) Collaborating the four language skills to promote communicative competence in learners.
- (5) Using technology in teaching listening can help the learner to develop interest in listening activities and provide a better comprehension.

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