

## EFL Learners Listening Comprehension Difficulties and their Remediation: An Overview

صعوبات فهم الاستماع لدى طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة اجنبية وحلولها: نظرة شاملة

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### Abstract

Listening plays a vital role not only in language learning, but also in daily communication. However, this skill is the least understood by learners because of its implicit nature, the transient nature of the input and the difficulty of determining where comprehension breaks down. This study seeks to review the major factors influencing English listening comprehension and the remedial techniques that might be followed to improve EFL learners listening comprehension. The paper, thus, starts by defining what listening comprehension is then it explains the processes (bottom up and top down) of listening. This is followed by a review of research dealing with the major factors (phonological, cognitive, linguistic, contextual, etc.) that may interfere with EFL learners listening comprehension. It ends by sketching out the remedial techniques teachers can use to aid their students become skilled listeners.

**Key Words:** Listening, Listening Comprehension, Factors, Process, Remedial Techniques

**المخلص:** يلعب الاستماع دورا أساسيا في تعلم اللغة وفي التواصل اليومي. ومع ذلك فإن هذه المهارة هي الأقل فهما من قبل الطلاب بسبب طبيعتها الضمنية، الطبيعة العابرة للكلام وصعوبة تحديد زمن فشل الفهم. تسعى هاته الدراسة الى تحديد اهم العوامل التي تؤثر على فهم الاستماع للغة الإنجليزية والتقنيات العلاجية الممكن اتباعها لتحسين فهم الطلبة الاستماعي. اذن، يبدأ هذا البحث بتعريف الفهم السماعي ثم يشرح عملية الاستماع -فهم تصاعدي وتنازلي-ويلى ذلك مراجعة البحوث التي تتناول اهم العوامل -الصوتية، المعرفية، اللغوية، السياقية، الخ- التي قد تؤثر على الفهم السماعي للطلبة. ينتهي هذا البحث بتقديم بعض التقنيات العلاجية التي يمكن للأساتذة استخدامها لمساعدة طلابهم على ان يصبحوا مستمعين ماهرين.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الاستماع، فهم الاستماع، العوامل، عملية، التقنيات العلاجية.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Listening lies at the heart of language learning. When learning a foreign language, learners spend almost half of their time listening. No speaking is possible without listening. Indeed, listening is a precursor to speaking and paves the way to learning the language. It provides the learner with the input he needs to function effectively in the language. Listening builds up the knowledge and necessary skills which act as the basis for developing other language skills. (Krashen, 1985) confirmed this when he stressed that language acquisition is achieved through the reception of linguistic input through listening. In other words, without an input, learning can never take place. Thus, listening is an important skill, and as such deserves to be treated like the other skills.

Though a significant component of language learning, listening has long been an undervalued and neglected skill (Vandergrift & Goh, Teaching and testing listening comprehension, 2009). EFL learners always struggle with comprehending the input their teachers bring to the classroom and complain that they encounter many problems in listening comprehension. These difficulties are due to their teachers' beliefs and practices; many of them think that listening is the easiest to teach skill since it requires no more than making the learner listen to an input then test this comprehension. Indeed, most teachers believe that their learners' listening skills would develop through the mere exposure to the target language and without any assistance. Thus, university EFL teachers in our classrooms seem to assess rather than teach their learners how to listen.

Indeed, listening is a not a passive process where learners absorb the words they hear like sponges, but a set of complex and interrelated processes a listener uses to comprehend spoken discourse starting with the recognition of sounds, perception of intonation patterns, interpretation of the message, then construction of the meaning relying on the sum total of the listener's prior knowledge (Vandergrift, 1999)

(Hamouda, 2012) pinpointed that understanding speech is an arduous task for most language learners. To help their learners improve their listening skills, teachers should have a deep understanding of the process of listening and the factors that may cause comprehension to break down. This knowledge can help teachers track the source of their students listening difficulties and put them in a better position to guide them to cope or surmount them.

In this review paper, important issues related to listening are reviewed. It starts with a definition of listening comprehension then it discusses the process of listening comprehension. It ends with a discussion of the factors that affect learners listening comprehension and the remedial techniques that teachers may use to help their students boost their listening comprehension skills.

## **2. Definition of Listening Comprehension**

Listening has always been considered as a passive skill where the listener receives input sent by the speaker. It was also assumed that listening in a second/foreign language is the same as listening in one's native language, and that listening and reading-being receptive- are the same and what applies to one should also apply to the other. Only in the 1970s that researchers came to realise the uniqueness and knottiness of this skill and agreed that it should stand as an independent field of research. Thus, more recent researchers admitted that listening is an active and complex process made up of different kinds of overlapping processes: neurological, linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic (Rost, 2002). According to (Purdy, 1997, p. 8), listening consists of "attending, perceiving, interpreting, remembering, and responding to the expressed (verbal and non-verbal) needs, concerns, and information offered by other human beings". Sharing the same view, Lynch and Mendelsohn (2010) emphasized that listening is a set of complex and interrelated processes a listener uses to comprehend spoken discourse starting with the recognition of sounds, perception of intonation patterns, and finally the interpretation of the message by linking it to one's prior knowledge. These definitions mean that an aural input is understood through sound discrimination, stress and intonation, linguistic clues, grammatical structures, verbal and non-verbal language, and prior knowledge. Therefore, listeners are not passive agents who simply decode messages and extract meaning, but active agents who construct meaning relying on the sum total of their knowledge (linguistic, semantic, pragmatic, etc.) (Buck, 2001).

## **3. The Process of Listening Comprehension**

To explain how listeners process the incoming data and comprehend messages, researchers developed three approaches: bottom-up processing, top-down processing, and the interactive process (Buck, 2001; Flowerdew & Miller,

2005; Lynch & Mendelsohn, 2010; Vandergrift & Goh, 2009)

### **3.1. Bottom up Processing**

This model was developed in the 1940's and 1950's. It was described as the micro-level skills and the 'lower-level processing'. Bottom up processing emphasises the acoustic signal and seeks to help learners improve their perception skills (Vandergrift & Goh, 2009). According to this model, listeners comprehend an aural input by starting with the smallest units (phonemes) which are combined into words, which are further combined into phrases, clauses and sentences. These sentences are finally grouped together to create meaning (Wolvin, 2010). Vandergrift and Goh (2009) argued that listeners in this model "construct meaning by accretion, gradually combining larger units of meanings from the phoneme level up to the discourse level" (p. 456). This model is a mechanical process where listeners piece together parts of aural input using their knowledge of segmentals (phonemes) and suprasegmentals (stress, rhythm, intonation, etc.). In other words, the listener in the bottom up process uses his linguistic knowledge (phonology, morphology, lexis, syntax) to arrive to meaning as the last phase of the process. Buck (2001) stated that comprehension in this approach seems to occur in linear sequential fashion where the output of one phase becomes the input of the next. Research and every day experience, however, proved that information processing does not happen in a linear way, but different types of processing may occur at the same time. For example, grammar may help in identifying a word, knowledge about the topic may aid in syntax processing, and knowledge about the context may help in the interpretation of meaning (Buck, 2001).

### **3.2. Top down Processing**

This model is the converse of bottom up processing, it was described as the "macro level" skills and "higher level" processing. Researchers developed this model because they thought that linguistic knowledge alone could not help listeners attain comprehension. Previous knowledge; thus, is the focus of this type of processing (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). According to this model, when learners engage in listening they use "pre-established patterns of knowledge and discourse structure stored in memory" (p.25) to make sense of what they hear. These structures are called "schema"; all knowledge and memories people store and use in the future when needed (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). In other words,

top down processing entails the use of background knowledge in making hypotheses about the speaker's intended meaning. This knowledge includes topic knowledge, situational knowledge, contextual knowledge, etc. Lynch and Mendelsohn (2010) explained that this model goes from the whole to the parts and relies on meaning rather than sounds and words recognition. Nation and Newton (2009) pointed that "the listener uses what they know of the context of communication to predict what the message will contain, and uses parts of the message to confirm, correct or add to this" (p.40). Put differently, listening in this model is purpose-driven with the listener paying attention only to what he cares about, thus caring very little about the structure of the message.

Indeed, if the listener receives information he is unfamiliar with, he cannot evoke his schemata, but would instead resort to his linguistic knowledge. Therefore, relying on the top down processing alone can cause comprehension to break down.

### **3.3. The Interactive Process**

Most researchers agree that the linguistic knowledge gained from decoding and previous knowledge interact simultaneously when listeners try to make sense of what they hear. Many factors (personal preferences, learning styles, listening purpose, context, etc.) seem to influence which processing model listeners will use more (Santos & Graham, 2018). Vandergrift and Goh (2012) expressed the same view when they argued that the degree to which listeners use one model of processing more than the other is determined by individual characteristics (language proficiency), the purpose of listening, and the context of the listening event. For example, a listener who wants to check a specific detail (the date of an event) will use bottom up processing; however, the listener who wants to have general understanding of an event will resort to top down processing. In addition, more skilled or proficient listeners were found to use top down processing whereas less skilled listeners used bottom up processing. This does not mean that more proficient listeners do not need linguistic knowledge to sort meaning out of incoming information (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). Therefore, comprehension is arrived at through the interaction of the two processing models.

### **4. Major Listening Comprehension Problems**

Researchers identified many factors that may hamper learners' listening

comprehension. These factors are phonological (stress, intonation, concatenated speech, and speech rate), linguistic (knowledge of vocabulary and grammar), cognitive (short-memory constraints, and concentration), and contextual (lack of prior knowledge). Researchers identified many other factors like bad habits, noise, etc. (Goh, 2000; Hasan, 2000; Ur, 1984; Underwood, 1989; Vandergrift, 2007; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012)

#### **4.1. Phonological Factors**

Learners' ability to perceive sounds and comprehend language input depends largely on their knowledge of the phonological features of the target language. Students very often fail to recognise words they know when they listen to connected speech. Vandergrift (2007) explained that distinguishing word boundaries is not easy for learners because of their undeveloped segmentation skills. These learners tend to apply the segmentation processes typical of their mother tongue to the target language, which prevents them from recognising words and hence causes meaning comprehension to fail. Comprehension, however, does not fail because of the sounds themselves, but because of the varied pronunciations they receive when juxtaposed with other sounds. The word 'won't you' is pronounced like 'wonchoo', and 'next day' is pronounced like 'nexday' (Buck, 2001). Knowledge of intonation and stress patterns can also influence EFL learners' words recognition ability since these latter influence some sounds pronunciation and the meaning of certain utterances (Ur, 1984). EFL learners should have an adequate knowledge of the phonemes of the English language, based on Penny's argument that if they learn to pronounce them correctly, they would most probably hear them correctly, if proper sounds perception were to be achieved.

Another phonological feature that may impair comprehension is speech rate. Students perceive natural speech, which is full of pauses and hesitations, as very rapid and wish if it were a bit slower so that they could comprehend it. Research proved that the faster speech is, the more difficult it is for learners to understand it (Hasan, 2000). Spontaneous speech is full of hesitations, repetitions and pauses which cause learners to make perception errors; learners very often take hesitations for words or parts of words and even take words for hesitations (Buck, 2001).

Prosodic features such as intonation, stress and rhythm patterns are another

phonological feature that may interfere with EFL learners' comprehension of spoken English. The English language is a rhythmic language where speakers alternate between stressed and unstressed syllables to create the appropriate tone. With regard to intonation, its significance derives from the way it affects the meaning of utterances; important words are pronounced with a higher tone and speakers use intonation to convey a variety of meanings such as humour, irony, seriousness, doubt, etc. Teachers should draw their students' attention to the existence of these patterns, and give them more practice about them (Ur, 1984). The speakers' accent is another feature that may affect listening comprehension. FL learners who do not have direct contact with natives experience great difficulties to comprehend the different accents they may come across, and may even judge them as wrong. Research advocates the importance of sensitising learners to the existence of different accents, and invites teachers to focus mainly on the two varieties they need the most (the British and American standard varieties) (Ur, 1984).

#### **4.2. Linguistic Factors**

Linguistic knowledge plays a significant role in language learning and contributes to comprehension success. Students with a limited vocabulary stock are more likely to face listening difficulties. Underwood (1989) argued that when a student encounters an unfamiliar word, he would stop to think about its meaning and hence miss the remainder of the listening passage. However, it may happen that a learner fails to recognise a word or recall its meaning though he learnt it before. Although this may seem paradoxical, it is real because this learner is not sufficiently familiar with this item mainly when it occurs within the swift stream of speech. Developing this familiarity requires time and practice. Another reason which explains this contradictory situation is related to the speed with which natives utter these words; the learner does not have enough time to search in his memory for the meaning of words he cannot remember instantly (Ur, 1984). Goh (2000) explained learners' inability to recognise words by their undeveloped listening vocabulary, which means that the learners did not store the sounds of the lexical items they learnt efficiently in their long-term memory. Put differently, when students learned words they focused mainly on their written form while they neglected how they sounded when juxtaposed with other words.

This does not suggest, however, that these learners have no phonological representation of these words in their memory; rather it reveals their inaccurate learning of the sounds which renders any attempt to recognise words when hearing their correct sounds fruitless.

### **4.3. Cognitive Factors**

Maintaining one's concentration while listening to a foreign language is an onerous task given that the learner should stay focused during all stages of input processing. The least inattention to the spoken input can cause listening comprehension to break down. Students very often feel very tired mainly after spending a good time listening to a given input; this feeling is the result of the mental effort deployed during listening Underwood (1989). In his research on students listening difficulties, Goh (2000) maintained that his learners reported having many problems with concentration, they said that any diversion from the listening input deprived them from understanding subsequent parts and that concentrating too much gave reverse results. He advised teachers to familiarise their students with the topic of the passage before embarking on listening to facilitate comprehension.

Listening to long passages in a foreign language is also tiring because of the learners' short-memory span. Although the other language skills can also be tiring for the foreign language learner, listening is different because the pace is controlled by the speaker who may make pauses as he may not. Students find it difficult to listen to long passages, which contain long and complex utterances, because of their short-memory limitations. In addition, lack of vocabulary knowledge and topic familiarity forestalls long passages retention. Long passages oblige learners to spend much more time listening to them the thing that tires them cognitively, distracts their attention, and subsequently hinders meaning comprehension. Hasan (2000) explained that FL learners struggle while listening to long passages because their memory span for the foreign language is shorter than that of the native language.

Although contextual clues and visuals facilitate comprehension, many learners view them as an additional cognitive burden since they would have more items to focus on in addition to the listening input. Vandergrift (2004) argued that learners' inability to use these cues when they listen to a foreign language, though they do that perfectly in their mother tongue, relates to the fact that these



latter require further attentional resources and thus limit the amount of working memory available for the listener to focus on the required input. Teachers should, therefore, train their learners on the use of only essential details and ignore all unnecessary information.

#### **4.4. Contextual Factors**

Students who do not have enough prior knowledge will encounter serious problems with listening comprehension. Prior knowledge is all the perceptual information and experiences one learned and stored in the form of schemata to be retrieved when necessary. This knowledge helps listeners fill any gaps that may occur during listening (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Schema theory suggests that the text does not carry meaning by itself, but it provides listeners with hints to allow them construct meaning. In his study, Goh (2000) reported that his students stated that they were not able to understand certain parts of the listening passages, which he attributed to their lack of background knowledge. Knowledge of the target culture is also crucial in listening comprehension. Students who are not equipped with such knowledge will not be able to understand the deep meaning of speech. Teachers should use pre-listening activities to help their learners activate their background knowledge to successfully understand the meaning of spoken input.

Achieving comprehension is based largely on the listeners' ability to make predictions as well. If a listener is able to guess what the speaker would say, he will find the following information redundant, thus he will ignore it and focus instead on guessing the new incoming information (Ur, 1984). Foreign listeners' capacity to make guesses as what speakers may say is very limited because more often than not most of them lack previous knowledge which includes these components: knowledge of the language, background and cultural knowledge, and knowledge of the world (Ur, 1984; Hasan, 2000). To help learners set up sound predictions, teachers should pay due heed to activating their learners' prior knowledge via prelisting activities prior to embarking on any listening task.

#### **4.5. Other Factors**

Many FL listeners believe that they must focus on and understand every word they hear, and think that if they miss any detail, their comprehension will fail. Hence, whenever these students come across an unfamiliar word, they get

anxious and feel unable to carry on listening, thinking they will not understand the remainder of the input (Hasan, 2000; Underwood, 1989). This bad habit of paying attention to every single word overburdens learners cognitively because of all the information they have to process which hampers comprehension. It also prevents learners from focusing on important details that facilitate comprehension (Hasan, 2000). Skilled listeners, thus, should focus on the essential details and ignore those elements which add nothing to the meaning, but only distract their attention.

Redundancy and noise are factors which can also interfere with learners' listening comprehension. The act of listening does not take place in an ideal environment as interruptions may occur; some words may be obscured by outside noise while others may be indistinctly spoken. Though listeners can easily handle these interruptions in their mother tongue, it is hard for them to come to grips with them in the FL. This is due to many reasons. First, the FL listener encounters many gaps during listening more than the native speaker because of his unfamiliarity with the target language. Moreover, students' insufficient knowledge of the language (sound combinations, vocabulary, and colloquial language) may hurdle their capacity to make guesses as to what speakers may say, which deprives them from filling in the missing parts in conversations. Finally, even when the number of gaps is not large, some listeners' bad habit of trying to understand every word wards off any attempt to tolerate gaps that may occur. Undoubtedly, listening skilfully in a foreign language entails ignoring redundancies and coping with any interruptions that may blur parts of what speakers say (Ur, 1984).

### **5. Remedial Techniques to Overcome EFL Learners Listening Difficulties**

When teachers are well aware of the process of listening and the obstacles their learners encounter when listening to English, they are more likely to come up with effective ways to help them surmount some of these problems. Researchers (Hamouda, 2012; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016) discussed many ways of helping learners improve their listening comprehension. Here are some of them:

- a) It is of paramount significance that teachers adopt and adapt materials that correspond with their students' needs, learning styles, and proficiency level if they are truly after motivating them and subsequently optimising their

listening comprehension. Teachers can use semi-authentic materials with beginning level students so as to acquaint them with all the features of natural speech then use authentic materials, in later stages, since the ultimate goal is to be able to comprehend native natural speech.

b) Vocabulary knowledge is another critical component without which listening comprehension is prone to break down. Most students complain that their poor vocabulary repertoire is a major obstacle to comprehension. It is, thus, advised that teachers activate their learners' vocabulary through a whole host of activities that include, amongst many others, guessing, use of dictionaries, visual representations, games, etc.

c) The English sound system, another major obstacle for language learners, is notorious for the subtlety and complexity of its rules. Connected speech, characterised by such features as assimilation, elision, weak forms, and contractions, poses many problems for foreign language learners. Therefore, teachers should expose their learners to the pronunciation of native speakers so that they come into contact with all the features of spoken English. They should also give them the chance to experience the different accents though special attention should be placed on the most widely used ones-the British and American standard variations, mainly in extensive listening.

d) Activating students' schemata is of premium significance as it allows students to associate what they already know with the new upcoming information. Pre-listening exercises should be used before listening to any input; students can be asked to predict the topic they will listen to, the grammatical structures the text may include, or the words and phrases that are likely to appear in the listening passage.

e) The use of different types of input like radio news, films, TV plays, announcements, everyday conversations, songs, stories is strongly recommended as it keeps students motivated, boosts their enthusiasm, cultivate their listening interests and above all achieve the ultimate goal of language learning.

f) Last but not least, listening comprehension strategies should be part of the teachers' blueprint since the teaching of bottom up and top down skills, though momentous, on their own is not enough. Listening strategies, the

mental actions and tactics learners use to achieve specific aims, include three groups: cognitive strategies (mental operations used to manipulate incoming information), metacognitive strategies (learners knowledge about their cognitive processes), and socio affective strategies (interaction with the others and management of emotions). The use of these strategies is highly recommended as they, amongst many other things, boost learners listening ability and encourage autonomy.

## **6. Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, of all language skills, listening is the most difficult because of the complex processes and the different knowledge sources the learner hinges on when decoding and interpreting input. The multiplicity of these sources (linguistic, phonological, contextual, etc.) renders the identification of the element that causes comprehension failure difficult. This paper sought to review the different factors that affect the act of listening comprehension and offered some useful suggestions that help learners to ameliorate their listening comprehension. Although there is no single ideal method that suits all learners, teachers are recommended to take the lead in helping their learners surmount these difficulties. They should, for example, select more authentic materials that guarantee students exposure to the native speech, diversify the listening input, develop learners predicting abilities, and most important of all aid students in the selection and application of the listening strategies to make them efficient listeners and autonomous language learners.

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