

Recognition of Listening Comprehension Constraints of ESL Learners

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Abstract:

Current study is aimed at exploring the different barriers which hamper students' ability to comprehend the spoken input. After examining those barriers, it is attempted to introduce the strategies which can help students communicate properly after perceiving the message. For given purpose, an ESL class was selected where a questionnaire was used as a tool in order to deduce the required information. It was concluded that new vocabulary items and incompatible environment are the major factors which create distraction for learners and this problem can be reduced by introducing new vocabulary items before stating the message and also by providing the students with suitable environment for learning.

Key words: Listening Comprehension Constraints, ESL Learners, spoken input, vocabulary

Introduction

Second language listening comprehension is a complex process and it is often observed that students, learning English as EFL/ESL, are found unable to acquire communicative proficiency even after putting a considerable amount of time in L2 learning (Yousaf, 2006). Numerous studies have been conducted to identify various factors which influence L2 listening comprehension.

There are many problems which hamper the students' ability to comprehend what they hear, and reasons are believed to be such as students' lack of background knowledge about the language, lack of motivation, inability to associate what they hear with the current topic, colloquial style of speaker and environmental factors such as, loudness outside the class, weather conditions etc.

Flowerdew and Miller (1992) identified maintaining concentration for a long time as a barrier of listening comprehension. According to Underwood (1989) lack of concentration is also a major problem because sometimes even a little inattention from the hearing or listening process hinders a lot. Goh (1999) states difficulty in perception as a factor affecting listening comprehension.

Statement of Problem:

Listening comprehension, especially understanding concepts delivered by language instructor, is recognized as a problem for ESL learners.

Literature Review

Language and learning methods share certain common ideological grounds which are complemented by many cognitive psychologists and linguistics (e.g., Bialystok, 1978; Ellis, 1994;

Fillmore & Swain, 1984). For example, Ellis (1994) describes some of these common grounds: according to him different learning strategies highlight students' different behavior to acquire varied skills. So language learning strategies and strategies for skill-learning can be taken synonymously (p. 712). It is also related with Fillmore and Swain's (1984) model of language development, according to which the strategies at conscious level applied on L2 learning might not have any different stance than used in non-language tasks. Listening is a prime activity in understanding target language and without a good exposure to its vocabulary and culture one cannot comprehend it. Listening comprehension is very complex phenomenon and without proper knowledge and proper skills one cannot help comprehending the listening (Osada, 2004). It is an active/receptive, process in which a listener decodes, analyzes and synthesizes the bits of information, coming from auditory channel complemented with visual cues (Rubin, 1996). Considering many facets of listening comprehension, Underwood (1989) arranges the major listening problems as follows: a) Fast speed of speaker, b) Unable to repeat the information being shared, c) Limited vocabulary at listener's end, d) Not meeting the cues, e) Interpretation problems, f) Unable to be concentrate, g) Not having proper learning habits. Underwood (1989) considers that these problems are due to having diverse backgrounds such as culture and education.

Basing upon the availability of abundant research found on the range of listening strategy, some of the researchers try to move towards creating different best pedagogical ways of improving listening comprehension (Rubin, 1994). For the explicitness of rationale, Wenden (1987) inquires if there is any need to make the students aware of the usefulness and rationale behind the training or not. (p. 159). Basically there is a continuum of explicitness and whose extreme ends there are two kinds of instruction are found as direct and embedded, or in

the words of O'Malley and Chamot (1990), informed and blind training.

Activities and resources organized to prompt the use of the target strategies are given to the learner in embedded instruction, but the learners are not told about the purposes of a given approach (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Wenden, 1987). As Wenden (1987) points it out that the concentration of blind instruction is on getting to know something i.e. learn rather than learning how to learn. Chamot and O'Malley also proposed a content-based instruction model for language learners, named the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) (Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Robbins, 1999; Chamot & O'Malley, 1986, 1994). This approach is taken as a social-cognitive learning model where in cooperative learning, meta-cognitive information knowledge, self-reflection of learners and pre knowledge on learners' end is stressed (Chamot et al., 1999). CALLA has five stages: 1) preparation, 2) presentation, 3) practice, 4) evaluation, 5) expansion.

Another developed instruction model is presented by Oxford (1990). She gives a kind of guideline for teachers while teaching learning strategies. There are eight steps, of which the first five concerns with planning and preparation, and the last three are related with conducting, assessing, and reviewing the training program. The stages or steps are: 1) Try to find the learners need and how much time available for learning , 2) Selection of the strategies should be on sound grounds, 3) If possible, there must be mixing of strategy training, 4) Take into account the motivation issues related with the learners, 5) prepare well in time the materials and activities involved, 6) conduct "completely informed training", 7) assess the strategy training, 8) Review the strategy training.

It was until recent era that listening comprehension got a mere focus in terms of both theoretical and practical level while the other three language skills (i.e., reading, writing, and speaking) obtained direct instructional attention, teachers

mostly supposed on behalf of their students that they should develop their listening skill by ‘*osmosis*’ and without being helped externally (Mendelsohn, 1984; Oxford, 1993). In the osmosis approach (Mendelsohn, 1984), also known as the *audio lingual method*, it is thought that if the students will hear the target language all day long, they will enhance their comprehension skill at listening level being experienced in listening. Actually, it was believed that listening is a passive skill and if student are exposed with the spoken data, it will be sufficient to produce adequate listening skill in them, the basic reason of neglecting and teaching it poorly (Call, 1985). Berne (1998) revised an expanding corpus of literature related to L2 listening. This literature contains empirical research, such as the research revised in Oxford (1993) and Rubin (1994) as well as the publications of Flowerdew (1994). The L2 listening literature also contains many papers both theoretical type and kind of practical, such as Ur (1984); Rixon (1986); Anderson and Lynch (1988); Underwood (1989); Rost (1990, 1991); and Mendelsohn and Rubin (1995). Berne shows that there are number of facts about L2 listening comprehension emerged from the literature mentioned and described as follow:

- Learners’ awareness with the topic makes the L2 listening comprehension easy and comprehensible.
- The attention is given to phonological or semantic cues by low-proficiency L2 listeners otherwise only semantic cues attract the attention of high-proficiency L2 listeners.
- Which type of speech modification or visual aid is necessary or required for the listeners, depends mainly upon the degree of L2 listening proficiency.
- From different types of modification, repetition of passages should be used more and more than other types of modification but taking the fact that if it facilitates L2 listening comprehension.

Underwood (1989) proposes seven perceivable reasons of hampering efficient listening comprehension.

First, Fast speed of the speakers is uncontrollable by the listeners. Underwood declares that an immense difficulty in understanding the listening material (Underwood, 1989, p. 16). Secondly, repetition is a good thing for listening comprehension but most listeners cannot get the information repeated (Underwood, 1989, p. 17). Thirdly, in most cases the listeners have inadequate vocabulary. If the words selected by the speaker are unfamiliar by the listeners, they try to find their meaning and in this way they miss the good chunk of information. Fourthly, listeners' lack of knowledge about the signals/cues, creates a major shift of ideas. There are different Discourse markers and transitional words used in formal settings or in the lectures such as "secondly," or "then". In informal settings , '*signals*' as pauses, loudness increasing, changing pitch, gestures, different intonation forms are more vague. These signals are relatively easily being missed if learners are less proficient, these signals can be easily missed. Fifthly, lacking contextual knowledge from the listener' side poses a problem. Actually the sharing of mutual knowledge and having common context creates a world of mutability that ultimately makes communication easier. Each culture has its own nonverbal cues like nods, tone of voice, distance of speaker and listener, facial expression, gestures, so having no knowledge of these cues also forces the listeners to misinterpret message. Sixthly, concentration also creates serious problem while listening material in foreign language even if the topic is interesting. Seventh and last is that the students develop different peculiar learning habits by the teacher to grasp every bit of speech.

Significance of the study:

Most of the students, despite getting a big deal of knowledge about mechanics of language, still find themselves unable to

comprehend meaning and to communicate verbally. This study will enhance the level of those learners about their communicative deficiencies by recognizing the basic/ core problems of Listening Comprehension they face while listening in the class room.

Objectives of the Study:

To identify the barriers in Listening Comprehension.

To introduce strategies, to remove Listening Comprehension Barriers.

To highlight the link between Listening and Speaking for Communicative Purposes.

Research method

For the given purpose, 57 students of English Language Certificate Class (Morning/Evening) were chosen. The study is Quantitative in nature and Students' Questionnaire comprising of 10 close ended questions was used and analyzed through SPSS.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

After collecting data from 57 respondents, it was arranged and stored in SPSS grid sheet. In order to manage results of data, this chapter was divided into three sections. Section I deals with demographics characteristics of the respondents. Frequency and percentage of demographics variables were presented in tabular form.

Section II deals with data presented in tabular form followed by their descriptive explanations. Tables consist of frequency, percentage, mean scores and standard deviations of responses. For interpretation the number of participants related to option 'agree' and 'strongly agrees' are accumulated.

Table 4.1

Statement No.1. I don't understand a lecture delivered in English

Level	Frequency	Percent	Mean	S.D
Strongly Agree	4	7		
Agree	17	30		
Un Decided	6	11	2.7895	1.20619
Disagree	23	40		
Strongly Disagree	7	12		
Total	57	100		

Table 4.1 shows that 37% students responded that they didn't understand lecture delivered in English, 52% were disagreed with the statement and 11% remained undecided. The mean score is 2.789.

There could be no comment on this aspect because if a learner is totally unaware of concerned language then there is no question about the comprehension or anything other relevant to the understanding of message.

Table 4.2

Statement No. 2. I cannot differentiate between the main points and supporting details.

Level	Frequency	Percent	Mean	S.D
Strongly Agree	8	14		
Agree	11	19		
Un- decided	12	21	3.0175	1.10988
Disagree	26	46		
Total	57	100		

Table 4.2 shows that 33% students responded that they could not differentiate between the main points and supporting details, 46% students were disagreed with the statement and 21% remained undecided. The mean score is 3.0175.

Table 4.3

Statement No.3 A few vocabulary items confuse me but I usually guess their meaning.

Level	Frequency	Percent	Mean	S.D
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Agree	46	80		
Un Decided	9	16	3.7544	.57572
Disagree	1	2		
Strongly Disagree	1	2		
Total	57	100		

Table 4.3 shows that 80% student agreed with the statement that a few vocabulary items confused students but 4% students disagreed with the statement and 16% remained undecided. The mean score is 3.7544.

Osada (2004) and Underwood (1989), while concluding their studies, found that vocabulary creates problems for listeners because it is swarming with different cultural items

Table 4.4

Statement No.4 I can follow the whole lecture with no listening problem at all.

Level	Frequency	Percent	Mean	S.D
Strongly Agree	10	18		
Agree	15	26		
Un Decided	12	21	3.2632	1.12641
Disagree	20	35		
Total	57	100		

Table 4.4 shows that 44% student agreed with the statement that they could follow the whole lecture with no listening problem at all, but 35% disagreed with the statement and 21% remained undecided. The mean score is 3.2632.

Again for a person who can follow the lecture in its full length, s/he can understand it that is why s/he can follow so again there is no question of lacking in comprehension of the message at all.

Table 4.5

Statement No. 5 Native speakers like accent is the major problem for me in listening comprehension.

Level	Frequency	Percent	Mean	S.D
Strongly agree	17	30		

Agree	29	51		
Un Decided	4	7	3.9825	.93525
Disagree	7	12		
Total	57	100		

Table 4.5 shows that 81% students agreed with the statement that native speaker like accent is the major problem for them in listening comprehension but 12% disagreed with the statement while 7% remained undecided. The mean score is 3.9825.

Blau (1990) also is of the view that native accent produces difficulties for NNS/non-native learners to grasp the input because of its fluency.

Table 4.6
Statement No.6 Classroom environment is not effective/ideal for listening comprehension.

Level	Frequency	Percent	Mean	S.D
Strongly Agree	10	18		
Agree	10	17		
Un Decided	9	16	3.0175	1.20255
Disagree	27	47		
Strongly Disagree	1	2		
Total	57	100		

Table 4.6 shows that 35% students agreed with the statement that classroom environment is not effective/ideal for listening comprehension but 49% disagreed with the statement and 16% remained undecided. The mean score is 3.0175.

Table 4.7
Statement No.7 Listening materials are culturally different for me.

Level	Frequency	Percent	Mean	S.D
Strongly Agree	2	3		
Agree	24	42		
Un Decided	16	28	3.2105	.92073
Disagree	14	25		
Strongly Disagree	1	2		
Total	57	100		

Table 4.7 shows that 45% student agreed with the statement that listening materials are culturally different for them, but 27% disagreed with the statement and 28% remained undecided. The mean score is 3.2105.

It is a well-known fact that language is the career of culture, Osada (2004) has pointed out that different cultures produce a big disparity in thinking styles of students, which is the ultimate reason of listening comprehension problem.

Table 4.8
Statement No.8 The listening materials are not generally interesting.

Level	Frequency	Percent	Mean	S.D
Strongly Agree	2	3		
Agree	14	25		
Un Decided	14	25	2.8070	.97172
Disagree	25	44		
Strongly Disagree	2	3		
Total	57	100		

Table 4.8 shows that 28% students agreed with the statement that the listening materials are not generally interesting, but 47% disagreed with the statement and 25 % remained undecided. The mean score is 2.8070.

Hayati (2009) gives the point that if the material being presented is not interesting then ultimately there would be lacking understanding.

Table 4.9
Statement No.9If the teacher gives clear instruction before the lecture, it will enhance comprehension level.

Level	Frequency	Percent	Mean	S.D
Strongly Agree	20	35		
Agree	34	60		
Un Decided	2	3	4.2807	.61975
Disagree	1	2		
Total	57	100		

Table 4.9 shows that 95% student agreed with the statement that if the teacher gives clear instruction before the lecture, it will enhance comprehension level, but 2% disagreed with the statement and 3% remained undecided. The mean score is 4.2807.

Underwood (1989), Oxford (1999), Jones (2003) and Yousaf (2006), all are in the favor of presenting the material in an interesting way and before presenting the material, teacher should present some kind of introductory lecture so that learners could have a precise idea about the material with help of back ground knowledge.

Table 4.10

Statement No. 10 If teacher repeats the new information in his/her lecture, the lecture will be clearer to the students.

Level	Frequency	Percent	Mean	S.D
Strongly Agree	38	67		
Agree	16	28		
Un Decided	3	5	4.6140	.59023
Total	57	100		

Table 4.10 shows that 95% student agreed with the statement that if teacher repeats the new information in his/her lecture, the lecture will be clearer to the students, but 5% remained undecided. The mean score is 4.6140.

Underwood (1989), Oxford (1999), Jones (2003), and Yousaf (2006) also culminated in their researches that repetition is the main factor enhances the power of memory. It is also beneficial for the understanding because somewhere a student, due to some internal/external problem, be distracted, so loop-holes could be filled by repetition.

Conclusion

The study addressed the question of determining barriers which produce difficulties of comprehension for the learners of English Certificate Class and identifying some of the strategies

to confiscate those difficulties effectively. The results collectively illustrate that there is much room for the betterment of the listening classes, and there are many areas, which need to be improved for comprehensible discernment of listeners. It is concluded that there exist certain intricacies regarding ESL listening comprehension yet they can be rectified by employing effective strategies.

Recommendations

After identifying the problematic areas of ESL learners regarding listening comprehension, it is most ample to recommend that what strategies can be used to liquidate the given barriers. The recommendations are presented according to the decorum of the problems; which means that each problem given will be followed by the suggestion for corrective measures. First problem was about the differentiation between main and Subsequent details that can be solved by giving lucid instruction and recurrence of the message.

Second problem regarding vocabulary items can be minimized by explaining new vocabulary items before properly stating the message. Third problem was regarding environment which creates distraction for the learners that can be reduced by teaching students to concentrate and by accommodating them in less noisy class rooms or language labs. Fourth problem relates to listening material i.e. culturally rich and uninteresting, teacher should give information about the target culture in an interesting way. Few Strategies as have been identified to promote the communicative ability of the Students through listening are as:

- Teacher should ask the student to reproduce the message which has been presented before.
- Classroom environment should be cooperative and facilitating.

- Positive attitude towards native-speaker like accent should be enhanced.
- Teacher should ask his/her students to complete spoken English home exercises after listening session/s.
- Annotation or clues are very much positive and pace oriented in the production of speech.

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