

The Importance of Teaching Listening Comprehension at the University Level

by

Prof. Dr. Abbas Deygan Darweesh ^[a]

Abstract

This paper focuses on the important role that listening comprehension plays in English language teaching. Listening skill has been neglected for many years and most universities have excluded this skill from their curriculum in spite of the vital impact that listening skill has in developing learners' knowledge about language. The study shows some definitions of listening and the processes of listening. It also reveals some of the difficulties faced by students while learning English language. Teachers' role is also explored through this study. A questionnaire has been conducted and distributed to university teachers to express their viewpoints of the role and strategies of listening comprehension. One of the main conclusions of the study is that listening comprehension skill should not be neglected particularly at the university level. Instead, listening should gain the priority over other skills due to the significant role listening plays in enhancing other skills.

Key words: Teaching, Listening, English, knowledge.

^[a] **Prof. Dr. Abbas Deygan Darweesh**

(General Linguistics)

University of Babylon

College of Education- Human Sciences

Dept of English Language and Literature

1. Introduction

Listening is one of the most important skills used by people while communicating with each other. It is considered as an essential part for students at all stages of education since it represents the primary medium of learning. Listening has been overlooked by most of our teachers as they believe that learners can acquire such a skill during listening to vocabulary and grammar used by their own teachers during practicing other skills. English language comprehension is one of the problems that most EFL learners face since most universities neglect the role of listening comprehension and focus instead on teaching grammar, reading and vocabulary. Though many teachers consider listening as a passive activity, Underwood (1989) thinks that hearing is a passive activity but not listening which is an active one because listeners need to concentrate on the message to be able to understand what they hear. Listening involves an active process of deciphering and constructing meaning from both verbal and non-verbal messages. A study conducted by Barker, Edwards, Gaines, Gladney, and Holley (1980) showed that "the portion of verbal communication time spent by college students was 52.5 percent in listening, 17.3 percent in reading, 16.3 percent in speaking, and 13.9 percent in writing"(Gilakjani and Ahmadi, 2011:978). Consequently, for success in academic setting, both instructors and students should acknowledge the importance of listening comprehension.

2. Definitions

Saricoban (2012:1) states that “[l]istening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying.” According to Anderson and Lynch (1988:6) understanding does not solely depend on what a speaker says, but “the listener has a crucial part to play in the process, by activating various types of knowledge, and by applying what he knows to what he hears and trying to understand what the speaker means.” Mendelsohn, as cited in Gilikjani and Ahmadi, 2011:978, states that listening comprehension is the way of understanding what the native speakers say. He (978) points out that:

In listening to spoken language, the ability to decipher the speaker’s intention is required of a competent listener, in addition to other abilities such as processing the linguistic forms like speech speed and fillers, coping with listening in an interaction, understanding the whole message contained in the discourse, comprehending the message without understanding every word, and recognizing different genres.

Therefore, in order for the listeners to listen well they must have the ability to decipher the message using different strategies and processes to make meaning. They should also have the ability to respond to what it is said according to the nature of the communication they are involved in.

Listening plays an important role in communication. Mendelsohn, as cited in Galikjani and Ahmadi 2011:978, says that of the total time spent on communicating, listening takes up 40-50%; speaking, 25-30%; reading, 11-16%; and writing, about 9%. He (977) states that although the teaching of listening comprehension has long been —somewhat neglected and a poorly taught aspect of English in many EFL programs, listening is now regarded as much more important in both EFL classrooms and SLA (Second Language Acquisition) research. Galvin claims that there are five main reasons for listening such as to engage in social rituals; to exchange information; to enjoy yourself; to share feelings and to exert control (Hedge, 2000: 243).

3. Processes of listening

In order to understand a message different strategies should be used during the listening process. Therefore, teachers should be aware of this in order to help their students to learn how to listen. The interaction of linguistic knowledge and world knowledge is essential for listeners to create a mental representation. To get to this mental representation to achieve comprehension, two main processes of listening are involved: the bottom-up process and top-down process. Scrivener (2011:259) states that “when we listen, we probably adopt a continually varying combination of top-down and bottom-up strategies, so work on both areas is useful to learners.” According to Lynch and Mendelsohn(2002:183) “a competent listener uses both of these in order to achieve effective comprehension of spoken language, and a key factor in successful listening is the individual’s ability to integrate information gathered via the two.”

A. Bottom-up listening process

This type of process is linear in the sense that listeners separate the parts of what they hear into pieces ;a sequence of one by one, which means going from parts to whole. Richards (2008: 4) states that this process refers to “using the incoming input as the basis for understanding the message. Comprehension begins with the received data that is analyzed as successive levels of organization – sounds, words, clauses, sentences, texts- until meaning is derived.”Hedge (2000:230) points out that we use our knowledge of the language and our ability to process acoustic signals to

make sense of the sounds that speech presents to us. In other words we create the message from the individual parts e.g. from sounds to words to grammatical units to lexical meaning.

B. Top -down process

This process is holistic; going from whole to parts. It focuses on the interpretation of meaning rather than the “recognition of sounds words and sentences.”(Lynch and Mendelson,2002:184).Listeners depend on background knowledge to interpret what the speaker is talking about. The listener, in this process, depends on what he/she already knows in order to make sense of what he/ she hears. The prior knowledge and experience that somebody has in memory is termed as schemata. Machackova (2009:11) states that:

Native speakers usually use their background and cultural knowledge; and their previous knowledge for listening situations as they expect that certain situations are connected with typical features and language. These abovementioned facts make the listening comprehension easier as they help them to interpret what is being spoken about and what will probably follow (Underwood).It is teachers’ responsibility to teach their students to pay attention to what they hear, to get the main idea and interpret it and subsequently respond to the information.

Although the top–down process is important, the bottom-up process is also important and indispensable.

4. Difficulties Faced by Students

Fang (2008:25) believes that “students often complain that listening and speaking are their vulnerable spots, and speaking is even weaker.” However, it is common that language comprehension precedes language production since in speaking the speaker can handle the choice of vocabulary to express an idea while in listening can no longer do that. Machackova (2009:12) states that “a great number of students believe that listening is the most difficult skill and they start to panic when they hear the word listening or see a CD player. But on the other hand students, who learn from what they hear, usually achieve better results at listening.” She (12-16) identifies a list of common problems that students face in the classroom during the listening classes. They are as follow:

- 1) Problems caused by pronunciation
- 2) Problems caused by the lack of control of a speaker’s speech speed
- 3) Problems caused by the inability to get things repeated
- 4) Problems caused by the listeners’ limited word stock
- 5) Problems caused by the failure to concentrate
- 6) Problems caused by the interpretation
- 7) Problems caused by the inability to identify the signals
- 8) 8 Problems caused by the language
- 9) Problems caused by the lack of visual support

5. Teacher's Role

Teachers should consider some important factors while teaching listening comprehension activities. Chastain, as cited in Mirhassani and Ghaemi, 2007:115) presents these factors as follows:

- 1) The activities should be meaning- centered and the focus must be on content.
- 2) The activities should resemble those in real- language situations and those to which the students are accustomed in their everyday life.
- 3) Teachers should set their goals realistically. They should not expect the elementary students to be able to describe all that they understand. Students often comprehend without being able to remember the content.
- 4) Listening practice should entail situations with which students have some experience and the requisite background knowledge.
- 5) Teachers and students should be aware of the fact that the ability to comprehend the language will be at a higher level than the ability to produce it.
- 6) They should be aware that real language includes much redundancy and that trying to attend to every word is counter- productive. Teachers should teach them to avoid overloading their mental processes by focusing on linguistic elements.
- 7) Native speakers regularly make intelligent guesses as to the meaning of unknown elements in their language. Teachers should help the students to learn to make the same types of guesses.
- 8) Real communication occurs in real context. Teachers should prepare the students to listen by establishing a context within which the speech sample takes place.

Teachers should also be wise enough to select materials based on a wide range of authentic texts. Richards(2013:18) states that authenticity in materials is considered to be “part of a pedagogy of teaching listening that is now well established in TESOL.” Mendelsohn, as cited in Richard, 2013:18-19, adds that “schemata building” i.e. grammar & vocabulary exercises, is also important and should precede listening. Moreover, different strategies should be incorporated in the listening materials. In addition, learners should be given the opportunity to participate actively in the learning process through giving them the opportunity to listen to materials several times and by making them aware of what they are listening to and why.

6. Research objectives

This study examines teachers' views about the role of listening comprehension and its impact on education. It focuses on teachers' roles with respect to the methods and strategies used by teachers and students to achieve comprehension in a proper way. It also focuses on the availability of educational technology programmes and facilities at the university level and how this affects the teaching staff in their methods of teaching and how it enhances the quality of their teaching and the quality of their students as well.

7. Methodology

A. Participants

Teachers of the English Department/ College of Education for Humanities/ University of Babylon have participated in this study. Twenty teachers expressed their views of the importance of listening comprehension and the role that listening plays in teaching at the level of university. Teachers' views of the factors that affect listening comprehension are also expressed in this study.

B. Questionnaire

The questionnaire contains 10 items related to the participants' view about listening comprehension role in teaching English as a foreign language. Other factors affecting listening comprehension are also included in this questionnaire. The questionnaire includes different items to measure the necessity of adopting listening comprehension in the syllabi together with the ways they may follow to enhance the quality of their teaching strategies and their students' listening comprehension skill.

C. Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed to the participants on 12/12/2013. They are instructed to respond and point out paper-based items. The questionnaire consists of 10 items directed to participants regarding the importance of incorporating listening comprehension at the university level. Each item of the questionnaire is measured according to certain variables: YES, NO, and OTHER respectively.

8. Discussion of Results

The results show that 19 participants 95% in the University of Babylon/ College of Education for Human Sciences/ The English Department believes that the way they follow in teaching skills other than listening and the strategies they use affect their students' listening comprehension ability. Moreover, 12 participants 65% think that different courses require different strategies used by learners to comprehend the materials presented to them whether these materials are linguistic or literary. On the other hand, 8 participants 40% state that learners will not be affected by the different courses (literary or linguistic) they learn during their learning process (the different college courses). Regarding the necessity to include listening comprehension in the four stages syllabi, 16 participants 80% agree on including such skill in the four stages syllabi while 4 participants 20% express their disagreement. This reflects the participants' awareness of the importance of listening comprehension as a separate skill and its necessity to be included in the syllabi, but they might be circumvented by the curriculum designed by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. It seems that participants prefer productive skills to receptive ones since that 4 participants 20% prefer the reading skill to the listening one. Fifteen participants 75% think that students' reading comprehension is more important than listening comprehension. One participant only 5% shows that both skills are equally important. Seventeen participants 75% believe that the students' repertoire of lexical items highly affect students' comprehension while only 3 participants 15% believe that this will not affect students' listening comprehension. Meta language used by participants highly affects the students' listening comprehension; 16 participants 80% state that their use of meta language has an effect on the students' listening while 4 participants 20% say that their use of meta language has no effect on their students. In commenting on the relationship between the participants and their students and how it affects students' listening comprehension, 13 participants 65% mention that teachers-students relationship can influence students' listening comprehension while 7 participants 35% state that such a relationship has no effect on the students' listening. Regarding the importance of using educational technology in teaching, 18 participants 90% confirm the necessity of using such technology which will help increase students' listening comprehension. Only 2 participants 10% deny the role of educational technologies in influencing listening comprehension. Fifteen participants 75% believe that teachers' pronunciation does not affect students' listening comprehension while 5 participants 25% confirm the role pronunciation plays in listening comprehension. Teachers' speech rate is also considered in this study where 15 participants 75% state that speech rate of teachers does not affect students' listening comprehension while 4 participants 20% believe that it has an effect on listening comprehension of the students. Only one participant 5% thinks that teachers' speech rate has a very little effect on students' listening comprehension (see table (1) and figure (1) below).

Table (1): Participants’ Responses to the Questionnaire Items

ITEM NO.	YES		NO		OTHER	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1	19	95	1	5	0	0
2	12	60	8	40	0	0
3	16	80	4	20	0	0
4	4	20	15	75	1	5
5	17	85	3	15	0	0
6	16	80	4	20	0	0
7	13	65	7	35	0	0
8	18	90	2	10	0	0
9	15	75	5	25	0	0
10	15	75	4	20	1	5

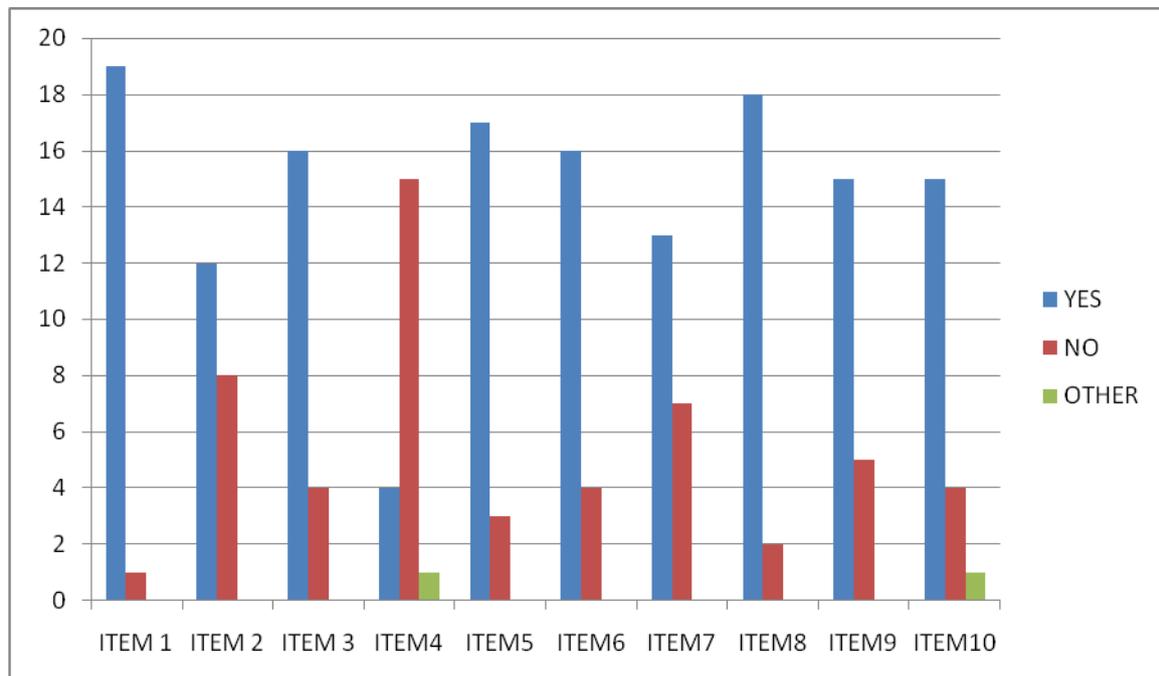


Figure (1): Participants’ Responses to the Questionnaire Items

9. Conclusions

In the light of the above discussion of results, one can conclude the following:

- 1) Teachers should follow the effective strategies while teaching different courses in order to facilitate their students listening comprehension.
- 2) Classrooms should be student- centered rather than teachers – centered.
- 3) Listening comprehension skill should not be neglected particularly at the university level. Instead, listening should gain the priority over other skills due to the significant role listening plays in enhancing other skills. University teachers should be aware of the importance of adopting listening in the four stages syllabi.
- 4) Teachers should guide their students to the processes of listening and make them aware of how to develop these processes in order to be competent listeners.
- 5) The teachers contend that their speech rate and their pronunciation do not affect their students' listening comprehension.
- 6) Education technology plays a significant role in teaching listening comprehension, since teachers need to cope with the new trends and methods used in developing students' listening ability.

10. References

- 1) Gilakjani, Abbas Pourhossein and Mohammad Reza Ahmadi (2011) "A Study of Factors Affecting EFL Learners' English Listening Comprehension and the Strategies for Improvement." *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, Vol. 2, No. 5, pp. 977-988.
- 2) Lynch T. and Mendelsohn D. (2002) 'Listening'. In N. Schmitt (ed.) *Introduction to Applied Linguistics*. London: Arnold. 180-195..
- 3) Machackova, Eva (2009) *Teaching Listening*. Available at :http://www.is.muni.cz/th/183878/pdf_b/bachelor_thesis.pdf
- 4) Mirhassani, Akbar and FaridGhaemi (2007) *Language Teaching Theories, Approaches, Methods, and Skills*.
- 5) Nunan, D. (1998). "Approaches to Teaching Listening in the Language Classroom." Paper presented at the Korea TESOL Conference, Seoul.
- 6) O'Malley, J. M. & Chamot, A. U. (1989). "Listening comprehension strategies in second language acquisition." *Applied Linguistics*, 10(4): 418-437.
- 7) Richards, Jack C. (2008) *Teaching Listening and Speaking From Theory to Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 8) Richards, Jack C. (2013) "Current Trends in Teaching Listening and Speaking." *ELT The Teacher*. Available at:
- 9) <http://jezykangielski.or/teacher3.pdf>
- 10) Saricoban, Arif (2012) *the teaching of Listening*. *The internet TESL Journal*. Available at: <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Saricoban-Listening.html>.
- 11) Scrivener, Jim (2011) *Learning Teaching: the essential Guide to English Language Teaching*. Thailand: Macmillan.
- 12) Xu, Fang (2008) "Listening Comprehension in EFL Teaching". In *Us-China Foreign Language*. Vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 21-29.

The Appendix

Dear colleagues,

You are kindly requested to participate in answering the following questionnaire which deals with the importance of listening comprehension at the university level .

No.	Questions	Yes	No	Other
1	Do you think that the teaching method and strategies you use affect the students' listening comprehension?			
2	Do you think that the different courses (literary and linguistic) differ in the type of listening comprehension needed by the students?			
3	Do you think that there is a necessity to include listening comprehension within the four stages syllabi?			
4	Do you think that students' listening comprehension is more important than reading comprehension?			
5	Do you think that students' lexical repertoire affects their listening comprehension?			
6	Do you think that the meta-language used by teachers will affect students' comprehension?			
7	Do you think that teachers- students' relationship affects the students' listening comprehension?			
8	Do you think that the lack of using education technologies impede students' listening comprehension?			
9	Do you think that teachers' pronunciation affects their students' listening comprehension?			
10	Do you think that teachers' speech rate in delivering lectures affect students' listening comprehension			

*If you choose 'Other', please mention below:
