



EXPLORING ENGLISH LISTENING COMPREHENSION PROBLEMS AMONG UNIVERSITY LEVEL STUDENTS.

Khan Muhammad Zardari

M. Phil Scholar at University of Sindh

Email: muhammadk545.kz@gmail.com

Saba Qadir

Undergraduate from Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University

Email: Sabaqadir57@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study investigates causes of English listening comprehension problems. It found the difficulties that the students faced when listening to an English text. This study explored the problems and obstacles faced by university level students while listening to English. This was quantitative based research; a questionnaire was adopted and distributed to 50 participants. The questionnaire was later analyzed with ethical considerations. Listening comprehension is a cycle where people focus on chosen parts of aural info, structure importance of a passage, and associate what they heard with existing contextual information. It includes many processes in the understanding and making sense of spoken English. Listening includes understanding of the meaning of particular words, recognizing the speech sounds and understanding the syntax structure of sentences. The university level students faced the issues in English listening. Some of the factors that were included were contextual, mental and physical. These factors contributed to the problem of English comprehension. Students faced the problem of not being able to comprehend some word due to lack of background knowledge.

1. INTRODUCTION

Almost all of the information that we acquired in schools was with the help of active listening skill. An average student spends about 40 – 45% of his time listening in schools. This is how much importance holds the skill of listening. In this thesis I plan to study on the skill of listening of university level students and how much they use it in the university, this will also be taken into consideration that how many of the students have a fluent listening ability and if they don't than what difficulties are faced by them.

1.1 DEFINITION OF LISTENING

Listening does not simply mean just acquiring stimulus from the outside world. Its more complex, it demands one person to be very active in order to understand the other persons intentions and the feelings. Listening also requires observing the other person's body language as well. Listening is not just hearing, but hearing also deals with understanding sound and it is about listening and understanding what other individual is speaking. Listening involves many types, e.g a person can hear in order to answer a question or react to an answer. A person can hear all sounds but not understand any of them. Other type of listening includes being active and understanding what has been said and what was missed. The best kind of listening is when one person hears with his heart and understands it.

1.2 LISTENING COMPREHENSION PROBLEMS

Listening skill is considered most problematic with the context of it as being a language of a foreign country. The English language in Pakistan is the official language but it is certainly not the common language, especially in a new university like SBBU which holds a huge number of students belonging to the rural areas of Sindh. Having an opportunity of practicing English is limited and therefore students face a lot of issues when it comes to listening and comprehending what is being said in classrooms of the university. The skill of listening is the most difficult skill for foreign English language students because it is complex and requires a lot of contextual information in order to be understood by a non native speaker. Students in



Pakistan only learn English in text books and they have zero exposure to it when it comes to speaking, students of Pakistan have no exposure to the real language and they only hear this language from their instructors who themselves are not native speakers of English, this leads to an inaccurate perception of English language, students as a result make up their own accents which are related to their own languages or they just copy the accents of their teachers. This is where the problem of comprehension of English starts from, students don't have enough exposure to the language and they don't have proper background contextual information of that language. The material given to the students belongs to a high level and most of the university students of Sbbu have no idea of how to comprehend that information this becomes more complex when teachers start giving lectures based on that complex information. This also leads to the problem of practicing that language. Some universities like SBBU have fixed number of hours for the students and if they want to practice the only get one hour of free time which is their break, apart from that they don't get much time and environment for practicing speaking or listening. That's the reason this paper investigates the listening problems encountered by university level students of Sindh.

1.3 RESEARCH AIMS

This thesis aims to get the insight into the problem of listening comprehension problems in the university level students. It also aims to give information about the causes for the listening problems. A research proposed Hassan (2000) proved that words that are unfamiliar, words that are difficult, the length of the spoken text and its grammatical structures are the crucial parts for understanding factors of listening problems. Many researches have been conducted concerning listening problems but only a few explored whether final year students of university faced these comprehension problems or not. So there remains some gap which needs to be investigated.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION

- 1 What difficulties are faced by university level students in their listening comprehension process?
- 2 What comprehension difficulties are frequently experienced by university level students when they are listening to aurally presented texts of English?

1.5 ORGANIZATION OF THESIS

This is Quantitative Study of listening comprehension problems among university students, following survey questionnaires developed by Rubin (1994) and Hamouda (2013). In this chapter there are five more other chapters. The second chapter involves research done on listening comprehension problems. Chapter three deals with methodology of the research, the data collection processes and techniques of analyzing that data. The fourth chapter is about the research findings of the Questionnaires collected from the final year students of English dept of SBBU University. Chapter five deals with details of the research findings in detail and the last chapter is about the overall summary, limitations and conclusions plus suggestions for further research studies.

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The findings of this thesis are important for language teachers, material developers and the experts who are involved in the language learning field and language teaching and assessment. This thesis explores the problems in English listening, knowing the problems



helps in getting solutions of these problems. Teacher and students both can get an insight into the problems of English listening comprehension.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Listening is an active ability to comprehend what the other person is saying. It can have many problems starting from physical to cognitive settings. Different kind of problems and theories are viewed in this chapter.

2.1 THEORIES OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION PROBLEMS

There are four main sources of listening problems. First problem is the main message itself. If the message is not clearly conveyed then it would cause some problems. The second problem is concerned with the speaker, certain factors such as tone and speed affects the listening comprehension. The third problem is connected with the listener, how it perceives the message and how he develops its meaning. The fourth factor is the physical setting. Settings such as classrooms which are big or small can have its affects on the comprehension process. Students might face difficulties in hearing the message in these kinds of settings. (buck, 2001) identified many difficulties which are faced in the listening process such as the problem of unknown vocabulary, topics of discussion that are unfamiliar, fast speech rate and the problem of hard or unfamiliar accents. Listening involves an active process that is the process of decoding the given message and making meaning from the verbal and non verbal messages of that particular language.

The listening skill is considered an ability which helps humans in understanding the world around them; this ability is considered one of the most important processes in making successful communication. (Abbas Pourhossein Gilakjani, 2011) Applied that listening comprises of listening for intentions, feelings and thoughts. It includes active involvements, participants, efforts, and practice. The learners who are striving to speak should first learn to listen to that language and practice it on the daily basis. If learners want to communicate with the speakers of the native language, they have to learn the language first in the context of outside world situations in order to understand how natives speak. In real life situations words and sentences are spoken with context. Listening comprehension points out the understanding of what the listeners has heard and what was understood in order to gain the ability to repeat the texts. With proper practice and guidance the students can improve their listening skills. The English teachers need to see and respond the needs of their students in order to develop increased listening comprehension skills by applying listening process as an important component of their syllabus (Ahmadi, 2016). The Listening is a skill which helps us to identify what other people are saying. Understanding the accents or the pronunciation is also included in this process. It also involves grammar vocabulary and understanding the message. Listening is seen as a very difficult skill because when listeners are given a listening activity, they have to face various obstacles in order to understand the clear message. (buck, 2001) pointed out that in listening there are many challenges which can come up while doing the listening assignments, for example difficult vocabulary, new points, new distinctive accents or the quick discourse rate. Students need to face and solve these obstacles every day and each errand in the classroom (Ehsan Namaziandost, 2019). The students face many problems while comprehending English language. The most constant problem experienced by students is identified with input problem; It was understood that the main input issues that the students faced were the speakers accent, the way in which the word are pronounced, the content of unknown word and the speed and length and the talking speed of the speaker (Ehsan Namaziandost, 2019). Another listening issue is speech rate. It is difficult to



understand the content of the message when the speaker speaks quickly without pausing (Ehsan Namaziandost, 2019). One more problem recognized is the issue of text length. It is very hard to see long texts specially if it already contains a lot of new words which are unfamiliar to the learner. Generally, it can be said that main problems of input experienced by the students are the unfamiliar accents, the length of the text, speech rate and the wrong pronunciation of the words (Ehsan Namaziandost, 2019). The learners are not born with innate ability of effective listening, it is the duty of the teachers to share that knowledge with their students. The most effective way to teach listening skill is when teachers create their own model of teaching and creating an environment which encourages the students to listen. (Abbas Pourhossein Gilakjani, 2011). The English listening is a very complex kind of skill which demands uninterrupted conscious development. (Abbas Pourhossein Gilakjani, 2011). The ability of understanding what is being spoken has a very crucial role in acquiring the second language. It is a crucial skill to be included in the classroom activities. With proper guidance and guided practice, the learners can effectively improve their listening comprehension skills (Ahmadi, 2016)

2.2 THE FACTORS ATTRIBUTED TO THE LISTENER

Fearch and Kasper (1986) exposed that when a learner of another language tries to fully understand the dialect, hearing loss occurs. The characteristic of second language learners is that they want to know the meaning of words when they are listening to an English text. The learners aren't accustomed to listening to English rhythms. Apart from that, second language learners are unaware of the speaker's speech speed and changes in the pitch which identifies the crucial information. Therefore, the learners lose an important strategy make listening an easy skill to understand.

Underwod (1989) reports that hearing problems are caused by a lack of familiarity with the gestures used by speech markers and informal speakers to move from one point to another. These are related to changes in signal a marker of pitch and the different sources of the patterns. In addition, Underwood (1989) also conveys that students cannot tolerate ambiguity and imperfection. Therefore, they are difficult to hear. When students can't understand every word in front of them, they lose interest and feel pressured. In fact, it refers to the way teachers teach. Teachers focus on understanding each word by repeating, speaking softly, and using clear words.

Similarly, Hedge (2006) pointed out that the cause of hearing impairment is that students are not aware of facts that they don't have to comprehend every word in the listening quotes in order to fully understand the meaning. Vandrgift (2011) also said that "Sometimes the students must not accept ambiguity and understanding."

In addition, Underwod (1989) believes that another obstacle to listening comprehension is the lack of visual aid. English as foreign language learners cannot see the speaker's facial expressions and body language while listening to recordings, which impairs hearing comprehension. He says there is a strong connection between language and language. He emphasized that the speakers reactions, body language, gestures, facial expressions, body language and appearance would help English as a foreign language learners understand what the speakers are saying in front of them.

Lin (2000) reached a conclusion that in listening comprehension, he distinguishes between the high achievement and the low achievement. They found that the key factors influencing high-achieving hearing comprehension differed from those with low success. Unable to understand language and distractions, this makes it difficult for high achievers to understand.



However, the rapid retention of the speaker's speech has reduced the listening comprehension of the poor. In addition, Teng (2002) studied the listening comprehension difficulties of 95 technical college students. He found that the most common factor was student skills. Then there is the speaker's explanation and auditory concentration. In addition, Chen (2007) pointed out that real source of the difficulties faced by the junior high school students are the listener themselves. The student's skills control their understanding. Limited words also hinder students' comprehension of words. He revealed that lower-level students problems are attributed with personal factors, while higher level students face the difficulty in the text itself.

King & Behnke (2003) pointed out the degree of anxiety in the listening activities can impair listening comprehension process. Listening to the audio script will have a negative effect on students' mood, and once they have finished listening, anxiety will be reduced. In addition, these negative emotions make the audience dislike the work and fail to pay attention to the corresponding words.

2.3 THE LISTENING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES

The early second language listening research was interested in the theory that believed that exposure to understandable input would improve listening skills which would also language learning and acquisition (Krashen, 1985). In recent years, however, second language listening research has shifted to how the learners connect these inputs. That's why understanding the strategies that the second language learners use to deal with hearing difficulties have become an important part of this research. Second language auditory research aims to clarify the psychological process of listeners and determine promotion strategies (Mendelsohn, 1995 Thompson & Robin, 1996 (L, 2003). O Malley and Chamot (1989) divided listening strategies in two types: cognition and metacognition. The third type, the social and emotional type, is included to describe learning which occurs when learners discuss with classmates and clarify specific techniques to reduce anxiety from teachers. Need to do or use them. Previous studies have also shown that learner skills are one of the key factors determining strategy choices (Conrad, 1985, O'Malley and Chamotte).

It was found that learners who are skilled use more strategies than those of unskilled learners. There are also differences between these two types of proficient and less proficient strategies. These both are discussed below separately.

2.4 THE COGNITIVE STRATEGY

The cognitive strategies are problem solving techniques which are used for learning tasks or to acquire skills and knowledge (dery and Murphy 1986). Cognitive strategies are directly related to the with the learning process and it involves change and manipulation. "Language learners use cognitive strategies to help them process, retrieve and store new information" (Goh, 1998).

There are mainly two research topics in second language listening: down and up. The following strategies include translating verbatim, repeating spoken text, adjusting speed of the speech, and focusing on the features of the text. On the other side, these strategies include prediction, estimation, and purification. The previous studies have shown the strategies of advanced learners are much lower than those of new beginners (Ts Sui & Flavo, 1998). In scientific strategy, there are four strategies which can be analyzed here. The first strategy deals with trying to understand without translating. This happens when the listener is trying to understand second language input without translating it into first language. This strategy is



useful in cases where many words in a language are not equal, which makes the process of understanding difficult. That's why this strategy draws the attention of the audience into the meaning and the structure of the target language. On the other hand, the second scientific strategy focuses on keywords to comprehend new words. Listeners use their knowledge of keywords (from target language to sentence) to create knowledge. This strategy is helpful for those listeners who desire to increase their understanding of small stocks. The Storage relies on the third scientific strategy which is about the main idea to understand the full text. This can help the listeners to find a topic initially and then find the main details. Fraud is a technique involved in this strategy. Learners using this strategy can quickly find the main ideas and can quickly understand the Second language track input.

The fourth cognitive strategy is to rely on a clue (context or language) to determine the meaning. This strategy is used when the audience doesn't know all of the words or they do not understand the overall meaning of the given sentences. Even if they are native or non native speakers, they have to use this strategy when their hearing is not accurate or the meanings are not clear.

2.5 THE METACOGNITION STRATEGY

The Cognitive strategy is about the managing techniques which are used as a control by monitoring, planning, modification and evaluating (Rubin 1987). Take for example, a sound planning strategy, the audience will clarify the target of the expected auditory activity and focus on the main parts of auditory language inputs or help they serve a help to understand details for auditory inputs. A research from Oxford (1990) suggests that the conscious usage of the metacognition strategy can help learn to regain attention after losing attention. However, as much as it is important but the self monitoring and the self assessment learners often do not use metacognitive strategies. (Brown and Baker 1984) presented two kinds of miscegenational abilities: Thw cognitive content knowledge (i.e. what to know) and the cognitive adjustment (ie, how to know it). The first kind is about being aware of what is happening, and the second kind is about what he should do in order to listen affectively. The studies that are experimental show that learners who are skilled and the learners who are not skilled have their own significant differences. These second language listeners are based on their metacognitive strategies. (O'Malley, 1989) suggested that the skilled listeners use more restoration strategies in order to attract the attention of the people to work if they misunderstood, while skilled listeners would avoid listening to their work. Vandergrift (2003) found that the meta-symbol strategy used by professional listeners is twice that of unskilled listeners. In the diagnosis strategy, there are basically two strategies to be analyzed here, Paying attention to speakers voice is the strategy which allows audience to pay more attention to the speakers information without the need to interfering with any kind of interfering factors. This strategy is helpful for those who are going to the classroom, listening to the radio, watching television or chatting with other individuals. The other diagnostic strategy is related to predetermine the direction to look for. The audience uses this attention as a technique or skill to facilitate the understanding process. Take for example, some of the listeners choose to take all their focus on pronunciation and they rely on pronunciation to understand languages having different accents. Having too much emphasis on accent may put a negative impact on the understanding, because it might lead to adjustments and cause misunderstandings.



2.6 SOCIO-AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

The last type of strategy that is social and emotional strategy, which involves efforts to establish and promote a positive emotional reaction and it also promotes attitudes towards language learning (Chamot 1987). Vandergrift (2003) uses social engagement strategy techniques as techniques used by the audience to verify understanding or to collaborate with others to reduce anxiety. According to Gardner & McIntyre (1992, 1993), emotional strategy is very important for overcoming the learning experience, because the learning environment is directly involved with the psychological factors of the learner (e.g. about the learners learning experience).

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4 This study employed a quantitative methodology. Quantitative research entails the systematic examination of data, focusing on gathering measurable information and subsequently applying mathematical, statistical, or computational methods to analyze it.

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a classroom-based descriptive research design, utilizing quantitative methods for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Information on students' challenges with listening comprehension was obtained through a survey questionnaire.

3.2 RESEARCH LOCALE

The research process was conducted at Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University from the final year students of English department. The participants were both male and females.

3.3 THE PARTICIPANTS

Fifty (50) students who are studying English in the final year during the time that the research was being conducted participated in the research.

3.4 SAMPLES AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUES

Samples were randomly selected from English department and were given a questionnaire which consisted of 12 items. These questionnaires were filled by last year students of 17 BS (English) and 19 MA (English).

3.5 SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

The survey questionnaire utilized in this study was adapted from Prof. Cecilia L. Calub, Ph.D., from the College of Education at Tarlac State University. This adapted questionnaire employs a four-point Likert scale, offering participants four choices: 1 for Never, 2 for Sometimes, 3 for Often, and 4 for Always. The purpose of this survey was to gather data on the listening comprehension challenges faced by the selected respondents. Prof. Cecilia incorporated elements of the survey questionnaire, including a checklist and rating scale, which were originally developed by Rubin (1994) and Hamouda (2013). However, the majority of the items were sourced from Hamouda's (2013) instrument.

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

The data that was gathered was put in Microsoft Excel and it was analyzed there with given formulas. The data was gathered through =COUNTBLANK, =COUNTA, and =SUM formulas. After getting the percentage the data was converted into charts. These charts are later explained in the research.

4 THE RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 DIFFICULTIES RELATED TO STUDENTS' LISTENING COMPREHENSION PROCESS



Listening comprehension is a functioning cycle where an individual focuses on chosen parts of aural info, structure importance from a passage, and associate what he/she hears with existing information. It comprises of various process of understanding that are involved in making the sense of spoken text. The listening process of comprehension also takes into consideration the memory and the demands of keeping track of the relationships that are expressed in the area of discourse. This process also includes understanding the meaning of particular words, recognizing new speech sounds, and understanding the syntax structure of the sentence in which are presented.

The main questions below were answered in this research:

4.2 What are the difficulties faced by University level students in their listening comprehension:

(Goh, 2000) Suggested that the listening difficulties could be external or internal, these characteristics could interrupt texts which are directly to the cognitive process. (Underwood, 1989) Emphasized on the factors beyond the difficulties that are obstacles for the language learners. Underwood reported that having a lack in context and background knowledge could result as barriers for the comprehension process of listening. Factors that are causing students into facing difficulty in listening could be categorized into different sources. These sources include the problems of the listener related with their concentration. We also have the problem that is related to the listening material and the problems of basic linguistics. We also have the problem of physical setting that causes difficulty in listening.

Based on this research, in conclusion, listening is an activity which is problematic for many students. These findings are backed up by results from the questionnaires which were distributed to the final year students. All of these problems can be divided into five factors that were faced by the students when they listened. Among these, the usage of context in order to understand or guess the meaning of these words that they could not hear was one of the problems faced by the students. The students also faced difficulty in getting the main idea of the text. Students had difficulty because they couldn't get a personal association with new information that they were exposed to. The Students also found it hard to concentrate on text if they were facing any kind of difficulty in understanding the text. Finding out the main purpose of listening was also an issue. These were all features of comprehension of listening, these all were more or less internal factors which attributed with the listening process. Apart from that the students also found it hard to understand the overall accuracy of their listening comprehension.

4.3 What are the comprehension difficulties frequently experienced by the university students when listening to aurally presented texts in English?

The aural refers to the ear or hearing. The listening skill has an important part in daily lives, from maintaining our personal relations with people to taking notes in classroom to getting jobs done. No matter how we engage with listening, it is crucial to understand that doesn't only involve hearing but it is also an active process by which we make sense of the text and respond to what we heard. The questions in the questionnaire were based on mental, contextual and physical attributes related to listening. Item four focused on Context that was used to guess some parts of listening texts that we could not hear clearly. This is more kind of an external factor which can be attributed as aural. Thirty eight percent of the participants faced this problem sometimes. By looking at this ratio we can clearly see that this problem is more or less common among university level students. If students face problem in hearing the



text than the students won't be able to comprehend the text. After that thirty two percent of the respondents in the targeted locale reported to never facing this kind of issue. Sixteen percent reported as to often facing this problem and fourteen percent of the respondents faced this issue always. Item six focused on students hearing the text to get the main ideas of the text. It can be a hard task to keep focus on what the speaker is saying, if we hear it suddenly. Just think about entering in a class in middle of a lecture, you might understand the words and the sentences that you are hearing, but it would be hard to immediately understand what the lecturer is explaining even if he is taking about the main points at that moment. Forty six percent of the respondents from the research locale reported to never facing this kind of issue but there were thirty one percent who admitted to facing this problem sometimes. Fifteen percent of the students on the other hand reported to facing this issue often and eight percent of them reported to always facing this issue of not being able hear the text correctly and get the main idea.

5 CONCLUSION

The study focused on pinpointing the challenges and issues encountered in understanding English listening. These comprehension difficulties were examined through a quantitative analysis of a questionnaire. Students faced five main problematic factors when listening to and trying to understand English. One issue was using context to grasp the meaning of new vocabulary words they misheard, a problem for university students due to their inability to personally connect with the new information. Additionally, students struggled to grasp the central idea or main purpose of the text. Concentration became difficult if there was any misunderstanding of the text. Identifying the main purpose of listening was another factor contributing to listening comprehension issues. Students also found it challenging to assess the overall accuracy of their comprehension of the heard text. Listening is a cognitive process that demands focused attention to understand others' emotions. It plays a crucial role in language learning, especially for a second language, as it not only expands vocabulary but also enhances the speaker's accent and pronunciation. Given the importance of listening, it is essential to identify the obstacles and challenges listeners face during the listening process.

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