

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE WHEN LISTENING COMPREHENSION IS DIFFICULT?

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ABSTRACT: Listening comprehension is a course which students majoring in English must take. It is also a part of every English competence test. It is usually considered as a difficult course just because students usually have problems in understanding what they are listening either in classrooms or in tests. There are factors which contribute to these problems. Students and teachers must recognize these problems in order to have better listening comprehensions. There are also suggestions to solve these problems. This paper is discussing why listening comprehension is difficult and possible solutions which students and teachers can do.

Keywords: Listening, comprehension, problems, solutions

Listening is prerequisite to other language skills because the first stage in language learning is listening. It is widely known that people start to learn language by hearing sounds. From the sounds heard, he or she will try to imitate them. This activity is the first stage of a child beginning to learn to pronounce words. So, listening is the initial steps in language development. It is the most important skill in language learning. Nunan (1998) explains that listening is the basic skill in language learning. He also says that without listening skill, students never learn to communicate effectively because students spend 50% of the time operational in a foreign language is dedicated to listening. Furthermore, Gilbert (1988) notes that students from kindergarten through high school are expected to listen 65-90 percent of the times. The importance of listening in English language learning is also highlighted by Mendelsohn (1994) who states that 40-50% of communication time is spent for listening, 25-30% for speaking, about 11-16% for reading, and only about 9% for writing. However, listening does not seem to receive as much attention as the other language skills. According to Tompkins and Hoskisson (1995), among four language skills –listening, speaking, reading, and writing- listening has been called the neglected skill for some decades.

A study conducted by Hamouda (2013) entitled “An Investigation of Listening Comprehension Problems Encountered by Saudi Students in the EL Listening Classroom” found that students who were satisfied with the instruction of reading 70%, writing 25%, speaking 13.3% and listening 6.7%. It means that most of the students thought listening instruction was ‘below average’ or ‘poor’ from another skill. In line with that, the report on test taker worldwide TOEIC (2014) revealed that Indonesia’s listening performance was in 42nd rank out of 44 countries with the mean 234 which is under the average TOEIC score, where the score should be 500 for listening performance. Thus, students’ listening proficiency in Indonesia are still very poor.

That fact might have caused listening comprehension course received more than 10 credit hours on the average in the curriculum almost in every university with English major in Indonesia. At our English Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Sriwijaya, there are 12 credit hours for listening comprehension course which students must take starting from the first until the fourth semester. In spite of the fact that listening comprehension has more credit hours than other courses and teaching and learning strategies applied by the lecturers, students still have difficulties in listening. Hamouda (2013) states that EFL students have crucial problems

in listening comprehension because universities pay attention to grammar, reading, and vocabulary. Listening and speaking skills are not significant parts of many books and teachers do not consider these skills in their classes. Similarly, Osada (2004) stated that listening is not very important for both teachers and students and teachers test not to teach listening and students learn listening not listening comprehension. Consequently, it remains the most neglected aspect of language teaching. Hamouda (2013) further emphasized that comprehending speech is a very difficult activity for students. Students face a lot of problems when they listen to a language. If teachers are expected to help students improve their listening comprehension, they should comprehend their listening difficulties in understanding spoken passages. In this paper, problems usually encountered by students in listening comprehension classes are going to be discussed.

PROBLEMS FACED BY STUDENTS IN LISTENING COMPREHENSION

There are many factors that can cause listening difficulties. They are external and internal in terms of what contribute to them. According to Azmi et.al (2014), students may encounter difficulties in listening comprehension processes because of the following reasons:

Quality of Recorded Materials

In some classes, teachers use some recorded materials that usually have been rerecorded for more than three times. These will reduce the quality of the sounds which eventually will affect the students in trying to comprehend the listening materials.

Cultural Differences

Students must be familiar with the cultural knowledge of language that has a significant effect on the students's understanding. If the listening task involves completely different cultural materials then the students may have critical problems in their comprehension. It is the responsibility of teachers to give background knowledge about the listening activities in advance.

Accent

Munro and Derwing (1999) stated that too many accented speech can lead to an important reduction in comprehension. In addition, Goh (1999) stated that 66% of students mentioned a speaker's accent as one of the most significant factors that affect listener comprehension. Unfamiliar accents both native and non-native can cause serious problems in listening comprehension and familiarity with an accent helps students' listening comprehension. Similarly, Buck (2001) mentioned that when listeners hear an unfamiliar accent such as Indian English for the first time after studying only American English will encounter critical difficulties in listening. This will certainly interrupt the whole listening comprehension process and at the same time an unfamiliar accent makes comprehension impossible for the listeners.

Unfamiliar Vocabulary

When listening materials contain known words it would be very easy for students to them. If students know the meaning of words this can arouse their interest and motivation and can have a positive impact on the students' listening comprehension ability. A lot of words have more than one meaning and if they are not used appropriately in their appropriate contexts students will get confused.

Length and Speed of Listening

It is very difficult for lower level students to listen more than three minutes long and complete the listening tasks. Short listening passages make easy listening comprehension for students and reduce their tiredness. According to Underwood (1989), speed can make listening passage difficult. If the speakers speak too fast students may have serious problems to understand L2 words. In this situation, listeners are not able to control the speed of speakers and this can create critical problems with listening comprehension. Despite the fact that we can cope with missing whole chunks of speech having a conversation on a noisy street in our own language, many people don't seem to be able to transfer that skill easily to a second language. One method of tackling this is to show them how to identify the important words that they need to listen out for. In English this is shown in an easy-to-spot way by which words in the sentence are stressed. Another is to give them one very easy task that you know they can do even if they don't get 90% of what is being said to build up their confidence, such as identifying the name of a famous person or spotting something that is mentioned many times.

Physical conditions

Sometimes inconvenience of classrooms affects students listening comprehension. In the large classrooms students who are sitting on the back rows may not hear the recording as students sit in front. Students who prefer to stay next to the windows also effected by the noise that come from outside. As a teacher we have to take into account all this conditions in a body. The size of the classroom also makes difficult for teacher to manage the all class in group activity or to get feedback from students. The temperature of class can be counted as a factor that makes listening comprehension difficult. The class that does not have air conditioner or heater may be too hot in summer or too cold in winter.

Lack of concentration

Students' motivation is one of the crucial factors that affect listening comprehension. It can be difficult for students maintaining the concentration in a foreign language learning classroom. In listening comprehension, even the smallest pause in attention may considerably spoil comprehension. When students find the topic of the listening text interesting, comprehending would be easier. For all that, students find listening very boring even if they are interested in the topic because it needs a huge amount of effort in order to not miss the meaning.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

The following are solutions suggested by Gilakjani (2016):

1. Listening activities should be provided based on the students' needs and teachers should provide authentic listening materials for students that help them understand better the natural speech uttered by native speakers.
2. Teachers should design listening tasks that arouse students' interest and help them learn listening skills and strategies. These tasks not only test the students' listening comprehension but also motivate them to use various types of listening strategies in order to gain the maximum benefits in doing their activities.
3. Teachers should provide students with different types of input like lectures, radio news, films, TV plays, announcements, everyday conversation, and interviews.
4. Teachers should familiarize their students with the rules of pronunciation in order to help them hear the different forms of rapid natural speech and ask them to imitate native speakers' pronunciation.
5. Teachers should help their students to be familiar with the accents of different native speakers. Due to the fact that native speakers have specific accents it is necessary for students to recognize the differences between American and British accents.
6. Listening activities should be presented according to their level of complexities; that is, listening activities should be provided from the very simple texts to the lower level students and moved to the very complicated authentic materials to the advanced students.
7. Teachers should provide background knowledge and linguistic knowledge to their students while listening to different listening materials.
8. Teachers should give their students the necessary feedback on their performance because it can promote their error correction and increase their motivation, and help them to develop their confidence in listening exercises.
9. Teachers should help their students to develop the necessary skills of listening comprehension like listening for understanding particular information, listening for the main ideas, explanation and inference, listening for intended meaning through providing different tasks and activities at different levels.
10. Teachers should use body language such as pointing and facial expressions to reinforce oral messages in their students.
11. Teachers should provide opportunities for developing top-down and bottom-up processing skills because top-down activities motivate students to discuss what they already know about a topic and bottom-up activities give confidence in the understanding of the components of the language such as sounds, words, intonation,

and grammatical structures.

12. Teachers should encourage their students to develop listening strategies. Predicting, asking for clarification, and using non-verbal cues are some examples of these strategies that improve students' listening comprehension ability.
13. Teachers should be appropriately trained in speaking skills. Listening is related to good pronunciation; therefore, teachers should have good and acceptable pronunciation which can help students to become better listeners.
14. Teachers should ask their students to always listen to music, documentaries, and news on the radio and television, talk to native speakers face to face or on the Internet so that they can create and reinforce a good habit of listening in themselves.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that listening comprehension course is a difficult course because students need good listening environments, good recording quality, excellent linguistic competence, and intensive exposure towards English to have satisfying listening skill. Through intensive listening practices, students can improve their listening comprehension.

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