



Investigating the Causes of Poor Listening Comprehension among ESL Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigates the causes of poor listening comprehension among ESL undergraduate students of majoring in English at Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University, Shaheed Benazirabad (SBBU, SBA). Meeting the research objectives, the data were collected using a quantitative research method. The sample (n=204) was selected randomly, and a closed-ended questionnaire was used for data collection. The questionnaire was based on four categories: (a) Problems related to listening text, (b) Problems related to the listener, (c) Problems related to the speaker, and (d) Problems related to the physical setting. The data were analysed through SPSS software. The study came out with these findings namely noise as a barrier, unfamiliar words, unfamiliar topics, long listening texts, lack of prior knowledge, lack of interest, complex grammatical structures, slang expressions, hesitation, pauses, the spoken text contains jargon, variety of accents, speech rate, pronunciation, and physical setting. Considering the above findings, the study suggested effective remedies to overcome poor listening comprehension issues.

Keywords:

Listening comprehension problems, ESL learners, medium of instruction, accent.



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INTRODUCTION

Listening is the most notable viewing language acquisition and learning process. As stated by Hamuda (2013), listening is a crucial skill for the growth of communication skills. Language learners are roughly 45 to 50 percent given exposure to listening practice in their routine life (Hedge, 2007; Nunan, 1998). Since effective listening makes efficient communication process as Rost (2002) claims that mastering listening is essential for mastering speaking. To put it

differently, this receptive skill occurs naturally in the acquisition process, where children acquire unconsciously, but L2 learners listen consciously in their learning process because adults practice listening activities inside and outside of the class. Language learners internalize linguistic knowledge by hearing, and they cannot produce language without it (Brown, 2001).

Hasan (2005) stresses that listening comprehension tasks "create the optimal setting for language acquisition and the development of other linguistic abilities" (p.138). Accordingly, listening is the primary skill to understand the concepts of language like the ideas, thoughts, and feelings of other people. As clarified by Rost (2002) decoding, comprehending, and interpreting are the phases of the listening process that provide an understanding to assimilate different circumstances. Notably, listening enables learners to comprehend the speech that undergoes three stages namely, 1. Hearing, 2. Understanding, and 3. Judgmental.

Besides, listening is a key enabler for learning a second language; however, learners pay little or no attention to listening comprehension as it requires full attention for comprehension. Since listening is found less significant to L2 teachers and they do not engage learners in listening exercises (Krashen, 1985). Although, it is considered a passive talent that develops organically through speaking and reading, and hence has received, less research and classroom focus in comparison to other language skills (Richards, 2005; Rost, 2011; Vandergrift, 2004). In this regard, the present endeavour highlights the significance of listening comprehension while learning the target language; thus, the purpose of this study is to identify the factors, which cause poor listening comprehension.

Background of the Study

In educational setting, listening skill has a core function while learning a target language. This receptive language skill is the sole road map to develop communication skills. Having this in view, poor listening comprehension has been a prime focus of many researchers at both tertiary and pre-tertiary levels. Academicians like Assaf (2015) examined that some teachers are ignorant about strategies to overcome poor listening comprehension and others have not taken it seriously. The present study found it mandatory to investigate the roots behind poor listening comprehension in the majoring in English students in the department of English at PQR University.

Research Objective

- To investigate the causes of poor listening comprehension countered by tertiary-level students.

Research Question

1. What are the causes of poor listening comprehension among PQR university undergraduate students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Effective listening is made possible through these four components: the physiological dimension; the psychological component; and the sociological participation in the communication process

(Wolvin, 2010). Hamouda's (2013) study revealed listening difficulties on the side of speaker speech delivery (tempo of speech, poor recording quality, and dialectical variation), and on the side of listeners (lack of concentration, anxiety, and insufficient vocabulary). In Vietnam, Duong and Chau (2018) conducted a study to address listening comprehension issues and identified these aspects: new terms, slang, idioms, colloquial words, and complicated sentence structures were the most common causes of impaired listening comprehension among the 115 English majors. Furthermore, speedy delivery, incorrect pronunciation, varied accents, nervousness, the invisibility of speakers' facial expressions, and noise all had an impact on their listening comprehension.

Many studies (Ahkam, 2015; Khamprated, 2012) identified listening impairing factors namely, local accents, speaker speed, cultural differences, and inadequate English grammar and lexical resources. Besides, it is stated by Rost (2002) that listening comprehension is viewed as a challenge, collaborative process in which listeners take part in the dynamic construction of meaning (as cited in Hamouda, 2013).

Importance of listening

Academically the worth of listening skills is inevitable (Rost, 2002) so listening strategies may be used to develop students' listening comprehension (Abedi, Keshmirshakan, & Namaziandost, 2019). Jinhong (2011) states that the understanding of listening is both 'process-oriented activities' that requires listeners too actively and step-by-step work on materials and creative activities. Besides, this receptive language skill creates meanings depending on the information and experience provided. Many studies (Nunan, 2002; Rosst, 2000) have identified several merits of listening comprehension while language learning such as first language learning, the foundation for all aspects of a child's linguistic and cognitive development that are essential to the communication process.

According to Brown (2001), effective listening skills are essential in academic performance. The language acquisition and learning process carries out listening with speaking and reading with writing. Since the acoustic messages of L1 and L2 differ from each other, learners are accustomed to sounds, vocabulary patterns, and stress patterns of both languages (Siegel, 2013).

Teaching Listening

Academically, students learn to listen to the speech rather than interpret what they hear (Osada, 2004). Prior to coaching listening skills, Goh (2000) asserted that instructors were required to improve learners' vocabulary, grammar, and phonological commands. Another study identified that teaching listening comprehension is an essential skill that integrates with speaking skills (Mastafa, 2007). Notably, when students are enrolled in tertiary education, they have poor listening skills due to a lack of exposure during their primary and secondary level education (Seferoglu & Uzakgoren, 2004). In other words, language teachers require the use of suitable techniques that may prompt listening skills. Although instructions by teachers may overcome listening challenges and needs, listening stages can be utilized in this regard (Field, 2002).

Pre-listening

The teacher briefly introduces the topic to the students. Students are made known about their goals, subjects, and language goals; otherwise, learning outcomes may not be achieved. The listening script includes common words and structures; so that, students may understand the tape recorders easily (Echevarria, & Short, 2013).

While-listening

The instructor plans the timeframe to play the tape recorder achieving a particular goal. Besides, students are guided to listen to the audio script noting the name, date, and location. The class of the students is divided into clusters and are given a diverse listening assignment. Tasks that help children integrate their knowledge, such as learning answers to multiple questions (Brown, 2001).

Post-listening

At this level, students' listening test is conducted to assess understanding of the subject of the discussion in terms of a variety of situations. After hearing, two types of assignments are given to the students such as literal and latent level. At the literal level, linguistic features are under consideration while the latent level considers how one responds beyond the sentential level (Filed, 2002).

Factors behind Difficulty in Listening Comprehension

The length of spoken episodes, complex and sophisticated structures, and new terms as the main causes of students having trouble in listening (Hasan, 2000). Another study by Lynch (2010) asserted that message, listener, speaker, and body language were the four main contributors to cognitive impairment issues. Because of this, the linguistic characteristics of the listening text, speaker, listener, and body language were all classified using the same system in this study as they cause poor comprehension. Similarly, a number of obstacles causing poor listening comprehension are inadequate target language interpretation, difficulties with social and cultural standards, grammar and text structure, and individual traits like apathy and lack of motivation (Goh, 2000). Similar to this, the study by Nowrouzi, Tam, Zareian, and Nimehchisalem (2015) investigated several listening comprehension problems like students' perception, categorization, and level of comprehension. Common problems with listening comprehension are excessive unknown terms, new vocabulary, unfamiliar subjects of the script being heard, fast speech, different accents, and unclear articulated words (Hassan, 2000; Tian, 2002).

Strategies to Overcome Difficulties while Listening.

Listening materials may be utilised by going through needs analysis, students' backgrounds and interests, innovative, attractive and inspirational content (Gilakjani & Narjes, 2016). In addition, teachers need to understand the laws of articulation, to encourage students to perceive dissimilar types of fast, normal speaking and copy the pronunciation of natural speakers. This will improve students' pronunciation skills and enable them to listen to native speakers effectively and efficiently (ibid, 2016). Another study by Hamouda (2013) suggested to use of a variety of study resources such as lectures, radio news, movies, television shows, presentations, regular conversations, interviews, and English songs. Notably, lack of vocabulary may be a major

listening obstacle as Underwood (1989) has asserted that educators must provide extensive vocabulary which they require for effective listening.

Moreover, visual aids for unfamiliar words and a pair of words to make distinctions in terms of meaning, sound, and usage may be used to raise the interest and understanding of the students to overcome listening challenges (Hamouda, 2013). A well-equipped language lab having various technology-based resources namely tapes, recorded material, and written audio texts may facilitate learners to improve their listening skills (Hamouda, 2013).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study uses a quantitative research design. Quantitative studies gather numerical records. It is applied to make predictions, identify patterns and averages, confirm causality, extend findings to larger populations, and locate patterns and averages. Furthermore, quantitative research allows us to synthesis large amounts of data and facilitates comparisons with other studies (Kruger, 2003). The present study used this method to get general and accurate data.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

The sampling size in the current study was based on (n=204) majoring in English students from four studying batches at SBBU, SBA. The participants were chosen randomly; so that, every individual may get an equal chance of selection from the population. In this regard, the drawn sample from each batch (n=51) was comprised of both male and female students of the age between 18 to 22 years.

Research Instruments

Considering data collection, this study used a closed-ended questionnaire based on the Likert scale. The research tool was adopted from Ahkam (2015) which contains 22 questions about poor listening comprehension. The questionnaire consists of four sections namely listening problems related to content of the listening text (1 to 7 items), listening problems related to listener (8 to 14 items), listening problems related to speaker (15 to 19 items), and listening problems related to the physical setting (20 to 22 items). The point scale on the Likert scale consists of strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree.

Procedure of Data Collection

The present study randomly selected a sample of (n=204) majoring in English students who exercised questionnaires for data collection. The sample comprised both male and female participants from the graduation level. Considering participants' availability and technological integration, the questionnaire was converted into google Forms, and then the link was shared with students. The produced results in an MS Excel file were converted into SPSS for comprehensive data analysis. Further description of the results and discussion is given below.

Results and Discussion

After retrieval of numerical data, SPSS was utilized for the analysis of complex data in terms of frequencies, standard deviations, arithmetic means, composing tables, and percentages. The produced findings were displayed into tables and figures addressing the research question. The responses were set into three categories viz. strongly agree and agree are denoted as agree (A)

showing acceptance; strongly disagree and disagree are denoted as disagree (D) showing rejection; whereas neutral is denoted as (N) showing uncertainty. The results, in table 1, demonstrate listening problems related to listening comprehension text as shown below:

Listening Problems Related to Content of the Listening Text

As showed in table 1 (See Appendix), the first item is about listening text with unfamiliar words in which 68% of the participants admitted new words cause difficulty; only 8% could tackle this challenge whereas 24% of them were unsure about this issue. Above results show that listening comprehension difficulties may be minimized when the listening text is based on common words; otherwise, comprehension as a prime of purpose of listening may not be gained. The second item related to listening text containing complex grammatical structures in which 63% of the participants countered such difficulty; 21% of them were unsure about issue and remaining participants (16%) showed disagreement. The results exhibit that the listening text should be plain; so that, effective listening may be made possible. The third item addresses difficulty of listening text based on jargons in which 62% asserted as a challenge, 24% showed unfamiliarity with the issue whereas 14% of them had no problems in this regard. Thus, this issue may be addressed by defining and simplifying jargon prior to communication. Results of the fourth item regarding hearing unfamiliar content showed that the majority of respondents (62%) countered difficulty; 20% of them had no trouble whereas 18% of the participants did not express any opinion about the issue. Above results have made it vivid that unfamiliar topic becomes a cause of disagreement for student when they listen such content. However, the majority of respondents (60%) in terms of lengthy spoken texts indicated that they posed a significant issue that directly affects listening understanding whereas 22% of the participants showed no difficulty and 18% of the participants were unsure of this answer. In the next item related to the usage of colloquial and slang terms, many respondents (56%) found challenging to understand the listening material whereas 20% disagreed and 24% of respondents were unsure about this. Finally, most of the participants (49%) hardly had difficulty in comprehending every single term of the speech; 38% of the participants found it challenging to sense of every single word of the incoming speech; however, 13% of the participants were unsure about such an issue.

Listening Problems Related to Listener

Table 2 exhibits (See Appendix) that 55% of the participants countered comprehension issues due to mispronunciation of familiar words whereas 25% of the students disagreed with this assertion and 20% were unsure about such a case. This means that meaningful communication is made possible when the speakers pronounce words as meaning required. Participants response regarding uninteresting spoken content to listen to, 54% of them approved ineffective comprehension due to said issue; 29.4% of them indicated that they had no issue and the remaining 16.2% were uncertain of this item. It is deduced from the above results that result-oriented communication is made possible through interesting text. The next item was about effects of tiredness on students' listening comprehension in which 72.5% of them agreed to have no comprehension; only 12.2% disagreed with statement and 15.2% of the students expressed uncertainty regarding this issue. Hence, It is suggested that efficient listening is possible when students feel relaxed. The next item regarding lack of prior knowledge about the topic, the majority of respondents (64%) often had issues with it; only 14% of the learners had no trouble while 22% were unsure about this matter. The next item is about listening to a topic the first time in which 44% of the participants had trouble; 31% of the participants had not faced any trouble whereas remaining 25% of the participants lacked clarity about this issue. The results

have made it vivid that the majority of the participants can comprehend new listening content but it is mandatory not to ignore those who do not digest the meaning. It may be resolved by using common words when an instructor conducts listening comprehension text. The next item is about predicting what would come next in the story, 28% of the respondents had no trouble predicting upcoming moments in the listening text; however, 48% of them claimed to have trouble doing this, and 24% were unsure about it. Finally, students' responses about pauses in the stream of speech, the majority of the learners (57%) admitted they countered difficulty while listening text rather than written text; 19% of them had not ever experienced such hurdle and 24% of the learners were not sure about this issue.

Listening Problems Related to Speaker

Table 3 (See Appendix) shows the results related to listening problems related to speaker. The first item enquires about difficulty caused by the speaker's natural speech full of hesitation and pauses which a huge number of the respondents (59%) admitted this issue; 22% of them experienced no problems and the remaining 19% lacked clarity on this issue. Thus, the speakers should communicate with coherence and cohesion; so that, effective listening may be made possible. The next item enquires about difficulty in understanding mispronounced words that the majority of the students (68%) approved difficulty caused by the said issue; 14% of them disagreed with this idea and uncertainty was expressed by 18% of the students. The next item enquires about difficulty when the speaker speaks too fast in which 70% admitted trouble; 12% of them stated that their comprehension was unaffected by this issue while 18% were not sure about this item. The next item investigates the difficulty when a speaker switches to multiple accents in which 59% of the participants approved comprehension issue; 18% of them had never dealt with this type of issue, and 23% of them were uncertain about the issue. The last item enquires difficulty when a speaker has long pauses during conversation in which 65% of the participants countered trouble; conversely, 15% of them had no trouble, and 20% of the pupils were unsure of the issue.

Listening Problems Related to the Physical Setting

Table 4 (See Appendix) addresses listening problems regarding the physical setting. The first item enquires comprehension difficulty due to noise pollution in which the large number of participants (81%) approved it; 11% of them were unsure about it, and 8% of them claimed that this issue had no impact on their comprehension. The next item enquires difficulty due to poor quality CD player in which 75.5% of the participants approved a solid cause of poor listening comprehension; 5.4% of them had opposite opinion; however, 19.1% were unsure of this statement. The last but not least item enquires listening difficulty due to poor quality hearing equipment in which 81% of participants approved the issue; 5% of them had never experienced such issue whereas 14% of the participants were unsure about the issue.

DISCUSSION

RQ: What are the causes of poor listening comprehension among SBBU, SBA undergraduate students?

Above research question has been the prime focus of the current study; thus, the emerged results using questionnaire have unfolded various factors that cause poor listening comprehension. The

worth of listening skill is undeniable since the receiver requires complete attention when exposed to any piece of information orally. Keeping this in view, the current study proposes to highlight the significance of listening comprehension academically. Moreover, this study also provides suggestions to overcome listening issues, which will be fruitful for ESL learners. As listening ability is one of the most essential talents and its exposure is excessive to target language learners.

Considering the research tool, the findings of this study are based on four categories namely, listening problems related to the script, to the listener, to the speaker, and the physical setting.

First of all, listening script with unfamiliar words, idioms, and complex grammatical structure remains a dominant cause of poor listening comprehension (Cárdenas-Claros, 2020; Ningrum, 2022; Tran, & Duong, 2020; Toni, Susilowati, & Sartipa, 2021). This may be resolved when instructors use such words which are common and easy to comprehend the conative. Besides, results clarified that the complex-grammatical structures, jargon, slang, unfamiliar topics, and long spoken text are some of the issues on the side of listening comprehension text that may be supported through these studies (Kanwal, Yasmeen, Manzoor, Jamal, & Khan, 2022; Mirza, Pathan, Memon, & Memon, 2021; Rahma, Oktavinanda, Syahputri, Setiyana, & Jakfar, 2022; Teo, Abd Gani, & Ummah, 2022). It is, therefore, suggested to converse in simple code; so that, students may comprehend text easily.

Secondly, listeners' poor comprehension is caused by these factors such as: mispronounced words by speaker, tedious topic, tiresomeness, lacking of prior knowledge about topic, first exposure to target language, predicting what may come next, and stream of speech. These findings may be buttressed with these studies (Derakhshan, Kruk, Mehdizadeh, & Pawlak, 2021; Jyoti, 2020; Ramadhianti, & Somba, 2021; Sabih-Ul-Hassan, Gul, & Imran, 2023; Saipullah, Syahri, & Susanti, 2021; Winn, & Teece, 2021). Having this in view, it is the responsibility of the speaker to ensure words uttered clearly; to ensure the topic is interesting or adding something new in the knowledge of the listener; and to ensure communication should be in moderate form.

The findings confirm the issues that earlier studies discovered. The respondents agree that poor listening practices have led to a significant issue that has reduced their listening ability. Aspects of the listening materials indicate that students have trouble in understanding spoken text consists of unfamiliar terminology and is challenging to understand when the content is lengthy. This study also demonstrates that challenges for the learners bring out by a deficiency of commitment, intellectual causes, and physical conditions of both the narrator and the audience.

Thirdly, listening problems related to the speaker show that the listener counter problems due to these issues: natural speech full of pauses, hesitation, and hedges; mispronounced words and phrases; fast pace of speech; using a variety of accents; and lacking long enough pause while communication. Similarly, various studies (e.g., Ekayati, 2020; Gilakjani, & Sabouri, 2016; Ramadhianti, & Somba, 2021; Richards, Hohl, Whiteside, Ludman, Grossman, Simon, & Williams, 2019) have accorded that the pace of communication becomes a challenge for a listener to digest message since speedy conversation makes many things unclear. Although effective talk is possible when a conversation takes place in a natural tone with reasonable pauses. Moreover, using a variety of the accents during conversation may become a cause of poor listening comprehension as many studies (Field, 2019; Kang, Thomson, & Moran, 2019; Ockey, & French, 2016) have accorded such comprehension barrier while hearing multiple

accents by speaker. Viewing findings of the current study, conversation matters a lot so speaker should avoid a wide range of accents during conversation in order to have meaningful talk.

Finally, physical setting may become a substantial cause behind poor listening comprehension. The results emphasise that these items cause poor listening comprehension namely, lack of sound proof environment, lack of good quality CD player and lack of sound equipments without interference. These findings may be asserted with these studies (Jeffery, & Bauer, 2020; Renukadevi, 2014; Wu, Liu, Shi, Sun, Shao, Wu, & Yang, (2020) which claims that physical setting produce a significant impact on listening comprehension. It is, in conclusion, emphasised that the listening expertise should be taken seriously; so that, learners may be benefitted academically and professionally.

CONCLUSION

The current study examined various factors that became a cause of poor listening comprehension at the tertiary level. In viewpoint of the findings, the study also suggests some remedies to overcome poor listening of ESL learners. Using a survey questionnaire, the study identified prominent issues behind poor listening comprehension in terms of listening content, listener's willingness, speaker's clarity and physical setting. The results of the current study identified these issues while listening any instruction: topic of interest, speaking speed, new accent, new vocabulary, noise pollution, low quality instrument and so on. Besides, the findings have inferred that listening content makes complications due to sentential, inter-sentential structure, verbal, and tonal speech. In addition, listening process hampered due to mental issues, lack of interest, lack of attention, mispronunciation, hesitation, physical environment, poor recording quality and cassettes of poor quality. Having above findings in view, it may be extracted that the learners counter copious difficulties which may be addressed by following strategies provided by the respondents, academicians and teachers.

Limitations of the study

This study invites prospective researchers to have more studies on the left niches. First, the sampling was based on majoring in English students at SBBU, SBA so other departments may be included in sampling frame in order to have comprehensive results. Second, this study used questionnaire as a sampling tool so interviews may provide insightful perspectives about research problem. Third, the current study mainly focused on poor listening problems so it is proposed to have a comprehensive study regarding remedies to address listening issues. Finally yet importantly, the study can be conducted using mixed method research paradigm.

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APPENDIX

Poor Listening Comprehension Questionnaire

Dear Participant(s),

I would like to thank you for agreeing to take part in my research project on the protocol: Investigating the Causes of Poor Listening Comprehension among ESL Undergraduate Students. This gained information will be employed in part of BS thesis in English Department at SBBU,SBA and will be treated with complete anonymity and confidentiality. The questionnaire should take approximately 15 minutes.

Thank you for your cooperation!

Table 1: Listening Problems Related to Content of the Listening Text

Item No.	Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1.	I find it difficult to understand listening texts in which there are too many unfamiliar words.			
2.	I find listening comprehension difficult when the text contains complex grammatical structures.			
3.	I find listening comprehension difficult when the spoken text contains jargons.			
4.	I find it difficult to understand listening texts when the topic is unfamiliar.			
5.	I find listening difficult when I listen to long spoken texts.			
6.	I find listening difficult when utterances contain slang expressions.			
7.	I find listening difficult to understand every single word of incoming speech.			

Table 2: Listening Problems Related to Listener

Item No.	Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
8.	I found it difficult to recognize the words I know because of the way they are pronounced.			
9.	I find it difficult to understand the spoken text which is not of interest to me.			

10.	I find listening comprehension difficult when I feel tired.			
11.	I find it difficult to understand the listening text when I lack prior knowledge about the topic.			
12.	I find it difficult to get a general understanding of the first listening.			
13.	I found it difficult to predict what would come next.			
14.	I find it difficult to tell where one word finishes and begins there are words that I would normally understand in writing, but when I hear them in a stream of speech.			

Table 3: Listening Problems Related to Speaker

Item No.	Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
15.	I find it difficult to understand the natural speech which is full of hesitation and pauses.			
16.	I find it difficult to understand the meaning of words which are not pronounced clearly.			
17.	I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast.			
18.	I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak with a variety of accents.			
19.	I find it difficult to understand well when the speaker dose not pauses long enough.			

Table 4: Listening Problems Related to the Physical Setting

Item No.	Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
20.	It is difficult for me to concentrate with noises around.			
21.	Unclear sounds resulting from a poor-quality CD-player interfere with my listening comprehension.			
22.	Unclear sounds resulting from poor equipment interfere with my listening comprehension.			