


Factors Affecting Undergraduate EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension: A Case Study at YUFL

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Abstract

Listening is one of the most important skills in learning English language. This research was mixed methods. The objectives of this research were to find out EFL learners' difficulties in comprehending listening and to give some suggestions to be able to improve teaching listening skill and students' listening comprehension abilities. The samples used in this research were 112 undergraduate EFL students from Yangon University of Foreign Languages (YUFL), consisting of 97 females and 15 males aging from 20-23. The instruments used to collect the data were a questionnaire and an informal interview. The findings of this research revealed that “Length and Speed of Listening”, followed by “Unfamiliar Vocabularies” and “Accent” become the most significant factors that affect EFL learners' listening comprehension. Findings based on the replies of the students along with

analysis of the data were of great significance and could be advantageous to improve EFL learners' English listening comprehension skill.

Keywords: EFL, Student's listening problems, Strategies for listening comprehension.

Introduction

In second language learning, listening skills are considered especially important because they are fundamental to acquire a language. Learners obtain language input through listening. Acquisition takes place only when learners obtain sufficient comprehensible input (Krashen, Terrell, Ehrman, & Herzog, 1984). Listening is particularly important in language learning because it provides input for learners and it has also an important role in the development of learners' language knowledge (Rost, 1994). Therefore, EFL teachers always expect their students to develop their listening capability by osmosis and without help. However, developing the language skill is not always an easy task. In Myanmar, most of the EFL learners have significant problems or constraints in understanding listening and in developing their listening comprehension abilities. A great number of teachers believe that it will develop naturally within the language learning process and they will learn unconsciously. In addition, teaching and drilling listening strategies can be able to ease students listening comprehension. In Myanmar, only few studies focused on undergraduate EFL students' listening problems from different colleges and universities. In order to fulfil the gap, this paper investigates undergraduate EFL learners' listening comprehension difficulties in learning English Language within an undergraduate degree program at Yangon University of Foreign Languages (YUFL). This paper also gives some suggestions to consider when teaching this skill.

Literature Review

1. Definition of Listening Comprehension

There have been different definitions of the term "listening comprehension. According to Brown and Yule (1983), listening comprehension is an

individual understanding of what he has heard and it is the listener's ability to repeat the text despite the fact that the listener may repeat the sound without real comprehension. According to Rost (2002) and Hamouda (2013), listening comprehension is as an interactive process in which listeners are involved in constructing meaning. Nadig (2013) defined listening comprehension as the various processes of understanding and making sense of spoken language. These involve knowing speech sounds, comprehending the meaning of individual words, and understanding the syntax of sentences.

2. The importance of Listening Comprehension

According to Rost (1994) and Ziane (2011), listening comprehension is very important because it is a process through which we get input and without its comprehension learning does not happen. Doff (1995) and Ziane (2011) represented that listening has a significant effect on developing speaking. That is, we cannot develop our speaking ability unless we develop our listening skill. If a learner has a good listening ability in English language, it would be quite easy for him to listen to the radio, to study, watch films, or communicate with foreigners. Learners should have a lot of practice and exposure to English in order to develop this ability. According to Hedge (2000), listening has an important role in everyday life and when people are engaged in communication nine percent is spent to writing, 16 percent to reading, 30 percent to speaking, and 45 percent to listening which shows the significance of listening in the communication process. Hedge (2000) indicated that modern society likes to change from printed media towards sound and its members. Therefore, the significance of listening cannot be ignored. He emphasized that listening is of great importance in English language classrooms.

Research Objectives

Listening is an essential skill in English Language learning and teaching. When students listen to English language, they face some difficulties in

listening comprehension. This study attempts to find out some factors affecting EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension. The objectives were:

1. To find out EFL learners' difficulties in comprehending listening
2. To give some suggestions to be able to improve teaching listening skill and students' listening comprehension abilities

Methodology

1. Research Design

This study is part of a larger study on listening comprehension difficulties faced by undergraduate EFL students who study English Language at Yangon University of Foreign Languages (YUFL). The mixed methods: quantitative and qualitative were conducted in this study.

2. Population and Samples

Undergraduate EFL students (112 in total) who study English Language at the Department of English Language from YUFL participated in this research. YUFL is one of the two language universities in Myanmar where students can learn English as a foreign language. There are 97 females and 15 males, and their ages range from 20-23.

3. Instruments and Procedures

This study used two instruments: a questionnaire and an informal interview. The questionnaire aims to explore listening comprehension difficulties that undergraduate EFL learners face. The questionnaire includes two parts. It is developed by Bingol, Celik, Yidliz, and Mart (2014). The first part of the questionnaire is demographic information about the students and the second part includes questions to get information about listening comprehension difficulties. The questionnaire covers five main different areas including length and speech of listening, unfamiliar vocabularies, accent, cultural differences and quality of recorded materials. In addition, an informal interview was used to find out more listening comprehension difficulties of undergraduate EFL students both inside and outside of the classroom.

4. Data Collection

The questionnaire was distributed to the students by the classroom teacher during a regular class period. The full descriptive instructions regarding to the procedures of administration were provided and the instructor discussed with the students before administration. The students were told that there were no right or wrong answers to any question and their confidentiality was secured and their response would be used for research purposes only. They were also informed that their participation would not affect their grades. Concerning the interview, participants were informed of the aim of the interview and they were told that it would be recorded. The interview was conducted with each participant face-to-face. It was audio recorded and transcribed.

4. Data Analysis

The quantitative data analysis included the computation of descriptive statistics (frequencies) to compile information about demographics of the participants and to calculate listening comprehension difficulties, and the content analysis was employed for the qualitative data.

Results

Quantitative findings from the questionnaire survey in the following figure shows significant factors affecting undergraduate EFL learners' listening comprehension in learning English Language.

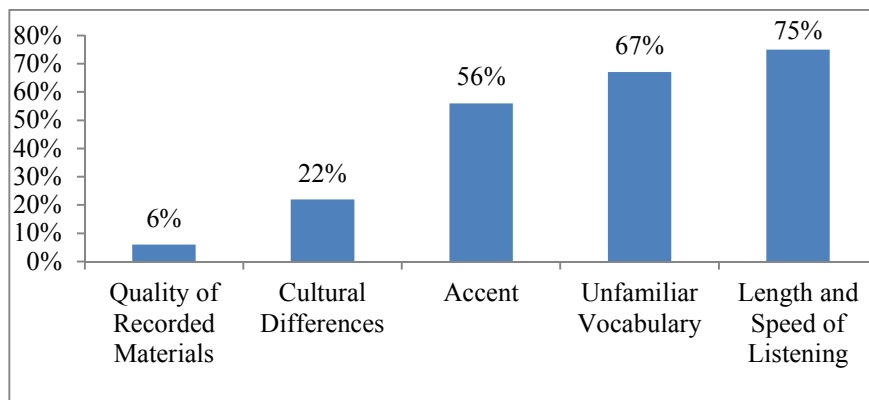


Figure 1. Factors affecting undergraduate EFL learners' listening comprehension.

As shown in the Figure, the biggest problem that students encounter is Length and Speed of Listening (75%). Over half of the participants agree that Unfamiliar Vocabularies make them difficult in comprehending the meaning of individual words and understanding the syntax of sentences (67%). Accent is another biggest factor according to the vast majority of the participants (56%). Moreover, undergraduate EFL learners also have some difficulties in Cultural Differences (22%) and Quality of Recorded Materials (6%).

It is noticed from the interview that lack of concentration and attention, lack of background or prior knowledge and proficiency, difficulties related to classroom and environment noises are other common factors that prevent EFL learner to listen well. According to Samuels (1984), background knowledge about a topic is also an important variable that can influence listening. Even if a person has mastered the skill of analyzing speech accurately and automatically, lack of basic background knowledge can cause reduced listening comprehension. This finding goes in accordance with that reached by Hasan (2000) who has suggested that associating newly heard information with prior knowledge is a powerful and very frequently used way to guess the meaning of a listening passage. Other difficulties according to the replies are listed as below:

"I have difficulty comprehending the listening text because I don't know which strategy to use while listening.

I find it difficult to find the right answer for "Wh" questions in a listening task as the speaker talks for long.

When I listen to texts in English, I experience difficulty with listening for the main idea of the text."

According to the replies of the students, it can be concluded that undergraduate EFL learners have difficulty in context, listening task and strategies to apply during listening. The results are in line with Chen and Cheng (2007). They investigated listening difficulties of 51 civil engineering students enrolled in the two-year junior college program at a technical college. They have found out that fast, natural native-sounding speech, limited vocabulary capacity to understand the message, speakers' habitual expression of spoken English such as accent, stress, linking, and omitting of sounds, and insufficient knowledge or cultural differences were their major listening problems. Yang (2011) also conducted a study on exploring the English-listening difficulties encountered by 32 students at an institute of technology. From an analysis of the diaries of EFL learners, the top five listening problems encountered by the subjects were unknown words in the text, the speedy delivery of listening text, limited vocabulary knowledge, insufficient practice, and inability to pay attention to the next part of the text when thinking about the meaning of the previous text.

Discussion

Rost (1994, P.141) noted "Authentic spoken language presents a challenge for the learner to attempt to understand language as it is actually used by native speakers". This section discusses the most common difficulties encounter by undergraduate EFL learners in the listening comprehension process. The purpose is to be aware of these problems and try to give suggestions to ease listening problems.

1. Length and Speed of Listening (75%)

Bingol et al. (2014) stated that the level of students can have a significant role when they listen to long parts and keep all information in their mind. For final year students, the listening text are more than six minutes long to complete the listening tasks. According to the reply of the student "I find it difficult to remember the meaning of a long listening text. According to Underwood (1989), speed can make listening passage difficult. Therefore, length becomes the biggest problem for undergraduate EFL learners at YUFL. Short listening text can make easy listening comprehension for learners and reduce their tiredness. Therefore, it is recommended to chunk into pieces to make the listening text shorter so that students can overcome the tiredness.

If the speakers speak too fast students may have serious problems to understand (75%). One student replied that "I lose the flow of speech because I concentrate very hard on understanding every word or phrase I hear." In this situation, listeners are not able to control the speed of speakers and this can create critical problems with vocabulary and listening comprehension. According to Underwood (1989), there are some barriers to effective listening comprehension process. First, listeners cannot control the speed of speech. The biggest problem with listening comprehension is that listeners are not able to control how quickly speakers talk. Second, listeners cannot have words repeated and this can cause critical difficulties for them. Students cannot replay a recording section. Teachers decide what and when to repeat listening texts and it is difficult for teachers to know whether or not their learners understood what they have heard. Third, listeners do not have high vocabulary knowledge. Speakers may select words that listeners do not know them. Listeners may face an unfamiliar word which can stop them and think about the meaning of that word for a while and miss the next part of the speech. Fourth, listeners may lack contextual knowledge. Mutual knowledge and familiar texts can make communication easier for listeners. Listeners can sometimes comprehend the surface meaning of a passage, but they can have substantial problems in understanding the whole meaning of a passage unless they are familiar with it. Fifth, it is not very easy for

listeners to concentrate on the listening text. Sometimes a shortest break in attention can prevent comprehension. If the listening passage is interesting for listeners, concentration will be easy for them.

According to Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), listening activities should be provided based on the students' needs and teachers should provide authentic listening materials like lectures, radio news, films, TV plays, announcements, everyday conversation, and interviews for students that help them understand better the natural speech uttered by native speakers. Furthermore, 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.

2. Unfamiliar Vocabulary (67%)

According to the replies of the students, when they have meaning of unfamiliar words, they neglect the next part of the listening text. Some students find difficult to quickly remember words or phrases they have heard. In some cases, it is difficult for them to recall their meaning immediately although some words sound familiar. Some students forget the content which was mentioned before because of the new words.

According to Bingol et al. (2014), when listening texts contain known words it would be very easy for students to them. Moreover, it is also suggested to provide background knowledge and linguistic knowledge, such as complex sentence structures and colloquial words and expressions, as needed. If students know the meaning of words this can arouse their interest and motivation. A lot of words have more than one meaning and if they are not used appropriately in their appropriate contexts, students will get confused. Therefore, some new words that students might be unfamiliar should be pre-taught before listening. This can have a positive impact on the students' listening comprehension ability.

3. Accent (56%)

Learners tend to be used to their teacher's accent or to the standard variety of British or American English. They find it hard to understand speakers with other accents. This can certainly interrupt the whole listening comprehension process and at the same time an unfamiliar accent makes comprehension impossible for the listeners. Munro and Derwing (1999) expressed that too many accented speeches can lead to an important reduction in comprehension. According to Goh (1999), 66% of learners mentioned a speaker's accent as one of the most significant factors that affect listener comprehension. Some EFL students replied that their listening comprehension is interfered when the speakers do not pronounce words clearly or if they have unfamiliar intonation patterns. Unfamiliar accents both native and non-native can cause serious problems in listening comprehension and familiarity with an accent helps learners' listening comprehension. According to Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), 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. Therefore, it is recommended to make students aware of different native-speaker accents. Strong regional accents are not suitable for training in listening, but in spontaneous conversation native speakers do have certain accents. Moreover, the American accent is quite different from the British and Australian. Gilakjani and Sabouri also noted that teachers should help their students to be familiar with the accents of different native speakers. Since native speakers have specific accents it is necessary for students to recognize the differences between American and British accents.

Therefore, it is necessary to let students deal with different accents, especially in extensive listening.

4. Cultural Differences (22%)

Lack of sociocultural, factual, and contextual knowledge of the target language can present an obstacle to comprehension because language is used

to express its culture (Anderson & Lynch, 1988). If the listening task involves completely different cultural materials, then the learners may have critical problems in their comprehension. Therefore, learners should be familiar with the cultural knowledge of language. It is the responsibility of teachers to give background knowledge about the listening activities in advance (Azmi, Celik, Yidliz, & Tugrul, 2014).

5. *Quality of Recorded Materials (6%)*

To practice listening skill, teachers use taped materials such as cassette and “rely on them to provide a significant source of language input” (Harmer, 2001). A tape in language classroom can provide students with an opportunity to listen to other voices apart from the teachers. In some classes, teachers use some recorded materials that do not have high quality. The quality of sound system can impact the comprehending of learners’ listening (Bingol et al., 2014). According to Doff (1995), it is a path of bringing natives voices to the class. Students with tapes listen to dialogues, interviews, discussions, stories and expose more than one speaker; otherwise, it depends on the teacher to act the majority of roles in classroom. For all the reasons mentioned above, most students show an increased level of interest when they have a chance to hear the language used by native speakers, since they get information not only about grammar and vocabulary but also about pronunciation, rhythm, stress and pitch (Harmer, 1998).

In some classes, teachers use some recorded materials that do not have high quality. The quality of sound system can impact the comprehending of learners’ listening (Bingol et al., 2014). In this study, quality of recorded materials is not the most serious problem that can affect students' listening comprehension. However, it is necessary to consider that the quality of recorded materials should have a good speaker, clear voice and good motor speed in order not to go faster or slower and it can be heard by all learners all around the classroom.

6. Other Factors that affect EFL learners' Listening Comprehension

According to the replies of the students, they do not know which strategy to apply during listening. Here, teachers play an important role to encourage their students to develop listening strategies. Predicting, asking for clarification, and using non-verbal cues are some examples of these strategies that improve learners' listening comprehension ability. 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 (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

Furthermore, teachers should design listening tasks that arouse students' interest and motivation. 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. After listening, 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 (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

Some students find difficult to do some exercises and listening task. To overcome these difficulties, 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. According to Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), 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.

In order to be beneficial to students overcome some of the listening problems, (Harmer, 1998) says that “Teachers need to listen to the tape all the way through before they take it into the class. That way they will be prepared for any problems, noises, accents...etc., that come up. That way, they can judge whether students will be able to cope with the tape and with the tasks that go with”. Gilakjani and Sabouri also suggested learners 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.

Recommendations

1. Implications

This paper might be helpful to overcome the difficulties faced by students and improve their listening comprehension ability. The findings of this study will contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning in listening comprehension.

2. Further Studies

Further studies are as follows:

- 1) Listening comprehension lessons should have definite goals and they should be clearly stated.
- 2) Listening comprehension lessons should be constructed with careful step by step planning. This suggests that listening activities move from the simple to the more complex ones; that the learners know what the activities are and are given directions as to “what to listen for, where to listen, when to listen, and how to listen.”
- 3) Listening comprehension structure should demand active overt student participant. That is, the most overt student participant includes his written answer to listening comprehension material and immediate feedback on performance helps keep learners’ interest and motivation.
- 4) Listening comprehension lessons should provide a communicative necessity for remembering to develop concentration. This necessity should

come from the lesson. This is done by giving the learners the writing assignment before they listen to the material.

5) Listening comprehension lessons should emphasize conscious memory work. One of the objectives of listening is to strengthen the learners' immediate recall to increase their memory spans. It means that listening is receiving, receiving needs thinking, and thinking needs memory; there is no way to separate listening, thinking, remembering.

6) Listening comprehension lessons should "teach" not "test." It means that the goal of checking the learners' responses should be viewed only as feedback, as a way of allowing the learners understand how they did and how they are progressing. There should be no pass/fail attitude related with the correction of the exercises.

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