

Iraqi University Students' Listening Comprehension Problems in Learning English as a Foreign Language*

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to identify the most frequent problems Iraqi university students encounter in learning English as a foreign language. It also aimed to explore and find out the instructors' suggestions and opinions in overcoming the reported problems. This study was designed as a mixed method study. That is, both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to find out the answers to the research questions. The perception questionnaire that was used with the students gathered quantitative data while the follow-up interviews conducted with the teachers gathered qualitative data. A perception questionnaire was used with the students and 10 interview questions that were prepared based on the questionnaire results were used with the instructors. The study was conducted at Lebanese French University (LFU) in Erbil/ Iraq in the academic year of 2018-2019. The participators of this research were 50 university students from second and third stage of English language and literature department and 7 of their instructors at English language and literature department. The findings of the current study revealed that the students studying English as foreign language are struggling with the problems regarding the length of a spoken text, understanding the intended meaning of the speaker. In addition, the

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* *Research Article - Submit Date: 21.12.2019, Acceptance Date: 14.01.2020*

Doi Num: 10.17932/IAU.IJMCL.2015.014/ijmcl_v06i1001

difficult grammatical structures used in spoken texts, note taking during listening, natural speeches with hesitations and pauses, speakers speaking too fast, varied accents, lack of internal motivation and feelings of worry and nervousness, uninteresting topics, listening to every detail to get the main idea and deficiency in using topic markers were respectively the most common problems that the students experience in listening comprehension. The instructors' suggestions to reduce the students' reported problems were about the significance of raising the students' awareness about the vitality of acquiring listening skill in a language and for the teachers the proper use of the pre-listening activities and conducting conferences with the students to learn about the difficulties that they experience so as to plan and use appropriate listening materials and tasks.

Keywords: *Listening Comprehension, Listening Strategies, Listening Comprehension Problems*

İngilizceyi Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğrenen Iraklı Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Dinlediğini Anlama Konusunda Karşılaştıkları Problemler

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı Iraklı üniversite öğrencilerinin İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenirken dinlediğini anlama konusunda en sık karşılaştıkları problemleri bulmaktır. Çalışma aynı zamanda öğrencilerin en sık karşılaştıkları problemleri çözmek için İngilizce öğretmenlerinin çözüm önerilerini bulmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma karma yöntemli bir vaka çalışması olarak tasarlanmıştır. Yani, araştırma sorularının cevaplarını bulabilmek için hem nitel ve hem de nicel araştırma teknikleri kullanılmıştır. Çalışmanın nitel verileri öğrenci anketi yoluyla, nicel verileri ise izlem görüşmeleriyle toplanmıştır. Çalışma 2018-2019 yılında Erbil/İrak'ta bulunan Lebanese French Üniversitesinde yürütülmüştür. Çalışmaya İngiliz dili ve edebiyatı bölümü ikinci ve üçüncü sınıflarında öğrenim görmekte olan 50 üniversite öğrencisi ve aynı üniversitenin aynı bölümünden 7 öğretim görevlisi katılmıştır. Çalışmanın sonucu bize dinlediğini anlama konusunda öğrencilerin en sık karşılaştıkları problemlerin aşağıda sırasıyla belirtilen nedenler olduğunu göstermiştir: dinleme metninin

uzunluğu; kastedilen mesajları anlama; metinlerde kullanılan karmaşık dil yapıları; dinleme esnasında not alma; konuşmacıların kullandığı doğal duraksamalar ve/ya tereddütler; konuşmacıların çok hızlı konuşması; farklı aksanları anlama; dinleme aktivitelerine karşı içsel motivasyon seviyesinin düşüklüğü; endişe ve tedirginlik duyguları; ana fikri anlayabilmek için bütün detayları anlamaya çabalama; bağlaçları kullanma gerekliliğini bilmeme. Öğrencilerin dil öğrenme sürecinde dinlediğini anlama konusunda deneyimledikleri problemleri çözmek için İngilizce öğretmenlerinin çözüm önerileri ise aşağıda belirtilenlerden konulardan oluşmaktadır: öğrencilerin dinleme becerilerinin bir dili öğrenmede ne kadar önemli olduğu konusunda farkındalıklarını arttırma; İngilizce öğretmenlerinin dinleme öncesi aktivitelerini düzgün bir şekilde kullanmaları gerekliliğini bilmeleri ve öğrencilerle görüş alışverişinde bulunarak uygun dinleme materyalleri ve aktiviteleri tasarlayıp kullanmaları.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Dinleme-algılama, Dinleme-algılama Stratejileri, Dinleme-algılama Problemleri*

Introduction

Language communication is a human way to share experiences and knowledge and to transfer civilizations from one society to another. It is also a measure of progress. This is why language communication is highly regarded important by language specialists. When learning a foreign language, learners do practice activities using four skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking. However, the absence of strong emphasis on teaching listening strategies in language learning contexts results in a negative impact on the learners. Among all the other four language skills, listening takes place first as in children. Speaking comes after listening skills, as reading which comes before writing. Hence listening is the skill that emerges first (Lundsteen, 1979).

For Guo and Wills (2006) listening “...is the medium through which people gain a large proportion of their education, their information, their understanding of the world and human affairs, their ideals, sense of values” (p. 3). Listening is the fundamental skill in language learning. Students spend more than fifty percent of their learning time for listening skill in the process of functioning a foreign language. Nunan (1998) states listening

has its own significant impact in daily life as well as in the academic contexts. Thus, acquiring listening skill is very crucial since it is through listening that students receive information and gain insights (Wallace, Stariha & Walberg, 2004).

In order to be able to use a language efficiently, acquiring the four skills of language are the major keys of success. Listening is one of the four skills of a language. The students need to be effective listeners to become successful professionals in the academic world. As pointed out by Rivers (1981), if the utterances are not comprehended by the listener, only speaking itself cannot be accepted as communication.

Actually, this study was designed from the need to specifically identify the listening comprehension problems from the learners' perspectives, their attitudes toward listening activities and the difficulties they experience in classrooms, so that the instructors can establish an understanding of the learners' difficulties and provide their suggestions in order to help the students overcome those difficulties.

Hence, this study had two aims. The first aim of the study was to identify the university level EFL learners' perceptions of listening comprehension problems. The second aim was to find out EFL instructors' suggestions to reduce the learners' listening comprehension problems. The following research questions framed this study:

- What type of listening comprehension problems do EFL learners experience in language learning process?
- What are EFL instructors' suggestions to reduce the learners' listening comprehension problems?

Research Methodology

This study was designed as a mixed method study. That is, both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to find out the answers to the research questions. The present study was conducted at a Lebanese French University (LFU) which is one of the advanced private universities in Kurdistan Region/ Iraq. The study was conducted with two groups of participants. The first group of the participants was 50 second

and third grade students studying at the English Language and Literature department of Lebanese French University. The students' age range was 20-28. Their language proficiency level was B1.2. The second group of participants were seven English language instructors with different years of experience, who were teaching second and third grade students at the time of the study.

The data of this study were collected by means of two sources: a perception questionnaire completed by the students and follow-up interviews held with their English language instructors. The questionnaire of this study was adapted and used by Yıldırım in 2013, that was also adapted from Hasan (2000). The aim of using this questionnaire was to identify the university level EFL learners' perceptions of the types of listening comprehension problems that they experience. There are 30 items in the questionnaire. The items in the questionnaire are grouped under five categories which are labeled as *Message related problems* (Items 6, 15 and 27), *Speaker related problems* (Items 1, 5, 13, 16, 18, 28 and 29), *Task related problems* (Items 3, 4, 11, 14 and 17), *Listener related problems* (Items 2, 7, 8, 9, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25 and 26), and *Strategy related problems* (Items 10, 12, 19, 24, 30). The questionnaire items are based on a five-point Likert-type rating scale ranging from 1 "Never" to 5 "Always."

The aim of the follow-up interviews was to explore the English language instructors' suggestions and opinions to reduce the learners' listening comprehension problems. The follow-up interviews included 10 questions. The questions were prepared by the researcher based on the survey results. The quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire was subjected to the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) software version 22. As a second step, the data elicited through the interviews were subjected to descriptive analysis.

Findings and Conclusions

The findings of the study are presented under five aspects of listening comprehension problems; the message, the task, the speaker, the listener and the strategy related problems.

Message related problems

Message related problems involve the length of a spoken text, unfamiliar words and difficult grammatical structures' interference in students' listening comprehension. The findings of the study indicated that students mainly experience difficulties in one of these above-mentioned issues in the message of a spoken test. Hence the most problematic item for the students was found to be the difficult grammatical structures. Related to this problem, the English language instructors' suggestions for reducing this problem included providing the students with tape scripts, writing the grammatical structures on the board and holding discussions with the students by using these grammatical structures.

Task related problems

Task related problems presented in the questionnaire were about the difficulties the students experience in holding a discussion, predicting the speakers' topic from the title, writing a summary, filling in gaps and charts and note taking during the spoken task. The learners' choices to the items indicated that they struggle with these issues but taking notes during the listening task was the most complicated and the most frequent one. To overcome this difficulty, the instructors suggested to pre-teach the strategies for note taking, by simplifying the task of taking notes through breaking it into smaller parts. For example, in the first phase of listening, the students should only take notes about the names of the places, the persons and the years. In the second phase, they might be asked for the physical description of the places.

Speaker related problems

The speaker in a listening comprehension task seems to be one of the basic features that the students find hard to cope with. Based on the questionnaire results, we concluded that the learners experience difficulties the most, regarding natural speech full of hesitation and pauses, pace of speed especially when the speaker speaks too fast and varied accents. The students believe that it is hard to understand a spoken text that is full of pauses and hesitations. The findings of the current study focused on the speaker related problems and they are in line with the findings of Higgins (1995). Higgins (1995) conducted a study on listening comprehension

problems Omani students face in learning English as a foreign language, and he found out that the factors which facilitate, or hinder listening are speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation. When this problem was shared with the instructors, they came up with two suggestions. The first suggestion was to have the students listen to the text twice or three times and then show the students the script. Then, working with the students identifying the pauses, hesitations or anything that they couldn't tackle during the listening task. The second suggestion by the instructors was exposing the students to authentic input as much as possible, using both in and out of class activities. They stated that a teacher can't do much in class, because of time limitations. They continued stating that natural pauses and hesitations are the components of any language even in Arabic, Kurdish which are the mother tongue languages of our students. What they suggested for the students was to watch movies, dramas or anything that would make them to become familiar with the natural flow of the language.

The speed of speech was another problematic issue that was raised by the students of this study, and the instructors' suggestions were to pause the audio tape recorder every now and then and to repeat what the speaker said in his/her speed. This method was found to be effective by some of the teachers based on their teaching experiences in classroom. Those teachers stated they believe that when the students understand better, they will be more involved in the task and they also mentioned that the students seem to be more confident when the teacher is involved in the task, as well.

The difficulties the students face because of varied accents was another frequent issue that the findings of the study revealed. The instructors think that the difficulties regarding varied accents for second and third stage students are normal and that what the students need is time. Meanwhile, they claimed that their university (LFU) and especially the students at English language and literature department need exchange programs to reduce these kinds of problems, because exchange programs would be a great help for the learners to practice English in real life with different accents. Additionally, the instructors shed light on another solution, which is related to having English language instructors from different countries with different accents of English, and they also stated the teachers from variety of cultural backgrounds are another support to reduce this problem.

The listener related problems

The listener problems can be seen in the feelings the students have when facing a problem. Based on the findings of the current study, we may conclude that the feelings of nervousness and worry for understanding a listening task and uninteresting topics were the highest rated problems among other listener related problems. The instructors offered two main solutions to reduce the problems the students experience. The first solution for being nervous and worried was to motivate the students and then to involve them in classroom activities. Internal motivation is what that the students lack at this stage. Thus, awareness raising activities related to the problem is the very first step then boosting the students' confidence and self-esteem. The instructors stated that providing the classes with inspirational videos and motivational quotes might be the keys to success. In addition to the above-mentioned solutions, they emphasized the role of the parents in such cases. The instructors believe that talking to the parents and the siblings of the students is an important way to reduce these anxieties in short period of time, as the parents can create motivational environments for their children. The next suggestion was about uninteresting topics in listening texts. The instructors claimed that when they know the topic is not of interest to the students, they would talk to them about the importance of listening and would show them interesting videos to make the students ready for the listening task. Related to this issue, the instructors stated that they could use peer or group work activities to reduce the students' boredom.

The strategy related problems

Different strategies are used by the students to comprehend a listening task. Some of these strategies are effective ones and some are not. Using the students' background knowledge of the topic, and their life experiences in understanding a spoken text are effective for the learners to comprehend the listening texts. The outcomes of the study revealed that the students listen to every detail to understand a spoken text and the second most frequently experienced problem is the students' ignorance of the topic markers such as; firstly, in conclusion etc. The findings of the present study are in line with Graham's (2006) study results. What is reported by the learners, as their frequently experienced listening comprehension

problems were their attempt to hear and understand the individual words to understand the main message of the spoken text.

The instructors' opinions to reduce the first problem were to raise the students' awareness to the importance of reading the instructions and the given tasks before listening to the whole listening topic. Because listening to the whole topic makes them tired and leads them to lose their interest and concentration, so following the teachers' instruction is the best way to reduce the negative impacts related to this strategy. Additionally, the instructors confirmed that repeating the audio tape twice or three times in the beginning of the course, or in the urgent times are necessary because it helps the learners to understand the requirements. Regarding the use of topic markers, the instructors added that they wished their students could detect and notice them from the spoken text, but only two or three learners are aware of them. Almost of all of the instructors believe the topic markers are helpful and beneficial because they lead the students to the key points and the basic information of the spoken task. Meanwhile, some of the instructors suggested writing the topic markers on the board or putting them on little cards after the task and sharing them with the students helps the students' better understanding of the topic.

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