

## **Factors Affecting Listening Comprehension and Strategies for Improvement: A Case Study**

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**Abstract:** Listening comprehension is the ability to receive the messages sent by speakers. Yet it is not always easy to decipher these messages and construct meaning. There are factors that should be taken into account in listening comprehension. These factors enable listening materials become comprehensible for the learners. This study has tried to explore the factors which affect listening comprehension of learners. This study has mainly focused on factors which affect listening comprehension of Iraqi foreign language learners at Ishik University. The study has listed ten factors in terms of their significance and provided some useful strategies to improve listening comprehension.

**Keywords:** Listening Skill, Listening Comprehension, Factors, Strategies, Improvement

### **1. Introduction**

Listening holds an important place in foreign language learning process because it provides learners comprehensible input. However, language learners encounter some factors that hinder listening comprehension. One of the factors is the intelligence of the learners which decides on how much language input they receive. Background knowledge about the topic, another factor, enables the learners to comprehend the listening text better; in other words prior knowledge facilitates comprehension and allows learners to make predictions. Furthermore, the topic of the listening text is another factor that prevents learners from better comprehension; for instance a topic that draws attention of learners is easier to understand, at the same time it can motivate the learners to achieve better. Metacognitive strategies of the learners is another factor that impedes listening comprehension for instance the ability to use listening strategies and self-monitoring make a difference in understanding the listening tasks.

### **2. Literature Review**

Boyle (1984, p.35) identifies the factors that influence listening comprehension in three groups:

- listener factors
- speaker factors
- factors in the material and medium

## 2.1 Listener Factors

- Educational level of the learners is an advantage for learners. Well educated learners stand a better chance of comprehending listening activities. Listening comprehension also requires physical advantages; for instance a learner with hearing problems will not be able to understand the listening activities.
- Age is an important factor in language learning. Young learners learn faster than adult learners.
- The environment where listening activities are carried out facilitates comprehension. In a quiet learning environment, learners concentrate better. This will influence their understanding.
- Those learners who learn a foreign language at a better school will develop better comprehension skills. At a school where listening skills are neglected, learners will fall behind.
- Intellectual knowledge
- Language knowledge; the knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation helps learners comprehend easily.
- Learners need to have specific knowledge of the topic. This knowledge will allow learners to make predictions easily.
- Motivation allows learners to concentrate on the topic, and enables them to listen to attentively. Motivated learners stand a better chance of developing listening comprehension.
- Listening topics should absorb attention of learners therefore; lecturers should study listening activities which learners show interest. When learners show interest in the listening topics, their commitment will be high and they will show better performance.

## 2.2 Speaker Factors

- Speakers' ability plays a big role in comprehension. Lecturers should prefer listening activities of native speakers because it can help learners understand better. Listening activities of non-native speakers might not be clear for the learners to comprehend because of pronunciation differences.
- The pronunciation and accent of the speaker influences comprehension.
- Delivery speed of the speaker is a major factor in listening comprehension. If the delivery is fast, learners might have difficulty in understanding.
- Listening to well-known and prestigious speakers can motivate learners.

## 2.3 Factors in the Material and Medium

- The choice of listening materials holds an important place because if message is not conveyed then the materials will not be useful. Vocabulary and grammar level of the material influences comprehension largely. Lecturers make sure that the level of the material is in compatible with the level of the learners. Phonological features of the listening material are even more important. The learners should easily master stress and intonation in the material.
- The content of the material should draw attention of learners. Concepts in the material should be easily understood. Long listening activities might bore the learners and they might fail to understand. At the same time poorly organized material might not be useful for the learners to

develop their listening comprehension. Listening materials that have many technical words will not give any benefits to learners' listening skills development.

- The listening environment should be quiet. There should not be any interference in the classroom.
- Lecturers should support the learning environment through gestures and visuals.

Fast delivery of language might result in comprehension failure because learners might not receive all the messages. Underwood (1989) stresses the negative role of fast delivery and concludes that “many English language learners believe that the greatest difficulty with listening comprehension is that the listener cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks” (p. 16).

Lecturers do not allow the learners to listen to a listening material more than once. Though listening to a listening activity twice might have disadvantages, in particular learners at elementary level should be given this chance. When learners get used to listening twice, they might fail to understand the listening activities until they listen to it for the second time. Yet, learners at the beginning level should be given the second chance. This will help them understand with ease and increase their motivation to achieve more in listening exercises.

Language knowledge is a key factor that helps learners understand better. Vocabulary level of the learners help learners recognize the words easily which plays major role in comprehension. Grammar and pronunciation knowledge allow learners to understand and decipher the main idea easily.

Learners due to not having a good mastery of the target language may fail to understand a listening material because they are not aware of the signals when the speaker moves from point to another. Speakers use such terms as “first of all”, “thirdly” when they talk about an issue to list down the points. If learners are not aware of these signals, comprehension of the material might be difficult.

The knowledge of context gives learners an advantage to understand the materials better. When learners know about the context they will listen to it more attentively, and when he knows what the major idea is the learner will be more motivated which can lead to better achievement. While having a conversation, the learners will be able to respond more appropriately when they know the context because the contextual knowledge will enable them to comprehend the issue better.

Foreign language learning is not an easy process; it requires learners to pay undivided attention. Enthusiasm is needed; if learners are not interested in what they are doing they can accomplish language learning. Therefore, without attention and learning enthusiasm language learning cannot be carried out. While listening, if learners fail to receive the messages which are not an easy task, learners might be disappointed, and their motivation might be reduced. Learners need to make ongoing effort particularly in listening skills development.

Learners might expect whole-comprehension of a listening activity. Language learners might not always understand the whole listening exercise. But this could be considered as unsuccessful by language learners. Yet, mastery of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, which are major factors in listening comprehension, is a long process. They cannot be achieved in a short time. Learners should be aware that listening comprehension development would enhance gradually. Therefore, when learners cannot achieve whole-comprehension of a listening activity they should not let this demotivate them.

Encouragement is important in listening comprehension development in that it allows learners to succeed more. Though the above-mentioned obstacles could discourage them, learners through making constant effort might develop their listening skills. Listening skills requires learners to have a great amount of knowledge such as language and content knowledge. It is true that receiving the messages without this knowledge is not an easy process yet learners through using strategies could still promote their listening comprehension skills.

Research Questions:

- 1) What are the most important factors that affect listening comprehension of Iraqi foreign language learners at Ishik University?
- 2) What are the most useful strategies to improve listening comprehension of these learners?

### 3. Research Method

#### 3.1 Design of the Study

This study employs both qualitative and quantitative methods. A survey was conducted to find out the factors affecting listening comprehension of Iraqi foreign language learners at Ishik University. Descriptive (non-numerical) data was gathered through qualitative research to understand the underlying reasons and opinions; moreover qualitative research in this study is used to explore and understand learners' experiences, and attitudes. On the other hand numerical data was collected to transform the data into statistics. Participants were asked to list the factors from the most important to the least important.

#### 3.2 Participants

Participants in this study are Ishik University Preparatory School students. The number of participants involved in this study is 65. Participants were selected from different proficiency levels. Questionnaires were distributed randomly to learners.

#### 3.3 Findings

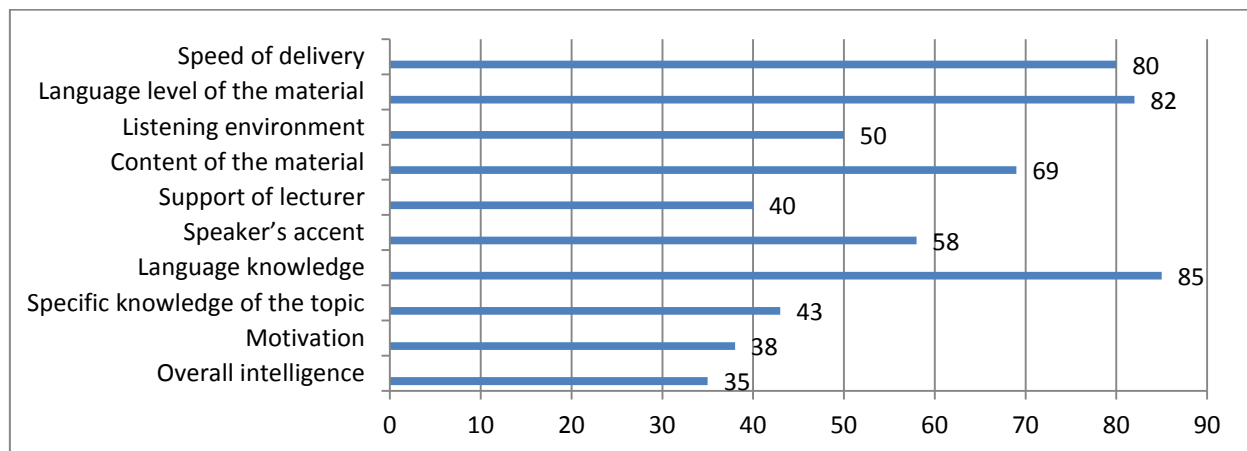


Figure 1: Major factors that affect listening comprehension of Iraqi language learners

55 of the subjects (85 %) chose language knowledge as the primary factor in listening comprehension. Grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation knowledge allows learners to receive and convey messages accurately. Linguistic knowledge largely influences listening comprehension. 53 of the subjects (82 %) chose language level of the listening material as the second important factor. Difficult and easy listening texts might lead to boredom and do not provide any benefits for learners. 52 of the subjects (80 %) chose speed of delivery as the third factor. Fast delivery has always been source of difficulty for foreign language learners because learners cannot receive the messages clearly so they fail to understand the text. 45 of the subjects (69 %) specified content of the material as the fourth factor. Listening texts that draw attention of learners motivate them. Interesting listening materials help learners develop their language skills because learners do them eagerly. On the other hand, uninteresting and very long listening texts might demotivate learners. 38 of the subjects (58 %) specified speaker's accent as the fifth factor. Wrongfully pronounced words affect comprehension. Pronunciation and accent of speakers are significant factors to receive the messages accurately. 33 of the subjects (50 %) chose listening environment as the sixth factor. Listening requires motivation. Unless learners listen to the texts attentively, they fail to understand; therefore, listening environment must be free of interference. 28 of the subjects chose specific knowledge of the topic as the seventh factor. Specific knowledge about the topic is a big advantage for the learners which facilitate comprehension. 26 of the subjects (40 %) chose support of lecturers as the eighth factor. Listening is a difficult process so learners need support of their lecturers. 25 of the subjects (38 %) specified motivation as the ninth factor. Motivation enables learners to concentrate better. 23 of the subjects (35 %) chose overall intelligence as the tenth factor. Learners with high overall intelligence stand a better chance of understanding the materials.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

Listening comprehension ability is a key factor in foreign language learning and teaching process. If learners fail to receive messages, they are unable to respond. Factors aforementioned influence listening comprehension largely. Learners need to have a good mastery of linguistic knowledge. Without sufficient grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation knowledge comprehension of listening materials does not occur. Lecturers must ensure that all grammatical structures and vocabulary in listening texts are taught beforehand. This could be done during pre-listening activities. The difficulty of listening texts must be at learners' level of understanding and listening texts must absorb attention of learners. Listening texts with interesting topics motivate learners which will finally lead to achievement. Speed of delivery must be slightly slower than normal speech. When the delivery is fast learners cannot control the meanings of utterances in the speech. The accent of speakers in listening texts influence comprehension so native accents should be preferred. And finally a silent and motivating listening environment should be created.

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