

Exploring Jordanian EFL Students' Perceptions of Listening Comprehension Difficulties

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Abstract

This study investigated listening comprehension difficulties that EFL students experience when listening to textbook recordings in language classroom. One hundred and six male tenth-grade students in a public school in Jordan responded to a researcher-designed questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of four main domains, namely *process*, *input*, *listener* and *task*. The questionnaire was comprised of 20 items. The study came to the conclusion that there are several factors that affect listening comprehension. The participants reported that input-related issues were the most challenging, while task-related ones were the least difficult.

Key words: listening comprehension, listening difficulties, textbook recordings, EFL, Jordan

Introduction

Listening, reading, speaking and writing constitute the English language skills. The former two are regarded as receptive skills, in which a person receives language and tries to fully comprehend the spoken or written message. The latter two skills, on the other hand, are more concerned with the production of language. Comprehension is defined as the ability to grasp and interpret spoken or written language (Crystal, 2008). Language comprehension, rather than language production, is considered by Krashen (1993) as the primary pathway to language acquisition.

Listening is not merely a language skill, but it is also a principal method of second and foreign language acquisition (Rost, 2001). Although listening is a receptive skill, it is not a passive one in the least. By listening, according to Broughton, Brumfit, Flavell, Hill and Pincas (1980), the listener decodes a message in order to actively take part in the interaction between those involved. Literature posits that listening is highly instrumental in language learning (Feyten, 1991). Contrary to the traditional approaches to language teaching, which failed to stress the importance of listening comprehension, the more recent ones attach more significance to listening comprehension as a basic component of language competence (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Listening is typically the weakest skill for the majority of language learners and lacks adequate support in the language classroom (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Listening comprehension has failed to attract attention in many ELF programs (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

One issue worth considering, when seriously tackling listening comprehension, is the uniqueness of spoken language. Phonological modifications, such as assimilation, elision and intrusion, are considered a distinctive characteristic of spoken language (Buck, 2001). Assimilation is the process of making two adjacent sounds similar to one another in a specific manner. For example, the /t/ in *football* and *basket maker* might be pronounced as a /p/. Elision is leaving out a sound or a syllable in speech. *Gonna*, being an elided form of *going to*, is a common example of such modification. Intrusion, a third phonological change occurring in connected speech, takes place when an additional sound is inserted between vowel sounds, like intruding /w/ between *do* and *it*: *do /w/ it*.

Prosodic features, such as stress and intonation, are another characteristic that distinguishes spoken language from written language. Since English is a stress-timed language, the prosodic features are instrumental in listening comprehension. For example, if the first syllable of the word *produce* is stressed, the listener should realize that it is a noun meaning fresh fruit and vegetables grown for the market. If the second syllable is stressed, however, the listener will identify it as a verb synonymous with *manufacture*. Intonation is the use of patterns of pitch. People say *Peter is absent* as a statement with a falling pitch, but as a question with a rising pitch at the end of the utterance. Furthermore, intonation patterns heavily contribute to the communication of personal attitudes, like sarcasm and anger (Crystal, 2008).

Speech rate or rate of delivery is a third conspicuous feature of spoken language. If a reader finds some part of the written message indecipherable, he or she may pause to reread that part or consult a dictionary or encyclopedia. However, if a listener finds some spoken input unintelligible, he or she might not always be able to ask the speaker to repeat or pause. The speed at which one speaks, according to Richards and Schmidt (2010), is usually reliant on several factors including the speaker's personality, the theme and the audience size. Research results substantiate the claim that the faster the speech rate, the harder it is to understand (Buck, 2001).

A fourth key attribute in spoken language, which is closely related to speech rate, is that listening takes place over time, not over space as the case in reading. That means, according to Wilson (2008), that the gaps that appear between written words would disappear in connected speech. Finally, unfamiliar accents might cause some difficulty to EFL learners. Standard, non-standard, regional and non-native accents are obvious examples of spoken texts that EFL learners could hear (Richards, 2008).

For second or foreign language learners, the language classroom could provide an ideal chance to practice listening and get into better listening habits. Teacher talk, student talk and textbook recordings are usually the principal listening sources in second or foreign language classroom. Textbook recordings have three substantial benefits: providing listening sequence, being integrated with the syllabus by reinforcing grammar or vocabulary and offering a variety of genres such as stories and interviews (Wilson, 2008).

English as a foreign language (EFL) is a compulsory subject in Jordanian schools and universities. In schools, students learn all English language skills as well as grammar and

vocabulary. Listening activities are an essential component of EFL textbooks in Jordan. Each listening activity is accompanied by a textbook recording, to which students listen in order to do the listening activity. In Jordan, schoolchildren receive ten years of basic education, from the first to the tenth grade, and two years of secondary education: the eleventh and twelfth grades. Unlike secondary education, basic education is compulsory in Jordan. In light of the researcher's teaching experience, many schoolchildren in Jordan find listening activities quite challenging. They never stop complaining once they fail to comprehend the aural input. This study was conducted to pinpoint the factors that impede students' listening comprehension.

Purpose and question of the study

This study aimed at investigating the difficulties that Jordanian tenth-grade Jordanian students face when listening to the textbook recordings in the EFL classroom. Therefore, the study was carried out to answer the following question: What difficulties do Jordanian EFL tenth-grade Jordanian students face when listening to textbook recordings?

Significance of the study

The present study, targeting Jordanian EFL tenth-grade students, has added pieces of research into the obstacles EFL learners encounter while doing listening activities in language classroom. The findings of the present research will probably be of particular interest to EFL curriculum designers, educational policy makers as well as EFL teachers and students, particularly in Jordan. Also, the study will probably enlighten EFL teachers about the major and minor hurdles their students might face in listening activities.

Review of Literature

Compared to reading, writing and speaking, listening comprehension is the least researched (Wilson, 2008) and historically undervalued (Field, 2009; Wilson, 2008). However, second language research at present is attaching considerable significance to listening, especially after appreciating the vital role of comprehensible input in language learning (Nunan, 2002). Azmi, Celik, Yidliz and Tugrul (2014) touched upon a few potential factors influencing listening comprehension, such as the quality of sound system, unfamiliar accent and vocabulary, length and speed of the spoken material and lack of concentration. Lynch (n.d.) added other factors that contribute to learners' listening comprehension skills and comprehension: rhyming sounds, grammar in context and idioms.

Recently, some studies have been conducted to explore EFL learners' perceptions of factors affecting their listening comprehension. Some of these studies focused on one factor. For example, Tauroza and Luk (1997) examined the effect of accent on second language listening comprehension, while Révész and Brunfaut (2013) looked into the effect of task factors on learners' listening performance. Having searched the Internet thoroughly, the researcher found five studies that used a questionnaire covering several factors likely to influence listening comprehension. These studies are outlined below.

Hasan (2000) explored 88 university students' beliefs about their listening problems. The participants were native speakers of Arabic studying EFL at Damascus University, Syria. A 34-item questionnaire was used to collect data. Major findings indicated that unfamiliar words, complex grammatical structures, length of the spoken input, fast-rate speech and varied accents could pose challenges to EFL students.

Butt, Sharif, Naseer-ud-Din, Hussain, Khan and Ayesha (2010), looked into the factors creating listening problems to 300 students from three government boys' higher secondary schools of District Kohat, Pakistan. The study used a questionnaire and concluded that pronunciation, accent and colloquial expression were the major problems hindering listening.

Lotfi (2012) investigated the factors influencing listening comprehension of 580 Iranian EFL learners. The participants were from three majors: English Translation, English Literature and Teaching English as a Foreign Language at Islamic Azad University in Iran. A six-factor questionnaire was used to collect data. The study came to the conclusion that participants attributed their listening problems to several factors.

Hamouda (2013) examined the listening problems faced by 60 first-year English major students of Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. A questionnaire and an interview were the data-collection methods. The questionnaire addressed problems related to the listening material, linguistic problems such as those related to slang and reduced forms, concentration problems, problems pertinent to psychological traits such as anxiety, listener-related problems, speaker-related problems, and difficulties posed by physical settings. Findings indicated that participants encountered various kinds of listening problems in learning comprehension such as unfamiliar words, the length of the spoken text, speed rate and accents.

Nowrouzi, Tam, Zareian and Nimehchisalem (2015) investigated 100 Iranian tertiary level EFL learners' listening comprehension problems. The participants' major was English, and they were from three universities in Mashhad, Iran. To gather data, a 23-item questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale was administered. The questionnaire addressed three areas: perception problems, parsing problems and utilization problems. The findings showed that distraction, misperceiving sounds and words, chunking difficulties, sentence forgetting, and confusion about the main ideas were among the most dominant problems.

As noticed from the five studies, four studies, namely Hasan (2000), Lotfi (2012), Hamouda (2013) and Nowrouzi et al. (2015) targeted university students specializing in English. A single study, Butt et al. (2010), targeted secondary school students. The current study, on the other hand, targeted a different age group: 10th-grade students, who are not specialized in EFL or ESL. Rather, they learn EFL as a basic school subject. What adds to its novelty, this study took place in Jordan, where no previous study tackling listening comprehension difficulties has been done so far, to the best of the researcher's knowledge.

Nation and Newton (2009) distinguished between two types of listening: one-way or transactional listening, which is connected with the transfer of information, and two-way or interactional listening, which is more associated with social interactions. The present study addressed difficulties encountered upon listening to textbook recordings, being a prime example

of one-way listening, while the previous studies dealt with problems faced when listening to spoken language in general, not to textbook recordings.

Methodology

Participants

One hundred and six tenth-grade students participated in the study. The participants were from three intact sections at a public school in Irbid City, Jordan. The participants were 15-year old male students who had been studying EFL since the first grade, at the age of six.

Design and instruments

This is a descriptive study, which does not involve any experimental manipulation. Dornyei (2005) regarded learner beliefs as a key individual-difference variable that profoundly influences learner behaviour. Learner beliefs and attitudes constitute a basic source for teachers willing to improve their students' listening comprehension. To gather participants' perception of difficulties EFL learners encounter in listening activities, a questionnaire was used as the main data-collection method in the study.

Having examined relevant literature pertinent to factors affecting listening EFL listening, such as Goh (1999), Graham (2006), Lotfi (2012), and Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), the researcher prepared a 20-item questionnaire with four domains: process, input, listener and task. The items were written on a 6-point Likert scale: *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *slightly disagree*, *slightly agree*, *agree* and *strongly agree*. Having such an even number of options and eliminating 'neutral' non-opinion option would urge respondents to give a definite opinion and prevent them from sitting on the fence and (Brown, 2001). To ensure that participants understand the instructions and items, the questionnaire was printed in two languages: English and Arabic.

To assure the questionnaire content validity, the instrument was reviewed and refereed by a validation jury, which consisted of experienced university professors, teacher educators and English language teachers, all of whom hold a PhD degree in Curriculum and Methods of Teaching English as a Foreign Language. The jury approved of the questionnaire. To ensure reliability, a pilot sample of 20 tenth-grade students responded to the questionnaire. Then, internal consistency reliability using Cronbach Alpha test was calculated, and the results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Reliability coefficient for the questionnaire domains

Domain	No. of items	alpha coefficient
Process	5	.93
Input	7	.90
Listener	4	.87
Task	4	.90
All (whole questionnaire)	20	.97

As shown in Table 1, the alpha coefficient was very high for the whole questionnaire (.97) and high for all the four domains, ranging from .87 to .93. This indicates that the questionnaire items measure the same underlying measure, and the questionnaire is highly reliable.

Findings and Discussion

The research question reads as: What difficulties do Jordanian EFL tenth-grade Jordanian students face when listening to textbook recordings? The researcher used the following scale (Table 2) as representative of the participants' responses to the items of the questionnaire.

Table 2
Levels of participants' responses

Means value	1-1.83	1.84-2.66	2.67-3.49	3.5-4.32	4.33-5.15	5.16-6
Level	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree

The listening difficulties and problems were categorized into four different domains: process, input, listener and task. The researcher used SPSS to find the descriptive statistics. The results of each domain are tabulated below. Table 3 shows the results related to the first domain: process.

Table 3
Students' perceptions of listening comprehension difficulties related to the first domain: process

No.	Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Order	Level
1	I find it difficult to predict from the instructions and visuals what I will hear.	3.68	1.770	3	Slightly agree
2	I find it difficult to listen for the main ideas.	3.60	1.755	5	Slightly agree
3	I find it difficult to listen for specific information of the listening text.	3.66	1.667	4	Slightly agree
4	While listening, I find it difficult to guess the meaning of unknown words from context.	4.12	1.625	1	Slightly agree
5	While listening, I find it difficult to understand clusters of words.	4.01	1.618	2	Slightly agree
Total		3.82	1.365		Slightly agree

As shown in Table 3, participants slightly agreed that they experience difficulties applying appropriate process to comprehend listening material. Process in this study indicates to how learners employ various signals in order to comprehend what is being heard (Rubin, 1994).

This domain is comprised of five items related to listening process. The highest means (4.12, 4.01) correspond to lack of enough vocabulary and unfamiliarity of clusters or chunks of words, respectively. This substantiates relevant literature on the effect of limited vocabulary on listening comprehension, such as Underwood (1989), Hasan (2000), Rost (2013), Hamouda (2013) and Nowrouzi et al. (2015). Participants also found it a little hard to find the gist and details of a listening material, which is consistent with Nowrouzi et al. (2015). The findings pertinent to the second domain, input, are presented in Table 4.

Table 4
Students' perceptions of listening comprehension difficulties related to the second domain: input

No.	Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Order	Level
6	I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast.	4.25	1.689	2	Slightly agree
7	I find it difficult to understand a listening text on an unfamiliar topic.	3.82	1.596	5	Slightly agree
8	I find it difficult to follow the speakers if they do not pause enough.	4.00	1.729	4	Slightly agree
9	I find it difficult to follow the speakers if they use contractions, like <i>I've</i> and <i>won't</i> .	2.86	1.905	7	Slightly disagree
10	I find it difficult to understand words when they are linked together in speech.	3.79	1.631	6	Slightly agree
11	I find it difficult to understand words if they are uttered in a different way than I have learned.	4.21	1.596	3	Slightly agree
12	I find it difficult to understand most of the listening text if it is played only once.	4.28	1.643	1	Slightly agree
Total		3.89	1.218		Slightly agree

The second domain, input, consists of seven items. Input, in this study, is the aural textbook recordings that accompany listening activities. As shown in Table 4, listening to the input only once was reported by participants as the biggest input-related barrier to listening comprehension (mean: 4.28). Fast-rate speech was also reported as a major barrier to effective listening, which is consistent with previous studies, such as Hasan (2000) and Hamouda (2013). Other problems highlighted here are unfamiliar topics, the speaker not pausing enough, connected speech, and unfamiliar pronunciation. Pronunciation, according to Butt et al. (2010), is a major problem hindering listening comprehension. However, participants did not perceive spoken contracted forms as hindrance to understanding aural input. The results concerning the third domain, listener, are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5
Students' perceptions of listening comprehension difficulties related to the third domain: listener

No.	Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Order	Level
13	I give up when I do not understand parts of the listening text.	3.78	1.805	2	Slightly agree
14	I find it difficult to retain what I have heard.	3.41	1.745	4	Slightly disagree
15	I find it difficult to apply listening strategies while listening.	3.51	1.634	3	Slightly agree
16	I find it hard to understand a listening text because I cannot understand every single word I hear.	3.85	1.666	1	Slightly agree
Total		3.64	1.389		Slightly agree

The third domain in the questionnaire is the listener himself. The participant here expresses his perception of listening comprehension difficulties that are related to the participant himself when listening to the aural input. Many students try to grasp each and every single word they hear, and according to Table 5, the participants reported grave concern about this issue. The second most serious listener-related difficulty (mean: 3.87) is that participants stop paying attention to the rest of the listening activity if they fail to grasp some part of the aural input. Also, participants found it hard to apply the proper listening strategy. On the other hand, participants reported that the trying to retain what is being heard was not a big obstacle to their listening comprehension, which is inconsistent with Nowrouzi et al. (2015). With regard to the fourth domain, task, Table 6 lists the results.

Table 6
Students' perceptions of listening comprehension difficulties related to the fourth domain: task

No.	Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Order	Level
17	I find it difficult to take notes while listening.	3.65	1.773	1	Slightly agree
18	I find it difficult to answer Wh-questions in a listening activity.	3.54	1.703	3	Slightly agree
19	I find it difficult to answer True/False questions in a listening activity.	2.80	1.904	4	Slightly disagree
20	I find it difficult to write the missing words in a listening activity.	3.60	1.782	2	Slightly agree
Total		3.40	1.434		Slightly disagree

The last four items on the questionnaire constitute the fourth domain: task. Such items are associated with the nature and characteristics of listening tasks lying in the participants' textbook. As noted in Table 6, taking notes and providing the missing words was reported as the two most crucial task-related issues (means: 3.65, 3.6 respectively). Answering wh-questions

was reported as less difficult (mean: 3.54), though. On the other hand, participants slightly opposed to the idea that answering True/False questions is difficult (mean: 2.80).

Conclusion

Listening comprehension is perceived by many EFL learners as a vexed issue that needs to be taken into consideration. Of the four factors influencing listening comprehension, participants reported that task-related issues are the least challenging (means: 3.40), while input-related issues were perceived as the most challenging (mean: 3.89). This study reached to the conclusion that there are several factors that affect listening comprehension, and such claim is consistent with the previous studies, such as Hasan (2000), Lotfi (2012) and Nowrouzi et al. (2015).

The present study dealt with factors likely to affect EFL learners' listening comprehension. Listening in the study was limited to one-way listening, listening to textbook recordings in particular. Tenth-grade students from a public school in Jordan participated in this research. Targeting a different sample or carrying out the research in a different context could yield dissimilar results.

For those wishing to improve their listening skill, Czekala (2019) highlighted the centrality of two factors: adequate listening practice and vocabulary size. The researcher here adds a third significantly contributing factor: familiarity with phonological modifications, such as assimilation, elision and intrusion. The vital role of such three factors, i.e. listening practice, vocabulary enrichment and familiarity with phonological modifications, does not undervalue other issues mentioned in this study.

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