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The Investigation of Listening Comprehension Problems of American Accents for Iranian B.A.
Students of Translation Studies

Abstract

This study attempted to investigate the listening comprehension problems of American accents of B.A. students of English translation studies. To attain this objective their performance in TOEFL and IELTS (their listening comprehension sections) tests were checked. Further, they received a short, open-ended questionnaire to comment on their problems in listening comprehension. Based on the results, most of the students performed poorly on both TOEFL and IELTS (listening comprehension) tests. Further, most of the students (21 cases, 52.5%) asserted that their main problem was in ‘identifying words when they listened to an audio file, i.e. they were not used to fast speech’. In all, 16 students (40%) announced that they were ‘weak at vocabulary and colloquial terms’. So, it appeared that students had major problems in listening and in vocabulary and viewed these two elements as the main factors that hindered the listening comprehension process. Moreover, it was found that 45% (18 cases) of the participants believed that ‘insufficient attention to listening comprehension practices at the university’ was responsible for their problems in listening comprehension. It appeared that universities should put more emphasis on listening comprehension problems. In fact, listening comprehension problems are a dominant one among language learners (Field, 1998). The findings in this thesis could be useful for language learners as well as language teachers.

Key Terms: listening comprehension; accent; TOEFL; IELTS

1. Introduction

Many problems have been reported by different researchers concerning listening comprehension of EFL and ESL students. Listening comprehension is an important language skill and if we can find ways to improve students' listening comprehension, they will benefit considerably. Such an endeavor will also be useful for teachers since it will ease their teaching practice substantially. Students' problems in listening comprehension is rooted in many factors and accordingly the present study intended to assess the listening comprehension ability of the Iranian EFL students, at B.A. level majoring in English, by checking their performance on TOEFL and IELTS listening comprehension tests and using an open-ended questionnaire. Accordingly the following questions were introduced in this study:

1.1 Research Questions

The following research questions were tackled in this study:

1. How did the participants perform in TOEFL and IELTS listening comprehension tests?
2. In your opinion what is your main problem in listening comprehension? And following your answer to the first question, what do you think the root of this problem is?

2. Literature Review

As argued by Byrnes (1984), listening is a complex skill in which people have to employ all types of knowledge to interpret meaning. He further defined listening as more than mere perception of sounds. In fact, he believed that listening included comprehension of words, phrases, clauses, sentences and connected discourse.

Accent is a combination of three main components: intonation (speech, music), liaisons (word connection), and pronunciation (spoken sounds of vowels, consonants, and combinations). Grammar and vocabulary in language are systematic and structured. Accent is the intuitive and creative spirit of language. Learning a new accent for every language may seem impossible in theory but in practice it may be possible. If you live in England (first place of living) with a different accent from America

(second place of living) you can learn their accent just by learning their techniques of pronunciation (Cook, 2000).

In pronunciation, word stress conveys meaning through tone or feeling, which can be much more important than the actual words that speakers use. Native speakers may often tell people who are learning English to slow down and speak clearly. Although this may be done with the best of intentions, it is exactly the opposite of what a student really needs to do. If you speak quickly and with strong intonation, you will be understood more easily. Many people equate ‘accent’ with ‘pronunciation’. But, this is not true at all. America is a big country, and the pronunciation over there varies from the east coast to the west coast. The English learner especially gets hampered, by a negative outlook about not understanding ‘the American accent’ but in fact their ears are not familiar to it. Every language is equally valid or good, so every accent is good (Cook, 2000). Cook (2000) calls language fluent and fluid. According to him:

“Language is fluent and fluid like your own language, conversational English has a very smooth, fluid sound. Imagine that you are walking along a dry river bed with your eyes closed. Every time you come to a rock, you trip over it. Stop, continue, and trip over the next rock .But to have a good pronunciation we should be like a great river rushing through the same riverbed – rocks are no problem, you just slide over and around them without ever breaking your smooth flow. It is this feeling that I want you to capture in English. (p.VI).”

EFL learners have serious problems in English listening comprehension due to the fact that universities pay more attention to English grammar, reading and vocabulary. Listening and speaking skills are not important parts of many course books or curricula and teachers do not seem to pay attention to these skills while designing their lessons. Most teachers take it for granted and believe that it will develop naturally within the process of language learning. Persulesy (1988, p. 50) stated that one of the reasons for the opinion that listening was a skill that tended to be neglected was the feeling among language teachers that this skill was automatically acquired by the learner as he learned to speak the language. Most teachers also assumed listening was synonymous to breathing – i.e. automatic (Thomas, & Dyer, 2007). Another reason why this skill was not given serious attention was the fact that incompetence in it was easy to hide through nodding and shaking of the head, which might give the impression of understanding, even when there was none. Still another reason was that audio-lingual

courses gave the impression that they were teaching listening when in fact they were teaching other skills. In addition to this, Osada (2004) reported that listening had not drawn much attention of both teachers and learners; they were generally less aware of its importance. In classrooms, teachers seemed to test, not to teach listening. Meanwhile, students seemed to learn listening, not listening comprehension. As a result, it remained the most neglected and the least understood aspect of language teaching (Glisan, 1985).

Thus, the present study intends to assess the listening comprehension ability of the participants by checking their performance on TOEFL and IELTS listening comprehension tests and through an open ended questionnaire.

The present thesis is believed to be significant both theoretically and practically. It can help researchers and teachers find the listening comprehension problems of B.A. students of English translation studies. The findings in this study can also help EFL students improve their listening ability. If students learn the strategies by themselves through discovery methods, they will acquire a more active approach to problem solving that may be generalised to other kinds of listening tasks. Improving teachers' knowledge about this vital skill can also be useful during the process leading to listening comprehension in the foreign language. After the exploration of the process, teachers can guide learners in the use of alternative strategies for listening. As a result, these processes and strategies may provide insights for teachers to employ in designing the listening components of their programmes. On the other hand, developing taxonomy of the strategies used by proficient listeners could help the teachers use these strategies to improve the listening habits of poor listeners.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

In total, 71 senior B.A. students (the whole group) of English Translator Training from Shiraz Azad University English Department were selected as participants. Senior students were selected since they had passed all listening comprehension courses. They were both males and females. All the participants received the brief structured interview and the tests and were asked to complete the questions. Out of

the 71 students, 40 returned the questionnaire and answered the tests completely. Hence this reduced the sample size to 40 students (17 males and 23 females) whose ages ranged between 20 and 25 years. Local dialect was ignored here.

3.2 Methods employed in the testing

In all, three sets of data were collected in this thesis: The listening section of a TOEFL test, the listening section of an IELTS test, and a short open ended questionnaire comprising two questions. Each is explained briefly in the following sections.

3.2.1 TOEFL PBT (Paper Based Test) Listening Section

A combination of the listening section of BARRON's TOEFL PBT 2003-2008, 9th edition test as well as the listening section of the Developing Skills for the TOEFL PBT were used in the first phase of the study. The TOEFL test included 50 listening comprehension questions (see Appendix A). This activity tested the ability of the students to understand both short and long conversations in English. The listening comprehension questions were provided in three parts, each part with special directions for use:

In Part A, students heard short conversations between two people. After each conversation, they heard a question about the conversation. The conversations and questions were played only once. After they heard a question, they read the four possible answers in their test book and chose the best answer on the answer sheet.

In Part B, students heard longer conversations. After each conversation they were supposed to answer several questions. The conversations and questions were played only once. After they heard a question, they read the four possible answers in their test book and chose the best answer on the answer sheet.

In Part C, students heard several talks. After each talk, they heard some questions. The talks and questions were repeated only once. After they heard a question, they read the four possible answers in

their test book and chose the best answer on the answer sheet. After the TOEFL test was carried out, the answer sheets of participants were scored by the TOEFL standard scoring system.

3.2.2 IELTS (Listening Section)

The listening comprehension part of IELTS 2012 was used as the second activity in phase 2 of this study. The total number of IELTS questions was 40 (see Appendix B). The Listening test was the same for both Academic and General Training tests, required 30 minutes (plus 10 minutes transfer time) and covered four separate sections as follows: *Section 1* was a conversation between two people set in an everyday context (e.g. a conversation in an accommodation agency). *Section 2* was a monologue set in an everyday social context (e.g. a speech about local families). *Section 3* was a conversation between up to four people set in an educational or training context (e.g. a university tutor and student discussing an assignment). Finally, *Section 4* was a monologue on an academic subject (e.g. a university lecture).

3.3 Procedure of the Study

This study as stated, was conducted in three phases. First, the TOEFL test (the listening comprehension section) was given to the 40 participants of the study. Immediately afterwards, phase 2, the IELTS test (again the listening comprehension section) was given to the students. Finally, in phase 3, the two questions were given to the students who were asked to submit their answers in written form. The first two phases were in the form of multiple-choice items but the third one was an open ended questionnaire encompassing two broad researcher introduced questions. Having completed the data collection process, the data were input into SPSS Version 20 for further analysis.

4. Results

In this part, each research question will be repeated and then all the analyses related to that research question will be introduced.

4.1 Analysis of Research Question One

Using the results of phases 1 (TOEFL) and 2 (IELTS) of the study, the first research question to answer and analyse was “*How did the participants perform on TOEFL and IELTS listening comprehension tests?*” The TOEFL test was used here as representing the American accent whereas the IELTS test was used as representing the British accent. This question was posed to find out which pronunciation (the American or the British) was easier for the participants to perceive.

Table 1 *Performance of the participants on TOEFL listening comprehension test (50 items)*

Parts Names	Score Range	Level Label	No. of Students in This Band
			Level
Part A (30 items), Part B (10 items), Part C (10 items)	0-24	Low	29 (72.5%)
	25-34	Intermediate	10 (25%)
	35-50	High	1 (2.5%)
Total (students)			40

Table 1 shows that out of the 40 participants, 29 (72.5%) ranked low on the TOEFL test, ten participants (25%) ranked intermediate and only one participant (2.5%) ranked high..

Table 2 *Performance of the participants on IELTS listening comprehension test (40 items)*

Parts Names	Score Range	Level Label	No. of Students in This Level
Section 1 (10 items),	1-3	Low	37 (92.5%)
Section 2 (10 items),	4-6	Intermediate	3 (7.5%)
Section 3 (10 items),	7-9	High	0 (0%)
Section 4 (10 items)			
Total (students)			40

Table 2 shows that out of the 40 participants, 37 (92.5%) ranked low on the IELTS test, 3 students (7.5%) ranked intermediate and no student ranked high on the IELTS test. Comparison of the performance of the participants on the two tests indicated a number of points as follows: 1) Most of the participants (72.5% in TOEFL and 92.5% in IELTS) ranked low on the two tests. Few participants (25% in TOEFL and 7.5% in IELTS) ranked intermediate and almost no participant could rank high on either test. In fact, only one participant on the TOEFL test ranked high. All this indicated that the

participant were really weak at listening comprehension regardless of the variety of English (American or British).

4.2 Analysis of Research Question Two

The second research question of this thesis was a descriptive one which was based on phase 3 in which two broad questions formed by the researcher were delivered as an open ended questionnaire. The following repeats each question and then the data retrieved from the participants are described. The first question in the interview read as “In your opinion what is your main problem in listening comprehension?”

Table 3 *Answers to “In your opinion what is your main problem in listening comprehension?”*

Col.	Students' Description	Frequency	Percentage
1	I cannot identify words when I listen to an audio file, i.e. I am not used to fast speech	21	52.5%
2	I am weak at vocabulary and colloquial terms	16	40%
3	I am weak at correct pronunciation	3	7.5%
4	Total	40	100

In Table 3, the researcher tried to reword the descriptions to reduce the list of possible descriptions submitted by the students. Of course, he tried to do his best to preserve the original meaning intended by the participants. Three broad answers were given by the students. Most of the students (21 cases, 52.5%) asserted that their main problem was in identifying words when they listened to an audio file, i.e. they were not used to fast speech. In all, 16 students (40%) announced that they were weak at vocabulary and colloquial terms. So, it appears that students have major problems in listening and in vocabulary and view these two elements as the main factors that hinder in the listening comprehension process.

The second question in phase 3 was “Following your answer to the first question, what do you think is the root of this problem?”

Table 4 *Answers to “Following your answer to the first question, what do you think is the root of this problem?”*

Col.	Students' Description	Frequency	Percentage
1	Minor attention to listening comprehension practices at the university	18	45%
2	Lack of real contexts for conversation practices in everyday life	15	37.5%
3	Low performance of teachers at the university	4	10%
4	Lack of facilities at home like broadband connection, PC, etc.	3	7.5%
	Total	40	100

As indicated in Table 4 above, the participants introduced four broad reasons for their problems in listening comprehension practices.

It deserves mentioning that the researcher tried to merge some answers to simplify description of the answers. Of course, while rewording, care was taken to preserve the real meaning intended by the participants.

The results obtained revealed that 45% (18 cases) of the participants believed that insufficient attention to listening comprehension practices at the university' was responsible for their problems in listening comprehension. Similarly, 37.5% (15 cases) believed that 'lack of real contexts for conversation practices in everyday life' was the main source of their listening comprehension problems. These two elements together comprised 82.5% of the answers submitted by the participants. It appears that universities should put more emphasis on listening comprehension practices. As reported by students, they do not even use English much at the university campus since all the correspondence is in Persian, they talk to other students in Persian, and out of the class they again talk to their instructors in Persian. So, they do not feel any need to strengthen their listening abilities.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

In this section, the results obtained regarding each research question is repeated and discussed briefly.

5.1 Discussion on the First Research Question

The first research question of the study was “*How did the participants perform on TOEFL and IELTS listening comprehension tests?*” The TOEFL test was used here as representing the American accent whereas the IELTS test was used as representing the British accent. This question was posed to find out which pronunciation (the American or the British) was easier for the participants to perceive.

Comparison of the performance of the participants on the two tests indicated a number of points as follows: 1) Most of the participants (72.5% in TOEFL and 92.5% in IELTS) ranked low in the two tests. Few participants (25% in TOEFL and 7.5% in IELTS) ranked intermediate and almost no participant could rank high on either test. In fact, only one participant on the TOEFL test ranked high. All this indicated that the participants were really weak at listening comprehension regardless of the variety of English (American or British).

5.2 Discussion on the Second Research Question

Two questions were asked in the second research question of the study including “In your opinion, what is your main problem in listening comprehension?” and “Following your answer to the first question, what do you think is the root of this problem?”

Regarding the first question it was observed that most of the students (21 cases, 52.5%) asserted that their main problem was in ‘identifying words when they listened to an audio file, i.e. they were not used to fast speech’. In all, 16 students (40%) announced that they were ‘weak at vocabulary and colloquial terms’. So, it appeared that students had major problems in listening and in vocabulary and viewed these two elements as the main factors that hindered the listening, comprehension process.

Regarding the second question it was found that 45% (18 cases) of the participants believed that ‘insufficient attention to listening comprehension practices at the university’ was responsible for their problems in listening comprehension. Similarly, 37.5% (15 cases) believed that ‘lack of real contexts for conversation practices in everyday life’ was the main source of their listening comprehension problems. These two elements together comprised 82.5% of the answers submitted by the participants. It appeared that universities should put more emphasis on listening comprehension practices. As reported by students, they did not even use English much at the university campus since all the correspondence was in Persian, they talked to other students in Persian, and out of the class they again

talked to their instructors in Persian. So, they did not feel any need to strengthen their listening comprehension abilities.

6. Implications

The findings of this study are pedagogically significant. In fact, the listening comprehension problem is a dominant one among language learners (Field, 1998). Accordingly, since this thesis has tackled this topic and has reported the main problems students have within this language skill, it can be very useful for language learners as well as language teachers. Language learners can realise the importance of the listening skills and hence equip themselves with the necessary capabilities in this regard. Similarly, teachers can benefit a lot from the findings of this study. They can get familiar with the problems language learners face and hence can do their best to find solutions to the problems students have. Syllabus designers and policy makers can also use the findings of this study. They can consider revising the listening courses taught at the university level. They can give more priority to this skill. Policy makers can also introduce policies that can assign more importance to listening courses and the listening skill in general.

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