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# Iranian EFL Students' Listening Comprehension Problems

Sara Nowrouzi

English Language Department, Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, Malaysia

Shu Sim Tam

English Language Department, Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, Malaysia

Gholamreza Zareian

Department of English Language and Literature, School of Humanities, Hakim Sabzevari University, Iran

Vahid Nimehchisalem

English Language Department, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

**Abstract**—English as a Foreign Language (EFL) listening skill is considered a problematic skill particularly in a foreign language context where practice opportunities are limited. This study aimed to explore the listening comprehension problems of a group of EFL learners. Survey method was followed to collect data from a group of Iranian tertiary level EFL learners (n = 100) using the Listening Comprehension Processing Problems Questionnaire. The results indicated that the learners experienced moderate to high levels of difficulty in all three categories of listening comprehension problems, namely perception, parsing, and utilization. The findings are expected to have useful implications for syllabus designers and teachers who intend to address the listening comprehension problems of EFL learners.

**Index Terms**—EFL language teaching and learning, listening skills, listening problems

## I. INTRODUCTION

Listening is one of the most difficult skills for foreign language learners due to the complexity of its process and different types of knowledge required for successful listening (Field, 2008b; Graham & Macaro, 2008). Moreover, as Graham (2006, p. 178) alluded "many learners see themselves as less successful in listening than in other language areas" like reading due to some uncontrollable facts like "the speed of delivery of texts" and "the speaker's accent" (Graham, 2006, pp. 174-175).

In Iran, English is commonly learned as a foreign language. Before they enter university, students learn English for six years during guidance school and high school. The primary focus of the English courses that these students experience is on language structure, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and translation skills. Listening is neglected in the syllabus. As a result, when these learners are suddenly exposed to audio material at university level, they face a lot of difficulties before they develop the essential listening skills. This necessitates research on the listening problems of these learners. The purpose of this paper is therefore diagnosing the listening problems of a group of tertiary level students in English Language and Literature departments of four universities in Khorasan Razavi Province, Iran.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is divided into two parts. The first section reviews the available literature on the way scholars in the area of language teaching classify L2 learners' listening problems. The second part is a review of a few studies that explored these learners' listening problems.

### A. Classification of L2 Learners' Listening Problems

Second or foreign language learners may encounter a wide variety of problems in listening comprehension. Different researchers have focused on various problems and shown a wide range of listening challenges for foreign or second language learners (Goh, 2000; Liu, 2002). Listening comprehension problems refer to all the difficulties that may occur during the three phases of perception, parsing, and utilization (Anderson, 1995; Goh, 2000, Vandergrift, 2003). Figure 1 presents the three phases in which listening problems can be categorized. As the figure shows, these phases are non-linear and inter-related. Due to the nature of listening, a listener may have to move focus from one phase to another in order to be able to decode the message.

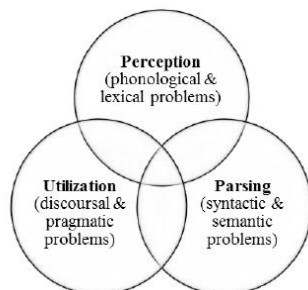


Figure 1. A Taxonomy of Listening Comprehension Problems (Adapted from Anderson, 1995; Goh, 2000, Vandergrift, 2003)

Perception problems are related to listeners' inability to distinguish the sounds and words in a stream of speech (Field, 2008b). Phonological and lexical problems are two different types of challenges that listeners face during the phase of perception. Phonological problems cover learners' difficulty in understanding intonation, stress, and different accents (Ur, 1984). Such problems are commonly related to listeners' low language proficiency (Goh, 1999). Specific features of informal conversation such as hesitations, interruption, recurrent pauses and overlaps, as well as constant changes in the rhythm of speech pose serious problems for EFL listeners (Goh, 1999). Problems such as high speech rate and unfamiliar prosody reportedly affect learners' comprehension of video texts (Cross, 2009a).

Goh (2000, p. 59) identified ten L2 listening problems five of which are related to the perception phase of listening: "Do not recognize words they knew; neglect the next part when thinking about meaning; could not chunk streams of speech; miss the beginning of texts; and concentrate too hard or unable to concentrate".

According to Goh (2000), about half the problems identified occurred in the initial phase of listening, or perception. In the related literature, cliticisation and resyllabification are also mentioned as two phonological problems that listeners should deal with (Cross, 2009b). Cliticisation happens when the pronunciation of an unstressed word is attached to that of a stressed word forming a single accentual unit, as in *tell them*, commonly pronounced as /tel'm/. Because of cliticization, "word boundaries can become blurred" due to the "tendency of the speaker to group syllables together into strong-weak (SW)" (Cross, 2009b, p. 46). For example the phrase "the side" may be misperceived as "decide". In resyllabification, "syllables that carry secondary stress in a word may be incorrectly processed as separate words; i.e., learners insert an imaginary word boundary prior to the syllable with this characteristic" (Cross, 2009b, p. 46). For example, "I scream" will sound like "ice-cream" if it is syllabified as "I s-cream". In the same vein, Field (2008a) mentions reduction, assimilation, elision, resyllabification, and cliticisation as systematic variations in connected speech that cause a number of potential impediments to L2 listeners' lexical segmentation.

As stated by Cross (2009b) the most important problems for second language listeners occurred in word recognition. The reason is that "cues in connected speech can often be inconsistent and unreliable for marking word boundaries and the range of conventions which the listener needs to know can be broad" (Rost, 2005 as cited in Cross, 2009b, p.34). Similarly, Field (2003, p. 329) suggests various problems in word recognition such as "reduction, assimilation, elision, resyllabification, and cliticisation".

In addition to phonological problems, L2 learners may face lexical problems in perception phase.

Vocabulary repertoire is found to be strongly correlated with listening, as it is the case in reading (Milton, Wade and Hopkins, 2010). It is claimed that readers and listeners should recognize 50% of the words in a text and use them unconsciously in order to understand it (Paran, 1996). Cross (2009b, p. 47) refers to deficient vocabulary knowledge as a textual listening problem in which known words are matched instead of the actual words that are mostly "idiomatic language, proper nouns, and low frequency words". Foreign or second language learners who are mostly exposed to formal language encounter difficulties during listening to "idioms, slang, and reduced forms" (Brown, 2001, p. 253). A person needed around six thousand to seven thousand vocabularies to understand ninety-eight percent of the authentic discourse (Nation, 2006). However, Bonk (2000) found that lexical knowledge has no effect on listening comprehension. As he stated "on some occasions examinees were nonetheless able to achieve good comprehension with a lexical knowledge of only 75% whereas others cannot achieve this level of comprehension even with 100% of lexical knowledge" (Bonk, 2000, p.24). Bonk attributes this to the "students' sophisticated use of coping strategies" (Bonk, 2000, p.27), but Stæhr (2008) questions the methodology that was limited to dictation and recall protocols as the only data collection methods used in Bonk's (2000) study to assess learners' word knowledge and to measure their listening comprehension, respectively.

Parsing is the next major phase in the cognitive processing in L2 listening comprehension. The problems that the learner may face during parsing are commonly syntactic and semantic. Syntactic problems may involve: (1) quickly forgetting what is heard, (2) failure in forming a mental representation from words heard, and (3) not understanding the subsequent parts of input because of earlier problems (Goh, 2000).

Semantic problems occur when learners are preoccupied with the meaning of certain words that may be redundant; and thus, they miss the other parts of the message because of the limited processing capacity in their short term memory and shallow processing (Goh, 1999).

Utilization is the final phase in the cognitive processing of L2 listening comprehension. The problems faced by L2 learners during this phase are typically pragmatic and discorsal in nature. "Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to communicate meaning in a socially appropriate manner and to interpret meaning—whether explicit or implicit—on the basis of context" (Thomas, 1995 as cited in Taguchi, 2008, p.424). "It entails the ability to control the complex interplay of language, language users, and the context of language use" (Kasper, 1992; Mey, 1993; Thomas, 1983, 1995 as cited in Taguchi, 2008, p. 424). An example of this ability is to know which linguistic means are used to communicate meaning indirectly through everyday interactions. "To become pragmatically competent, one needs to be linguistically competent and able to both assess contextual information and use linguistic resources appropriately according to context" (Taguchi, 2008, p. 425). Pragmatic problems will rise when listeners understand the meaning of words but fail to realize their intended meaning. Discorsal problems occur when the listener is unable to understand the flow of ideas in connected speech. For example, when learners fail to recognize the overall organization of the ideas in a text, they have discorsal problems. Gruba (1997) and Ockey (2007) maintain that focusing on rhetorical signaling cues can help listeners understand the discorsal features of the text they are listening to. For instance, a competent listener would recognize the cue, "Let me put it in another way!" as a clarification signal.

#### B. *Studies on L2 Learners' Listening Problems*

There are a few studies seeking to diagnose ESL/EFL learners' listening problems that are reviewed in this section. Goh (2000) conducted a study through diaries, semi-structured interviews, and recall protocols on the online listening problems of Chinese less skilled listeners of English as a second language based on Anderson's (1995) cognitive model of listening. The problems that she found included: recognizing words, chunking, missing the beginning of the text, and concentration (related to perception phase); quick forgetting of what was heard and hence the inability in forming a mental representation of the input (related to parsing); and understanding the words and not the intended message (related to utilization).

Another study was conducted by Hassan (2000) in an EFL context through a questionnaire to determine students' self-perceived listening problems. The identified problems were "missing parts of the text, not recognizing words, problems resulting from unclear pronunciation and rapid speech rate" (Vandergrift, 2007, p. 194).

Furthermore, Liu (2002) conducted a study through semi-structured interviews, questionnaire survey, partial transcription, and introspection to determine online processing problems in listening comprehension and the role of compensatory schema use in solving them. The problems that the participants had included: (i) unfamiliar vocabulary, (ii) sound segmentation and word recognition, and (iii) over-reliance on phonetic cues.

Speech rate is also considered a major problem for L2 learners (Goh, 1999; Flowerdew and Miller, 1992). In Goh's (1999) study, 78% of the participants and almost all of Flowerdew and Miller's participants in both interviews and diaries reported that their main problem was the fast English speech rate.

### III. OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is an attempt to examine the Iranian tertiary level EFL learners' listening comprehension problems in the three listening components: perception, parsing and utilization; to meet this objective the following research questions were addressed:

1. What level of perceptual processing listening comprehension problems do Iranian tertiary level EFL learners have?
2. What level of parsing listening comprehension problems do Iranian tertiary level EFL learners have?
3. What level of utilization listening comprehension problems do Iranian tertiary level EFL learners have?

### IV. METHOD

Quantitative method was followed to answer the research question. Survey method was used to collect the data.

#### A. *Participants*

The data were collected from Iranian tertiary level first-year EFL learners (n = 100). The respondents were selected randomly from three universities in Mashhad, Iran. The participants were 70% female with minimum and maximum ages of 19 to 23. Their major was English.

#### B. *Instrument*

The instrument that was used for collecting data was a questionnaire, called the Listening Comprehension Processing Problems Questionnaire (henceforth LCPQ). The detailed information about the validation and the developing process of LCPQ has been presented in Nowrouzi, Tam, Nimehchisalem, and Zareian (2014). In a nutshell, the instrument was developed based on the related literature and theory (e.g., Anderson, 1995; Goh, 2000; and Liu, 2002). The questionnaire was then validated by a panel of experts (n = 7) and field-tested on a sample representing the main respondents of the present study. The final questionnaire had 23 items and a five-point Likert scale (1= never, 2= rarely, 3= sometimes, 4= usually, and 5= always). The first 10 items dealt with perception problems. To offer an example, one of the items concerned with concentration problems that may lead to the listener's missing the beginning of the text. Items 11 to 17 covered the parsing problems, such as the student's inability in dividing the long sentences into different

parts. Finally, items 18 to 23 elicited information on the respondents' utilization problems, like their failure to understand the intended message. An acceptable Cronbach's alpha coefficient (0.80) was obtained for the internal reliability of the questionnaire.

### C. Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to 100 learners to determine their listening comprehension problems. Before administering the questionnaires, the respondents carried out a listening activity so that they could base their responses to the questionnaire on a real listening task (Vandergrift et al., 2006). At the beginning, the significance of the study was presented to the students by one of the researchers. Moreover, the related questions to LCPQ raised by the students were answered by her. Then, the LCPQ were administered among the respondents to be accomplished. All these procedures took approximately 60 minutes and the response rate was 100%. (as cited in Nowrouzi et al, 2014).

### D. Data Analysis Procedure

Descriptive statistical methods like frequency, percentage, means, and standard deviations were followed for analyzing the data using SPSS (Version 16). In this study, the 33rd percentile was regarded as the cut-off point between 'low' and 'moderate' levels of listening problems. The 67th percentile was considered the cut-off between 'moderate' and 'high' levels. Therefore, a mean of 1.65 (upon 5) or below was considered a 'low' level of listening problems; a mean ranging between 1.66 and 3.35 was regarded as 'moderate'; and finally, a mean of 3.36 or higher was reported as a 'high' level of listening problems.

## V. RESULTS

The results are presented and discussed in the order of the research questions, which categorized listening comprehension problems into the three cognitive stages of perception, parsing, and utilization.

### A. Perception Problems

In this section, the results pertaining to perception problems (items 1 to 10) in LCPQ are presented (Table 1).

TABLE I.  
PERCEPTION PROBLEMS

Item	Mean	SD	Level*
1: Hearing Sounds but not Clear Words	3.68	.66	High
2: Fast Speech Rate	3.81	.64	High
3: Missing the Beginning of the Text	3.20	.96	Moderate
4: Knowing the Meaning of a Word When Seeing it	3.27	.86	Moderate
5: Slow in Recalling the Meaning of Familiar Words	2.79	.94	Moderate
6: Mistaking one Word for another	3.50	.78	High
7: Too Many Unfamiliar Words or Expressions	3.43	.83	High
8: Not Recognizing so many Sound and Words	3.22	.85	Moderate
9: Missing the Next Part of the Text while Thinking about the Meaning	3.63	.66	High
10: Difficulty in Concentration	3.08	.91	Moderate
Total	3.37	.80	High

\*Means values  $\leq 1.65$  (low), 1.66-3.35 (moderate); and  $\geq 3.36$  (high) levels of listening problems

As it can be seen, the Learners have reported experiencing moderate or high levels of listening problems in all areas of perception: concentration, sounds (fast speech rate that leads to missing the beginning of the text, knowing the meaning of a word when seeing it, and too many sounds) and in words (not hearing clear words, mistaking words for each other, too many unfamiliar words, missing the next parts while thinking about the earlier sections), and not remembering the meaning of familiar words.

### B. Parsing Problems

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations and levels of parsing problems experienced by the students.

TABLE II.  
PARSING PROBLEMS

Item	Mean	SD	Level*
11: Forgetting Words or Phrases Just Heard	3.12	.83	Moderate
12: Not Understanding the Meaning of Sentences	2.58	.91	Moderate
13: Difficulty in Dividing Long Sentences into Several Parts	3.47	.82	High
14: Difficulty in Guessing the Accurate Meaning of Words in Sentences	3.43	.76	High
15: Difficulty in Following Unfamiliar Topics	3.60	.81	High
16: Difficulty in Understanding a lot of New Information in a Short Time	3.24	.80	Moderate
17: Missing the Next Parts Because of Earlier Problems	3.27	.76	Moderate
Total	3.24	.81	Moderate

\*Means values  $\leq 1.65$  (low), 1.66-3.35 (moderate); and  $\geq 3.36$  (high) levels of listening problems

Based on the above table, the learners' reports implied moderate to high levels of difficulty regarding the parsing problems, including topic unfamiliarity, sentential level problems, and too much information to process except a lower level of problem in understanding the meaning of sentences.

### C. Utilization Problems

The six utilization problems (items 18-23) in the questionnaire are mostly related to the general message of the text, the main ideas in it with the related supporting details, the relationship among these ideas, and their order. The results related to utilization problems are displayed in Table 3.

TABLE III.  
UTILIZATION PROBLEMS

Item	Mean	SD	Level*
18: Understanding Words but not the Intended Message	2.97	.75	Moderate
19: Difficulty in Getting the Order of Ideas in a Text	3.05	.74	Moderate
20: Getting Confused about the Main Idea	2.82	.73	Moderate
21: Difficulty in Getting the Details	3.50	.71	High
22: Difficulty in Getting the relationships among Ideas	3.60	.72	High
23: Difficulty in Getting the Supporting Ideas	3.73	.73	High
Total	3.27	.73	Moderate

\*Means values  $\leq 1.65$  (low), 1.66-3.35 (moderate); and  $\geq 3.36$  (high) levels of listening problems

As displayed in this table, it can be seen that the learners have lower levels of problem in getting the main ideas, the intended message, and the order of ideas, but high levels in getting the details, the supporting ideas, and the relationships among them.

The questionnaire findings on problems, as summarized in Table 4, show that out of the 23 processing problems, the learners have moderate to high degrees of difficulty while listening to texts in English (Table 4).

TABLE IV.  
A SUMMARY OF EFL LEARNERS' LEVELS OF LISTENING PROCESSING PROBLEMS

Problem	Mean	Level*
Perception	3.37	High
Parsing	3.24	Moderate
Utilization	3.27	Moderate

\*Means values  $\leq 1.65$  (low), 1.66-3.35 (moderate); and  $\geq 3.36$  (high) levels of listening problems

## VI. DISCUSSION

The present results are almost similar to those of the previous studies. Goh's (2000) sample similarly were found to have listening problems of all three categories; i.e., perception, parsing, and utilization. Likewise, the participants in Hassan (2000) and Liu's (2002) studies exhibited difficulties in perception and parsing.

As one of the components of perception problems, high speech rate was reportedly perceived as the greatest problems by the learners in Goh (1999) as well as Flowerdew and Miller's (1992) studies. Likewise, based on the results of the present study, the item on 'fast speech rate' obtained the highest mean, indicating that what L2 learners fear most is native speakers' high speed of talking. This can be attributed to the fact that English is a stress-timed language and the presentation rate is too fast for those whose native language is syllable-timed (Griffith, 1991) namely for Chinese (Lin & Wang, 2006) and Iranians (Hall, 2007). With regard to this problem, Brown (2001, p. 254) posits "since English is a stress timed language, English speech can be a terror for some learners as mouthfuls of syllables come spilling out between stress points". According to him, intonation patterns are important for understanding "questions, statements, emphasis, sarcasm, endearment, insult, solicitation, praise, etc." (Brown, 2001, p. 254). Reduced forms such as "Djeetyet? for Did you eat yet?" also pose difficulty for foreign language learners (Brown, 2001, p. 253).

Another problem that was rated as a major difficulty by the majority of the participants in this study was the lexical problems, a subcategory of perception problems. 'Mistaking one word for another' is an example of such problems, which may be caused by homophonic forms such as reign/rain and lain/lane that should be resolved by reference to the context (Boersma & Cutler, 2008). Understanding the linguistic context in audio materials is what most foreign language learners find relatively difficult. Students' homophonic form problem is also called "scaling-up" problem (Bradlow, 2007 as cited in Boersma & Cutler, 2008, p. 23) in which "phoneme perception performance often mismatches with listening performance in real speech, in both directions: poor phonetic discrimination with good sentence-level performance, or good discrimination in phonetic-level tasks with poor performance on word recognition involving the same contrasts".

## VII. CONCLUSION

The data collected by the listening comprehension problems questionnaire reveal that Iranian tertiary level first-year EFL learners' listening problems can be categorized into three types in relation to the three phases of listening

comprehension: perception, parsing, and utilization. The most dominant problems were distraction and missing or misperceiving sounds and words related to perception, chunking difficulties and sentence forgetting concerned with parsing and confusion about the main idea pertaining to utilization.

This study has pedagogical implications. Based on the results, the participants in the present study suffered almost equally from all three categories of problems. This means that in L2 listening courses perception, parsing, and utilization problems should be emphasized equally. Due to the primary importance of perception and parsing problems, equally important areas of difficulty like pragmatic and discoursal problems can be neglected. Material developers, syllabus designers and L2 teachers should pay particular attention to learners' utilization problems since owing to their implicit nature it is likely that learners fail to recognize their own pragmatic and discourse problems. Further research is required to explore the strategies that L2 learners employ in dealing with their listening problems.

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**Sara Nowrouzi** is currently a PhD candidate in Teaching and Learning English at University Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Her research interests are in Curriculum evaluation and development, learning strategies, informal assessment, writing, and listening.

**Shu Sim Tam** is a senior lecturer with the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics at the University of Malaya. She holds a PhD in Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL) and is supervising postgraduate students in the field of CALL, language learning and teaching, ESL and SLA. She is currently exploring social constructivism in postgraduate studies.

**Gholamreza Zareian** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Hakim Sabzevari University, Iran. He holds a Ph.D. in Teaching English as a Second Language. His main research interests include language learning strategies and material development.

**Vahid Nimehchisalem** holds a PhD in Teaching English as a Second Language. He is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Communication and Modern Languages, Universiti Putra Malaysia. His main area of research interest is assessing ESL writing.