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The Perceptions of EFL Prep School Students on their Listening Skills: A Quantitative Study

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Abstract

Since the second half of the twentieth century the view of listening skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has tremendously changed. There has been a constant move from a purely linguistic listening perception towards one which includes many aspects and facets in relation to the cultural constructs, topic familiarity, discourse clues and pragmatic conventions (Hinkel, 2006). This quantitative study was an attempt to discover the perceptions of the EFL prep school students of their Listening skills in English courses and if they have any impact on their learning process and whether they can be predictive for their academic success regarding their Listening course scores. The study group of this study consisted of 95 EFL prep school students (62 females, 33 males) in academic year of 2015-2016 fall term at Hacettepe University in Ankara. All students were Turkish, of similar cultural and linguistic background. The students were composed of levels B1 and B2+. For the collection of the data a 5-point Likert type questionnaire with 41 items developed by Lotfi (2012) was administered and the students were asked to write their biographical information like their age, gender, type of high school graduation and Listening scores. The statistical descriptives, MANOVA and Regression tests were run in this study to find out the answers to the research questions. The findings and the results are discussed and presented in the full paper along with the recommendations and limitations of the study.

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1. Introduction

Since the second half of the twentieth century the view of listening has tremendously changed. There has been a constant move from a purely linguistic listening view towards one which includes many aspects and facets in relation to listening. Cultural constructs, topic familiarity, discourse clues and pragmatic conventions (Hinkel, 2006). Teachers need to activate the schemata lying in the students so that there can take place effective learning.

1.1. Evolution of the View on Listening

Until recently, second language (L2) teaching has essentially focused on reading, writing, and speaking as the key skills needed in language acquisition (Vandergrift, 2003). During the 1960's and 1970's listening comprehension involved pre-teaching of new vocabulary; extensive listening –questions about general context; intensive listening - detailed questions; examination of vocabulary and/or exponents of grammar; use of play and repeat/play and predict/recall words (Field, 1998. p.110). This was mainly because before the 1970's, listening was considered as a receptive skill in language learning (Johnson, 2008) which was necessary for correct/better pronunciation (Vandergrift, 2011) and had to do with language input. Although this view of listening is simplistic compared to those that preceded, it was significant because it was the first approach recognizing the importance of listening as a skill in language learning.

Those pioneers who saw listening as one of the key skills of language acquisition viewed it as a passive, receptive skill (Johnson, 2008; Mendelsohn 1995). From this early view to present day, listening has been progressively viewed as an active mental process. In 1970's and 1980's some researchers have recommended that strategies for effective learning should be devised for listening skills. Rubin (1975) was one of the first authors to point out the link between effective learning strategies and L2 acquisition in 1970s. In other words, similar with teaching other contents, teachers should teach students effective strategies for listening.

Although some researchers found general learning strategies (independent of content) as applicable to L2 acquisition (Chamot, 1995), others objected that strategies that may work well even with acquisition of first language may not necessarily work with learning a second language (Mendelsohn, 1994). Some went further to claim that they may even be less applicable to listening skills (Aponte-de-Hanna, 2012).

Early views on listening focused on the language content. This later shifted from content to skills. An emphasis on skills rather content brought about questions about classroom listening as to how relevant they are to those that take place in real life. This reflects a more contextual framework which highlighted “the importance of inferring the meaning of new words, the use of recordings which are authentic in origin, the inclusion of material with conversational features, and the use of simulated tasks rather than formal exercises” (Field, 1998; 111).

Such focus also made the motivation and focus of the learner as an important factor in listening which inevitably highlighted the needs of the learner. In endorsing a learner sensitive-approach Field (1998) raises three important issues regarding the current practice: “how to teach listening rather than practice it, the implications of using authentic materials, and the nature of real-life second-language listening” (p.111).

1.2. Practicing Listening vs. Teaching the Skills

Focusing on product rather the process may provide practice but fail to teach the skills. For example “*a conventional listening comprehension lesson simply adds yet another text to the learners' experience; it does little or nothing to improve the effectiveness of their listening or to address their shortcomings as listeners. Teachers focus upon the outcomes of listening, rather than upon listening itself, upon product rather than process. When a learner supplies a correct answer, there is no indication as to how that answer has been arrived at: has meaning been constructed by correctly identifying all the words in a particular piece of text, or by identifying one word and making an inspired guess?*” (Field, 1998, 111).

1.2.1. A Diagnostic Approach

Listening lessons are often top-heavy. They begin with an extended pre-listening period in which relevant language is revised, or there is discussion about the topic of the text. This is followed by the setting of a task and by a period

(often quite short) of listening. Finally, in the last minutes of the lesson, answers are checked. A revised lesson model might feature a shorter pre-listening period, of as little as five minutes, which focuses on creating motivation and establishing context. This would be followed by a lengthy listening session, with several replays for learners to re-listen and check their answers. Finally, there would be an extended post-listening session (possibly in a subsequent lesson) in which gaps in learners' listening skills could be examined and redressed through short micro-listening exercises (Field, 1998. p. 112).

“Where might we expect understanding to break down? What is likely to be the subject matter of a remedial micro-listening exercise? Most obviously, misunderstandings occur at the level of syntax, when learners overlook inflexional signals or misinterpret structures” (p. 112). In line with premises of major learning theories, Field (1998) recommends that listening skills teaching should involve; breaking down skills into sub-skills, authentic material and strategy teaching.

1.2.2. Factors Impacting Listening

An extensive body of research on variables influencing learners' listening comprehension have emerged in recent decades. Doing an extensive review of literature on these factors, Rubin (1994) arrived at five factors examined text, task, interlocutor, listener and process.

Personal variables of the learner have received a great deal of research attention with respect to L2 acquisition as well as to acquiring listening in particular. These variables range from contextual factors (cultural, economic, political, community related etc.) to personal characteristics of the learner (i.e., affective and cognitive, motivational etc.). Various studies have linked learner's perceptions such as self-efficacy, his/her beliefs with language learning processes and outcome (i.e., Dornyei, 2005; Hosseini & Pourmandnia, 2013; Lotfi, 2012).

When listening is concerned a diagnostic approach in detecting learners' difficulties is crucial. Thanks to the Self-Directed learning paradigm, learners are considered to be capable of evaluating and reflecting on their learning processes and outcomes (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Thus, some authors recommend that assessing learner's perception about their L2 listening experience could be an essential tool in monitoring and improving teaching listening skills (Lotfi, 2012).

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate perceptions of EFL prep school students on their listening skills. An additional aim of the study was to investigate the relationship between students' beliefs and their gender, type of highschool attended and their listening scores.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The study group of this study consisted of 95 prep class students (62 females, 33 males) at Hacettepe University in Ankara. All students were Turkish, of similar cultural and linguistic background. The prep class students take 25 hours of English language course throughout the school year. The students were composed of levels B1 and B2+.

The students were administered a 5-point Likert type questionnaire with 40 items and asked to write their biographical information like their age, gender, type of high school graduation and Listening scores they get from English courses. I have collected the data at the end of 2014-2015 school term which was planned to give more reliable data as they would have almost completed all the English classes for the year at hand.

2.2. Data Collection Instrument

In the study, the scale of attitude of students towards speaking skills of 40 items and 6 factors were used to collect the data. The scale was developed by Lotfi (2012) and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .82 which indicates an internal consistency. It is a 5-Likert type questionnaire, in which 1 means absolutely disagree while 5 means absolutely agree.

The scale is composed of 6 factors: Process, Input, Listener, Task, Affect and Context. Process has 12 items, input has 9 items, Listener was given with 10 items, task was represented by 3 items, affect was given with 4 items, and

context has 2 items. The researcher who developed the scale gives the Cronbach's alpha coefficient as .90 for Process, .86 for input factor. As for the listener factor, there are 10 items with .87 as coefficient. The next factor which is task factor is composed of 3 items with a 3 .72 Cronbach's alpha value. The last but not the least part of the scale is composed of context items of 2 as the last items of the study.

2.3. Data Collection Procedure

In the present research the participants were handed a scale composed of 40 items by the researcher. They were provided with instructions on how to complete the tool. They were instructed to provide honest responses to the scale. The English course teacher of each class was present when the students filled out the scale. The participants were not familiar with such a study before; therefore, they were allowed to ask for further explanations if they did not understand the instructions or the items in the scale.

At the first part of the scale, students were supposed to write their ages, gender, type of high school graduation and listening scores obtained in English course in the provided place. For the second part of the scale, students checked the best answer from among 5 alternatives (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree) that fitted them along for the 40 items. The students followed the instructions carefully, they were told in Turkish that there are 40 items which show their perceptions towards listening courses and activities they have had all through the academic year and to choose the one response for each item which they believe reflects their attitude best. The instrument was administered among three groups of students as part of their regular class session and they completed it nearly in 8 minutes.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data were digitalized via Statistical Package for Social Sciences Version22 by the researcher. First, the statistical descriptives of the study group were given. MANOVA and Regression tests were run in this study to find out the answers to the research questions. The level of significance was set to .05.

Research Question 1: Are there any statistically significant differences among students' listening scores and their total self-reports regarding listening components according to gender and high school?

To give answer for above research question, MANOVA should be carried out (two independent categorical and two dependent continuous variables).

Table 1. MANOVA

	mean	SD	frequency	frequency
highschool	1,6316	,79964		
gender	1,3474	,47866		
AHS*			54	
ATTHS**			22	
Other			19	
Female				62
Male				33

Anatolian High School, *Anatolian teacher Training High School**

2.5. Normality

To check normality, the kurtosis and skewness values were divided by their standard errors. If the value is between -1,96 and +1,96, factor is considered to be normally distributed. To make it normal some observation using Box-plot were discarded.

Table 2. Normality Table

	Total listening scores		Listening scores	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
mean	,3607860	,2204489	72,7330	73,0918
SD	,96346667	,80313578	18,12930	17,47934
Skewness	-.265	-.502	-.460	-.165
Standard error	.304	.409	.304	.409
Kurtosis	.550	-.410	-.455	-.578
Standard error	.599	.798	.599	.798

For the Total listening skills part of the females, we divided Skewness value of $-.205$ by its standard error which gave us 0.87 ; and Kurtosis value gave us 0.91 . For the males the calculations gave 1.22 for Skewness and For Kurtosis we had 0.51 which are between the values set for normality. As for the Listening scores, the females showed 1.51 normality for Skewness and Kurtosis yielded 0.75 value which are again seen to be normal. Listening scores of the males were seen to be 0.403 for Skewness and 0.72 for Kurtosis. As we see, the data is seen to be normally distributed. No significant differences were found between students' scores on factors of listening and their listening scores according to gender and high school.

Table 3. Multivariate Tests

Effect		Sig.
Intercept	Pillai's Trace	.000
	Wilks' Lambda	.000
	Hotelling's Trace	.000
	Roy's Largest Root	.000
Gender	Pillai's Trace	.119
	Wilks' Lambda	.119
	Hotelling's Trace	.119
	Roy's Largest Root	.119
HighSchool	Pillai's Trace	.390
	Wilks' Lambda	.390
	Hotelling's Trace	.390
	Roy's Largest Root	.129
Gender * HighSchool	Pillai's Trace	.308
	Wilks' Lambda	.307
	Hotelling's Trace	.307
	Roy's Largest Root	.092

As seen in above table, all the findings are statistically insignificant including the intersection. So we do not need to conduct any post-hoc test.

Research Question 2: Do the components of listening skills predict listening scores of the students?

Multiway regression was carried out to answer this research question as all variables are continuous and we would like to predict the dependent variable.

Table 4. Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized		Standardized				Collinearity				
	Coefficients		Coefficients		Correlations		Statistics				
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	order	Partial Part	Tolerance VIF			
1 (Constant)	68,138	1,573		43,311	,000						
Process	-7,546	2,594		-,398	-,2909	,005	-,522	-,296	-,257	,419	2,388
Input	-1,582	2,233	-,083	-,708	,481	-,370	-,075	-,063	,571	1,753	
Listener	1,785	2,728	,093	,654	,515	-,390	,070	,058	,383	2,609	
Task	-1,852	2,078	-,099	-,892	,375	-,351	-,095	-,079	,638	1,568	
Affect	-3,829	2,141	-,205	-1,789	,077	-,379	-,187	-,158	,596	1,679	
Context	1,161	1,893	,060	,613	,541	-,035	,065	,054	,825	1,213	

a. Dependent Variable: ListeningScore

All independent variables affect dependent variable insignificantly except for process components. Standardized beta coefficients are the ones that show the effect power of the independent variable over dependent ones. That is, for example if one increases process component of a student by one standard deviation, listening score of corresponding student will increase by -0,398. It should also be noted here that if all the independent variable were equal to zero, there would be still some language score of any student.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study was an attempt to discover the beliefs of the students on Listening skills and if those beliefs have any impact on their learning process and whether these beliefs can be predictive in terms of their Listening scores. The findings of the study summed that students have some problems in Listening classes which was a highly expected result. It is also revealed that students attributed their problems to more than one single factor. This may suffice to utter that students have a multidimensional nature which also yields their having a complex and intricate system of views and perceptions in relation to Listening skills. This also explains that the problems of the students in class should not be taken as from a single dimension as it has many more facets beneath.

Five of the factors have an insignificant impact on the prediction of the language scores of the students. Only the factor of process has a say in the prediction of the Listening scores of the students. Affective factor in the scale should be studied in detail as students reflected their psychological aspects that they find themselves in the Listening classes. The factor of context enabled us to witness the changes of the students' beliefs according to the context they are pulled into. Additionally, we can also observe that their beliefs were developed and shaped by a particular learning context like in experiences they have and to what they are exposed.

4. Recommendations and Limitations

Merely relying on self-report data by itself holds limitations since the reliability of data relies solely on accuracy and sincerity of the participants' responses. A more desirable way would be to utilize measures from multiple

resources. In other words, future work should incorporate qualitative data as well as utilizing interviews conducted right after students' experiences with listening tasks.

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