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SLS650-Term Paper
12/18/02

WHAT DO LEARNERS KNOW ABOUT THE FACTORS THAT AFFECT THEIR LISTENING COMPREHENSION?

For a second language learner the importance of listening comprehension can never be overemphasized. In fact, listening comprehension (LC) precedes production in all cases of language learning, and it stands to reason that there can be no production unless linguistic input is provided and becomes comprehensible intake for the learner. Thus listening is a fundamental language skill, and as such it merits a critical priority among the four skill areas for language students. As Hasan (2000) pointed out, “listening comprehension provides the right conditions for language acquisition and development of other language skills”(p.138).

There is cumulating evidence in second language acquisition research of the crucial role that input plays in learners’ linguistic development, especially in its early stages. In the case of first language acquisition, children typically go through a period of listening to people talk before they produce their first words. This “silent period” is necessary because the child needs to discover what language is and what it does. Although the silent period is not obligatory in the case of second language acquisition as the learner already has some concept of language, it still characterizes the linguistic behavior of many beginners (Ellis, 1994). Comprehension is important not only because it precedes production chronologically (in L1 anyway, and in L2 too in many cases), but primarily because, “it appears to be the basic mechanism through which the rules of language are internalized” (Winitz, 1981, cited in Byrnes, 1984, p.319). In addition, the increasingly

popular communicative approach to language has given a new dimension to the importance of receptive skills in communication. Hence Krashen and Terrell (1983) stated that “ acquisition can take place only when people understand messages in the target language” (cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.180). After all, communication is not a monologue. It seems logical that one needs to hear sounds before producing them; that in order to speak a language one must have "a 'feel' for the sounds and be able to understand a message" (Gilman & Moody, 1984, p.331).

Since listening comprehension can enhance the process of language learning and facilitate language acquisition, several types of advantages can result from giving pre-eminence to the listening activity (Gary, 1975, in Vandergrift, 1999): cognitive, efficiency, utility, and affective. The cognitive advantage of an initial emphasis on listening is its respect for a more natural way to learn a language, for processing and decoding aural input requires recognition knowledge, whereas encoding and generating speech output requires retrieval knowledge. One cannot possibly retrieve something he has not yet stored in memory. To place listening before speaking is, so to speak, to “put the horse before the cart.”

Related to the cognitive advantage is the efficiency advantage, which means that language learning can be more efficient if learners are not immediately required to produce all the language material they are exposed to, since learners can use all of the “limited attentional resources” (Vandergrift, 1999, p.169) of short-term memory to concentrate on meaning. Also, comprehension or input-oriented instruction uses classroom time more efficiently than production-oriented instruction because students are exposed only to good language models (the teacher and recordings). Furthermore, a

beneficial side- effect of the comprehension model points to the fact that "language learners who have been taught to capitalize on the advantage of a receptive approach to language learning" (Gary and Gary, 1981, cited in Dunkel, 1991, p.437) are more ready to continue with independent study by listening to the radio, watching TV, or going to foreign language movies.

The third advantage, the utility advantage, has to do with the usefulness of the receptive skill. Since, as a general rule, adults spend about 50% of communication time listening, compared to 30% speaking, 16% reading and 9% writing (Rivers in Gilman & Moody, 1984, p.331, in Vandergrift, 1999, p.169), language learners will make much greater use of comprehension skills than other skills. At the college level, second language students are expected to attend lecture-centered courses during their earliest learning experience within mainstream classrooms. The lecture system draws heavily upon listening skills, and requires that college students function effectively as listeners from the very beginning of their academic careers. Thus listening is a primary activity of college students and in most cases, serves as a primary channel for learning. In addition, "a student's listening index correlated most positively with success or lack of it in college"(Feyten, 1991, p.174).

The last, but not the least, advantage of an emphasis on listening comprehension is the psychological advantage. "Forcing learners to produce language before they are cognitively, emotionally, and linguistically ready is traumatic" (Dunkel, 1991, p.436). Without the pressure of early oral production learners can relax and focus on developing listening skills, and on internalizing the rules that will facilitate the development of other skills.

Not only is listening comprehension important at the beginning stages of SLA, it is crucial for intermediate and advanced-level learners as well. When asked to identify the relative importance of listening, speaking, reading and writing for international students' academic success, US and Canadian professors gave the receptive skills of listening and reading the highest ratings (Dunkel, 1991). Also, the importance of LC was the only area of real agreement between students and professors in their ranking of seven aural/oral skills (Ferris, 1998).

Until recently, however, listening comprehension has attracted "the least attention of the four skills" (Call, 1985, p.765). In many instances it is treated "like a neglected stepchild" (Oxford, 1993, p.205) and is, in Feyten's (1993) words, "an overlooked dimension in language acquisition" (p.173). This neglect may have stemmed from the misconception that listening is a passive activity and that merely exposing the student to the spoken language at an appropriate level is adequate for comprehension to occur. Thus students are expected to develop their listening ability "by osmosis and without help" (Mendelson, 1984, cited in Oxford, 1993, p.205). This brings up the question of what listening comprehension means. Although listening is categorized as a receptive skill, it does not follow that it is passive assimilation of language input. As a matter of fact, listening is anything but a passive activity. According to Vandergrift (1999), listening is a "complex, active process in which the listener must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intonation, retain what was gathered in all of the above, and interpret it in the immediate as well as the larger sociocultural context of the utterance. Coordinating all of this involves a great deal of mental activity on the part of the listener" (p.168). Thus listening comprehension is a

highly complex problem-solving activity; it is at the same time an interactive, interpretive process in which the listener actively engages in a dynamic construction of meaning.

Listening is hard work, and as such it deserves more attention and research.

The dimensions of difficulty involved in listening comprehension are manifested in a number of ways. First, unlike the other skill areas over which learners have at least some degree of control, the listening process is almost completely beyond the control of listeners: they must deal with the stream of speech exactly as it reaches them, especially in situations involving minimum interaction, such as listening to the radio or to lectures. Second, the transitory nature of the listening task makes it different from and harder than reading. With reading, there is a time element that can be manipulated and what is more, readers can go back to check their interpretation. With listening, however, listeners must process the incoming speech as it flashes past, and there is nothing to go back to. Third, second language listening necessarily requires more effort on the part of learners than the native language process because of their imperfect knowledge of the linguistic code. Learners must gain entry into a new form/meaning system, and the sound entities with which meanings are to be associated are unfamiliar or unknown. Finally, there is the constraint of short-term memory. Findings from research indicated that "memory span for target language input is shorter than for native language input" (O'Malley, Chamot, & Kupper, 1989, p.420). Because it takes a longer time to process target language data, "short-term memory for target language words is often overloaded, causing words to be purged before they can be organized and interpreted" (Call, 1985, p.766). Obviously, an enormous amount of processing capability is required of the learner to attend to all these aspects of the listening activity.

In the area of ESL study, recognition of the highly demanding nature of listening activities has incited a number of researchers to probe the specific factors that affect L2 comprehension. In a survey of 70 Chinese teachers and 60 students, Boyle (1984) indicated the factors perceived to be most salient influences on EFL listening comprehension in terms of (a) listener factors (e.g. intelligence, memory, motivation and background information); (b) speaker factors, such as language ability of the speaker, quality of the speaker's production, speed of delivery and prestige and personality of the speaker; and (c) factors in the material and medium (e.g. language used to convey the message, difficulty of content and concepts, and amount of support provided by gestures, visuals, etc.). Samuels (1984) identified a number of factors "inside and outside the head" that influence listening: intelligence, language facility, background knowledge, metacognitive strategies, kinetics, motivation, topic, speaker awareness, clarity, and context. Dunkel (1991), in studying the factors influencing the success or failure of native and second language listening comprehension, also summarized the elements both "inside the head" and "outside the head" that affect NL comprehension in positive and negative ways, such as personal internal distractions, personal disinterest in the topic of the message, inattentiveness, emotional responses toward the speaker, the rate at which material is presented, and the conceptual difficulty and organization of the information presented. He concluded that all of the internal and external barriers for NL comprehension serve also to confound comprehension of L2 messages. In her review of second language listening comprehension research, Rubin (1994) specified five major factors that researchers believe affect LC: text characteristics, interlocutor characteristics, task characteristics, listener characteristics, and process characteristics.

Since listening comprehension is a covert activity that goes on inside the brain of the language learner, researchers have become interested in discovering the mental processes learners use while listening and looked into what learners actually do as aural input is processed. O'Malley et al.'s (1989) study, using think-aloud procedures, differentiated the mental processes of listeners into three theory-based cognitive phases of perception, parsing and utilization. According to Anderson (1983, 1985, in O'Malley et al., 1989), the cognitive framework of language comprehension, as it applies to listening, consists of (1) perceptual processing, which involves encoding the acoustic message by segmenting phonemes from the stream of speech and retaining the sounds in echoic memory; (2) parsing, during which words and messages are used to construct meaningful mental representations; and (3) utilization, which means relating the mental representation of the text meaning to existing knowledge. In a similar study, Goh (2000) also offered a cognitive perspective on the comprehension problems of L2 listeners through the procedures of learners' self reports: diaries, interviews, and introspective verbalizations. Her analysis yielded 10 problems that emerged during the same three-phase cognitive processes discussed in O'Malley et al.'s article. An earlier report of the same study (Goh, 1997) investigated learners' metacognitive awareness of person knowledge, task knowledge, and strategy knowledge in the listening experience. In still another report of the diary study, Goh (1999) examined the perceptions of the factors that influence listening comprehension among the same group of subjects. Of the twenty factors categorized under five characteristics—text, listener, speaker, task, and environment—five were reported by more than two-thirds of the participants: vocabulary, prior knowledge, speech rate, type of input, and speaker's accent. In a more recent survey

research, Hasan (2000) provided empirical evidence to the kinds of listening problems encountered by EFL learners and showed how the problems were perceived by learners themselves: problems pertinent to the message they listened to, the speaker, and the listener. It looked, in particular, at learner strategies, features of the listening text, characteristics of the speaker, attitudes of the listener, the task to be completed as a result of understanding the text, and the degree of visual or written support for the aural input. The results of the study showed that EFL learners are quite aware of the factors that hinder or assist their listening comprehension. In addition, various techniques that help learners to utilize effective strategies to confront their problems were discussed and the pedagogical implications stated.

At the same time, researchers have explored the strategies that learners use or the strategies that can be taught to learners to improve their listening ability. Studies of the listening strategies of successful learners have uncovered a number of cognitive and metacognitive strategies that assist the listening process. Cognitive strategies are behaviors, techniques, or actions used by learners to facilitate acquisition of knowledge or a skill (Derry & Murphy, 1986; Rubin, 1987; in Thompson & Rubin, 1996). These strategies result from the need to respond to specific problems that learners encounter in the comprehension process. Metacognitive strategies are "management techniques by which learners control their learning process via planning, monitoring, evaluating and modifying their learning approaches" (Thompson & Rubin, 1996, P.331). Cognitive strategies include elaboration, inference, prediction, and visualization. Metacognitive operations, on the other hand, consist of flexible use of strategies and self-monitoring.

These studies reveal that learners learn best when they combine cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and that strategy instruction does make a difference.

THE PRESENT STUDY

As is evident from the literature review, efforts have been made by a number of researchers to identify the difficulties experienced by second language listeners and how they deal with the difficulties. More empirical study, however, is needed to explore learners' own perceptions of their listening experience since listening cannot be observed directly and defined precisely. Learners' perceptions may offer clues to the sources of difficulties—how or why comprehension breaks down—and the strategies learners use to overcome the challenges.

This is what the present research tries to demonstrate. Taking into consideration the importance of the listening ability to language students and its dimensions of difficulty, the study reported here is another attempt to investigate what learners know about their listening comprehension problems in actual classroom practice. It should be noted that learners' perceptions of their listening problems and strategies could affect their comprehension in either positive or negative ways. When listeners know more about their own problems, strategies and attitudes they will be able to improve their listening practice and become better listeners. In addition to insights based on theoretical explanations, more empirical research in the classroom is necessary to bridge the gap between what theory says and what learners actually know and do. This research, therefore, is intended to identify the LC problems as perceived by a particular group of classroom learners themselves, and explore the strategies they use in response to the problems. It is also intended to raise teachers' awareness of these problematic areas in LC so that appropriate

treatment measures can be taken. It is hoped that findings from this research will provide insights for the teaching and learning of LC skills.

By using the same questionnaire, the present project offers a replication of Hasan's (2000) EFL study, in which native speakers of Arabic (n=81) learning English as a foreign language at a university in Syria responded to a questionnaire of 34 statements and a couple of open questions. It would be interesting and illuminating, this author thinks, to compare results from learners of different language backgrounds (mostly East Asian) and proficiency levels (intermediate/advanced) in an ESL context, and similar research has not been found in LC literature. Specifically, the present study intends to address the following questions:

- (1) What do learners know about the factors that affect their listening comprehension?
- (2) Do learners of different language backgrounds display similar patterns of listening problems?
- (3) Do learners of different proficiency levels display different patterns of listening problems?

The hypotheses based on previous research are: (1) Learners are, to a considerable degree, aware of their listening comprehension problems as well as the factors that influence their listening experience positively and negatively; (2) Learners of different language backgrounds display similar patterns of listening problems, as no evidence has been found that argues otherwise; and (3) Learners of different proficiency levels display different patterns of listening problems, as language proficiency has been found to be a major variable in almost all of the studies on LC. It seems to be an important indicator distinguishing effective listeners from ineffective ones.

Method

Subjects

Subjects for this study were 106 international students at the University of Hawaii at Manoa in the fall semester, 2002. All were non-native speakers of English and came from a variety of (mostly oriental) first language backgrounds, with the largest three represented by Japanese (47.2%), Korean (19.8%), and Chinese (17.0%). While simultaneously enrolled in one or more content courses in their regular academic programs, subjects were also taking English Language Institute (ELI) listening and speaking classes, with 43 of them in the ELI70 (intermediate-level) classes and 63 in the ELI80 (advanced-level) classes, as differentiated by their TOEFL scores. These classes meet twice or three times a week for a total of 150 minutes. All subjects had previously had varying amounts of formal ESL/EFL instruction in the United States or in their home countries. Their length of stay in the U.S. ranged from 3 months to 8 years, but about half of them (52.1%) had less than one year of ESL experience. They ranged in age from 17 to 43, with the majority (68.9%) in their twenties.

Instrument

As this is a replication of Hasan's (2000) study, the same questionnaire was used to elicit data. According to Hasan, the questionnaire administered to the EFL learners in his study consisted of 34 questions, but for some reason only results from 26 questions were reported. Thus the replicated questionnaire was composed of 26 questions asking subjects to identify their listening comprehension problems by responding to statements arranged from "never," "seldom," "sometimes," "often," to "always." As in the original study, subjects were also asked to respond to open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire to point out other factors that "interfere with" or "help" their English listening comprehension.

Procedures

The survey was conducted a little more than half way through the semester. A total of 9 classes were involved in the process. In most cases class instructors distributed the questionnaires for subjects either to take home or to finish at the end of the regular class periods. In two instances this researcher went to the classroom and handed out the survey questions for subjects to take home. A small token of thanks was given to each participant as an expression of the researcher's appreciation for his/her time.

Analysis

Descriptive analyses of the results will be reported in percentages to indicate the extent to which various listening problems affect the sample population, and the patterns of these problems in terms of different language backgrounds and proficiency levels.

Results

Learner Strategies

Table 1 Learners' perceptions of listening strategies

Item No.	Statements	Never %	Seldom %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
1	Pre-listening information about the text improves my listening comprehension.	1.88	10.37	31.13	31.13	25.47
2	I use my experience and background knowledge of the topic to understand the spoken text.	0.00	0.95	20.00	40.95	38.09
3	I listen to every detail to get the main idea of the spoken text.	1.88	25.47	38.67	26.41	7.54

Appropriate listening strategies have been shown to assist comprehension (O'Malley & Chamot, 1989; Thompson & Rubin, 1996); thus it is important to know what strategies learners use to their advantage and what strategies they use adversely. Table 1 shows that the strategies learners employ in tackling listening comprehension tasks are only partially effective. On the

one hand, more than half respondents (often or always) use effective listening strategies such as taking advantage of pre-listening information (56.6%) and background knowledge (79.0%) to help them understand the message, while another 51% sometimes do so. Pre-listening information about the topic can assist comprehension because it helps to build up prediction. The more you know about the speaker and the better acquainted you are with the topic, the more prepared you will be for what he/she is going to say. In cases of professional talks or academic lectures, in particular, listeners must be equipped with significant stores of related knowledge to bring to the situation; otherwise the task of comprehension would be simply overwhelming. Background knowledge plays a crucial role in the comprehension process because it enables listeners not only to form expectations but also to make inferences. Cognitive scientists believe that knowledge is organized in the forms of scripts, also called frames or schemata (Long, 1990), that is, stereotyped scenarios and sequences of actions that define well-known situations (Long, 1989). “Schemata aid comprehension by providing a context and filling in missing information”(Long, 1990, p.66). Thus they enable the listener to anticipate what will come next, to predict conclusion, and to infer meaning. The advantage of activating learners’ existing scripts in appropriate situations is obvious in the L2 comprehension process. Listeners, as a general rule, make use of two kinds of information to identify the meaning of spoken texts: real world (background) knowledge and linguistic knowledge. Because L2 learners have imperfect control of the linguistic code (linguistic knowledge), they must rely on a frame of reference (background knowledge) into which they can fit the bits and pieces that they have comprehended. Listeners who make effective use of schematic knowledge can be said to use “top-down” or meaning-based processing (O’Malley &

Chamot, 1989), for they are drawing upon existing information in memory to comprehend content or meaning.

On the other hand, Table 1 also shows that contrary to what effective listeners do, a lot of students use ineffective listening strategies by listening to every detail to get the main idea of the listening material (72.7% do this sometimes, often or always). Instead of paying selective attention to important details, these listeners are under the false impression that they must understand every single word in order to get the message. Listeners who interpret meaning based on their perception of the sum of all the discrete sounds, syllables, words or phrases are using “bottom-up” processing (Oxford, 1993), which does play a role in L2 listening, but which can result in loss of information if undue attention is focused on linguistic details of aural input. For L2 listening to be effective and successful, it requires substantial amounts of “top-down” processing in which meaning is inferred from broad contextual clues and background information.

Compared to Hasan’s EFL learners (see Appendix A), subjects in this study are at a slight disadvantage with respect to the strategies discussed: more learners in Hasan’s study (75.2%, compared to 56.6%) often or always take advantage of pre-listening information. In addition, more learners make use of the effective listening strategy of not attending to every detail (40.6% never or seldom listen to every detail, compared to 27.4% in this study). It might be that subjects in this study do not feel they have frequent pre-listening activities in the classroom, instead of saying that these activities do not help them. As for different proficiency levels, 70-level subjects are at a slight advantage in making use of the first two strategies (see Appendix B), while both groups tend to worry too much about details.

The Listening Text

Table 2 Learners' perceptions of listening problems related to the message

Item No.	Statements	Never %	Seldom %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
4	Unfamiliar words interfere with my listening comprehension.	0.00	6.60	32.07	32.07	29.24
5	Difficult grammatical structures interfere with my listening comprehension.	1.88	20.75	34.90	20.75	21.69
6	I find it difficult to interpret the meaning of a long spoken text.	0.94	9.43	38.67	33.96	16.98

Features of the listening text may present comprehension problems, the major sources of difficulty being unfamiliar words, complex grammatical structures, and long spoken texts. According to Table 2, students are, to a great extent, aware of the problems pertinent to characteristics of the material they listen to. Unfamiliar vocabulary seems to be the number one difficulty interfering with their listening comprehension (93.4% sometimes, often or always). This conforms to Kelly's (1991) study which provided empirical support to the claim that lexical ignorance is the main obstacle to L2 auditory comprehension beyond the intermediate stage. The fact that so many students regard vocabulary as the major factor affecting their comprehension shows that it is a dominant perception among students. The same view was also found in Boyle's (1984) and Goh's (1999) studies. It seems that for many learners knowing the meaning of words is crucial for their understanding. Complex grammatical structures appear to have similar effect (77.3% sometimes, often or always). This, along with unfamiliar vocabulary, is in line with Vogely's (1998) findings that difficulty in LC is, to a large part, perceived to be due to the structural component of the text. Students may feel that their listening activity is often "interrupted" by new words and complicated syntax, and while they are fixated on these words and structures, they miss out on the overall message. This shows the

inadequacy of the bottom-up processing strategy in which students rely on word and sentence-level analysis for interpreting meaning. A majority of learners seem to believe that “meaning resides exclusively within those unfamiliar words and structures” (Hasan, 2000, p.143). Thus they are engaged in a painstaking attempt to unlock the meaning of individual words and sentences, rather than infer the meaning from contexts or relevant prior knowledge --- a top-down processing strategy.

Learners also find it difficult to understand long spoken texts (89.6% sometimes, often or always). Research findings indicated that memory span for target language input is shorter than for native language input (Call, 1985). As long texts tend to contain longer utterances with embedded clauses, students find them especially difficult to digest owing to limitations of short-term memory. Besides, the length of listening time for long texts may place an additional burden on memory, and may cause lapses in concentration and even fatigue, resulting in loss of information and comprehension breakdown.

A comparison with Hasan’s report indicates that subjects in the present study experience more serious problems regarding linguistic features of listening texts. Almost twice as many students in this study (often or always) encounter difficulties of this type as those in the original study. It might be the case, though, that ESL learners were responding to both ESL classes and mainstream content classes, where they are more likely to be exposed to difficult vocabulary and varied sentence structures found in academic lectures. In terms of proficiency levels, 70-level students perceive these difficulties as occurring more frequently (often or always) than 80-level students, while the latter tend more to describe problems in this respect as occurring only sometimes.

Listening Task

Table 3 Learners' perceptions of listening problems: Tasks and Activities

Item No.	Statements	Never %	Seldom %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
7	I find it difficult to predict what speakers are going to say from the title of the spoken text.	4.71	29.24	50.00	10.37	5.66
8	After my teacher stops the tape I find it difficult to predict what will come next.	5.76	25.00	41.34	19.23	8.65
9	I find it difficult to do listening activities in pair work.	10.47	37.14	35.23	14.28	2.85
10	I find it difficult to do listening activities in group work.	10.37	44.33	27.35	13.20	4.71
11	I find it difficult to hold a discussion after listening to the spoken text.	12.26	27.35	37.73	16.98	5.66
12	I find it difficult to write a summary of the spoken text.	3.77	17.92	39.62	24.52	14.15

Table 3 illustrates the difficulties encountered by listeners in completing certain tasks and activities intended to encourage them to develop their listening comprehension abilities. More than half subjects (sometimes or often) find it difficult to do prediction tasks (either from the title of the text, 60.4%, or in what will come after a certain point, 60.6%). This may result from learners' inappropriate technique of processing every single word rather than focusing attention on content words and contextual cues which might help them set up predictions. Lack of vocabulary and struggle with syntactic structures may also play a role: if listeners do not understand what comes before, they are not able to predict what will come next. Furthermore, some learners may not be aware that they can make use of their existing knowledge about the topic to predict what the speaker is going to say.

Listening activities that are interactive in nature, such as those done either in pairs or in groups, pose only minor problems. Nearly half of the subjects seldom or never find it difficult

to do listening activities in pair or group work, and another third find it difficult sometimes. This may be attributed to the fact that interactive listening tasks provide learners with “a supportive environment for both listening and speaking” (Hasan, 2000, p.144). Students feel relatively comfortable with such activities because they encourage collaboration and negotiation for meaning through interaction.

Finally, Table 3 shows that some students are not adequately trained to practice listening in relation to other language skills, such as speaking and writing. While nearly 40% do not find it hard to hold a discussion after listening, 54.7% sometimes or often find it hard to do so. Slightly more students (64.1% sometimes or often) find it hard to write a summary of the listening text. Thus learners need some more training in incorporating listening with the other skills of speaking, reading and writing to enhance their comprehension capacities.

Findings from the present research regarding listening tasks and activities are similar to those reported by Hasan, with the notable exception that much more subjects in this study seldom or never experience difficulty in pair or group work (54.7%, compared to 23.5% in Hasan’s study). This is probably because group work is a much more common practice in ESL classrooms. With different proficiency levels, not much difference is found between the two groups as far as listening tasks and activities are concerned, except that more subjects at the intermediate level reported difficulties in prediction.

The Speaker

Table 4 Learners' perceptions of listening problems related to the speaker

Item No.	Statements	Never %	Seldom %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
13	I find it difficult to understand natural speech which is full of hesitation and pauses.	4.71	18.86	51.88	16.98	7.54
14	I find it difficult to understand the meaning of words which are not pronounced clearly.	0.00	6.60	30.18	42.45	20.75
15	I find it difficult to understand the meaning of the spoken text without seeing the speaker's body language.	7.61	31.42	39.04	18.09	3.80
16	I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast.	0.00	7.54	27.35	38.67	26.41
17	I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak with varied accents.	0.94	5.66	34.90	35.84	22.64
18	Visual clues help me understand the spoken text (pictures, diagrams, video, etc.).	0.00	0.94	15.09	31.13	52.83
19	Tape scripts provided before listening exercises help me understand the text.	0.00	4.71	25.47	37.73	32.07

Factors affecting LC with respect to the speaker include pronunciation, speech rate, accents, and presence or absence of visual clues. Table 4 shows that students (seldom or sometimes, 70.7%) find it difficult to understand natural speech full of hesitations and pauses. Earlier research in this field was inconclusive. Voss's (1979, in Rubin, 1994) findings indicated that hesitation phenomena in real, spontaneous speech cause perceptual problems and comprehension errors for non-native speakers. Language learners are sometimes bothered by hesitations and pauses in natural speech probably because they "get stuck in bottom-up processing of phonetic utterances that do not affect meaning"(Rubin, 1994), while native speakers possess strategies to discard such utterances in favor of top-down processing of

meaning. Blau (1990), however, came to a different conclusion from his study of the effect of syntax, speed, and pauses on listening comprehension. What he found is that at most levels of proficiency, pauses seem to enhance the comprehensibility of aural input, more than either mechanical slowing or “normal” rate of delivery. This suggests that learners can sometimes benefit from the extra processing time provided by the pauses.

Learners also encounter problems when speakers speak too fast (65.1% often or always) or with varied accents (58.5%), or produce words that are not clearly pronounced (63.2%). As Goh (1999) pointed out, the perception of speed could have been due to the differences in the nature of spoken English and the oriental languages spoken by most of the subjects. Japanese, Korean and Chinese are considered to be syllable-timed languages in which words are given more or less equal stress. English, on the other hand, is a stress-timed language. Given the L1 background of the students, they might expect to hear every word and might not be used to hearing speech with a lot of unstressed syllables. In addition, spoken English contains such features as weak forms, blending, liaison, deletion and assimilation, which could further compound perception difficulties. Furthermore, learners may not have adequate processing time for fast speech (Flowerdew & Miller, 1992). In terms of varied accents and unclear pronunciation, it is easy to understand why students are having trouble in these aspects since they have been accustomed to clear, “standard” English on published tapes.

It seems that subjects in this study don’t find it particularly difficult to interpret the meaning of spoken texts without seeing the speaker’s body language (39.0% never or seldom, 39.0% sometimes). While speakers’ facial expressions and gestures might sometimes offer clues that aid comprehension, students depend much more on other forms of visual support such as pictures, diagrams, charts, and video recordings (84.0% often or always) and tape scripts

(69.8%). This accords with previous research which concluded that the use of video as a means of presenting listening passages facilitates information processing and enhances L2 comprehension (Long, 1989; Thompson & Rubin, 1996; Berne, 1998). Visual support plays an important part in assisting LC because it provides more interesting and motivating input, and makes the topic more comprehensible by offering nonverbal clues and contextual cues. Written support in the form of tape scripts also benefits listeners as it acts as visual reinforcement for “intangible” aural messages.

A comparison with Hasan’s results reveals that with regard to learners’ perceptions of listening problems related to the speaker, EFL learners more frequently encounter difficulties in speed of delivery (83.9% often or always) and varied accents (70.3%), compared to 65.1% and 58.5% respectively in the present study. This might be attributed to the fact that ESL learners are more used to natural speech and different accents they are exposed to inside and outside the classroom. As far as proficiency levels are concerned, intermediate level learners tend to have more problems with unclear pronunciation, varied accents and in particular, hesitant speech. On the other hand, they tend to benefit more from non-verbal assistance such as body language, visual clues (pictures, video, etc.) and tape scripts. Again this is in line with previous findings that “more proficient language learners, because of their linguistic abilities, need less stimulation (such as visual contextual cues) to activate appropriate scripts,” and that “less proficient learners, who are not able to rely on linguistic cues, have greater need of the auxiliary visual organizer” (Long, 1989, p.37).

Listener Attitudes

Table 5 Learners' perceptions of listening problems related to the listener

Item No.	Statements	Never %	Seldom %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
20	I find it more difficult to listen to a recorded spoken text than to my teacher reading aloud.	3.77	9.43	38.67	26.41	21.69
21	Unclear sounds resulting from poor-quality tape-recorder interfere with my listening comprehension.	0.94	4.71	24.52	31.13	38.67
22	Unclear sounds resulting from poor classroom conditions or outside noise interfere with my listening comprehension.	2.83	6.60	34.90	34.90	20.75
23	I find it difficult to get a general understanding of the spoken text from the first listening.	3.77	9.43	50.00	30.18	6.60
24	I feel nervous and worried when I don't understand the spoken text.	1.88	15.09	31.13	31.13	20.75
25	I find it difficult to answer questions which require other than a short answer (e.g. why or how questions).	3.77	15.09	43.39	25.47	12.26
26	I find it difficult to understand the spoken text which is not of interest to me.	1.88	9.43	40.56	31.13	16.98

Listeners' problems may arise as a result of lack of interest in the listening material, anxiety, and other negative attitudes caused by type of input, sound quality, and the demand for answers to questions that involve deeper cognitive thinking. Table 5 indicates that in general, students find it easier to listen to their teachers than to recorded texts (38.7% sometimes, 48.1 % often or always). Students may be more familiar with the pronunciation and accent of their teachers, and teachers may control and adjust their speech as they deliver listening passages, both of which contribute to improved comprehension. Presenting listening exercises through a tape recorder seems to be a common way of classroom teaching. However, tape recordings are not always clear, and unclear sounds resulting from poor-quality tape recorders often (31.1%) or always

(38.7%) prevent listeners from getting the message. Learners also reported that unclear sounds from the environment (poor classroom conditions or outside noise) interfere with their understanding (34.9% sometimes, 55.7% often or always). This is especially true with listening to recorded speeches, where students cannot interrupt the speaker to ask for clarifications. Table 5 also shows that students sometimes (50%) or often (30.2%) find it hard to get a general understanding of the text from the first listening, and this factor may create psychological problems, as 51.9% (often or always) feel nervous and worried when comprehension breaks down. Anxiety, in turn, will affect comprehension adversely (Vogely, 1998; Goh, 1999), leading to further loss of information and even confidence.

Listeners find it difficult to answer questions which require some degree of explanation or analysis (43.4% sometimes, 37.7% often or always). This implies that some students lack the ability to synthesize what is heard other than recalling bits and pieces of information. More training is needed in this area for learners not only to know “what” but also to understand “why” and “how.” Finally, motivation and interest also significantly influence listeners’ understanding of aural messages. It was found that nearly 50% subjects often or always find it hard to follow materials they are not interested in, and another 40% sometimes feel so.

EFL learners in Hasan’s study tend to encounter more problems in type of input (recorded speech as opposed to teaching reading), noise (resulting both from quality of equipment and from classroom conditions), and first listening experience. To some extent, this may be the result of different teaching and learning conditions in EFL and ESL contexts. Different proficiency levels also display a slightly different pattern of difficulties. While 70-level learners experience greater trouble in understanding recorded speech and getting the message from first

listening, 80-level students more often find it hard to answer “why” or “how” questions, probably because the latter more frequently encounter this type of questions than the former.

Other Factors

76.4% of participants responded to the open questions at the end of the questionnaire. Of these, 77.8% responded to both, and the rest responded to one of the questions. In response to the question of what other factors interfere with their listening comprehension, learners listed unfamiliar vocabulary, especially slang words and idioms, the speaker’s accent, fast speech, unclear or incorrect pronunciation, uninteresting or unfamiliar topics, poor physical conditions (e.g. fatigue, illness), unfavorable state of mind (anxiety, stress, nervousness, etc.), and noise. It seems that instead of listing *other* factors, learners listed *important* factors that hinder their aural comprehension. It can be seen that these factors are mainly related to the text, the speaker, and the listener. This is in accordance with Goh’s (1999) findings which identified five major characteristics of the twenty factors that affect Chinese learners’ LC: text, listener, speaker, task, and environment.

Learners’ answers to the question of what other factors help their listening comprehension centered on visual aid (body language, video, movies or TV, written support, etc.), pre-listening information, background knowledge, moderate or slow speech, clear recording or pronunciation, making friends with native speakers, listening to the radio, interesting topics, and ease of mind. Again, learners focused on *important* factors that aid their auditory understanding.

Discussion

Findings from this research that investigated learners’ perceptions of listening comprehension strategies and problems have provided evidence that ESL listeners encounter a range of problems related to the listening text, tasks and activities, the speaker, and the listener.

Moreover, it was found that these learners are, to some extent, poorly equipped with effective strategies and skills that help to enhance their listening comprehension ability. The findings provide support to hypothesis (1) that learners are keenly aware of their listening comprehension problems as well as the factors that influence their listening experience in positive and negative ways. A comparison with Hasan's study indicates that learners of different language backgrounds display both similar and different patterns of listening problems. But it is not clear whether the differences found can be attributed to language backgrounds, as they might have been caused by different proficiency levels or social contexts (EFL/ESL). Thus hypothesis (2) is only tentatively supported. As for learners of different proficiency levels (intermediate/advanced), they do display slightly different patterns of problems, although not as much as expected. This is probably because some of the 80-level students were those who had just finished their 70-level study in the previous semester, thus the difference in proficiency between the two groups of subjects is not as great as it was assumed. Hypothesis (3), therefore, is partially supported.

The identification of listening comprehension problems as reported in the present research has significant implications, for identifying problems would be the first step toward searching for solutions, and studies in LC strategies would be more informative and meaningful with a clearer picture of what difficulties they are supposed to overcome. Based on the findings of this research, the following guidelines for listening activities are proposed for tackling learners' LC problems.

(1) Pre-listening

As students themselves have realized it, pre-listening activities facilitate listening comprehension if they provide relevant information about the topic that assists inference and

prediction. Preparing students to listen to a text can involve discussion of unfamiliar vocabulary, difficult grammatical structures, prior knowledge about the content to be expected, and other relevant information about the speaker and the text. Questions can also be provided and previewed to guide the search for meaning. The more work the teacher and student can do together before the student is exposed to the listening material, the better prepared the student will be for inference and prediction.

(2) Listening in progress

While listening to spoken texts, students can practice taking notes of key words and main points to work out the gist of the talk. To familiarize students with the speed of natural speech, activities can be designed to help students identify the features of spoken input, such as stress patterns, reduced forms, linking, deletion, and blending. Visual aid should be provided whenever possible, and written support should be available after students have made their initial attempts to understand the text without it. Listening topics should be interesting and engaging, and relevant to students' academic knowledge or life experience. In addition, a relaxed classroom atmosphere is important, as students feel they can concentrate best without stress and anxiety.

(3) Post-listening

Paired or grouped discussions can be held after listening for students to share what they have learned about the topic. Interactive activities can help to reduce tension and pressure, as they create a supportive atmosphere through negotiation for meaning. Summaries and reactions in written form are also helpful, since they can reinforce the aural message in a more tangible fashion. Other exercises such as true-false or multiple-choice questions are useful too as a means of evaluation.

It should be made clear to students that they are not expected to understand 100% of whatever they listen to, nor are they expected to produce 100% correct answers. As Brown and Yule (1983) pointed out, only a reasonable interpretation is required (in Hasan, 2000). In particular, students should be trained to pay attention to the overall message rather than listen to every detail. They should be aware that intelligent guesswork is a useful strategy to cope with unfamiliar vocabulary, and that background information plays an important role in making inferences and predictions. What is more, classroom tasks should be designed to *teach* listening comprehension rather than *test* it.

In summary, this study offers a number of pedagogical implications in addition to presenting a general picture of learners' perceptions of LC problems and strategies. However, it does not investigate teachers' views of teaching LC. Examination of teachers' perceptions is needed in future research to shed further light on this important but often neglected language skill. More in-depth research is also needed to examine the relationship of listening to other language skills, such as speaking, reading, and writing, and how to incorporate listening with these skills, since they are never separated in real life communication.

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Appendix A

Results from Hasan's (2000) Study

Item No.	Statements	Never %	Seldom %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
1	Pre-listening information about the text improves my listening comprehension.	1.25	1.25	22.3	29.6	45.6
2	I use my experience and background knowledge of the topic to understand the spoken text.	1.23	2.4	22.27	40.7	33.4
3	I listen to every detail to get the main idea of the spoken text.	12.3	28.3	32.0	18.5	8.9
4	Unfamiliar words interfere with my listening comprehension.	1.2	11.1	48.3	32.0	7.4
5	Difficult grammatical structures interfere with my listening comprehension.	4.9	25.9	40.7	19.7	8.8
6	I find it difficult to interpret the meaning of a long spoken text.	2.4	19.7	49.3	22.2	6.4
7	I find it difficult to predict what speakers are going to say from the title of the spoken text.	11.1	23.4	40.7	23.4	1.4
8	After my teacher stops the tape I find it difficult to predict what will come next.	3.7	22.2	48.3	20.9	4.9
9	I find it difficult to do listening activities in pair work.	18.5	34.7	33.3	11.1	2.4
10	I find it difficult to do listening activities in group work.	7.4	16.1	46.9	22.2	7.4
11	I find it difficult to hold a discussion after listening to the spoken text.	11.1	33.3	37.0	16.2	2.4
12	I find it difficult to write a summary of the spoken text.	7.4	16.0	46.9	22.3	7.4
13	I find it difficult to understand natural speech which is full of hesitation and pauses.	2.4	23.4	44.7	24.6	4.9
14	I find it difficult to understand the meaning of words which are not pronounced clearly.	0	10.0	25.9	30.8	33.3
15	I find it difficult to understand the meaning of the spoken text without seeing the speaker's body language.	9.8	25.9	44.6	16.0	3.7

Item No.	Statements	Never %	Seldom %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
16	I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast.	0	0	16.1	43.2	40.7
17	I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak with varied accents.	0	4.9	24.8	37	33.3
18	Visual clues help me understand the spoken text (pictures, diagrams, charts, video, etc.).	0	0	18.6	39.5	41.9
19	Tape scripts provided before listening exercises help me understand the text.	0	4.9	22.4	27.1	45.6
20	I find it more difficult to listen to a recorded spoken text than to my teacher reading aloud.	4.9	6.3	14.8	35.8	38.2
21	Unclear sounds resulting from poor-quality tape-recorder interfere with my listening comprehension.	1.2	0	18.7	41.9	38.2
22	Unclear sounds resulting from poor classroom conditions or outside noise interfere with my listening comprehension.	0	1.2	24.8	44.4	29.6
23	I find it difficult to get a general understanding of the spoken text from the first listening.	1.2	14.8	32.0	40.7	11.3
24	I feel nervous and worried when I don't understand the spoken text.	9.8	11.4	24.6	28.3	25.9
25	I find it difficult to answer questions which require other than a short answer (e.g. why or how questions)	6.1	12.3	44.7	28.3	8.6
26	I find it difficult to understand the spoken text which is not of interest to me.	8.6	12.3	29.6	41.9	7.6

Open question:

List important factors that help and hinder your listening comprehension in English.

Appendix B

Results from the Present Study (Results from ELI70 subjects are presented in the upper line, and those from ELI80 subjects are in the lower line.)

(This is a survey of the needs in **listening comprehension** of ESL learners studying at American universities. Data collected will be used for a term paper the author is working on which is NOT intended for publication. Please feel free to contact the author if you have any questions or if you would like to have a copy of the final report. Thank you.)

Email: jtian@hawaii.edu

First Language _____

Major _____

Age _____

Length of time in the US _____

The following are statements about your **listening comprehension** in English.

Please check (✓) the appropriate box:

Item No.	Statements	Never %	Seldom %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
1	Pre-listening information about the text improves my listening comprehension.	4.65	4.65	30.23	34.88	25.58
		0.00	14.28	31.74	28.57	25.39
2	I use my experience and background knowledge of the topic to understand the spoken text.	0.00	2.32	13.95	32.55	51.16
		0.00	0.00	24.19	46.77	29.03
3	I listen to every detail to get the main idea of the spoken text.	4.65	25.58	39.53	20.93	9.30
		0.00	25.39	38.09	30.15	6.34
4	Unfamiliar words interfere with my listening comprehension.	0.00	2.32	30.23	30.23	37.20
		0.00	9.52	33.33	33.33	23.80
5	Difficult grammatical structures interfere with my listening comprehension.	0.00	30.23	13.95	25.58	30.23
		3.17	14.28	49.20	17.46	15.87
6	I find it difficult to interpret the meaning of a long spoken text.	0.00	9.30	30.23	39.53	20.93
		1.58	9.52	44.44	30.15	14.28
7	I find it difficult to predict what speakers are going to say from the title of the spoken text.	6.97	20.93	53.48	9.30	9.30
		3.17	34.92	47.61	11.11	3.17
8	After my teacher stops the tape I find it difficult to predict what will come next.	4.65	13.95	55.81	11.62	13.95
		6.34	31.74	30.15	23.80	4.76
9	I find it difficult to do listening activities in pair work.	4.76	42.85	35.71	11.90	4.76
		14.28	33.33	34.92	15.87	1.58
10	I find it difficult to do listening activities in group work.	4.65	46.51	30.23	13.95	4.65
		14.28	42.85	25.39	12.69	4.76
11	I find it difficult to hold a discussion after listening to the spoken text.	16.27	25.58	32.55	18.60	6.97
		9.52	28.57	41.26	15.87	4.76

Item No.	Statements	Never %	Seldom %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
12	I find it difficult to write a summary of the spoken text.	2.32 4.76	11.62 22.22	37.20 41.26	30.23 20.63	18.60 11.11
13	I find it difficult to understand natural speech which is full of hesitation and pauses.	2.32 6.34	13.95 22.22	51.16 52.38	18.60 15.87	13.95 3.17
14	I find it difficult to understand the meaning of words which are not pronounced clearly.	0.00 0.00	6.97 6.34	25.58 33.33	41.86 42.85	25.58 17.46
15	I find it difficult to understand the meaning of the spoken text without seeing the speaker's body language.	4.65 9.67	20.93 38.70	37.20 40.32	30.23 9.67	6.97 1.61
16	I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast.	0.00 0.00	6.97 7.93	30.23 25.39	37.20 39.68	25.58 26.98
17	I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak with varied accents.	2.32 0.00	4.65 6.34	30.23 38.09	37.20 34.92	25.58 20.63
18	Visual clues help me understand the spoken text (pictures, diagrams, video, etc.).	0.00 0.00	2.32 0.00	9.30 19.04	32.55 30.15	55.81 50.79
19	Tape scripts provided before listening exercises help me understand the text.	0.00 0.00	4.65 4.76	20.93 28.57	37.20 38.09	37.20 28.57
20	I find it more difficult to listen to a recorded spoken text than to my teacher reading aloud.	4.65 3.17	4.65 12.69	30.23 44.44	30.23 23.80	30.23 15.87
21	Unclear sounds resulting from poor-quality tape-recorder interfere with my listening comprehension.	0.00 1.58	2.32 6.34	27.90 22.22	18.60 39.68	51.16 30.15
22	Unclear sounds resulting from Poor classroom conditions or outside noise interfere with my listening comprehension.	2.32 3.17	6.97 6.34	30.23 38.09	44.18 28.57	16.27 23.80
23	I find it difficult to get a general understanding of the spoken text from the first listening.	4.65 3.17	2.32 14.28	46.51 52.38	39.53 23.80	6.97 6.34
24	I feel nervous and worried when I don't understand the spoken text.	2.32 1.58	9.30 19.04	37.20 26.98	25.58 34.92	25.58 17.46

Item No.	Statements	Never %	Seldom %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
25	I find it difficult to answer questions which require other than a short answer (e.g. why or how questions).	4.65	18.60	46.51	20.93	9.30
		3.17	12.69	41.26	28.57	14.28
26	I find it difficult to understand the spoken text which is not of interest to me.	2.32	11.62	41.86	20.93	23.25
		1.58	7.93	39.68	38.09	12.69

Open questions:

1. List other factors that **interfere with** your listening comprehension:

2. List other factors that **help** your listening comprehension:

