

## **Listening Comprehension Difficulties as Perceived by**

**Amna Abdelgadir Yousif**

*Assistant Professor,  
Department of English Language,  
College of Education, Almajmah, Saudi Arabia*

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**Abstract.** This paper reports the findings of a study into foreign language lectures conducted at tertiary level. The study investigated lecture comprehension problems of first year students listening to lectures in a FL subject matter classroom. Data was collected regarding the lecture comprehension difficulties of these students by means of a short open-ended questionnaire and interview. The analysis of the data provides an index of linguistic, conceptual, discourse, acoustic, environmental and psychological variables that hinder effective comprehension. The results of the study have implications for both EFL teachers and subject matter lecturers in the particular setting in which it was conducted as well as in similar FL tertiary levels.

### **Introduction**

L2 researchers are beginning to theorize about and investigate many of the barriers that detract from receivers' L2 comprehension. They discussed several obstacles that impact comprehension. These are divided into three main areas: listener factors, speaker factors and text factors.

Research on listener factors (Boyle [1], Faerch and Kasper [2], Sheils [3], Rost [4], Goh [5]) identified various factors as salient influences on EFL listening comprehension. These include: linguistic ability, ability to guess the meaning of unfamiliar terms, ability to use verbal and non-verbal strategies to compensate for gaps in linguistic ability, ability to infer meaning, ability to take notes, failure to understand the main points and logical argument.

In their study on the problems facing L2 students lecture comprehension, Flowerdew and Miller [6] indicated difficulty in concentration and maintaining concentration for a long time. This claim is supported by Underwood [7, p. 19] who stated that inability to concentrate "is a major problem because even the shortest break in attention can seriously impair comprehension." Goh [8] reported learners' difficulty in perception: students faced problems on recognition of familiar words. They stated that although they were familiar with some words, they were unable to remember their meaning immediately. They also expressed difficulty in understanding the intended message though they were familiar with literal meaning of words. Also noted were problems with processing the content of the message conveyed by the speaker because of lack of prior knowledge. On his article on lexical segmentation in L2 listening Field [9] attributed breakdown in listening comprehension to perceptual factors. He stated that understanding is impaired by students' failure to segment the word out of connected speech.

A number of applied linguists (Boyle [1], Sheils [3], Flowerdew and Miller [6], Griffiths [10, 11], Carroll [12], Zhao [13], Goh [5]) attributed problems of SL learners in understanding lectures to factors related to the speaker. These include: speech rate, repetition and paraphrasing.

Flowerdew and Miller [6] identified speed of delivery of lectures as a problem that faced their subjects who expressed their need for time to process the information. Underwood [7, p. 16] stated, "the greatest difficulty with listening comprehension.... is that the listener cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks."

The positive effect of reduced speech rate on comprehension was supported by Kelch [14] and was only partially supported by Griffiths [10, 11]. On two studies with semi scientific texts and stories Griffiths found that fast speech rate impaired comprehension. On the other hand, this claim was not supported by Blau [15] who found that fast speech rate did not significantly affect comprehension.

According to Rubin [16], the conflicting findings about the effect of speed of delivery on comprehension could be attributed to the differences in background knowledge, texts and measurement techniques.

Research on the effect of repetition and paraphrase on listening comprehension provided conflicting findings. Whereas Derwing [17] and Lynch [18] reported that redundancy and paraphrasing add to the listening load as they provide extra language to process, Chiang and Dunkel [19], Chaudron [20] and Pica *et al.* [21] working with high- and low-intermediate students found that redundancy facilitated students understanding of input.

Several studies (Boyle [1], Sheils [3], Faerch and Kasper [2], Olsen and Huckin [22], Goh [5]) identified text factors that are thought to affect processing oral discourse: complexity of lexis and syntax, density of information contained in the speech, excessive load of new terminology, excessive load of new concepts, asides and digressions.

Goh's [8] subjects reported problems with understanding long sentences and inability to understand subsequent parts if they missed part of the text. The subjects in Flowerdew and Miller's [6] study expressed difficulty with new terminology and new concepts which was attributed to the complexity of the subject and lack of background knowledge on the subject matter. Kennedy [23] identified sentence length and the amount of information contained in sentences as factors affecting comprehension. Leabuer [24] discerned another area which causes problems for L2 learners: the area of discourse markers. Leabuer's finding was supported by research carried out with Chinese students by Yuan [25] who found lack of discourse awareness. The students in this study demonstrated weakness at paying attention to the sequence of lecture because of their neglect of logical connectors.

The theoretical framework adopted here is Flavell's [26] task metacognitive knowledge, i.e. the students' knowledge about the objective, the requirements and the nature of learning to listen to speech. Following Flavell, Goh [5] identified three types of task knowledge. One of them is the factors influencing listening comprehension. It is these factors that concerns us in this article; the problems encountered by tertiary level students in listening to lectures.

This study is motivated by our students' inadequate listening experience as judged by our college entrance examination. In the system of education where the study was conducted, Arabic is the medium of instruction at all levels. English is taught as a requisite subject in the curriculum. However, in some colleges and universities, there are some departments that use English as a medium of instruction. On admission to these departments, students encounter various problems in pursuing their study in the medium of English. They particularly encounter difficulty in using English to communicate because among the four skills the aural/oral are the most neglected skills at the different educational levels. They are not emphasized by teachers nor by materials and the students are not motivated to use them to communicate. When they enroll in these departments, the students are confronted with the need for functioning effectively in English. They are required to use English for various activities. Listening to lectures is the most urgently needed as it is the main mode of information transfer. Academic listening skills are thus an essential component of communicative competence. Problematic features in listening to lectures that inhibit lecture comprehension warrant investigation. By investigating EFL lecture comprehension problems we can suggest appropriate methods to develop EFL learners' listening skills and guide content subject lecturers in how to present their lectures to ensure optimal comprehension.

Three questions were set:

1. What are the difficulties that university students encounter in listening to lectures?
2. What could EFL instructors do to better prepare their students for listening to lectures?
3. What advice could we offer content subject lecturers to facilitate lecture comprehension?

### **Subjects**

The subjects of the study were 50 first-year students majoring in English in their second semester at Almajmah College of Education. They were admitted to the English department on the merit of acquiring 80% or more on the school certificate examination. Their competence in English is at the pre-intermediate level as judged by their performance on the college admission examination. Prior to enrolling in college, they have encountered English as a subject at the intermediate and secondary levels. These students apparently face many problems in understanding lectures. These include their limited language ability, their unfamiliarity with lecture as a mode of transmitting information, and their encounter with English as a medium of instruction and majoring subject for the first time on admission to college.

### **Data**

The data was collected by means of a short open-ended questionnaire and interview. In responding to the questions, the students were asked to think about an actual listening situation, namely a lecture. The interview was given to complement the questionnaire so students didn't feel restricted in their answers. The interview, however, was given to 12 students who were chosen randomly. It was then recorded and transcribed. Both questionnaire and interview dealt with problems encountered in listening to lectures.

### **Analysis of participants' responses**

In analyzing the responses to the questionnaire and the interview a range of features which the participants believe impede their lecture comprehension were noted. These can be classified into 5 categories:

- Linguistic and conceptual variables
- Discourse variables
- Acoustic variables
- Environmental variables
- Psychological variables

### **Linguistic and conceptual variables**

#### *Linguistic variables:*

Many respondents mentioned vocabulary as an obstacle to comprehension. They commented:

- St. 5: The lecturer uses a lot of words I not understand.
- St. 14: Words are not pronounce in clear way.

When encountering an unknown word, many students stop listening and think about the meaning of the word. This interrupts the flow of speech and thus the students may miss some essential information. This tendency of seizing to listen and concentrating on the language word by word to work out its structure, and then decide on its meaning impairs comprehension (Underwood [7]). As Field suggests failure to recognize words can also stem out of students inability 'to segment the word out of connected speech.' [9, p. 327].

However, a number of the respondents reported that lexis didn't impede their comprehension. They commented:

St. 1: I know most of the words but don't understand them in continuing speech.

Understanding spoken language is not just a matter of lexical knowledge. It does not involve a simple one-to-one correspondence between words and their meanings. Rost [9, p. 33] claims that:

"Understanding spoken language is essentially an inferential process based on a perception of cues rather than straight forward matching of sound to meaning".

Rost suggests that the L2 listener must perform various inferential processes while listening. As our learners are word-by-word processors, this inhibits their ability to infer meaning, as links between items will be missed. There are many references in the participants' responses to problems related to sentence complexity.

Intelligibility is affected by factors such as sentence length and difficulty as indicated by the following:

St. 12: The lecturer use long sentences.

St. 16: The lecturer say difficult English.

Presentation of a long series of sentences affects comprehension (Caroll [12]). The students may be weak at paying attention to the sequence of the lecture because of unfamiliarity with the functions of the logical connectors. Inter-sentence connectives could be a source of difficulty as exemplified by the following:

.....and so therefore this is what they did

Lack of recognition of the referential system is another source of difficulty (Candlin and Murphy [27]). The students commented:

St. 13: Sometimes the lecturer uses (he) and I don't know (he).

St. 11: I confuse when lecturer say he, she.

Use of pronouns rather than complete noun phrase referents makes listening more difficult. Whenever listeners come across pronouns they must search backwards for the noun or noun phrase that it is substituting for.

*Conceptual variables:*

Failure to process lectures could also be related to conceptual difficulty resulting from unfamiliarity and/or inadequate explanation of theory or disorganization of the lecture in the part of the lecturer. This is exemplified by the following comments:

St. 6: The teacher can not explain clearly.

St. 13: When the teacher explain the topic I cannot be able to take a not from it.

St. 4: Difficult to understand new information and to listening.

Familiarity with the topic of the lecture augments comprehension. Some researchers (Long [28], Sheils [3], Chiang and Dunkel [19]) highlighted the critical role familiarity of topic and background knowledge play in L2 listening comprehension. Others, e.g. Caroll [12] and Boyle [1], claim that if the materials are unorganized or conceptually more difficult comprehension suffers.

**Discourse variables**

Students have a difficult task listening to lectures since they have limited exposure to lengthy connected speech.

St. 12: Difficult to listen to long talk in English.

St. 15: Teacher speak speak speak.

St. 5: I not understand long lecture.

Listening to lectures is particularly difficult since listeners cannot control the flow of information and hence the processing of it. Stopping a lecturer to ask for clarification is inhibited by fear of breaking the traditional lecture rules.

St. 1: I feel embarrassed to stop the lecturer and ask questions.

St. 8: I ashamed to ask teacher.

Students also commented on the density of information contained in a lecture.

St. 2: The lecturer gives too much information in a short time.

St. 6: Teacher give us much points.

Sheils [3] considers the density of information in speech and the amount of time allowed to process speech factors that affect processing incoming data. Repetition is another discourse factor that affects comprehension. However, according to the respondents' comments, lecturers don't always repeat what's been said:

St. 25: The lecturer doesn't often repeat what she says.

St. 30: Lecturer do not say points again.

Caroll [12] and Cabrera and Martinez [29] suggest that learning from aurally received input is enhanced by repetition of the material heard. But, our students are not in a position to get the lecturer repeat because, as mentioned earlier, interruption could break the customary rules of lecture delivery.

St. 39: I am ashamed to ask the lecturer repeat.

It is extremely hard for the lecturer to judge whether or not the students have understood a particular section of what she has said. It is therefore possible that she repeats at times when there is no need to do so and not repeat when it might be useful to do so.

#### **Acoustic variables**

One of the greatest difficulties hindering L2 lecture comprehension is the rate of delivery (Higgins [30]) as listeners cannot control how quickly a lecturer talks. They feel that the words disappear before they can sort them out.

St. 57: The lecturer speaks very quickly.

St. 34: The lecturer very fast.

St. 49: Sometime I slowly in writing and the teacher speaking quickly.

This means that they cannot keep up with the flow of speech, which results in missing crucial information. The students depend on bottom-up processing which is perhaps a hindrance to their ability to cope with the incoming speech message. However, Flowerdew and Miller [31] reported that they found it difficult at times to keep up with lecturers when they tried taking notes themselves. Many respondents commented on the quality of the lecturers' voice.

St. 12: Lecturer does not speak loudly.

St. 54: Voice of lecturer always not heard.

St. 29: We are wanting loud speaker.

With the noise coming from corridors and other classes some lecturers experience difficulty in projecting their voices to be audible to the whole class. Pauses is another factor that impeded the respondents' comprehension.

St. 58: The lecturer doesn't wait.

St. 47: Do not understand when writing notes and the teacher does not pause to explain.

From a comprehension point of view, pauses give hearers more time to process what they need to understand. Research on the effect of pauses on lecture comprehension revealed that pauses facilitate listening (Blau [15]), moreover, they give listeners time to take a greater quantity of notes (Dunkel [32]). The respondents comments emphasize the important role pauses play in facilitating comprehension.

#### **Environmental variables**

As a number of respondents commented comprehension is distracted by environmental factors inside and outside class. Climate was a common factor reported by the students to impede comprehension.

St. 4: The weather very hot.

St. 31: When the weather is hot I can't follow the lecture.

St. 51: The hot weather forbid my listening.

The classes are provided with tall glass windows and no curtains thus allowing the sun in most of the morning and although the college provides fairly effective air-cooling system, it fails sometimes and a period elapses before it is restored to action. The uncomfortable

feeling resulting from heat affects the students' concentration and ability for input intake as well as the lecturers' command of passing information, particularly in midday lectures.

Noise is another environmental barrier to comprehension. Interior as well as exterior class noise is an obstacle to comprehension as apparent in these students' comments:

St. 11: The voices of the students talking in corridors and other classes distract me.

St. 18: Some of the students make loud noise.

St. 8: The shouting in the room.

Classes are not well insulated against incoming sounds, and with the heat factor mentioned above, classroom windows and doors must be left open thus allowing various sounds to interfere with and obstruct teacher talk. Thus heat and noise interact to make listening to lectures even a harder activity.

#### **Psychological variables**

Boredom and frustration are other barriers to listening comprehension mentioned by the respondents.

St. 28: I bored and not interested.

St. 31: I sometimes feel nervous and frustrated.

Boredom and frustration may affect the extent to which attention is paid to listening. This occurs as a result of poor stimulation caused by disinterest in the topic, lack of motivation, failure in the part of the lecturer to present meaningful material in a stimulating manner, or presenting the lecture in a monotone instigating sleep.

Difficulties encountered by tertiary students in listening to lectures are numerous as shown by the analysis of the participants' comments. They were very concerned with their inability to comprehend lectures and are aware of the difficulties facing them. They experience problems that stem from a cluster of factors that characterize the lecture mode of information transmission. Their comments showed that they were specifically bothered by the following main variables: linguistic and conceptual, discourse, acoustic, environmental and psychological variables.

#### **Implications of the study**

The findings of this study have implications within the context of lecturing in English to foreign language learners. The study has revealed a fairly clear picture of the problems of students struggling to come to terms with a new situation that of the FL subject matter classroom. The findings have implications for both EFL teachers and subject matter lecturers.

#### **Implications for EFL teachers**

EFL instructors have an important and crucial role in assisting students surmounting their difficulties in comprehending lectures. This help can take the form of developing the students' listening communicative strategies in the following ways:

- EFL teachers should prepare their students for lecture comprehension in the content subject classroom by impressing upon them the importance of communication skills by teaching them to ask and respond to questions, by training them to interrupt the flow of speech in a lecture to ask for clarification or let the lecturer know if they do not understand something. This could be done through role-play.
- Train students to listen selectively for a purpose to help them overcome feeling overloaded with the flow of incoming information. They can be trained in selecting important information and ignoring other pieces of information that do not affect understanding the main topic.

Provide extensive listening exercises. Ridgeway [33] suggests that by providing extensive listening practice through graded comprehensible input 'sub skills will take care of themselves as they become automatized' [33, p. 183].

EFL instructors need to expose their students to longer text extracts to develop their listening skill. By using longer texts students will be exposed to some of the features of real lectures and will develop strategies that will help them to be better prepared for academic listening.

In our situation, references particularly more recent publications are scarce. Undoubtedly, the Internet provides current sources, however, for technical and other reasons only a small number of our students have access to these sources. Hence note taking becomes a valuable practice. Therefore, training in note-taking techniques should be provided to develop students' note-taking skills.

#### **Implications for subject matter lecturers**

Similar to their EFL colleagues, content subject lecturers could participate in facilitating students' listening comprehension in lectures in several ways.

Lecturers need to be aware of their students' psychological state. Boredom is indicated as a barrier to lecture comprehension. They need to motivate the students by involving them in various activities: asking questions and encouraging students to ask questions, nominating individual students to participate, encouraging group discussion followed by short reports, requesting short oral presentations, and making short quizzes.

Studies on negotiation of input (Long [34], Pica *et al.* [21]) assert that negotiation of input between speaker and listener (by comprehension checks, clarification checks, repetition) facilitates comprehension. Content subject lecturers should be made aware of the necessity of negotiation of meaning to the comprehension process, allowing for frequent give and take between lecturer and student and responding clearly, effectively and patiently to students' questions and comments.

Listening for long periods to complex concepts affects comprehension. Lectures can be segmented into short chunks through longer pauses for reflection, lecturer's

questions, use of audio-visual aids, and listener interaction asking questions, requesting clarification or group/pair activities.

It has been a common belief in L2 teaching that a slower rate of speech would facilitate listening comprehension (Griffiths [10]). Lecturers need to be advised to slow their speech rate down to a level that suits their students.

Lecturers can be apprised of the value students attach to outlines prior to lectures. They provide a certain level of prior knowledge which can facilitate listening comprehension as they help students building up a mental framework with which to link the incoming information they are listening to.

Difficult terminology and complex language are variables affecting listening comprehension as indicated by our students. Subject content lecturers should therefore attempt to modify their language to enhance comprehension. It should not be inferred from this suggestion that we are recommending oversimplification of their courses but rather that they would become more aware of the problems encountered by their students in academic listening comprehension and would be able to assist them to overcome their difficulties.

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## Appendix

### *Questionnaire on Listening Comprehension Problems*

Answer the following questions as truly as possible to the best of your ability:

1. How many lectures do you attend per week?
2. How many students are there in your lecture group?
3. Do you consider listening to lectures important?
4. Do you have difficulty understanding lectures?
5. Do you have problems with understanding words in a lecture? Specify.
6. What problems do you encounter in understanding the main points of a lecture?
7. What are the problems you encounter in understanding details in a lecture?
8. What are the problems you encounter in understanding the topic of a lecture?
9. What are the problems you encounter with respect to the language the lecturer uses?
10. Do you understand everything your lecturer says? If No, why not?
11. Do you find concentration on what your lecturer says difficult? If Yes, why is it difficult to concentrate?
12. Do you ask questions during a lecture? If No, why not?
13. How often does your lecturer repeat information?
14. How often do you ask for repetition?
15. Do you feel free to ask your lecturer to repeat an utterance? If No, why not?
16. What are the difficulties you encounter with respect to the way your lecturer speaks?
17. How does the way your lecturer speaks affect your understanding?
18. What are the problems you encounter when taking notes?
19. In your opinion, what are the factors that impede lecture comprehension? Mention as many factors as you can.

( / / / / )

**ملخص البحث.** تناولت هذه الدراسة الصعوبات التي تواجه طالبات المرحلة الجامعية في المستوى الأول، والمتمثلة في إعاقة فهم المحاضرات التي تُلقى باللغة الإنجليزية. استخدمت طريقة الاستبيان والمقابلة الشخصية لجمع البيانات الخاصة بمشكلات الاستيعاب، واتضح بعد التحليل أن الصعوبات التي تعيق فهم المحاضرات التي تُلقى باللغة الإنجليزية تتمثل في الآتي:

- ❖ صعوبات متعلقة باللغة نفسها وما تطرحه من أفكار.
  - ❖ صعوبات متعلقة بطريقة إلقاء المحاضرة (من حيث درجة الصوت - سرعة الإلقاء ... إلخ).
  - ❖ صعوبات متعلقة بالبيئة والمناخ.
  - ❖ صعوبات متعلقة بالشخص المتلقي للغة.
- ولهذه النتائج مردودات على كل من مدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية ومحاضري المواد التي تدرس باللغة الإنجليزية في الحقل التي أجريت فيه الدراسة وفي كل بيئة مماثلة.