Though listening ability is one of the important skills in foreign language learning, there has been relatively little research in this specific area. The present study attempts to investigate the listening problems encountered by a group of first year English major students of Qassim University. 60 students who took the listening course in 20012/13 were selected for the study. Data was gathered by means of questionnaires and interviews. The results of the study showed that accent, pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, different accent of speakers, lack of concentration, anxiety, and bad quality of recording were the major listening comprehension problems encountered by EFL Saudi learners. Understanding students’ learning difficulties may enable EFL teachers to help students develop effective learning strategies and ultimately improve their English listening abilities. Suggestions are made for addressing problems regarding how teachers can help their students overcome listening comprehension problems. The results of this study may also be useful for those who are interested in this field.

Keywords: listening, listening comprehension, listening problems

Introduction

No one can deny the importance of listening skills in foreign language learning because the key to acquire a language is to receive language input. Krashen, Terrell, Ehrman, & Herzog (1984) claim that acquisition takes place only when students absorb enough comprehensible input. The same claim was supported by Rost (1994) who confirmed that listening is vital in language classrooms because it provides input for learners. As an input skill, listening plays a crucial role in students’ language development. Krashen (1985) argues that people acquire language by understanding the linguistic information they hear. Thus language acquisition is achieved mainly through receiving understandable input and listening ability is the critical component in achieving understandable language input. Without understanding inputs at the right level, any kind of learning simply cannot occur. 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). Listening, therefore, is essential not only as
a receptive skill but also to the development of spoken language proficiency. Rost (2002) also indicates that developing proficiency in listening is the key to achieving proficiency in speaking.

Listening plays an important role in communication as it is said that, of the total time spent on communicating, listening takes up 40-50%; speaking, 25-30%; reading, 11-16%; and writing, about 9% (Gilakjani and Ahmadi, 2011). According to Devine (1982), listening is the primary means by which incoming ideas and information are taken in. Gilbert (1988), on the other hand, noted that students from kindergarten through high school were expected to listen 65-90 percent of the time. Wolvin and Coakley (1988) concluded that, both in and out of the classroom, listening consumes more of daily communication time than other forms of verbal communication. Listening is central to the lives of students throughout all levels of educational development (Coakley & Wolvin, 1997). Listening is the most frequently used language skill in the classroom (Ferris, 1998; Murphy, 1991; Vogely, 1998). Both instructors (Ferris & Tagg, 1996) and students (Ferris, 1998) acknowledge the importance of listening comprehension for success in academic settings. Numerous studies indicated that efficient listening skills were more important than reading skills as a factor contributing to academic success (Coakley & Wolvin, 1997). Nevertheless, it is evident that listening is more important for the lives of students since listening is used as a primary medium of learning at all stages of education.

In spite of its importance in foreign language learning, the teaching of listening comprehension has long been —somewhat neglected and poorly taught aspect of English in many EFL programs (Mendelsohn, 1994, p. 9).

The neglect of the listening skill was accompanied with an ongoing debate about which of the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) is the most crucial for the learning and acquisition of a second language. However, past research has thus far revealed that a large proportion of the L2 research findings indicates that listening is the most important skill for language learning because it is the most widely used language skill in normal daily life (Rost 2002), and it develops faster than the three other language skills, which in turn suggests that it can facilitate the emergence of the other language skills (Oxford, 1990).

EFL learners have serious problems in English listening comprehension due to the fact that universities pay more attention to English grammar, reading and vocabulary. Listening and speaking skills are not important parts of many course books or curricula and teachers do not seem to pay attention to these skills while designing their lessons. Most teachers take it for granted and believe that it will develop naturally within the process of language learning. Persulessy (1988:50) states that one of the reasons for the opinion that listening is a skill that tends to be neglected is the feeling among language teachers that this skill is automatically acquired by the learner as he learns to speak the language. Most teachers also assume listening is synonymous to breathing— automatic (Ina Thomas and Brian Dyer, 2007). Another reason why this skill is not given serious attention is the fact that incompetence in it is easy to hide through nodding and shaking of the head, which may give the impression of understanding, even there is none. Still another reason is that audio-lingual courses give the impression that they are teaching listening when in fact they are teaching other skills. In addition to this,
Nobuko Osada, 2004 reported that listening has not drawn much attention of both teachers and learners, they are generally less aware of its importance. In classrooms, teachers seem to test, not to teach listening. Meanwhile, students seem to learn listening, not listening comprehension. As a result, it remains the most neglected and the least understood aspect of language teaching (Glisan, 1985). In fact, listening is a complex mental process that involves perception, attention, cognition, and memory. Comprehending speech in a foreign language is a quite difficult task for language learners. When listening to a foreign language, many language learners face difficulties. In order to help students improve their listening ability, language teachers have to understand students’ listening difficulties in comprehending spoken texts, and instruct effective listening strategies to help students solve their listening difficulties.

From his observation and experience of teaching the EFL listening skills for more than 15 years, however, the researcher has noticed that most of the students who enroll in the English Department of Qassim University have serious deficiencies in listening comprehension. This is especially observable when the students take the listening course entitled “Listening Skills” (ENG 121) at first year level. The researcher observed that many students performed poorly in this course. They are unable to comprehend natural spoken English delivered at normal speed because they do not understand the spoken content of the lessons. Frequently such students lose all confidence as foreign language practitioners. They have difficulty in concentration and maintaining concentration for a long time. This problem was noticed even by other instructors who were offering the same course to different groups. The same problem has also been observed in many countries (Buck, 2001 and Hayati, 2010). The results of these studies have proved that difficulties in listening in a foreign language are typical to listeners from different language background. For example, Underwood (1989) and Flowerdew and Miller (1992) stated that inability to concentrate "is a major problem because even the shortest break in attention can seriously impair comprehension." Goh (2000) 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.

As is evident from the literature review, efforts have been made by a number of researchers to identify the difficulties experienced by second and foreign 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 an attempt to identify the LC problems as perceived by the Saudi students when listening to oral texts, 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

2. Aims of the Study

This study attempts to explore a broad view and in-depth knowledge about the understanding of how Saudi college students in EFL context face listening difficulties. This study aims at:

1. Identifying the Saudi students’ perception to the importance of studying listening comprehension.
2. Identifying which skills were emphasized in their previous education as language learners
3. Knowing how and when the students have the opportunity to listen to English.
4. Finding out kinds of listening comprehension problems encountered by English students at Qassim University.
5. Providing some suggestions for the teacher to help his students overcome these listening comprehension problems.

Research Questions

The present seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How can Saudi students perceive the importance of studying listening comprehension?
2. Which skills were emphasized in their previous education as language learners?
3. How and when do they have the opportunity to listen to English?
4. What listening problems do EFL students face when listening to spoken English?
5. How can the teacher help your students overcome these listening comprehension problems?

Significance Of The Study

This study points out the listening comprehension problems encountered by English students at Qassim University. Awareness of the factors that contribute to the problems EFL learners encounter in listening comprehension would benefit the following groups:

1. EFL teachers to have a better understanding of their students’ listening difficulties and examine their own teaching methods to improve students’ listening comprehension. Knowing why some of the problems occur will naturally place teachers in a better position to guide their learners in ways of overcoming some of their listening difficulties. It is also hoped that the findings about students’ listening difficulties can provide English teachers with some guidelines for material evaluation and selection.
2. Learners to identify their difficulties of listening comprehension to ascertain what further learning strategies are necessary. Learners need to be aware of the factors which contribute to their difficulties in listening; when listeners know something about their own problems, they will be able to improve their listening practices and become better listeners.
3. Syllabus designers and materials writers to make further improvements in the teaching materials and help students develop their listening comprehension skills.

4. Researchers who are interested in classroom research to use the findings as a basis for further study in the area.

**Definition Of Terms**

**Definition Of Listening**

According to Thomlison’s (1984) listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This process involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, the speaker’s grammar and vocabulary, and comprehension of meaning. An able listener is capable of doing these four things simultaneously.

**Listening Comprehension**

Listening comprehension is regarded as a complex, interactive process in which listeners are involved in a dynamic construction of meaning. Listeners understand the oral input from sound discrimination, prior knowledge of vocabulary, grammatical structures, stress and intonation, as well as other use linguistic, paralinguistic, or even non-linguistic clues in contextual utterance (Rost, 2002).

**Listening Problems**

Listening difficulties are defined as the internal and external characteristics that might interrupt text understanding and real-life processing problems directly related to cognitive procedures that take place at various stages of listening comprehension (Goh, 2000).

**Literature Review Related To Listening Comprehension Problems**

In the eyes of many researchers and learners of English, listening is a complex and active mental process that involves perception, attention, cognition, and memory. During the process of listening comprehension, various factors may affect learner listening ability. Lists of general factors have been identified (Hayati, 2010; Flowerdew and Miller, 1992) while the role of specific factors has also been examined. Some factors that have been the focus of research include speech rate (Conrad, 1989; Blau, 1990; Griffiths, 1992; Zhao, 1997), lexis (rost, 1992), phonological features and background knowledge (Long, 1990; Chiang and Dunkel, 1992). Other issues have also been related to listener difficulties. These range from text structure and syntax to personal factors such as insufficient exposure to the target language, and a lack of interest and motivation. Brown (1995) acknowledged the relevance of all these issues, and further argued that listener difficulties are also related to the levels of cognitive demands made by the content of the texts. Buck (2001) identifies numerous difficulties which can be confronted in listening tasks such as unknown vocabularies, unfamiliar topics, fast speech rate, and unfamiliar
accents. A considerable number of difficulties learners face in listening comprehension are discussed in literature (Underwood, 1989; Ur, 1984).

Higgins (1995) studied Omani students’ problems in listening comprehension and found that the factors which facilitate or hinder listening are speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation. After examining 81 Arabic speakers learning English as a foreign language for academic purposes and their perceived LC problems, a study conducted by Hasan (2000) shows that ‘unfamiliar words’, ‘difficult grammatical structures’, and ‘the length of the spoken text’ are the most important message factors for listening problems. In terms of speaker factor, it was revealed that ‘clarity’ was the main cause of EFL listening difficulties. As to listener factor, ‘lack of interest’ ‘the demand for full and complete answers to listening comprehension questions’ were the two main difficulties encountered by EFL students. Yagang (1994) attributes the difficulty of listening comprehension to four sources: the message, the speaker, the listener and the physical setting.

Boyle (1984) also classified the factors influencing listening comprehension and directly related to EFL listening into four inter-relating categories: listener, speaker, medium and environment factors. Aside from these, Chang, Chang, & Kuo (1995) discovered five major listening difficulties: speed, a cluster of sounds difficult for segmentation, obsession with the Chinese translation, association of sounds with words and meanings, and idiomatic expressions. Teng (2002) identified four listening factors, which were similar to Boyle’s (1984) classification; they were listener factors, speaker factors, stimulus factors, and context factors. She indicated that “EFL proficiency” was the most important listener factor for EFL listening problems. It implies that students’ difficulties may directly result from their deficient linguistic knowledge. However, Goh (2000) indicated that the most common problem was “quickly forget what is heard (parsing).” Similarly, in Sun’s study (2002), the most difficulty in listening for Taiwan’s students was “forget the meaning of the word (perception).”

Theoretical explanations of listening comprehension provide us with clues about the problems which learners face when they listen to a spoken text. These insights cannot, however, account for exhaustive explanation of these problems. As Vogely (1995: 41) states, ‘We still need research that documents empirically the relationship between what theory says and what learners actually know and more importantly do’. To locate the sources of listening comprehension, we need to consider the discourse itself in the context of the classroom.

Although a number of studies have been conducted concerning students’ listening comprehension, few studies explore whether first year college students have encountered different listening comprehension problems. So there still remains necessity of investigating university students’ listening difficulties they confronted. And little research has focused on the difficulties encountered by students. As a result, the present paper attempted to investigate the listening comprehension problems encountered by EFL Qassim University freshmen in Saudi Arabia.
Participants

This study was carried out with the participation of 60 first-year students majoring in English language and translation at Qassim University. Their ages range from 20 to 22 years old. The study took place during the First semester of the 2012/13 school year. The courses offered to the students include a listening component; they sometimes listened to audio cassettes and watched VCD’s in English. Before starting their university education, all of the students had to take the placement Exam, which consists of multiple choice test items mainly focusing on reading, grammar and translation. The aural-oral skills are not the focus of attention in the placement Exam, that is, speaking is tested indirectly and listening is not included at all.

Procedures Of The Study

To fulfill the above aims, the study was carried out with quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. The instruments used in this study were: (1) a questionnaire, (2) a semistructured interview with the subjects. These instruments are described in detail below.

The first instrument which was employed in this study was questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to get information about the difficulties the students faced in EFL listening while taking the listening course at Qassim University. The questionnaire was designed after a review of the literature (Boyle, 1984; Yagang, 1994; Hasan, 2010; Underwood, 1989; Rubin, 1994; Yagang, 1994; Dunkel, 1991; see also references of this research) about factors that influence listening comprehension.

The questionnaire consisted of four. Section one contained 11 questions to collect subjects’ English learning experience, ways of practicing listening skill, the importance of listening skill and their self-rated English listening proficiency level. Section two consists of 4 items dealing with the evaluation of the instruction of skills taught during their high school education. Section three consists of 5 items regarding how and when the students find the opportunity to listen to English. Section four included 51 items grouped into five categories: listening material (11 items), linguistic aspects (13 items), lack of concentration (6 items), speaker (6 items), listener (11 items), psychological category (6 items) and physical setting (10 items). The answers were recorded on 4-point likert scale (never, sometimes, often, and always).

The initial draft of the English Listening Comprehension Problems questionnaire consisted of 41 questions. To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, it was given to four experienced teachers, (Dr. Zidan Jassim, Dr. Fahad Al Jumah, Dr. Abdlay, and Dr. Nour AlDin, all of whom have taught English listening for years in the same university where the present study was conducted, to examine the structure, logical flow of the questionnaire, the wording, clarity, length, and the order of the questions. The researcher then made some modifications based on the comments of the experts. For instance, items with semantic ambiguity were clarified or deleted, and items recommended by the experts were added.
2. Follow-Up Interview

The second data gathering instrument which was employed in this study was interview. The purpose of the interview was to triangulate the information that was obtained through the questionnaire; to obtain data on how the listening difficulties which had been identified through the questionnaire affected the learners’ listening comprehension; to obtain information about the reasons behind the learners’ difficulties of listening comprehension; and to find out if there are any other listening difficulties that affect the learners’ listening comprehension. Moreover, by providing opportunities for learners to report in their own words, we might gain some insights into their understanding of and attitude towards some of these difficulties. The learner's voice can be very valuable to our understanding of their comprehension difficulties.

Techniques of Data Analysis

The data obtained through the questionnaire and the interview were organized and analyzed. While the data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively, the data obtained from the interview were analyzed qualitatively. And the results of the instruments identified the listening problems that affected the EFL learners of Qassim University.

Results and Discussion

This section aims to present the statistical results and the data analyses in order to answer the research questions addressed in the present study respectively. Firstly, the results of the Saudi students’ perception to the importance of studying listening comprehension are presented and analyzed quantitatively. The second section provides the results and analysis of listening comprehension problems encountered by the subjects. The third section deals with how the teacher can help his students overcome these listening comprehension problems. At last, recommendations for both teachers and students are given.

First, Discussion Of Questionnaire Results

The first section of the questionnaire is to answer the first enquiry:

1. Research question. How can Saudi students perceive the importance of studying listening comprehension?

In the first item of the questionnaire, the students were asked to evaluate their proficiency levels in listening skills. More than three quarters of the students rated themselves as “average, poor” in listening. Only 13.3% of the students think that their listening skills are ‘good’ whereas the other students (86.7%) think their listening performances are ‘average’ or ‘poor’.
Table 1 Students’ general self-rating to listening proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>excellent %</th>
<th>Good %</th>
<th>average %</th>
<th>Poor %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do you rate your English listening ability when compared to others in class?</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This might be a reflection of their frustration caused by their previous failures or unhappy experiences in dealing with English because they had not received sufficient training in the first place.

Students’ Perception To The Importance Of The English Listening Skill

As illustrated in Table 2, descriptive statistics are presented for the students’ perceived importance of English listening skill.

Table 2. Students’ perception to the importance of listening skill

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item no.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Never %</th>
<th>Sometimes %</th>
<th>Often %</th>
<th>Always %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I am more aware of the perceived importance of English listening skill.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>58.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I find that listening comprehension is difficult.</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I find that listening comprehension is boring and not interesting.</td>
<td>75</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I find that listening comprehension is exciting.</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I receive sufficient training in English listening comprehension during your school.</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I never heard about listening strategy.</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When students were questioned on their own perceptions of listening skills taught, they responded in a variety of ways. Table 2 shows that most of the students (58.3 % always &25% sometimes) were aware of the importance of listening comprehension. However, there were still a number (10%) of students who did not highly evaluate the role of listening skill.
When asked about the difficulty of the listening comprehension, 76.7% of the learners remark that listening comprehension is difficult. In addition to that, a small number of learners (25%) find that listening comprehension is boring and not interesting. Only 12% of learners find that listening comprehension is exciting. This is in line with a common problem that most students are unable to comprehend spoken English required at their beginning level.

As for item no. 6, we found out most of the subjects (83.3%) did not receive sufficient training in English listening comprehension during their school and tertiary stage. This may be attributed to the overemphasis on the teaching of reading and writing skills, which are assessed in the entrance exams to college. Sadly, most of the subjects did not gain proper training in English listening comprehension. Based on the collected data, 81.7% of the subjects never heard about listening strategy. The finding partly supports Bremnar’s argument (1998), “Only by reaching a certain level will a student be likely to use a given strategy” (p.495).

To sum up, most of the subjects did not know much about listening strategies; accordingly, teachers had better introduce listening strategies specially defined in this study to students.

2. Which Skills Were More Emphasized In Their Previous Education As Language Learners?

Since all of the participants were freshman students, their previous education was also important. Because they acquired the language skills in high school and they obtained some habits and beliefs that affected their future learning experiences. Because of this, in the questionnaire, the students were asked to evaluate the instruction of skills taught during their high school education.

Table 3 Students’ perceptions related to their high school education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Excellent %</th>
<th>Good %</th>
<th>Average %</th>
<th>Poor %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not surprisingly, many students were pleased with the instruction of reading skill (70%). However, the percentages of the students who were satisfied with the instruction of writing, speaking and listening were quite low (25%, 13.3% and 6.7% respectively). It is interesting that 70, 6% of the students thought listening instruction was ‘below average’ or ‘poor’. This means that students assessed their reading and writing abilities as “good”, and their speaking and listening as “poor”.

During the interviews, the students were asked to explain the reasons for this dissatisfaction. The answers are presented at the end of this section.
3. How And When Do The Students Find The Opportunity To Listen To English?

In the questionnaire, the students were asked to identify how and when they find the opportunity to listen to English. Table 4 displays the percentages of the answers given by the students. These range from listening to teachers and classmates to communicating with friends. For more than three quarters of the students (13.3% often, % 66.7% always), the most common listening activity is listening to teachers and classmates speaking English in class.

TV occupies the first place among other learning methods. Around (53.3% always, 20% often) students indicated that they use TV as a learning method for listening comprehension. The reason for this overwhelming use of TV can be contributed to the joy and entertainment one experience when watching TV so that students attention are attracted to the images displayed on TV.

Using voice chat on the internet communicating with their (Saudi) friends occupies the third rank among the students’ choices. More than two thirds of the students agree with item (16) that they use voice chat on the internet communicating with their (Saudi) friends as one of the ways to enhance listening SKILLS.

Table 4. Using Different Means to Enhance listening SKILLS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>sometimes</th>
<th>often</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12 Listening to teachers and classmates in class</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Listening to English language study cassettes or CD’s at home</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Listening to the radio channels in English</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Using voice chat on the internet communicating with their (Saudi) friends</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>38.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Watching British or American television channels</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the data displayed above, dependence on tape recorder to learn English language skills is low. As a matter of fact, just (16) students, i.e. 26.7%, said that they use this method to learn English. To put in a different way, 39 students (65%) said that they do not use the tape recorder method. The author believes that these statistics are disappointing as the percentage of those using tape recorder should be higher since this method is easy to use, has low cost to own, and it can be easy moved from one place to another. Moreover, using the tape recorder can help students record their own statements and hear again. It is unfortunate that the methods of radio and tape recorder are not well-used although they have so many benefits in helping students improve their listening comprehension.

Table 4 clearly indicates that using radio as a learning tool is low when compared with other tools or methods. More specifically, the percentage of respondents who used radio was 6.7%
while 85% of the students do not use radio. It is expected that the rationale for the former students not to use the radio as a learning method can be contributed to their weakness in listening comprehension.

4. Research Question. What Are The Listening Comprehension Problems Encountered By Saudi Students When Listening To Spoken English?

Factors causing students listening comprehension problems are categorized into different sources including problems related to the listening text, listening problems related to tasks and activities, listening problems related to the listener and teacher’s methodology which will be discussed in detail below.

4.1. Problems Related To The Listening Materials

The listening material may deal with almost any area of life. It might include street gossip, proverbs, everyday conversation, new products, and situations unfamiliar to the student. Also, in a spontaneous conversation speakers frequently change topics.

The material itself may be the main source of listening comprehension problems. In particular, unfamiliar words, difficult grammatical structures, and the length of the spoken text may present students with listening problems (Table 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item no.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>I find it difficult to understand listening texts in which there are too many unfamiliar words including jargon and idioms.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Complex grammatical structures interfered with my listening comprehension.</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Long spoken text interfered with my listening comprehension.</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>I find it difficult to interpret the meaning of a long spoken text.</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>I feel fatigue and distracted when I listen to a long spoken text.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>I find it difficult to understand listening texts when the topic is unfamiliar.</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>I use my experience and background knowledge of the topic to understand the spoken text.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I find it difficult to understand every single word of incoming speech.

I find the listening passage difficult to understand.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1.1 Problems Pertaining To Limited English Vocabulary

The first question was asked to know whether unfamiliar words, including jargon and idioms, interfered with the learners’ listening comprehension. The great majority of the students 51/60 (85%) have responded that unfamiliar words, including jargon and idioms (sometimes, often, always) interfered with their listening comprehension.

This finding coincides with Muhammad Naeem Butt, 2010; and Hanoi, 2010 who reported that the major problem hindering listening comprehension was that the students’ vocabulary was too limited to understand the message. The data also proves the theory realized by Underwood (1989) that lack of vocabulary is a big obstacle to most students in listening comprehension.

4.1.2 Problems Pertaining To Poor Grammar

The second question was asked to know whether complex grammatical structures interfered with the learners’ listening comprehension. The great majority of the students 50/60 (83.3%) have responded that difficult grammatical structures (sometimes, often, always) interfered with their listening comprehension. The percentages point out difficult grammatical structures cause much trouble to students. This conforms to Vogely’s study (1998) which shows that the difficulty in listening comprehension is partly due to the structural component of the text.

4.1.3 Problems Pertaining To The Length Of A Spoken Text

In addition to the insufficiency of vocabulary and the difficulty of grammatical structures, the length of the listening text was one of the main reasons why the students can’t understand most of the talk. Table (5) reveals that the majority of the students have responded that a long spoken text (35% sometimes, 25% often and 23.3% always) interfered with their listening comprehension. This result clearly shows that the length of the text can be one major factor that negatively affects the learners’ listening comprehension. This confirms Ur’s assertion (1984) which justifies that the difficulty in listening comprehension is partly due to the length of the listening text itself which bore listeners and distract their concentration. Therefore, it is possible to infer that long spoken texts interfere with the learners’ listening comprehension.
4.1.4 Problems Pertaining To Fatigue That May Arise As A Result Of Listening To A Long Spoken Text

"Fatigue" negatively influences a foreign language learner's listening to English. In academic listening especially, the listener will feel tired trying to "understand the unfamiliar sounds, lexis and syntax for long stretches of time". More than three quarters of the learners mentioned that they felt fatigue and distracted when they listen to a long spoken text (25% sometimes, 26.7% often and 33.3% always). Thus, memory problems or even fatigue would distract listeners’ attention from grasping the meaning of the text, and learners may miss the rest of the text when there is a lapse in concentration. However, this may be attributed to the fact learners do not pay enough attention to improving memory methods. Thus, many listeners’ listening level still remains at the original level.

4.1.5. Problems Pertaining To Understand Every Word In The Text

So students (25% often, 38.3 5 always) find it difficult to understand the meaning of every single word in the speech. This supports the claims of Muhammad Naeem Butt et al, (2010) who think that some foreign language learners try to understand every single word of incoming speech, but actually, doing so is both unnecessary and impossible. It is not even advisable because when they are trying hard to get every individual word or phrase, listeners are not seeing "the forest for the trees."

4.1.6 Problems Pertaining To Unfamiliar Topics

From the above result, therefore, it seems reasonable to generalize that unfamiliar topic hinders the listening comprehension of the majority of the students. Table 5 indicates that many students (16.7% sometimes, 36.7% often, and 35% always) find it difficult to understand the listening text when the topic is unfamiliar. Familiarity with the topic of the lecture augments comprehension. This finding is consistent with Nuttall’s declaration (1996) which shows that a more interesting requirement to understand a text is that the learner should share certain assumptions about the subject to the fact that students construct their understanding of the subject they listen on the basis of their experiences; problems arise, therefore, when there is a mismatch between the subject and the previous experience of the learner.

4.1.7 Problems Pertaining To Basic Background Knowledge

Background knowledge about a topic is also an important variable that can influence listening. Even if a person has mastered the skill of analyzing speech accurately and automatically, lack of basic background knowledge can cause reduced listening comprehension (Samuels, 1984). Table (5) shows that many students use their experience and background knowledge of the topic to understand the spoken text (23.3% sometimes, 40% often, and 26.7% always). This finding goes in accordance with that reached by Hasan (2000) who has suggested that associating newly heard information with prior knowledge is a powerful and very frequently used way to guess the meaning of a listening passage.
4.1.8 Problems Pertaining To Difficulty Of The Material

Table (5) also reflects that students (26.6% often, 41.7% always) find the listening material difficult to understand. These statistics show that the materials created certain difficulties for around two thirds of all students in listening.

In general, the above results indicate that the listening text itself can be the main source of listening comprehension problems. In particular, unfamiliar words, complex grammatical structures, long spoken text, a topic that cannot generate interest to listeners, complexity of sentences and unfamiliar topic pose listening difficulties to EFL learners.

4.2. Basic Linguistic Problems Perceived By Learners

Linguistic challenges are those that result from the English language itself. They are caused by both Saudi students' lack of English proficiency and their professors' use of English in class. Research shows that some difficulties in understanding and remembering information from speakers may be due to the lack of English language skill itself. Brown (1994) points out several linguistic sources which make listening difficult: 1) the use of colloquial language and slang; 2) the use of reduced forms; 3) the "prosodic features" of the English language; and 4) to strange accents and pronunciation.

Table 6. Listening problems related to Linguistic features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item no.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>I find it surprising and difficult to deal with colloquial language and slang.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>I find it difficult to understand reduced forms.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>I find the pronunciation familiar but cannot recognize the words.</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>I do not often pay attention to intonation of the speaker.</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>I find it difficult to recognize the signals which indicate that the speaker is moving from one point to another</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>When encountering an unknown word, I stop listening and think about the meaning of the word.</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>38.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>I find it difficult to infer the meaning of an unknown word while listening.</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>I find it difficult to follow the sequence of the spoken text when the sentences are too long and complex.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2.1 Problems Pertaining To The Use Of Colloquial And Slang Expressions

Colloquial language is a special challenge. If listening materials are made up of everyday conversation, they may contain a lot of colloquial words and expressions, such as stuff for material, guy for man, etc., as well as slang. Students who have been exposed mainly to formal or bookish English may not be familiar with these expressions. The uses of colloquial and slang expressions are likely to cause problems for non-native speakers in understanding a lecture. The results of this item show that 50% of the subjects (always) agreed that the use of colloquial and slang expressions made it hard for them to comprehend a lecture, while only 20% of the subjects (never) disagreed with this statement.

4.2.2 Problems Pertaining To The Use Of Reduced Forms

Another difficulty comes from the fact that in spoken English, as in all languages, people use many reduced forms. Reduction can be phonological ("Djedoit?" for "Did you do it?"); morphological (contractions like "Ill..."); syntactic (elliptical forms like the answer to "When is the paper due?" "Next Monday."); or pragmatic (The teacher asks a question, then points to a student in the classroom and says, "Tom! Please!"). These reductions pose significant difficulties, especially to classroom learners who may have only been exposed to the full forms of the English language. Table shows all the students find it difficult to understand reduced forms.

4.2.3 Problems Pertaining To The "Prosodic Features" Of The English Language

As shown in table (6), more than three quarters of the students (25% often, 50% always) relate their incomprehension to intonation patterns. This finding goes in consonance with that reached by Brown (1992) who mentions that the "prosodic features" of the English languages--stress, rhythm and intonation are very important for comprehension. As a "stress-timed" language, English can be a terror for some ESL learners as "mouthfuls of syllables come spilling out between stress points." (p.341)

4.2.4 Problems pertaining to the use of signal words

Signal words help the listener to grasp the thread of thought in the material. The listener can predict what may come next by using signal words. If you hear a word that signals more of the same such as ‘like-wise’ ‘moreover’, you needn’t worry about a new idea coming. If you hear such words as ‘but’ ‘however’ that signal a change is about to be made, you must be more careful. When you hear words like ‘in a word’ ‘as a result’ ‘to sum up’ that signal the main point of what has ever been said before is about to be summarized. That’s the most important part that you should pay special attention to.

Unfortunately, many listeners (26.7% often, 40% always) may fail to recognize the signals which indicate that the speaker is moving from one point to another, giving an example, or repeating
a point. Discourse markers used in formal situations or lectures such as "secondly," or "then" are comparatively evident to listeners. In informal situations or spontaneous conversations, signals are vaguer as in pauses, gestures, increased loudness, a clear change of pitch, or different intonation patterns. These signals can be missed especially by less proficient listeners (Gilakjani and Ahmadi, 2011).

4.2.5 Problems Pertaining To The Use Of Unknown Words

When encountering an unknown word, many students (38.3% always, 28.3% Often, 25 Sometimes) 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, 1989). Underwood also adds that failure to recognize words can also stem out of students inability 'to segment the word out of connected speech.'

4.2.6 Problems Pertaining To An Inferential Process

Moreover, many students find it difficult to infer the meaning of an unknown word while listening. This finding is in line with that reached by Rost (1990, 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 (1990) 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.

4.2.7 Problems Pertaining To Long And Complex Sentences

In addition to the natural rapidness of their speech and their unclear pronunciation, some teachers use many long and complex sentences when delivering lectures. The use of long and complex sentences can make it hard for non-native speakers to understand a lecture. Table 5 shows that about 10% of the subjects (never) thought that their teachers' use of long and complex sentences did not make it hard for them to understand a lecture. But 90% of them agreed that the use of long and complex sentences did cause them problems in understanding a lecture. Long and complex sentences contain complicated structures and more information. They may create challenges for non-native speakers in understanding a lecture.

4.3. Listening Problems Caused By The Failure To Concentrate

The fifth factor, which affects students listening comprehension, is concentration. During listening lessons students are required to be attentive since in a very restricted time they are required to process and understand a strand of newly introduced information. Failure to concentrate will result in the students missing some of the lecture content, which will eventually affect their understanding of the whole lecture.
### Table. 7 Problems caused by the failure to concentrate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item no.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>I lose focus of the talk when I have got an expected answer in my mind.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>I am unable to concentrate because I search for the answers, and I listen to the dialogue at the same time.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>I lose my concentration when the text is too long.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>I lose my concentration when I think about the meaning of new words.</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>I lose my concentration if the recording is in a poor quality.</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>I lose my concentration when I think of another question.</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3. 1 Problems Pertaining To Focus Loss Which Results From Looking For An Answer

From the table, learners pointed out that there are many reasons causing them unable to concentrate during the listening task. Besides simply not listening or paying attention, many students (33.3% sometimes, 16.7% often, 20% always) stated that once they have got an expected answer in their mind, they tend to lose focus of the talk.

4.3. 2 Problems Pertaining To Focus Loss Which Results From Thinking About Another Question

Thinking about another question is another reason for losing concentration. Many students (33.3% sometimes, 25% often, and 13.3% always) may be thinking about another question; therefore, they will not concentrate too much on the text. Others claimed that they (35% sometimes, 21.7% often, and 15% always) are not able to concentrate because they search for the answers, at the same time, listen to the dialogue.

4.3. 3 Problems Pertaining To Focus Loss Which Results From Text Length

Text length is one of the major problems for listeners since they tend to lose focus after concentrating too long on the listening. The students (35% sometimes, 21.7% often, 33.3% always) stated that when the text is lengthy, they have difficulty remaining focused. According to Gilakjani, A.P. and Ahmadi, M.R. (2011) if the exercise is too long it would be more suitable to break it up into shorter parts by pausing or a change of the speakers.
4.3. 4 Problems Pertaining To Hear New Words

A considerable number of students (26.7% sometimes, 33.3 % often, 16.7 % always) also lose their concentration when they hear new words and tended to depend more on analytical processing so that they would easily get distracted by the new words and failed to keep concentration on useful clues in the context.

Listeners (33.3% sometimes, 25% often, and 18.3% always) can also lose their concentration if the recording is in a poor quality or they are disturbed by outside noises. This finding is in line with reached by (Underwood, 1989).

4.4. Listening Problems Related To Psychological Characteristics

According to Yagang (1993), the listening comprehension process is also a relatively complex psychological process. In psychology, it is stated that when a person feels nervous or anxious he or she may not be concentrated. When one felt uncomfortable, his or her ability to listen is greatly reduced.

Boredom and frustration are other barriers to listening comprehension.

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 teacher to present meaningful material in a stimulating manner, or presenting the lecture in a monotone instigating sleep.

Table 8: Learners’ perceptions of listening problems related to psychological characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item no.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>often</th>
<th>always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>I feel nervous and worried when I don’t understand the spoken text.</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>I find it difficult to understand the spoken text which is not of interest to me.</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>I stop listening when I have problems in understanding a listening text.</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>If I don’t arrive at a total comprehension of an oral text, I feel disappointed.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Before doing listening comprehension tasks, I fear that I cannot understand what I will hear.</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.4. 1 Problems Pertaining To Anxiety

Very high percentages of students (41.7%) reach an agreement that they always feel nervous and worried when they don’t understand the spoken text. Only 6.6% claim they never experience panic when they fail to understand the spoken text. These figures point out that this factor creates psychological problems for learners.

4.4. 2 Problems Pertaining To Lack Of Interest

Matters of motivation and interest are also important factors in understanding the topic of the spoken text. 26.7% often and 30% always find it difficult to understand the spoken text which is not of interest to them and 3.3% report they can overcome this difficulty easily. The numbers indicate that students have certain difficulties in understanding the spoken text which is not of interest to them. This may be due to the fact that the types of listening exercises always remain the same; listeners will feel bored because of the repetition of exercise patterns.

4.4. 3 Problems Pertaining To The Students’ Inability Of Understanding A Listening Text

Many students (28.3% often and 23.3% always) stop listening when I have problems in understanding a listening text. This finding is in line with that reached by Jeremy Harmer (2000) who reported that some of his students lose interest in listening and some even give it up. It is the teacher’s job to arouse the students’ interest, help them gain confidence in themselves and make sure that they can achieve success in listening with the limited amount of English. The teacher must realize the important effect that success has on motivation.

Before doing listening comprehension tasks, many students (30% often and 3.3% always) fear that they cannot understand what they will hear. In order to arouse the students’ interest and lower their anxiety, the teacher must try every means to find appropriate and interesting materials and make his class go on in an enjoyable and relaxing way.

4.5. The Listener

Through the survey questionnaire, the respondents reveal that their problems may arise from their inability to recognize the main words in listening comprehension and understand the spoken text from the first listening.
Table 9: Listening problems related to listener

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item No.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>I find it difficult to get a general understanding of the spoken text from the first listening.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>At the time of listening I found it difficult to predict what would come next.</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>I find it difficult to quickly remember words or phrases I have just heard.</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>I found it difficult to recognize the words I know because of the way they are pronounced.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>There were words that I would normally understand in writing, but when I heard them in a stream of speech, I found it difficult to tell where one word finishes and another begins.</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>I find it difficult when listening to English without transcripts.</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>I find it difficult to answer questions which require other than a short answer (e.g. why or how questions).</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.5. 1 Problems Pertaining To Inability In Getting A General Understanding Of The Spoken Text And Predicting What Would Come Next

As can be seen from Table (9), almost all of the students in the study (88.3% and 90%) have responded that they found it difficult to predict what would come next and to get a general idea from the first listening, respectively. More than half of the students (65% and 66.7%) have also responded that they often or always found it difficult to apply the aforementioned listening strategies (i.e., the predictive skills and the skills of getting the general idea, respectively).
4.5. 2 Problems Pertaining To Inability In Recognizing The Words They Knew Because Of The Way They Were Pronounced

Table (9) shows that the majority of the students, i.e., 57 (95%) students out of 60 have responded that they often or always found it difficult to recognize the words they knew because of the way they were pronounced. And the majority of the students under the study have also responded that they “sometimes, often, always” encountered such problem. From this result it is possible to generalize that most students find it difficult to recognize the words they knew because of the way they are pronounced. This result is also consistent with Ur’s declaration (1984), which states that if a word is pronounced differently from the way it was said when it was learnt, the listener may not recognize it as the same word, or may even miss its existence completely. At this point, this problem interferes with the learners listening comprehension.

4.5. 3 Problems Pertaining To Inability In Recognizing The Words They Knew In Their Written Form When They Hear Them In A Stream Of Speech.

Table 9 shows that the great majority of the students, i.e., 70% of the students have responded that they often or always found it difficult to identify the words they knew in their written form when they hear them in a stream of speech.

From this result, we can conclude that there are words that most students normally recognize the words in their written form, but they find difficulty whenever they hear them in a stream of speech. In the Saudi case, when a student learns a new word or expression, it is believed the student usually learns both its written and spoken form. His recognition of the new word is linked to his knowledge of what it looks like on paper and what it sounds like when carefully pronounced by the teacher. If the student is not aware of what the new word sounds like when it is said quickly and juxtaposed with other words, the student may not realize that this may affect its pronunciation.

4.5. 4 Problems Pertaining To Memory

Memory, as depicted by the students, stands for ‘trouble remembering the definition of the word after being taught’, ‘difficulty in recalling the meaning of familiar words’ and ‘immediately forgetting the word after being said’. Many learners tend to quickly forget what they heard after the speaker finishes talking or they may spend too much time on translating. Therefore, when they need to choose the answer, they forget what was said and end up not knowing which answer is correct.

4.5. 5 Problems Pertaining To Questions

Table 9 further shows that the majority of the students (88.3%) have responded that they (sometimes, often, always) found it difficult to answer questions which required other than
short answer. From this result, it is possible to infer that many students find it difficult to answer listening questions which require longer answers (which demands writing skills at the expense of listening). This confirms Ur’s statement (1989) which justifies that the difficulty in listening performance is partly due to the provision of irrelevant tasks that demand the skills of reading, speaking and writing other than the skills of listening.

4.5. 6 Problems Pertaining To Lack Of Transcripts

The fact that learners find it difficult when listening to English without transcripts (41.7% often, and 26.7% always) but 6.6% indicates that written support in the form of transcripts provided before listening exercises never help them understand the text. It is clear that students’ learning habit is the main cause to their listening problems. This may be due to the fact that transcripts allow listeners to check and make sure that they have listened to everything on the tape.

In general, the above results showed that listeners’ factors can interfere with learners’ listening comprehension. The learners’ inability to apply listening strategies, their inability to grasp pronunciation, inability to manage challenging tasks, and frustration interfered with their listening comprehension. Moreover, the result pointed out that a listening text without visual support or the speakers’ facial expressions and gestures interfere with learners’ listening comprehension.

4.6. The Speaker

Problems of listening comprehension related to speaking can be seen in relation to natural speech, pronunciation, varied accents, and a voice heard only on an audio-tape cassette recorder without seeing the speaker.

Table 10 Listening problems related to the speaker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item no.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>I find it difficult to understand the natural speech which is full of hesitation and pauses.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>I find it difficult to understand the meaning of words which are not pronounced clearly.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>I find it difficult to understand the meaning of the spoken text without seeing the speaker’s body language.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>46.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak with a variety of accents.

<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.6. 1 Problems Pertaining To Hesitations And Pauses

Natural dialogues are full of hesitations, pauses, and uneven intonation. Table 10 shows that more than two thirds of students (sometimes or often, 70%) find it difficult to understand natural speech which is full of hesitations and pauses. This is in line with the findings of previous research which indicate that hesitations and pauses in spontaneous speech cause perceptual problems and comprehension errors for non-native speakers (Hasan, 2000). When people speak, they often hesitate, repeat themselves, say things that are ungrammatical and change their minds halfway through a sentence. These things are a natural feature of speech and may be either a help or a hindrance, depending on the students’ level. So, the teacher’s tasks when teaching listening will be to train students to understand what is being said in such conversations: to get them to disregard redundancy, hesitation, ungrammaticality and to be conscious of the speakers’ changing their minds. (Harmer, 2001)

4.6. 2 Problems Pertaining To Unclear Pronunciation

Unclear pronunciation of some speakers is also considered as a source of listening problem. Many students thought that unclear pronunciation causes much difficulty for them in understanding their English listening lesson. Results show that 36.7% always find it difficult to understand the meanings of words which are not pronounced clearly meanwhile 10% are never in that situation. The numbers above indicate that students’ listening problem is partly due to unclear pronunciation.

4.6. 3 Problems Pertaining To Variety Of Accents

According to table 10, variety of accents causes difficulties to students in listening comprehension since they do not have much exposure to different accents. The result from table 2 demonstrates that many students (43.3% often and 30% always) experience this kind
of problem because they have got used to the accent of their own teachers and they are usually "surprised and dismayed when they find they have difficulty understanding someone else.

### 4.6. 4 Problems pertaining to Speed of Delivery

According to the students’ responses, the number one problem that the students viewed as obstructing to their comprehension was undoubtedly the speed of speech. Faster speech rates, whether computer-manipulated or naturally produced, tend to have a negative impact on the comprehension of L2 listeners. Many students (90%, always, often, sometimes) point out that when the speaker speaks at a rapid speed, it is difficult for them to comprehend what is being said, even if the words spoken are the ones they are familiar with. On the other hand, a small number (10% never) of student did not consider it as a learning obstacle. As a result, the students absolutely encounter certain difficulties in listening comprehension since they lack control over the speed at which the speakers speak (Underwood, 1989). This coincides with the results of the studies done by Flowerdew and Miller (1992) and Hayati, A. (2010) who have reported that their subjects unanimously rated speed of delivery as one of the greatest obstacle to understanding.

### 4.6. 5 Problems Pertaining To Lack Of Visual Support

Another barrier of listening comprehension is lack of visual support. The majority of learners (90% always, often, sometimes) also reported that they find it difficult to understand the meaning of the spoken text without seeing the speaker’s body language. This deprives them of some contextual clues which make the message easily understood as they cannot see the speakers’ faces and gestures. Moreover, they have the added difficulty of remembering the setting and the individual speakers when the speakers are not seen. Visual support, whether it is in the form of pictures, a video, or writing helps students understand the text.

### 4.6. 6 Problems Pertaining To The Inability To Get Things Repeated

Another problem connected with listening is the fact that listeners cannot always make the speakers repeat what they have just said. Nearly two thirds of students find it difficult to understand the recorded material if they are unable to get things repeated. This is a serious problem in learning situations. In the classroom, the decision as to whether or not to replay a recording or a section of a recording is not in the hands of students. Teachers decide what and when to repeat listening passages; however, it is hard for the teacher to judge whether or not the students have understood any particular section of what they have heard (Underwood, 1989, p. 17).

If the recordings are under the students’ control they can be played over and over again but this is not possible in everyday classroom environment where the teacher decides whether they will listen to the recording again or not (Chen, 2002). Ur (1984) argues that learners should be exposed to the recording more than once in order to understand the discourse.
4.6. 7 Problems Pertaining To Lack Of Pauses

Pauses are another factor that impeded the respondents' comprehension. Table indicates that many students (83.7% always, often, sometimes) find it difficult to understand the listening text when the speaker does not pause long enough. From a comprehension point of view, pauses give listeners more time to process what they need to understand. Research on the effect of pauses on lecture comprehension revealed that pauses facilitate listening (Amna Abdelgadir Yousif, 2006), moreover, they give listeners time to take a greater quantity of notes (Dunkel, 1988).

4.7. Problems Pertaining To Physical Settings

Not only the difficulties come from the message, the listener or the speaker but also come from the environment surrounding the students. According to Amber Bloomfield et al (2011), noise or distortion in the audio signal interferes with listening comprehension for listeners.

Table 11: listening problems related to the physical setting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item no.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>It is difficult for me to concentrate with noises around.</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>Unclear sounds resulting from a poor-quality CD-player interfere with my listening comprehension.</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>Unclear sounds resulting from poor equipment interfere with my listening comprehension.</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.7. 1 Problems Pertaining To Noise

Noise is another environmental barrier to comprehension. Interior as well as exterior class noise is an obstacle to comprehension. Noise, including both background noises on the recording and environmental noises, can take the listener’s mind off the content of the listening passage. With the noise coming from corridors and other classes some students experience difficulty in listening to the teachers' voices. Because of the noise in classroom and the poorly preparation of lab, a great number of students claim that they cannot be concentrated on listening to the recording material (96.6% always, often). If the listening task is carried out with noises around, it is for sure they will not have a good result in listening. First, they are distracted by the noise no matter how hard they try to focus on the task. Otherwise, the noise makes a complex of sounds instead of the solo recording being played. This interrupts the students from hearing and focusing on the task.
4.7. 2 Problems Pertaining To The Poor-Quality Tapes Or Disks

The majority of the students think the difficulties they encounter in listening comprehension are due to the bad recording quality / poor-quality tapes or disks. For example, the cassette may be recorded while there are noises around or the cassette is used for such a long time so the quality is worn out. Unclear sounds resulting from poor-quality equipment can also interfere with the listener’s comprehension.

It can be drawn from the above figures that there are some main problems facing students when they listen to the tapes. Among these, keeping up with the speaking speed of the speaker is the most difficult for them. This is not surprising at all because students tended to work out the meaning of every utterance they heard in the second language. They were so busy trying to work out the meaning of one part that they missed the following one; consequently, they failed to grasp the overall meaning of the listening text. Furthermore, a lot of students were not good enough to comprehend what they were listening to. They often tried to catch everything they heard, so they felt panic when they failed to recognize a word or a structure.

Surely, it is difficult to expect the students to learn to listen better when they are exposed to so many problems. The teachers’ responsibility then is to find way to encourage their students to tackle the listening tasks with positive anticipation. Especially, for students at the early levels, teachers should present some key words and structures before allowing the students to do their listening.

Discussion Of The Interview Results

Key Analysis of listening problems encountered by the subjects

As already discussed in the methodology above, interviews were carried out with 12 volunteer students, who gave additional evidence of the listening comprehension problems. These interviews were semi-structured around the issues of the listening comprehension problems in the questionnaire. Compared to questionnaires, the interview can give more freedom to both the interviewer and the interviewee to express their opinions freely and fully. These discussions were recorded. Twelve students volunteered to be interviewed but when they were asked to respond in English, they felt shy. So they are allowed to use their native language when this is necessary. Anyway, the interviewer attempted to encourage the interviewee to express their opinions as possible as they can.

To present various views regarding different topics from interviewed students, the data were presented respectively under each question in the following section. The questions, some key comments and quotes were summarized and presented.
How Do You Rate Your Listening Skills?

In the first question of the interview, the students were asked to evaluate their proficiency levels in listening skills. For the listening skills, the students think their proficiency levels in listening skills are quite low. Only two of the students think that their listening skills are ‘good’ whereas the other students think their listening performances are ‘below average’ or ‘poor’.

Since the students identified listening as their area of least success, they were asked to explain their answers. Almost all of them told that their high school education focused on the preparation for the University Entrance Exam (UEE), which tested reading and writing directly. Language skills like listening and speaking were never tested and therefore less attention was paid to them. Listening, which was never tested in UEE, was generally always disregarded by teachers.

“When I was in high school, we had only one purpose: preparing for the final exam. Our teachers were aware of this fact. So, our teachers preferred to read the passages aloud. I think they didn’t want to spend much time on listening. Because, in the final exam, listening wasn’t important at all.” (interviewee 2)

Interviews also revealed that many students did not feel that listening skills in English were important for them to excel in schools as their English teachers often emphasized reading comprehension skills in the classrooms.

“In my school, teachers always stressed on reading - not so much listening. They just did drilling in class . . . until we had to do University Entrance Test], then we did listening. They also focused on grammar, no listening . . . “(interviewee 11)

“I’ve never learned how to listen. In schools, the teachers didn’t teach us listening [skills].” (Interviewee 12)

The comments above show that language learning in high schools in Saudi Arabia focuses on preparation for the final exam and that both students and teachers try to improve skills that will lead to success in this exam. The backwash effect of the final exam is quite important and, in a way, this test shapes the language courses presented in high schools.
Before You Joined The University, What Experiences Did You Have In Gaining Listening Skills?

- Did you get opportunities to practice listening skills? If that was so, in what way?
- What kind of listening activities did you practice?
- Were you exposed to the native speaker English?

Most of the interviewees reported that they have deep-rooted difficulties of EFL listening for the reason that they didn’t practice it at lower classes. Different students gave different reasons for this case. One interviewee (1) reported that he didn’t practice EFL listening while he was in high school. This was because his English teacher always skipped over the listening lessons of the textbook “My English teacher used to skip over the listening lesson whenever he got to the lesson.” The other interviewee’s (2) blame his poor listening performance on his rural background and on lack of access to resources of the EFL listening, “I came from rural area where there was no TV or video that can help me to practice the EFL listening.”

The researcher got some students who went through EFL listening practices while they were at high schools. The EFL listening experiences of these students was, however, based on the teachers’ ‘reading aloud’. Therefore, they have not been exposed to the native speaker English. The reason they presented for this case is that they did not get opportunity to be acquainted with the speech of the native speakers. This can be one factor which makes the students unfamiliar with the natural feature of spoken English.

Q2: After You Joined A University, Particularly At The Time You Were Taking The Listening Course, When And How Much Time Did You Practice Listening, In And Outside The Class?

- What kinds of listening tasks did you do in class?
- Were the listening tasks you did in the course (ENG 105) similar to the ones you had done in the English classes of your high schools?

All participants reported that they spent about two hours a week practicing listening in the language laboratory. The researcher got only three students whose average time of practicing listening outside class was 3 days a week and minutes a day. Among whom, one was a student who had a personal habit of listening to English news and the other two were students who had a habit of watching movies. However, the remaining students reported that they never practice listening outside class. Their reason for not doing this was lack of opportunity to do so. The researcher disagrees with this idea to the fact that this reason was not true. At least, there is TV in the auditorium of the University which gives 24-hour free service for all students.

Students were asked to report the kinds of listening tasks they do in the listening classes, and some of the tasks mentioned by the students are summarized as follows. In the listening course, there were activities in which the students were made to listen to a recorded interview (of native speakers) and then to carry out various tasks (such as, multiple choice, filling the
blank, matching), to listen to a recorded ‘real life’ conversation (of native speakers) and then to carry out various tasks, to listen to a recorded story or an incident and to fill charts, and transfer information, to listen to a recorded speech of BBC and to answer comprehension questions, to listen to live English radio broadcasts and to report it to the class, and to listen to live BBC television news and to write the summary of the news, etc. Many of the interviewees reported that these listening tasks they carried out in the listening course were quite different from the listening practice they experienced in the English classes of their high schools.

Some students also reported that their listening difficulty of understanding the native speech was related to the impact of their past experience of listening at lower levels. Some of such students reported that their difficulties of understanding the native speech was due to their past learning habit of listening which was absolutely based on reading aloud. In the high school’s listening lessons, it was their teacher who used to read aloud the listening passage for them; as a result, they are accustomed to their teachers’ accent. Whenever they come across the natural speech of the native speakers, they said, they fail to grasp the pronunciation.

**What Are The Problems That Affect Your Comprehension As Listeners?**

Listening is a difficult task for EFL learners. The subjects interviewed reported the following difficulties in listening: delivery speed, intonation, accents, vocabulary, syntactic structures, and background knowledge, may influence their comprehension during listening. There are some good comments given by the subjects who complained about the obstacles of listening strategy use they have.

**A- Unclear Pronunciation**

Many students said they were not successful since it was impossible for them to make out what the speakers said because of their lack of pronunciation ability. The students recognized words in written texts but they couldn’t understand what they heard. Interviewees 5, 7 and 8, for instance, complained about the difference between weak and strong pronunciation: “Sometimes consonants and syllables get lost or become almost inaudible, especially the auxiliaries can’t be noticed.”

“When I listen to native speakers, I feel that sounds change or blend with each other.”

“In school, we pronounce the words one by one. The pronunciation is strong but, within a sentence, the words change and it becomes impossible to hear them.”

The comments presented above show that the students had difficulties in identifying words in continuous speech. Some students, on the other hand, thought they had been taught incorrect pronunciations of words. Interviewee (4) blamed his teachers for the difficulties he faced: “When I was in high school, some of my teachers pronounced words incorrectly. Now, I can’t understand what I listen just because I don’t know the correct pronunciation (of words).”
B. Limited English Vocabulary

Lack of words was another major problem that impedes students’ listening comprehension. This is clear in the comment of the interviewed students:

“My vocabulary is poor; it is very difficult for me to understand what the conversation is, especially when the word that I don’t know is a key word. Though I have tried to look it up in the dictionary, it’s sometimes useless. I guess it’s because my pronunciation is not good enough, too.” (Interviewee 11)

“I am weak in listening because if there is a vocabulary I don’t understand then I miss many main points”. (Interviewee 11)

(in answer to the question, “What are the main problems you have in listening?”) ... some difficult words and vocabulary, some terms... (Interviewee 11)

“some vocabulary may not be understood”. (Interviewee 11)

Poor Knowledge Of Grammar

Some learners stressed the importance of grammar in relation to listening comprehension. For instance, Interviewee (11) says: "I don't think ‘knowing a lot of vocabulary’ only is useful ability for me... My ability to listen for complex sentences is too bad, and also I know my English grammar is as terrible as my ability to English conversation." Similarly, Interviewee (12) states: "My grammar is poor so my English isn't good... They [listening, reading, and writing] all need grammar, vocabulary, and so on... In the listening class, I feel this way, too."

Although the learner did not explicitly illustrate the relationship between grammar and listening comprehension, the concern was there.

Difficulties Related To Listening Strategies

This group contains the listening difficulties that are attributed to the listening strategies. The components of this group include forgetting to apply strategies, inability to apply strategies, and ineffective use of strategies. They will be discussed one by one.

A. Forgetting To Apply Strategies

Learners sometimes forgot to apply listening strategies while they are engaged in listening. For instance, Interviewee (11) responded, “I can't always remember the inferencing strategy and cannot use it often.” Interviewee (18) attempted to use self-monitoring and directed attention strategy, but often forgot to employ them in listening process: “sometimes I forgot to remind myself.” This might imply that strategy use has not yet reached an automatic stage of learning for these learners, or might imply that strategies were not yet internalized as part of their existing listening skills.
B. Inability To Apply Strategies

Some learners encountered practical problems while trying to put their understanding of strategies into practice. This might be due to the learners’ unfamiliarity with the procedures for specific strategy application. As exemplified in Interviewee’s (S5) response: “Roughly, I know what ‘prediction’ is about. But, when it comes time to apply it, it gets somewhat difficult,” the learner understood the strategy of prediction but was unable to apply it in listening process.

C. Ineffective Use Of Strategy

There is also a failure of comprehension even after applying strategies. Another frequent report from learners was that the texts were still not comprehensible in spite of strategy use. As Interviewee (6) indicated when the inferencing strategy was used: "I inferred the word meaning from the context" but still "when all the parts are put together, I don't know what the speaker is trying to say." Likewise, Interviewee (5) probably used the imagery strategy, but was left puzzled: "Easy to imagine. Hard to know what the people are going to say exactly. . . . I don't know what they mean." A problem also emerged while the Interviewee (6) attempted to practice the strategy of directing attention: "What's difficult for me is after focusing my attention; I still can't understand."

Linguistic Knowledge

According to Brindley (1997), both linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge are required for one to understand a listening input. This accounted for the reason why the learners could not understand the lesson. It seemed that the main factor that obstructed them from understanding the lesson was their vocabulary knowledge.

Student 4: “...I had the same problem again. I could not follow the lesson, and I did not know the vocabulary. I made guesses...”

Student 6): “...My problem was that I could not keep up with what the speaker was saying and I didn't know the vocabulary...I could not capture the main idea...”

The students stated that their level of understanding English words was not always the same. Topic was an important factor determining their understanding. Word knowledge related to the students’ familiarity with the topic will be examined in the next part.

Familiarity With The Topic

Seven out of twelve participants stated that they couldn’t understand some listening materials because they did not know anything about the topic. When the interview data were analyzed, it was found that this factor was actually related to the previous one, namely word knowledge. As seen in the comments of Interviewee 4:

“Sometimes there are dialogs about different topics such as economy. I don’t know any of the words related to economy.”
Most of these students were aware of the fact that they had to increase their lexical knowledge and they tried to increase their lexical knowledge by reading or listening.

**Rate Of Speech Too Fast To Comprehend**

Another problem that bothered the interviewees was the speech speed. Many students thought it was easier to understand speakers who had a slow rate of speech (2 out of ten) and difficult to understand speakers with a quick speech rate (10 out of twelve). Some students thought it was especially difficult to understand native speakers.

“Native speakers speak too fast. Sometimes I hear all the words as a single unit.” (Interviewee 1)

“The teacher speaks very quickly.” (Interviewee 10)

However, reasons given for this difficulty with speed of delivery included unfamiliarity with listening to native speakers:

“In my secondary school, all the English teachers are Saudi, there was no chance for me to talk with foreigners”. (Interviewee 9)

Another reason was the need to translate into Arabic:

S21 (interview): “I have to translate his English into Chinese so it takes many time to catch his meaning”. (Interviewee 11)

**The Inability To Concentrate**

Many students realized that attention was fundamental to listening and identified their lapses in concentration as another listening problem:

“The main problem is that I can’t concentrate well on those serious topic, maybe I need practising more.” (Interviewee 1)

Some students also said that whenever their attention was diverted from the input, they would miss a lot of information:

“Because I did not concentrate too much I missed some points.” (Interviewee 6)

Others, however, reported that concentrating too hard could be counter-productive:

“Sometimes you are so eager to catch more. As a result, you only care about your mind, not the listening material.” (Interviewee 7)

Difficulty in maintaining concentration over a long period

“The first part is too long with no break, it makes me very difficult to concentrate in the two hour lesson. (Interviewee 6)

It is clear that the above mentioned comments go in accordance with the quantitative results of the study.

**Different Accents And Dialects**

Some of the students felt confused because they thought English had different ‘versions’. Especially the difference between British English and American English was an important
contributor to this confusion. “In school, our teachers try to teach British English but we always hear American English on television. The pronunciations and intonations are quite different.” (Interviewee 8)

Language spoken in different parts of the UK and USA may also cause difficulties. “I don’t understand English spoken by different ethnic groups. Uneducated people use different pronunciations and grammatical structures. I think they don’t complete their sentences.” (Interviewee 9)

These students thought they were trying to learn not only English language but also variations of it. This fact sometimes made it very difficult for them to understand the spoken language.

Problems Pertaining To Length And Difficulty Materials

Intelligibility is affected by factors such as sentence length and difficulty. When the learners encounter listening materials that were above their level to a certain degree, complaints were often made about the difficulties of the listening process as indicated by the following:

“The speaker use long sentences.” (Interviewee 8)
“The lecturer says difficult English.” (Interviewee 9)

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

“Difficult to listen to long talk in English” (Interviewee 1)
“Teacher speak speak speak. “ (Interviewee 3)
“I not understand long lecture.” (Interviewee 6)

Presentation of a long series of sentences affects comprehension (Hasan, 2000). The students may be weak at paying attention to the sequence of the passage 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

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.

“The weather very hot.” (Interviewee 5)
“When the weather is hot I can’t follow the lecture.” (Interviewee 10)
“The hot weather forbids my listening.” (Interviewee 4)

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:

“The voices of the students talking in corridors and other classes
distract me.” (Interviewee 8)  
“Some of the students make loud noise.” (Interviewee 12)  
“The shouting in the room.” (Interviewee 3)  

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

Some affective factors might distract learners from listening and understanding. The affective factors that play a negative role in listening comprehension include anxiety, frustration, and resistance. 

For example, learner (interviewee1) felt depressed when he failed to comprehend: "I felt so depressed because I was totally lost in my personal matter outside class." The frustration led to thoughts of giving up the listening task. Some other students also reported that their frustration was related to their unfamiliarity with the speech of the native speakers. Interviewee (7) reported, “I have never ever been exposed to the speech of the native speakers until I enrolled in the listening course, so I feel worried whenever I engage in listening to the recordings.” Another interviewee (6) reported, “I didn’t practice listening skills at lower levels, so the listening course here was strange for me. Frankly, when I come to the listening class, I always feel worry.”

Difficulties encountered by tertiary students in listening to oral texts are numerous as shown by the analysis of the participants’ comments. They were very concerned with their inability to comprehend texts 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.

How Can Teachers Help Their Student Overcome Their Listening Comprehension Problems?

Not all the problems described above can be overcome. Certain features of the message and the speaker, for instance, are inevitable. But this does not mean that the teacher can do nothing about them. S/he can at least provide the students with suitable listening materials, background and linguistic knowledge, enabling skills, pleasant classroom conditions, and useful exercises to help them discover effective listening strategies. Here are a few helpful ideas:

1. Adapting And Improving Listening Materials

It is obvious that students differ in their learning styles and ability, therefore, teachers should adopt and adapt listening materials that match their students’ interest and background since the listening materials only become stimulating and motivating them when they are slightly challenging to what they have already known and suit their interest.
2. Activating Your Students’ Vocabulary

From the investigation, one of the great causes for the students in listening comprehension is their lack of vocabulary. The majority of all the students report not to have sufficient vocabulary in listening comprehension and a small number complains that their vocabulary is too poor to understand. It is, therefore necessary for teachers to equip students with certain key words needed for listening comprehension since lack of vocabulary becomes a great obstacle to them in listening comprehension, which is also realized by Underwood (1989) and Higgin (1995). However, it is better to activate students’ vocabulary by asking them to guess the meaning of words used in the listening context before explaining the meaning to them, since whenever students are able to relate what they have already known to what they are supposed to listen for, they are likely to listen better or more effectively.

3. Using Different Kinds Of Input

The teacher should also provide students with different kinds of input, such as lectures, radio news, films, TV plays, announcements, everyday conversation, interviews, storytelling, English songs, and so on.

4. Using Visual Aids

Teacher exploit visual aids or draw pictures and diagrams related to the listening topics to aid students to guess and imagine actively. Visual aids draw learners’ attentions, increase their motivation on the topic and help them relate to content of the spoken text, thus listener overcome difficulties such as unknown words, minimal pairs of words.

5. Accents

Make students aware of different native-speaker accents. Of course, strong regional accents are not suitable for training in listening, but in spontaneous conversation native speakers do have certain accents. Moreover, the American accent is quite different from the British and Australian. Therefore, it is necessary to let students deal with different accents, especially in extensive listening.

6. Pronunciation

The findings in the study show that incorrect pronunciation hinders at least many students from listening comprehension, so teachers need to help students expose themselves and get familiar with precise pronunciation of native speakers. By doing that the students’ pronunciation capacity is much more improved, which will help students find listening to native speakers effective and efficient. Many teachers suppose that students’ accurate pronunciation is of great help for them in listening acquisition. They also believe that one of the ultimate results of listening acquisition is to train students to produce accurate pronunciation.
7. Connected Speech

Connected speech is characterized by weak forms, contractions, elision, and assimilation (Anne Anderson & Tony Lynch, 1988), which are considered the big obstacle for beginning EFL learners in spoken English acquisition. Thus, the task of teachers is to inform their students about these distinctive features of spoken language at any time convenient so that the students do not feel stressful and surprised when they listen to authentic listening materials.

8. Activating Or Building Students’ Prior Topical And Linguistic Knowledge.

Activate the schemata by encouraging the learners to think about and discuss what they already know about the content of the listening text. Teachers can also provide the background needed for them to understand the text, and it can help them focus attention on what to listen for. Consequently, students begin to predict what they might hear and make connections with what they already know, increasing the relevance of the information.

9. Arousing Interest And Motivating Students To Attend To The Spoken Message.

Students will be more willing to listen actively to what the speaker says if they are able to relate the listening experience to their own lives. Besides, teachers can create an environment conductive to listening and encourage effective listening behaviors that are necessary lifelong skills.

10. Encouraging Prediction

This technique can be employed in the pre-listening or while-listening stages. Students are asked to predict what the text is about or what the speaker is going to say next. In order encourage students to imagine and predict what they are going to hear, teacher may tell something about the topic of the listening text or something about the speaker(s). Besides, students can be asked to predict the grammar structures that are likely to be used in the listening text or make a list of words, phrases that relate to the topic and may appear in the listening text. By this way, they can familiarize students with key concepts and vocabulary before listening to spoken text. When students have certain vocabulary in mind, they will be more self-confident and thus ready to listen effectively.

11. Using Slow Rate Of Speech

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.
12. Providing And Trying To Gain As Much Feedback As Possible

During the course, the teacher should fill the gap between inputs and students’ reply and between the teacher’s feedback and students’ reaction so as to make listening purposeful. This not only promotes error correction but gives encouragements as well. It can aid students to heighten their confidence in their ability to tackle listening problems. Students’ feedback can assist the teacher to judge where the class is going and how it should be instructed.

13. Improving The Learning Environment Of Listening Skill

Learning environment for listening skill, which is listening laboratory besides cassettes tapes, tape recorders and written listening texts, is a vital key affecting the quality of both learning and teaching listening skill. However, the findings of this study show that the students are not satisfied with the recent learning environment. Students argue that it still lacks well-equipped listening laboratory; consequently, the students find hard and challenging to concentrate while listening. It is, therefore, essential to upgrade the recent laboratory so that all of the students have equal and much chance to study listening skill in such a motivating environment for improving their listening skills.

In addition to what has been previously mentioned, various authors have discussed ways of helping learners improve their listening comprehension. Brown (1990) proposed a methodology that combined developing the learners' phonological code and helping them use contexts to make predictions. Buck (1995) proposed using pre-communicative and communicative activities, following a pedagogical framework by Littlewood (1981). This included helping learners develop a facility with fast natural speech and use good listening strategies. Field (1998) proposed an approach that took into consideration learners' listening problems and suggested a series of exercises for practising listening subskills in short micro-listening exercises.

Conclusions

Listening comprehension has been neglected in research and practice until quite recently. Even now, we can't say that Listening comprehension research abounds in the literature when compared to that of reading comprehension. This is why some researchers call listening “Cindrella skill” in second language learning (Nunan, 1997, p. 46). However it is true that listening is vital in language learning in that it provides input for the learner. Without understanding inputs, students can’t learn anything.

To conclude, listening is vital not only in language learning but also in daily communication. However, being one of the assistant professors at Qassim University, I can clearly see the situation of teaching and learning English. Listening comprehension seems to be the weakest skill and students encounter various kinds of listening problems. This study is done in the hope
of finding out the factors causing their listening comprehension problems and contributing some recommended strategies for teachers and students employ in improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning listening comprehension.

Research results have allowed me to arrive at the following conclusions:
1. Students at Qassim University encounter various kinds of listening problems in learning comprehension such as unfamiliar words, the length of the spoken text, speed rate, a variety of accents, lack of concentration and pronunciation.
2. Some suggestions that could be employed for teachers and students to encounter listening comprehension problems include adapting and improving listening materials, and improving teachers’ classroom techniques on the part of the teachers. As for students, they can alleviate their own difficulties by improving English proficiency, and improving listening strategies.

Suggestions For Further Research

Future studies may consider the following directions:
1. The present study needs to be carried out with large sample because the sample size was too small to generalize an overall conclusion applying to all EFL learners.
2. A standardized inventory of listening difficulties could be created to provide instructors and learners with an efficient way to diagnose strategy difficulties.
3. The present study needs to be studied in different English learning contexts in Saudi Arabia.
4. Further research needs to be conducted with more comprehensive samples including the primary, secondary, and preparatory levels in order to get a complete picture of the problem.

It is hoped that the results of this study will contribute to improving the teaching and learning in the field of listening comprehension in Saudi Arabia.

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