A Diagnosis of Listening Comprehension Difficulties Using an IELTS Listening Test Sample The Case of Master Students at the University of Bejaia

تشخيص صعوبات الاستماع لدى طلاب الماستر بجامعة بجاية باستخدام عينة من اختبار الاستماع الأيلتس

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Abstract

The present study attempts to diagnose EFL students' listening difficulties. To achieve this aim, an IELTS listening test sample was administered to seventy-one MA students specialized in Didactics of Foreign Languages[1] and Linguistics at the Department of English, the University of Bejaia. This paper relied exclusively on the analysis of the obtained results from the IELTS listening test. The study revealed that most test takers have a variety of listening problems. These problems are mainly related to two factors; the text and the listener. The major problem associated with the factor of "text" is the inability to detect meaning expressed in different grammatical forms and sentence types. This was due to limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. The main listening difficulty related to "the listener" factor is the inability to listen for specific information and detailed information, which requires the listener to find out key words. Actually, understanding EFL students' listening difficulties can help teachers to choose more effective learning strategies that can help develop students' listening skills.

Keywords: Diagnose – IELTS listening test sample – Listening difficulties – Listening problems – Listening skills.

[1] Officially labelled : Didactique des langues étrangères (DLE)

الملخص:

الهدف من هذا البحث هو تحديد وتشخيص صعوبات الاستماع لدى مجموعة من طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية باستخدام عينة من اختبار الأيل تس (نظام الاختبار العالمي للغة الإنجليزية). تم إجراء الاختبار على إحدى وسبعين طالبًا من درجة الماستر، تخصص تعليمية وتطبيقات لغوية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة عبد الرحمان ميرة (بجاية). إذ كشفت الدراسة أن معظم الطلبة الذين أجروا الاختبار لديهم مجموعة من المشاكل مرتبطة أساسا بمهارة الاستماع، وبذلك فهم في حاجة ماسة للمساعدة في تطوير هذه المهارة. ومن خلال النتائج المتحصل عليها، نجد بأن هذه الصعوبات مرتبطة بعاملين أساسيين هما: النص والمستمع. أما ما يتعلق بالعامل الأول، فتتمثل أساسا في عدم قدرة المستمع على فهم المعنى المصاغ في أشكال نحوية وأنواع جمل مختلفة وذلك مرده الى محدودية المفردات والمعرفة النحوية. أما المتعلقة بالعامل الثاني فتتجلى في عدم القدرة على الاستماع من أجل الحصول على معلومات محددة في النص، الأمر الذي يتطلب من المستمع معرفة الكلمات الأساسية للنص. إن فهم صعوبات الاستماع لدى الطلاب يمكن أن يساعد أساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية على اختيار استراتيجيات تعليمية أكثر فاعلية والتي من شأنها تطوير كفاءة الاستماع لدى الطلاب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستماع؛ مهارة الاستماع؛ مشاكل الاستماع؛ عينة من اختبار الأيل تس؛ تشخيص

Introduction:

Listening is an important language skill for second and foreign language acquisition (Feyten, 1991; Morley, 2001; Rost, 2001). Until the advent of the communicative approach, the teaching of listening to EFL learners was often neglected due to the difficulty of providing spoken texts (Buck, 2001; Vandergrift, 2003, 2007; Vandergrift & Goh, 2009). Even though listening was recognized recently due to the relative availability of spoken texts brought about by technological advancements, the dilemma of how to teach listening properly and effectively remained persistent. Accordingly, EFL learners face numerous problems in listening as they fail to understand spoken texts (Scrivener, 2005; Ur, 1984). Goh

(2000) pointed out that all language learners find problems when they listen to the target language. According to Chelli (2002), "Speech rates, decoding words or sentences, poor knowledge of the structure of the language, lack of prior and cultural knowledge, inferring abilities and the use of listening strategies are common problems encountered by listeners" (p. 50).

Many researchers have acknowledged that numerous factors can hinder the learning of a foreign language. Among them Abdelatif (2006) who indicated, "There are undoubtedly many factors affecting successful learning of English in the Algerian context" (p. 46). Concerning EFL listening comprehension, many factors, including major and minor factors, can influence the listening process and partially hinder the development of the students' level. One reason is that EFL students have limited time to practice listening inside the classroom, and they still generally do not have enough opportunities to practice it at out-of-class. Meanwhile, the listening skills are still in some way neglected and poorly taught in many teaching curricula, and teachers do not seem to give much importance to listening skills while preparing their lessons (Hamouda, 2013). This neglect may more likely result in an imbalance in the teaching and learning process, which normally caters for and requires the presence of the four language skills. According to Lynch (2011), a possible reason for this neglect would be "The inherent complexity of listening and listening research" (p. 80).

Assessment is a by-product of teaching. After a period of instruction, the assessment stage comes next or can be a part of the teaching process. Language proficiency is measured in terms of productive (speaking and listening) and receptive skills (listening and reading). Regarding listening comprehension assessment, some researchers have assumed that although listening assessment is a central component of the teaching process, it is still in one way or another

neglected and not understood in many EFL contexts. (Buck 2001; Dunkel, 1991; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Vandergrift & Goh, 2009).

Alderson and Bachman wrote in the Series Editor's Preface of Buck's Assessing Listening (2001), "The assessment of listening abilities is one of the least understood, least developed and yet one of the most important areas of language testing and assessment" (p. 4). There are several reasons that can affect the assessment and testing of EFL students' listening skills, including the large number of test takers, lack of sufficient time and necessary materials (Buck, 2001). Generally, Assessment is divided into two main types: classroom assessment and large-scale assessment. Large-scale tests are designed by testing and assessment experts. The main feature of large-scale assessment is that the conditions of administration and scoring follow standard procedures (Brown, 2003).

Large-scale tests are known for their qualities of good Assessment, mainly validity compared to classroom assessment. Cizek (2009) pointed out, "The ways in which validity evidence is gathered are fairly well-developed in large-scale testing contexts. Large-scale validation often involves statistical techniques that are not well suited to classroom contexts." (p. 68). However, classroom evaluation practices sometimes conjure up images of a test whose validity is not credible. In this, and according to Cizek (2009) "Regrettably, great progress has not been made in formalizing the sources of validity evidence that are appropriate to classroom contexts" (p. 68).

In EFL classrooms, students are usually assessed by means of tests, commonly designed by teachers (often referred to as teacher-made tests). Classroom tests are course-based. In other words, they emphasize students' grasp of the content taught at school. Hence, Students have more chance to get better scores in the test since the content is already limited to classroom instruction. One of the issues associated

with classroom tests is scoring reliability. In an explanation of the scoring reliability and its related issues, Cizek (2009) reported that

> Scoring reliability is relevant when teachers rate students' speeches, grade term projects, score students' responses to essay questions, and so forth. In these cases, the student work might vary substantially in features (e.g., legibility, organization, tardiness) that are unrelated to the primary characteristic the teacher intends to evaluate. In addition, the teacher also becomes a source of unpredictability, due to variation in time pressures, mood, leniency/stringency, and other factors that affect scoring. (p. 67).

The BEM[2] and BAC[3] are the standardized and large-scale exams most commonly used in the Algerian education system. Both exams are organized by the Algerian Ministry of National Education. They intend to measure and evaluate students' performance after a specific period of instruction (often described as achievement tests). IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) are illustrative examples of international large-scale English proficiency tests. They are developed by assessment and testing experts to measure non-native English language speakers' proficiency in English.

In the Algerian EFL context, international standardized tests of English proficiency are rarely used or administered in public schools and state universities, even as entrance examination test. As a means to measure students' English proficiency, EFL teachers can use proficiency tests as a valid measure of English proficiency to measure their students' level in English proficiency. The teacher can

[2] BEM (Brevet d'enseignement moyen): a National standardized exam that takes place after four years of study at the middle school. Students who succeed in the examination are granted access to secondary school.

[3] BAC (baccalauréat): In Algeria, the baccalaureate is a National large-scale exam administered at the end of the last year of secondary school. Students who succeed in the exam will be eligible to continue their higher studies at the university.

particularly use this type of tests to diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses in English.

Before enrolling in certain universities that require English proficiency tests, students must have a good English level and obtain the minimum test score set by the host university (IELTS, TOEFL, etc.). The student is required to submit official test scores as a proof of his English language proficiency. In Algeria, to opt for studying English or any other subjects at the University, it is not necessary to prove your English proficiency with any of these standardized international English proficiency tests. The lack of use of these tests in Algerian universities is attributed to several factors, including:

- International standardized tests of English proficiency are costly.
- The use of French is more enhanced than that of English in Algerian Universities.

Although English is the most widely used language in the world. However, the inclination toward French as the first foreign language in Algeria is most particularly evident because, historically, French is the language of the colonizer and has always played an important role in Algeria. Moreover, French is the language used to teach many University subjects particularly pure science and technology (Le Roux, 2017).

In the Algerian private schools, it is not the case since many of them use Large-scale English proficiency tests, sometimes as placement tests, to grade students according to their level in English (beginner, intermediate, advanced). In addition to private schools, there are centers in Algeria offer International English proficiency tests such as the IELTS, TOEFL, etc. For the IELTS, the most common exam centers are: Language Solutions Algeria in Chéraga; Algiers, British Council Algeria; Algiers. For the TOEFL, there are four centers in four cities: Algiers, Oran, Constantine, and Sétif.

In Algeria, English is taught as a foreign language. Before applying at the University, students learn English for seven years during middle school and high school. The English courses at this level often deal with teaching learners language structure, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Regarding listening, the process of teaching listening in Algerian schools is relegated (Chentouf, 2019). Consequently, when students come to the university and are confronted with an audio material, they more likely face difficulties in listening. At this level, this neglect is apparently manifested in the absence of listening comprehension as a module in the LMD system (Boughelamallah, 2018).

Several studies were conducted to investigate and diagnose EFL language learners' listening comprehension problems (Flowerdew & Miller, 1996; Goh, 2000; Graham, 2006; Hamouda, 2013; Hasan, 2000). From the results of these studies, it was found out that EFL listening is affected by many factors (text, task, listener, speaker, and physical environment). Obviously, most of the problems identified in these studies are limited to low-level of processing (bottom-up processing) such as fast speech rate, unfamiliar vocabulary, and complex grammatical structures.

Although it can be assumed that graduate students (MA) of English at Algerian Universities have developed effective listening skills as they spent many years studying English. However, further research is needed to reach evidence concerning the aforementioned statement. Based on the results obtained from the administered IELTS listening test sample, the present research can provide empirical evidence on the types of listening difficulties encountered by MA students, as well as the different factors contributing to these difficulties. This paper is an attempt to diagnose EFL students' listening comprehension problems at the Department of English in Bejaia University, and suggest a number of strategies and implications for classroom practices in order to improve the listening skill.

1- Methodology:

The present study is descriptive and its central objective is to diagnose the listening problems faced by EFL Master students at Bejaia University while listening to spoken texts. To elucidate the study, it tries to answer the following questions:

- What are the listening sub-skills required to answer the test items?
- What are the listening difficulties that EFL Master students face when listening to English?
- What are the main factors behind these problems?

The IELTS listening test sample consists of 40 items administered to 71 Master students of English at Abderrahmane Mira University of Bejaia. All participants in this research were randomly chosen. The selection of EFL students at the Master level was based on the assumption that they are more familiar with listening because they studied English for many years, and therefore their listening proficiency is improved.

This research was based upon the analysis of the results of an IELTS listening test sample. The selection of this test was particularly done due to its worldwide recognition as well as the available published data confirming its validity. The students were administered a sample of the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) listening test[4], an international standardized test jointly managed by the British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia and Cambridge Assessment English. The test consists of four major sections with different activities in each section. Sections one and two evaluate comprehension of everyday conversation, while sections three and four measure comprehension of academic discourse. For section one, listeners were given a conversation between a clerk at the inquiries desk of a transport company, and a man who is asking for travel information. In section two, participants were asked to listen to a conversation between a guiding counselor

[4] The test sample was downloaded from Official IELTS Practice Materials (http:takeielts.britishcouncil.org).

talking to a group of students and then answer comprehension questions. Concerning section three, it is a conversation, which involves listening for specific information, attitudes, and speakers' opinions. The remaining section namely section four has the same assessment objective as section three, but the stimulus is an academic monologue.

The main question types used in this test are multiple choice questions (MCQ), table completion, sentence completion, and matching questions. They are essentially the most common listening activities used in EFL listening comprehension tests. This test includes five (05) multiple-choice questions (Q36, Q37, Q38, Q39, Q40) and four (04) matching question (Q11, Q12, Q13, Q14). Besides, it consists of five (05) table completion questions (Q6, Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10, Q15, Q16, Q17, Q18, Q19, Q20, Q21, Q22, Q23, Q24, Q25, Q26, Q27, Q28, Q29, Q30, Q31, Q32, Q33, Q34, Q35) and five (05) sentence completion questions (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5).

The test is made conforming to the IELTS international rules and regulations. Prior to start answering the test, participants were given a general overview about the different IELTS listening test activities. Participants were informed about the time (30-minutes) required to finish the test answers. All participants were allotted extra 10 minutes to transfer their answers from the question paper to the answer paper. The papers were marked in accordance with the official IELTS test scoring system. The scores were calculated based on the correct answers test takers had out of 40 items. Consistent with the IELTS test rating scale, every correct item receives one point. Each activity was allocated a different mark according to the number of items it contained. For example, activity one can be attributed up to five marks because it contains five items while activity three can get four marks since it comprise only four items.

2- Results and Discussion:

The researchers carried out a qualitative study of test items. The analysis of test items was carried out to find the listening sub-skills employed by test takers to answer the 40 test items. According to Alderson (1990), "Such discoveries depend upon making inferences about what a test taker is doing when answering a question or responding to an item" (p. 437). The researchers followed Richards' taxonomy of listening sub-skills (1983, p. 102) in an attempt to identify the listening sub-skills, which were thought to be measured by the items in the actual IELTS listening test sample. Depending upon the number of repeated incorrect answers in each item, the researchers found out the challenging items for test takers. Subsequently, the researchers noted impressions of the listening sub-skills measured by test items, which the test takers found difficult to answer compared to other items. Based on the test items missed by students, the researchers noted the listening problems encountered by EFL students when they answered these items. Regarding the importance of developing taxonomies of receptive language skills, Alderson (2000), citing the example of reading skills, stated that the educational significance of these taxonomies is to help develop test tasks and items in order to measure learners' reading skills. This helps to diagnose the students' reading problems in order to provide effective remediation.

Table 01: The IELTS Listening Sub-skills and Pertinent Items

The listening sub-skills assessed by IELTS listening test	Definition and Description of the Sub-skills	Items corresponding to the sub-skills
Ability to detect meaning expressed in different grammatical forms/sentence types	Items evaluating this sub-skill deal with comprehending vocabulary and structure and require the listener to paraphrase the stimuli	1-2-3-4-5-11-12-13-14-21-22-23-24-25-26-27-28-29-30-36-37-38-39-40
Ability to detect keywords (, i.e., those which identify topics and propositions)	Listening for specific information	6-7-8-9-15-16-17-18-19-20-31-32-33-34-35
Ability to retain chunks of language of different lengths for short periods	Short-term memory	11-12-13-14
Ability to process speech delivered at rapid rate and in varied accents	Familiarity with natural speech delivery and accents	31-32-33-34-35-37-38-39-40
Ability to use phonemic recognition skills	A good application of phonological knowledge (the ability to manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words)	9

As Table (1) above indicates, the researchers identified the following major listening sub-skills as playing major role in answering the test items. Test takers used their: (a) ability to understand meaning expressed in other language structure or sentence types. It requires the capacity to paraphrase sentences using linguistic repertoire (e.g. vocabulary, and syntax), (b) the ability to discriminate between the distinctive sounds of the target language (phonological knowledge), and (c) the ability to look for Specific details; finding out keywords. In addition, the listeners were found to employ (d) their ability to retain chunks of language of different lengths for short periods (short-term memory), and (e) to process speech of rapid rate and varied English accents. It should be noted that every test item could measure more than one listening sub-skill at the same time.

Table 02: Students' IELTS listening test scores

Item	Mean	SD	Item format
1	0,11	0,31	SC
2	0,056	0,23	SC
3	0,056	0,23	SC
4	0,25	0,43	SC
5	0,11	0,31	SC
6	0	0	TC
7	0,11	0,31	TC
8	0,07	0,25	TC
9	0	0	TC
10	0	0	TC
11	0,49	0,50	MA
12	0,29	0,45	MA
13	0,28	0,45	MA
14	0,52	0,50	MA
15	0,45	0,50	TC
16	0,084	0,28	TC
17	0,12	0,33	TC
18	0,3	0,46	TC
19	0,63	0,48	TC
20	0,36	0,48	TC
21	0,11	0,31	SC
22	0,34	0,47	SC
23	0,11	0,31	SC
24	0,17	0,37	SC
25	0,28	0,16	SC
26	0,71	0,25	SC
27	0,32	0,47	SC
28	0,098	0,3	SC
29	0,07	0,25	SC
30	0	0	SC
31	0,66	0,47	TC
32	0,29	0,45	TC
33	0,084	0,28	TC
34	0,38	0,48	TC
35	0,35	0,48	TC
36	0,21	0,41	MCQ
37	0,098	0,3	MCQ
38	0,21	0,41	MCQ

39	0,33	0,47	MCQ
40	0,32	0,47	MCQ
Total mean	0,23	0.34	

Notes: N=71. MA: Matching Activity; MCQ: Multiple-Choice Questions; SC: Sentence Completion; TC: Table Completion

As displayed in Table (2), four items (14, 19, 26, and 31) have the highest mean scores. The items (11, 15) are the closest to the mean. Items 1, 4, 5, 7, 12, 13, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 32, 34, 35, 36, 38, 39, 40) have low mean scores while the remaining items (2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 10, 16, 28, 29, 30, 33, 37) have very low mean scores. The students' total mean score (0.23) illustrates the students' low level of listening comprehension. This is also manifested in the mean scores of several test items where there is low and very low mean scores for 33 items. These results prove the statement raised in the general introduction that EFL students have many difficulties in listening comprehension.

The purpose of this study is to diagnose the listening difficulties encountered by Algerian EFL Master students at Bejaia University using an IELTS listening test sample. The results showed that the problems faced by these students were multiple. The problems comprise the inability to understand the meaning stated in different grammatical forms or sentence types. This requires an understanding of vocabulary and structure to paraphrase oral input. Besides, listeners have difficulties with listening intensively to find out specific details, namely looking for keywords, as well as the inability to retain chunks of language of different lengths for short periods. The inability to process speech of fast rate, understand diverse accents, use phoneme recognition skills accurately, were some other serious challenges faced by students when listening in English. These findings are consistent with the results of previous studies (Yorio, 1971; Griffths, 1992; Zhao, 1997; Henrichsen, 1984; Goh, 1999; Hasan, 2000; Abidin & Juan, 2013; Hamouda, 2013).

The previous research has shown that listening comprehension difficulties are related to the following factors: listener, text, speaker, physical environment, and the linguistic features of the text (Hamouda, 2013; Hasan, 2000). The problems reported in this research are categorized into two types, the input factor and listener factor. There are three problems related to the aural input: the inability to process meaning expressed in different grammatical structures and sentence types, and to understand speech of rapid rate and various accents (Rubin 1994). This factor comprised thirty-three items and has an average of (0.23). Test takers find it also difficult to look for specific details and identify keywords, as well as to retain chunks of language of different lengths for short periods due to limited-working memory (Hasan, 2000; Rubin1994). In addition, the inability to use phoneme recognition skills accurately is another listening problem for these students. This factor is called listener, and it encompasses twenty items with a mean of (0.21).

The problems associated with aspects of the listening text indicate that listeners have limited bottom-up processing skills (bad manipulation of individual sounds or phonemes in spoken language). According to Hasan (2000), the listening text itself can be the main reason behind listening comprehension problems. The listening difficulties caused by the listener factor might be due to the listeners' limited exposure to EFL listening.

The items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, and 30 are meant to evaluate the ability to comprehend vocabulary and structure, and require the listener to paraphrase the spoken text (see table 1). The mean scores of these items show that the majority of test takers have failed to answer these test items. This can be due to the inability of test takers to understand the aural input. On the other hand, Listeners should develop their bottom-up processing skills to deal effectively with unfamiliar vocabulary and difficult grammatical structures. Torki (2006) pointed out that "Knowledge of vocabulary and structures constitutes the

cornerstone of language courses" (p. 16). Hasan (2000) stated that most EFL Listeners' problems are mainly due to their problems with bottom-up processing skills such as coping with unfamiliar words, difficult grammatical structures, and the length of spoken texts.

An attempt to understand a spoken text requires decoding the meaning of unfamiliar words and structures. If listeners fail to understand the meaning of these structures, they find it difficult to comprehend the meaning of the text. A study conducted by Vogely (1998) showed that the problems of listening comprehension are partly owing to the structural component of the text, which is similarly consistent with several studies (Flowerdew & Miller, 1992; Goh, 2000; Graham, 2006; Hamouda, 2013; Hasan, 2000; Yorio, 1971).

Items 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35 are in the form of table completion questions. The test takers are required to read intensively to understand the details of the passage and then find out keywords to fill in the blanks. According to Table (2), the average total score of these items is 0.24, which indicates that almost the majority of students did not correctly answer these items. The reason behind is that table completion items are the most difficult items for students in the IELTS (Coleman and Heap, 1998).

Concerning item 9, many test takers have written "community, commutive, comuty, callum, and camitian" instead of "commuter" in their answer sheets. It appears that students who missed the item might have a problem with phoneme recognition skills. Phonological knowledge plays a very important role in listening comprehension and "Any lack of such knowledge is likely to be reflected in reduced comprehension" (Buck, 2001. p. 33)". Goh (2000) and Hasan (2000) studies gave evidence that phoneme is a major source of concern for low-level L2 listeners. Furthermore, Henrichsen (1984) found that the majority of speakers have less difficulty understanding words in their modified form, whereas the presence of

phonological modification significantly reduces comprehension for second/foreign language listeners. Even recognizing easy language is sometimes difficult for higher-level L2 listeners.

Items 11, 12, 13 and 14 are matching activity items. The test results showed that three items (11, 12, and 13) were above the average. The remaining item (14) was below the average. This task is judged to evaluate the ability to apply comprehension of the oral input to paraphrase what was heard from the aural input. In this activity, test takers were asked to demonstrate their comprehension of the oral input by matching three names of counselors (A, B, and C) with four corresponding statements.

Matching question type is often demanding because it involves retaining the heard speech, understanding it, and then matching it with equivalent paraphrased phrases in the test. Moreover, this type of activity can also cause memory problems for many test-takers, especially if the spoken text is long. Students can understand what was said but they forget it as soon as they start listening to another part of the message. This can be attributed to "The constraints of a limited short-term memory" (Goh, 2000. p. 9). Hasan (2000) attributed memory problems to the length of the spoken text and reported that "It was pointed out earlier that listeners would not be able to keep in memory the information heard from a long text" (p. 149). Furthermore, the learners' lack of reading habits, as well as the difficulty of listening test texts and tasks, can make learners lose concentration and thus forget some parts of the text.

Items 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, and 20 are also table completion items. Concerning item 19, students had above mean scores. Items 15 and 20 had mean scores close to the average. For items (16, 17 and 18), the students performed rather poorly. This confirms that the majority of students did not understand the oral input and, therefore it was difficult for them to identify the keywords to fill in the table. Table

completion is an information transfer technique used to assess students' comprehension (Mebarki, 2008).

Items 36, 37, 38, 39, and 40 are multiple-choice questions. Test takers were required to choose one answer out of three options. Item 37 received the lowest mean score (0.098). Most students chose the answer (b) "They play video games instead of doing school work" instead of the correct answer (a), "They need to be in control of the way they learn". In items 36, 38, 39, and 40, students obtained below-average mean scores (0.21, 0.21, 0.33, and 0.32). Despite multiple-choice questions (MCQs) have little options that encourage lucky guesses, many test takers missed these items without even trying for random guessing. Many test-takers could not answer this activity (MCQs) even though the answers were explicitly expressed in the audio input. The reason might be that students who had the wrong answers could not understand the oral input.

Items 31, 32, 33, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40 were also thought to measure test takers' ability to process speech characterized by a rapid rate of delivery and a variety of accents. Most students scored poorly on these items with a mean score of (0.29). This shows that these two aspects of comprehension are one of the major problematic areas of EFL learners.

First, the problem of not being able to understand native speakers' speech rate is perhaps due to learners' common belief that listening involves recognizing and comprehending every single word uttered in a connected speech. Consequently, many listeners were unable to understand the whole listening input. A number of studies were conducted on the effect of speech rate on EFL listening (Flowerdew & Miller, 1992; Goh, 1999; Graham, 2006; Griffiths, 1990, 1992; Hamouda, 2013; Hasan, 2000). Another reason may be that students are not used to listening to native English speakers. Teachers need to familiarize their students with fast natural speech in order to understand native English speakers.

Second, variation of accents is one of the difficulties encountered by EFL listeners (Adank, Evans, Stuart-Smith, and Scotti, 2009; Buck, 2001; Goh, 1999; Hamouda, 2013; Hasan, 2000; Juan & Abidin, 2013). The bad scores in the last section are to some extent the result of a change of accent. The students felt confused when the accent changed from British English to American English. The mean score for this section (items 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40) was 0.29. The listening comprehension problems generated by variation of the speakers' accents are generally associated with the students' unfamiliarity with these accents.

According to Ur (1984), many foreign language learners, who are only used to hear the accents used by their teachers at schools, are chocked when they cannot understand someone speaking in other English accent. In a study conducted by Goh (1999), 66% of participants indicated that the difficulty in understanding when changing the accent is one of the main challenges faced by EFL learners when listening to a spoken text. The lack of familiarity with native or non-native accents is behind many problems in listening while familiarity with a particular accent can make listening comprehension easier. Buck (2001) also found that listeners who studied only American English have listening comprehension difficulties when they suddenly hear accents like Indian English. An unfamiliar accent can negatively affect the listening comprehension process and possibly make comprehension impossible. As a suggestion, Beghoul (2016) has recommended "Introducing the students to different varieties and different registers with some theoretical input would help the students to code switch in listening".

Conclusion

This paper aimed at investigating the listening problems and difficulties encountered by MA students at the Department of English, the University of Bejaia.

The problems identified in this study were related to two factors, namely the text and the listener. The problems associated with the text factor have originated mainly from inadequacy in bottom-up processing. It covers the inability to understand meaning expressed in different grammatical or sentence types using vocabulary and structure. The main listening problem related to the listener factor was the ability to look for details and find out text keywords. Based on the findings, some suggestions and recommendations were provided in an attempt to alleviate students listening difficulties and foster their listening proficiency.

The researchers suggest the following recommendations:

- Given the problems arising from inadequate bottom-up processing skills, further research is recommended to investigate the underlying causes of this ineffective low-level processing in order to propose some solutions.
- Teachers should encourage EFL students to develop the following basic listening comprehension sub-skills:

1. The ability to understand the meaning conveyed in different grammatical structures or sentence types using structure and vocabulary knowledge,
2. The mastery of phoneme recognition skills
3. The ability to remember quickly words or phrases that have just been heard (limited working-memory).
4. Train students to listen for specific information especially to find out specific details
5. Process and understand fast speech and the variations of English accents.

- Encourage students to exploit their top-down processing skills (background knowledge), which can help to overcome and cope with listening comprehension problems related to bottom-up processing skills.

- Help students to develop their bottom-up processing skills. The processing of a listening input requires an awareness of the basic language elements (words, sounds, intonations, stress, and grammatical structures).
- Teach students techniques that can help them remember the most important information and keywords in a text.
- Provide students with knowledge and practice of English phonetics and phonology so that they can quickly acquire phonemic recognition skills.

1. This involves helping students to master the main characteristics of spoken English: phonological modification, intonation, stress, reduction patterns and assimilation, etc.

2. Introduce students to the English pronunciation and accent rules to get them used to the natural English language. This includes teaching English phonetics, listening to different materials spoken by both English and non-English speakers, and encouraging students to imitate English speakers, both inside and outside the classroom, such as video clips, audiocassettes, and radio, etc.

- Involve students in activities that can develop their vocabulary and structure knowledge
- EFL learners should work to develop their limited working memory. One way is to listen permanently to native speakers to get used to hear and store large chunks of language.
- The use of standardized International IELTS English listening test helped students in the English Department of Bejaia University to diagnose their listening comprehension difficulties. Instead of assessing students' listening proficiency using classroom tests, getting students familiarized with tests for which their validity and validity is internationally recognized is very useful and can give EFL students a real picture about their level in listening comprehension.

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