

AN INVESTIGATION OF ENGLISH TEACHER CANDIDATES' PROBLEMS RELATED TO LISTENING SKILL

İNGİLİZCE ÖĞRETMEN ADAYLARININ DİNLEME BECERİSİNİN KULLANIMI İLE İLGİLİ SORUNLARININ İNCELENMESİ

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ÖZET

Bu çalışma Dicle Üniversitesi, Ziya Gökalp Eğitim Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili Eğitimi Anabilim Dalı'nda uygulanmıştır. Çalışmanın amacı öğrencilerin yabancı dilde dinleme becerileri ile ilgili değerlendirmelerini incelemek ve dinleme sırasında karşılaştıkları problemleri belirleyerek anlamayı kolaylaştıran ya da zorlaştıran faktörleri ortaya çıkarmaktır.

Verilerin analizi sonucunda dinlemenin öğrencilerin kendilerini yetersiz gördükleri bir beceri olduğu ortaya çıkmıştır. Öğrencilerin dinleme süreci sırasında konuşma hızı, ses tonu, görsel materyal eksikliği ve ses kalitesi gibi bir çok faktörden etkilendikleri belirlenmiştir. Ayrıca, Ortaöğretim Kurumlarında İngilizce derslerinin Üniversite Sınavı'na yönelik olarak okuma ve gramer ağırlıklı olarak verilmesinin öğrencilerin üniversite eğitimi sırasında dinleme becerisi ile ilgili başarı düzeylerini olumsuz etkileyen bir faktör olduğu saptanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: dinleme becerisi, dil öğretimi.

ABSTRACT

This article reports a study performed at the ELT Department of Dicle University, Ziya Gökalp Education Faculty. The aim of the study is to examine students' evaluations of their performances as listeners in English. Another purpose of the study is to determine the listening comprehension problems faced by language learners and the factors that make comprehension easier or more difficult.

The analysis of data reveals that the students rate their listening performances as "poor". In the listening process, they are affected by many factors such as speech rate, tone of voice, lack of visual materials and voice quality of listening materials. It has also been found that language courses offered in High Schools focus on reading and grammar with the purpose of preparing the students for the University Entrance Exam, but afterwards, during their university education, students' success level in listening is affected negatively.

Key Words: Listening skill, language teaching.

INTRODUCTION

A person who is trying to learn a second or foreign language has to improve four basic language skills possessed by the native speakers of that language. As stated by Harmer (1991), speaking and writing, which involve language production, are referred to as productive skills. Listening and reading, on the other hand, involve receiving messages and therefore, they are identified as receptive skills. However, in practice, some skills are laid more emphasis than the

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others in language teaching. For instance, most people think that knowledge of a foreign or second language involves being able to speak and write in that language (Nunan, 2002). Reading may sometimes be the focus of attention since some language teaching methods (e.g. Grammar Translation Method) lay emphasis on it. Listening, on the other hand, is generally seen as a means of teaching a language, rather than the goal of teaching. Sometimes, it is mainly used as a way of presenting new grammatical structures (Field, 2002); at other times students are asked to listen and repeat to improve their pronunciation skills (Jones, 2002).

Listening requires a number of elements such as access to words, parsing and memory processes (Cook, 1991). The mind tries to relate the words to the information stored in it. Then, the sentence is parsed by the listener, that is, the grammatical structure and meaning of the sentence are understood. Bottom-up or top-down directions can be followed in this process. Finally, the memory processes are connected to the previous elements. The scripts and schemas are used to make meaning clear.

The body of research related to listening skill includes diverse areas. Jung, (2003) examined the role of discourse signaling cues in second language listening comprehension. The role of gestures and facial cues in second language listening comprehension was investigated by Sueyoshi and Hardison (2005). Vandergrift (2006) studied the contributions of first language listening comprehension ability and second language proficiency to second language listening comprehension ability. Listening tests were examined by many researchers such as Ying-hui, who (2006) explored the effects of test features on test performance in EFL listening tests. Innami (2006) studied the effects of test anxiety on listening test performance. Anxiety was also examined by Elkhafaifi, who investigated the effects of general foreign language learning anxiety on students' achievement in an Arab course and of listening anxiety on students' listening comprehension (2005). Students' problems in listening have also been examined by some researchers. Goh (1999) tried to find out listening difficulties faced by a group of second language learners and examine these difficulties within a three phase model of language comprehension. She identified ten problems that occurred in the phases of perception, parsing and utilization.

The aim of the current study is to examine how students evaluate their performances as listeners in comparison to other skills. Another purpose of the study is to examine their previous language learning experiences related to listening. The study also aims to determine the listening comprehension problems faced by language learners along with the factors that make comprehension easier and more difficult.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The current research involved 92 first-year university students (26 males and 66 females) majoring in English language teaching. The courses offered to the students did not include a listening component but in their other courses, 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 University Entrance Exam (UEE), 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 UEE, that is, speaking is tested indirectly and listening is not included at all.

Instruments

The first source of data was a questionnaire prepared by the researcher. The first part of the questionnaire elicited information about the students' perceptions of themselves as language learners. They were asked to evaluate their performances concerning listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities. In addition, the questionnaire included a question about the students' previous language learning experiences. They were also asked about how and when they found the opportunities to listen to English. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions asked about the factors that increase and decrease their comprehension levels.

Another source of data was a semi-structured interview. 30 students participated in these group interviews based on the answers given to the questionnaire.

Procedure

The participants were administered the questionnaire in class. They were assured of anonymity. The questionnaire data were analyzed quantitatively. Interviewees signed a consent form, giving them details of the study and informing them that the interviews would be recorded by the researcher.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions.

- 1- How successful do learners believe themselves to be in listening and other language skills?
- 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 are the factors that affect their success or lack of success as listeners?

RESULTS

In this section, the quantitative data pertaining to Research Questions 1, 2 and 3 appear first as descriptive statistics. Then, the qualitative data related to Research Question 4 are presented.

How successful do learners believe themselves to be in listening and other language skills?

In the first item of the questionnaire, the students were asked to evaluate their proficiency levels in language skills. For the skills identified by students as areas of the most or least success, simple frequencies and percentages were calculated. As can be seen Table 1, the students think they are quite successful readers ($M=3.98$). 82,6% of the students think that their reading proficiency levels are 'good' or 'excellent'. 57,6% think their writing performances are above 'average' ($M=3.54$). However, the students believe that their proficiency levels in oral-aural skills are quite low ($M=3.01$, $M=2.71$ respectively). Only 20% of the students think that their listening skills are 'good' or 'excellent' whereas 41,3% think their listening performances are 'below average' or 'poor'.

Table 1. Students' perceptions related to their proficiency levels in different skills

<u>Skills</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>Sd</u>	Poor		Below average		Average		Good		Excellent	
			<u>f</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>f</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>f</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>f</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>f</u>	<u>%</u>
Reading	3.98	0.53	0	0	0	0	16	17,4	66	71,7	10	10,9
Writing	3.54	0.56	1	1,1	2	2,2	36	39,1	52	56,5	1	1,1
Speaking	3.01	0.76	2	2,2	20	21,7	45	48,9	25	27,2	0	0
Listening	2.71	0.89	8	8,7	30	32,6	35	38,0	18	19,6	1	1,1

In this study, the perceptions of male and female students related to their success levels in language skills were also compared. Table 2 below shows the results of the t-test which reveals that female students have higher perceptions than males related to their success levels in reading (Males=3.65, Females=4.04), writing (Males=3.38, Females=3.60) and speaking (Males=2.96, Females=3.03).

Table 2. Gender and students' proficiency levels

<u>Skills</u>	Male		Female		<u>t</u>	<u>p</u>
	<u>M</u>	<u>Sd</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>Sd</u>		
Reading	3.65	0.44	4.04	0.62	3.36	.001*
Writing	3.38	0.49	3.60	0.69	1.71	.089
Speaking	2.96	0.74	3.03	0.82	0.41	.676
Listening	2.76	0.91	2.68	0.86	0.38	.699

$p < 0.05$

The results of the t-test reveals that the difference between the perceptions of males and females pertaining to reading skill is significant ($t=3.36$, $p=.001$). The only skill that males find themselves more successful is listening (Males=2.76, Females=2.68).

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. The results are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Students' perceptions related to their high school education

<u>Skills</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>Sd</u>	Poor		Below average		Average		Good		Excellent	
			<u>f</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>f</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>f</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>f</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>f</u>	<u>%</u>
Reading	3.71	0.94	3	3,3	7	7,6	18	19,6	49	53,3	15	16,3
Writing	2.81	0.96	9	9,8	23	25	38	41,3	20	21,7	2	2,2
Speaking	2.23	1.10	30	32,6	25	27,2	24	26,1	11	12	2	2,2
Listening	1.94	0.93	37	40,2	28	30,4	22	23,9	5	5,4	0	0

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 (23,9%, 14,2% and 5,4% respectively). It is interesting that 70,6% of the students thought listening instruction was 'below average' or '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.

How and when do they find the opportunity to listen to English?

In the questionnaire, the students were asked to choose the most common ways of listening from a list of listening activities. Table 4 displays the frequencies and percentages of the answers given by the students. These range from listening to teachers and classmates to communicating with friends. For about two-third of the students (68,5%), the most common listening activity is listening to teachers and classmates speaking English in class. 59,8% watch British or American television channels whereas 52,2% listen to English language study cassettes or CD's at home. Watching English movies at the cinema is another common listening activity for the participants of this study (%40,3).

Table 4. Listening Activities

<u>Activities</u>	<u>f</u>	<u>%</u>
Listening to teachers and classmates in class	63	68,5
Watching British or American TV channels	55	59,8
Listening to English language study cassettes or CD's at home	48	52,2
At the cinema	37	40,3
Listening to the radio channels in English	24	26,1
Communicating with tourists or foreign friends	16	17,4
Using voice chat on the internet	6	6,5
Communicating with their (Turkish) friends	4	4,4

What are the factors that affect their success or lack of success as listeners?

The questionnaire included open-ended questions which inquired what the students attributed their success and lack of success as listeners. When the answers were analyzed, it was found that most of the answers were similar and that the same factors caused both success and lack of it. In other words, the same reason was sometimes given as a positive factor by some interviewees and as a negative one by some others. The overview of these factors is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. The Overview of Factors that may Affect Listening Comprehension Positively or Negatively

<u>Factors</u>	<u>Positive</u>		<u>Negative</u>	
	<u>f</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>f</u>	<u>%</u>
<u>Listeners' Proficiency</u>				
A- Pronunciation ability	31	33,7	53	57,6
B- Word knowledge	18	19,6	32	34,8
C- Knowledge about the topic	11	12	22	23,9
D- Previous education	-	-	62	67,4
<u>Listening Materials</u>				
A- Speech rate	13	14,1	68	73,9
B- Volume	5	5,43	13	14,1
C- Voice quality of listening materials	2	2,17	34	37
D- Lack of visual materials	-	-	32	34,8
E- Different accents and dialects	-	-	26	28,3

Factors Concerning Listeners' Proficiency

A- Pronunciation Ability

Pronunciation ability is basically related to speaking skill. However, 91,4% of the participants thought there was a connection between pronunciation and their listening performances. 33,7% of them believed they were successful listeners because they knew the correct pronunciation of words and that they had extra studies to improve their pronunciations. According to these students, knowing correct pronunciation increased their listening comprehension levels. On the other hand, 57,6% of the students mentioned this factor negatively. During the interviews the reasons were asked to the students. 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 texts but they couldn't understand what they heard. Interviewees 7, 23 and 27, 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).”

Another reason was the difference between the written and spoken versions of English. For instance, Interviewee 22 thought this was the main reason for her lack of success.

“English words are not always pronounced as they are spelt or shown in writing. Sometimes I hear a word and don’t understand it. Then, I see the transcript (of the text) and notice that I know the word. In Turkish, spelling and pronunciation aren’t so different.”

Interviewee 22 did not have the words in her spoken vocabulary in spite of the fact that she knew the meanings of them in reading. Word knowledge was also mentioned by some other students who thought having limited word knowledge affected their success in listening.

B- Word knowledge

19,6% of the students believed that a good knowledge of words helped to increase their comprehension levels. Similarly, 34,8% thought their failure stemmed from lack of word knowledge. The interview data supported this result. Some students mentioned the difference between formal and informal usages of English.

“During my education, written language was emphasized. So, we generally learnt formal expressions. When I hear an informal expression, I don’t understand it.”
(Interviewee 22)

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.

C- Familiarity with the topic

The participants stated that it was easier to understand the topics they were familiar with (12%). Some students referred to this item as a negative factor (23,9%). They said 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.

D- Previous education

Since the students identified listening as their area of least success, they mentioned many factors that caused failure. In the questionnaire, (see Table 2) the students answered a question about their high school education. Most of them thought that listening skill was not taught properly during their high school education. During the interviews, the students 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 directly. Language skills like writing and speaking were tested indirectly 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 UEE. Our teachers were aware of this fact. So, all of our lessons focused on reading and grammar. Now, I can comprehend difficult written texts, but I can’t talk to a native speaker, because I can’t speak. Even if I can, the conversation won’t be long. Because, I don’t understand what the native speakers say.”

(Interviewee 5)

“In high school, our teachers used well-prepared textbooks with audio-cassettes or CD’s, but generally they didn’t use these additional materials. They preferred to read the passages aloud. I think they didn’t want to spend much time on listening. Because, in the UEE, listening wasn’t important at all.”

(Interviewee 26)

The comments above show that language learning in high schools in Turkey focuses on preparation for the UEE and that both students and teachers try to improve skills that will lead to success in this exam. The backwash effect of the UEE is quite important and, in a way, this test shapes the language courses presented in high schools.

Factors Concerning Listening Materials

A- Speech Rate

Students thought it was easier to understand speakers who had a slow rate of speech (14,1) and difficult to understand speakers with a quick speech rate (73,9). 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)

However, some participants found a connection between their perceptions about speech rate and their previous experiences.

“ Most of my friends think that native speakers speak too fast. To be honest, I don’t think they speak too fast. The main reason is that we don’t have enough experience. We haven’t had many chances to listen to native speakers before.”
(Interviewee 9)

Another student noticed that her perceptions related to speech rates had changed through time.

“I have been trying to improve my listening skill for a few years. At first, I couldn’t hear any words. I thought they were talking very quickly. Now, I can understand almost all the words. For me, native speakers don’t speak too fast any more.”
(Interviewee 18)

The comment of Interviewee 18 reveals that students may have unreal beliefs about speech rate depending on their proficiency levels in listening. In other words, as their proficiency levels increased, their perceptions changed.

B- Volume

A few students mentioned the effect of volume in a positive or negative way (5,43%, 14,1% respectively). During the interviews, these students were asked to clarify their comments. Some answers are presented below.

“When I listen to a native speaker on television, I always turn the volume up. Otherwise, I don’t understand anything. My parents always complain about that.”

(Interviewee 21)

“ I can understand people better when they speak aloud.”

(Interviewee 10)

As mentioned before, the students had some difficulties in identifying words in continuous speech. In addition, they are not familiar to spoken versions of some words. The reason for listening with a high volume may be related to these factors.

C- Voice quality of listening materials

Since the students didn't have many opportunities to talk to native speakers of English, they generally listened to recorded materials. 37% of the students complained about the voice quality of the listening materials, especially tape cassettes. They thought tape-recorders and cassettes were out-of-date and that it was very difficult to understand what was said. Two students mentioned the same factor in a positive way. They said it was easier to comprehend the text if the voice quality was good.

D- Lack of visual materials

In classroom activities, cassettes and CD's are still widely used. 32 students mentioned the detrimental effects of this kind of materials on their listening comprehension. They complained about the lack of visual cues.

“When I see the speaker's gestures, I can understand more. With an audio-tape, I only rely on my ears. So, I don't understand much.”

(Interviewee 28)

Interviewee 28 was thus aware of the importance of visual cues in understanding and wanted to use them when he was trying to comprehend the materials.

E- 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 and at the cinema. The pronunciations and intonations are quite different.”
(Interviewee 8)

Language spoken in different parts of the UK and USA may also cause difficulties.

“I watched a soap opera, but I didn’t understand anything, because people spoke with an accent called Cockney.”
(Interviewee 13)

“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 15)

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.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how students evaluated their performances as listeners in comparison to other skills. The study also aimed to determine the listening comprehension problems faced by language learners along with the factors that make comprehension easier and more difficult.

The findings indicated that the students’ perceptions of themselves with regard to skills like reading and writing were quite good. On the other hand, they rated their listening and speaking performances as ‘poor’ and ‘below average’ respectively. This finding is consistent with the findings obtained from previous studies. For instance Seferoğlu and Uzakgören (2004) investigated beginner level English language learners’ perspectives on the listening skill and found that few students considered themselves “good” at listening. Similarly, Graham (2005) investigated the perceptions of students learning French and found that listening comprehension was the skill in which students felt they had achieved least success.

The findings revealed that the materials used in a language class should be chosen carefully. In addition to audio cassettes or CD's, visual materials should also be included in the lessons so that students can make use of visual cues.

These findings support the remarks made by Field (2003), who claims that a learner failing to understand words might sometimes have them in his/her vocabulary. He emphasizes that the reason for the failure can be diverse, sometimes the students know the word but attribute an incorrect sense, and at other times the pronunciation may be different for them. The difference between reading and spoken vocabulary may be another reason, the learner is unable to identify the word he is familiar with in writing. Finally, in a piece of connected speech, the learner is not capable of segmenting the word. Similarly, according to the results of the study, the students' failure in listening stem from various factors related to word recognition. In other words, their main problem is not always to have a limited vocabulary. Various factors may cause failure including weak and strong pronunciation. The findings also indicate that strong pronunciation is emphasized in Turkey by language teachers. However, in order to understand continuous speech, the learner should be familiar with weak pronunciation. This fact should be considered by language teachers and weak pronunciation should also be taught in language classes.

The participants of this study, who were university students, repeatedly mentioned a connection between their lack of success and previous language learning experiences which had focused on the preparation for a multiple choice exam, namely the University Entrance Exam. This factor was continuously brought out by the participants during the interviews. The oral-aural skills are neglected in the UEE, which is a tough and competitive test administered to thousands of candidates. When the students were preparing for this difficult exam, they ignored listening completely, because of the fact that this skill is never tested in the UEE. However, in spite of their high performances in the UEE, they had difficulties at university concerning the oral-aural skills. According to the findings obtained from the study, it can be said that the UEE has a harmful backwash effect on students' performances in listening. It is a fact that this test should be very objective and easy to administer and that if listening (and also speaking) components are added to the UEE, there may be problems related to objectivity and

administration. Nevertheless, in order to increase the beneficial backwash of the test, there is a need for a modification.

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