



Length in listening texts as a single determiner of difficulty for comprehension

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APA Citation:

İlhan, B. (2018). Length in listening texts as a single determiner of difficulty for comprehension. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 14(3), 336-346.

Submission Date:23/06/2018

Acceptance Date:03/08/2018

Abstract

Text length is considered as one of the factors that cause listening task difficulty along with others such as speech rate, clarity of voice, accents, text genre and topic. Despite all these factors, teachers sometimes consider text length as the single reason for a listening activity's difficulty. Not many studies have focused on the length as a single determiner or whether there are other factors that are associated with text length or not. In order to contribute to the field, the present study has aimed to investigate whether text length is a single determiner for difficulty and if not what other difficulties students have when they listen to long texts. Both quantitative and qualitative data have been collected. Reflection reports on the difficulties of the task constitute qualitative data whereas scores on comprehension questions comprise quantitative data. Two long listening tasks were implemented with an experimental group by dividing the length into manageable phases; meanwhile, with control group, they were done all at once. Scores of the two groups in comprehension questions have been compared by using T-test analysis. The findings have indicated that text length cannot be a determining factor alone. In the experiment, the scores of experimental and control groups do not have a statistically significant difference. According to student reflection reports, students have difficulties in listening long texts due to a lack of listening strategies, speech rate and pronunciation. Thus, text length might be better considered along with these factors.

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Keywords: Listening instruction; text length; listening task difficulty; difficulty in listening

1. Introduction

On several occasions, students listen to long texts in order to answer comprehension questions. These long texts are seen as barriers by many researchers and teachers with the assumption that they discourage students to pay their attention to the listening task (Chen, 2005). Students become bored, unfocused and they do not pay attention to the keywords that will help them answer the questions or get the gist of the text. Some teachers even judge the difficulty of listening texts by merely looking at how long it is. From time to time, they listen through pauses so that students can focus on necessary information for comprehension. Moreover, students sometimes criticize the listening texts just because they are long.

Despite this blame on text length as a barrier for listening comprehension, whether length is the only factor that causes difficulty is unclear. Who it is long for, what is the ideal text length or what other factors, if there are any, cause difficulty along with length are unanswered questions in the field. We, as

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teachers, prefer not to do listening exercises just because the listening text is long. In order to investigate whether length is a single determiner for difficulty or not, the present study has divided listening texts which are more than three minutes long into phases of one minute and thirty seconds at most. The study has been conducted in preparation classes of a Turkish university with twenty-four B1 level English learners and the longest listening texts were chosen from the course book that is covered in the classes. The purpose of dividing long listening texts into manageable phases was to see whether students would do better in comprehension questions or not. The control group listened the long text all at once whereas the experimental group listened with phases. After listening, students were also required to write reflection reports on the difficulties they had during the listening task. The experiment has provided the data to answer first research question whereas the reflection reports provided data for the second research question.

1.1. Literature review

Listening is among the four skills of language and what makes it distinctive is that it is the first skill to which people are exposed when they are born. It has a prerequisite nature for first language development (Khuziakmetov & Porchesku, 2016). Nevertheless, in second language learning, the amount of time for teaching and research on listening skill has been less when the amount of the researches is compared to the studies on other skill areas as reading, speaking and writing (Mendelsohn, 1994). It has been thought for many years that listening skill can be taken for granted if students listen enough. Yet, student failures have stimulated teachers and researchers to question the ways of teaching and practicing the listening skill.

Coakley & Wolvin (1986) suggest listening processes as receiving, focusing attention on and assigning meaning to aural stimuli. Listener has prior knowledge of the topic, linguistic knowledge and cognitive processes for listening task on one hand and aural text on the other. S/he creates an interaction between the two. According to Purdy's list of features that an effective listener possesses, focusing the attention, being perceptive during listening, consciously working to remember are three of the seven features (Purdy; 1997). It can be concluded from this list that merely focusing the attention is not enough but remembering is also required; therefore, memory plays a fundamental role in comprehension of a listening text as well. Gilakjani & Ahmadi (2011) emphasize the importance of memory in listening with following quote; "Listening is receiving, receiving requires thinking, and thinking requires memory; there is no way to separate listening, thinking, remembering." Akdemir (2013) proposes five steps about 'how a human being listens' and the third step is; 'Initial processing and transmission of input to short-term memory' whereas the fourth one is; 'Organizing it as a communicative data and binding with existing knowledge in long term memory.' Through these subsequent steps, recall of the information is achieved by transmitting the information from short term into long term memory.

Through all these researches and many others, listening skill is now considered as an active skill with cognitive processes. The researches on the skill in the last 20 years have mainly focused on the difficulties that students have in these cognitive processes. Many of them are qualitative. Chao (2013) studied the problems that college students in Taiwan have during listening tasks. The findings revealed that the most frequently indicated problems were easily forgetting the content, long listening texts, not knowing which strategy to use, unclear pronunciation and intonation patterns. Yildiz & Albay (2015) investigated the difficulties in Turkish context and focused on the issue with three factors in mind; input, task and listener factors. One of the suggestions of the study was that the difficulty of texts should be at learners' level of understanding and listening texts must absorb the attention of learners. Örsdemir & Yılmaz (2016) conducted an action research by incorporating note taking skills in order to raise comprehension of listening texts. The results of the study indicated that by taking notes and focusing their attention, students performed much better in listening comprehension tests and tasks. Carrell (2002)

examined the effects of note-taking, length and topic in listening tasks in TOEFL examination along with two aptitude variables. The results indicated that note-taking helped reduce the negative effects of listening length in TOEFL examination. Demirkol (2009) studied the most common comprehension problems of students in listening texts and text length was found to be one of the problems. Brindley and Slatyer (2002) identified ‘length of passage’ as a factor that contributes to listening task difficulty. In his study, Chen (2005) found out that length of sentences or texts is a barrier for students in using listening strategies.

Text length is the common finding among all these mentioned researches. The problem with the existing studies is that which of these listening barriers are most related to the text length is not mentioned. There are some long listening texts which students listen again and again without considering the time it takes and being bored due to its being funny, informative or interesting etc. However, teachers can judge some listening texts just because they are long without considering other positive elements that the text has.

1.2. Research questions

The present research takes text length as a single variable and by reducing the long text to manageable phases; it aims to answer following questions;

1. Can listening task difficulty in long listening texts be overcome by dividing the text into phases?
2. What other difficulties apart from text length do Turkish students have when they listen to long listening texts?

2. Method

The study has both quantitative and qualitative nature. In order to get the quantitative data, a quasi-experimental design was used. Quasi-experimental design is commonly applied in educational research in which it is simply not possible for researchers to undertake true experiments (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The design is ideal for the experiments in which there is a lack of control over ‘the when and the whom of exposure’ as stated by Campbell and Stanley (1996). Experimental and control groups post-tests-only design has been conducted. The scores of all students for comprehension questions in both control and experimental groups have been compared by using independent samples T-test analysis in SPSS 22 software. As Pallant (2010) states ‘An independent-samples t-test is used when you want to compare the mean score, on some continuous variable, for two different groups of participants.’ The scores were compared to see whether there is a statistically significant difference in comprehension scores for listening texts with phases and listening all at once. Students’ reflection reports on the difficulties they had while listening to long texts constitute the qualitative data. Common themes have been sorted out by using categorical aggregation in which ‘the researcher seeks a collection of instances from the data, hoping that issue-relevant meanings will emerge’ (Stake, 1995). Frequency chart, which can be seen below, has been created to present common themes by using SPSS 22 software.

2.1. Sample / Participants

All of the thirty-eight students were chosen with convenience sampling method and they were all the students of the researcher. They were chosen from B1 level classes at preparation classes in a Turkish university and as the teaching of English is done in modules, they got a place in B1 classes after paper-pencil exams, writing portfolios and oral exams in previous A1, A2 modules. Therefore, their English levels were almost same. Their scores were similar in listening section of their midterm exam with a

mean score of 60 at least and 75 at most. They were in three different classes. In order to get quantitative data, twenty-four students in two classes were chosen as the experimental and control groups. Therefore, while the qualitative data was obtained from thirty-eight students, the quantitative one was obtained from twenty-four students due to convenience.

2.2. Data collection procedures

In order to answer the first research question, thirty-eight B1 level participants were asked to listen to a three minute-twenty seconds long listening text. After listening, students were asked to reflect on whether they had any difficulties for comprehension and what these difficulties were. Analysis of the qualitative data has been done by categorizing each answer around similar themes.

To investigate second research question, two other listening tasks with long texts were implemented in an experimental group and control group with twelve students in each. One of the texts was 03.37 minutes whereas the other was 03.42 minutes. In each of the two texts, a tour guide introduces a place to tourists. Genre and topic were same in each text. They were chosen from the ones with same genre and topic in order to reduce the number of factors that might affect listening task difficulty. Two listening tasks were done in different days to reduce the negative affective barriers that students might have on the day of the listening. In the experimental group, a long listening text was divided into three phases. In each phase, students were required to write the key words and correct mistakes in two statements that were taken directly from listening. There was a mistake in each statement and these mistakes were underlined to make students focus on the information in the listening. They were taken from parts which were important to comprehend the whole text. The aim of this while-listening activity was to encourage students to focus more on the listening. After listening each phase for twice and correcting mistakes, students were required to answer five comprehension questions. In control group, the same listening tasks were given; however, the text was listened without phases. Students listened to the long texts twice and they answered five comprehension questions which were the same questions as the ones given to the experimental group. The answers in each group have been checked and a score for comprehension have been given. The scores have been compared by using independent samples T-test to reveal if there is any difference in comprehension scores between the two groups.

2.3. Data analysis

2.3.1. The Qualitative Data

The reflection reports from thirty-eight students after listening to three long texts were collected and common themes were categorized by using categorical aggregation (Stake, 1995). These themes were analyzed in SPSS 22 software to get the frequency chart that can be seen below.

2.3.1.1. The difficulties in Listening to the Long Text According to Reflection Reports

Table 1. Frequency of Difficulties According to Students' Reflection Reports

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid <u>Affective Factors (Theme 6)</u>	2	5.4	5.4	5.4
<u>Fast Speech (Theme 2)</u>	9	24.3	24.3	29.7
<u>Focus on Single Words (Theme 1)</u>	14	37.8	37.8	67.6
<u>Length (Theme 4)</u>	5	13.5	13.5	81.1
<u>Pronunciation/Intonation (Theme 3)</u>	5	13.5	13.5	94.6

Technical Problems (<i>Theme 5</i>)	2	5.4	5.4	100.0
Total	37	100.0	100.0	

Six common themes have been found in students' reflection reports. As it is clear from the chart, many students have difficulties because they focus on every single words and want to understand every detail (*Theme 1*; $f=14$). Fast speech (*Theme 2*; $f=9$) is another factor that causes difficulty for many students. Length and pronunciation/intonation have equal frequency (*Theme 3,4*; $f=5$). Students stated that they cannot understand the texts due to the pronunciation of the speaker and intonation patterns (*Theme 3*; $f=5$). Although the text was longer than many listening texts in the course book, the students stated that 'fast speech' and 'not being able to understand each word' caused difficulty more than length. Other difficulties with low frequency was technical problems and affective factors (*Theme 5,6*; $f=2$). Two students stated that they could not understand well enough due to low quality of speakers and two others had difficulty in listening because of his/her personal problems. Some of the excerpts from students' reflection reports are as follows;

Excerpt 1; "The text was difficult because I couldn't sort out the words and some parts were fast." (*Theme 1*).

Excerpt 2; "It was difficult because I can't sort out English words." (*Theme 1*)

Excerpt 3; "They speak fast and while I am trying to understand sentences at the beginning, they continue to speak and thus I can't keep up with the text." (*Theme 2*)

Excerpt 4; "The text is difficult because while I am trying to take some notes, as it is fast, I cannot keep up with the rest. After taking notes, connecting what I listen to the notes that I have taken is another problem for me." (*Theme 2*)

Excerpt 5; "I had difficulty because I couldn't understand the words as English people do not say some syllables and some letters and they speak fast" (*Theme 3*)

Excerpt 6; "Long listening texts are difficult both for me and for many of my friends because we forget what we hear at the beginning towards the end." (*Theme 4*)

Excerpt 7; "Even if I understand the sentences at the beginning, as the listening is long, I forget them towards the end." (*Theme 4*)

Excerpt 8; "The sound of the speakers is not clear enough to understand the texts" (*Theme 5*)

Excerpt 9; "I have some personal problems so I cannot focus on listening." (*Theme 6*)

2.3.2. The Quantitative Data

The scores of students for comprehension questions constitute the quantitative data. As stated earlier, the experimental group listened to two long texts with manageable phases while the control group listened them all at once. Both groups listened each text three times. After that, they were required to answer comprehension questions about the text. The overall scores of each student in both groups were analyzed by SPSS 22 software and independent-samples t-test analysis was conducted to reveal if there is any significant difference in comprehension scores of both groups. The findings of the analysis for two listening activities are provided below.

2.3.2.1. Analysis of the 1st Listening Activity (03.37 minutes.)**Table 2.** Mean Scores for Comprehension Questions

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Comprehension Score	Experimental Group	12	43.3333	18.74874	5.41229
	Control Group	12	35.0000	22.76361	6.57129

Mean scores of comprehension questions of experimental group and control group did not indicate much difference. An independent sample T- test was conducted for further analysis as can be seen in the following table;

Table 3. T-Test for Comprehension Scores

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Comprehension Score	Equal variances assumed	.810	.378	.979	22	.338	8.33333	8.51321	-9.32198	25.98865
	Equal variances not assumed			.979	21.221	.339	8.33333	8.51321	-9.35965	26.02632

T-test analysis of the comprehension scores for both groups indicated that there was no significant difference in scores for experimental group (M = 43.33, SD = 18, 74) and control group (M = 35, SD = 22,76; t (22) = 0.979, p = 0.338, two-tailed).

2.3.3. Analysis of the 2nd Listening Activity (03.42 minutes.)

Table 4. Mean Scores for Comprehension Questions

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score	Experimental Group	13	44.6154	18.53617	5.14101
	Control Group	13	36.9231	19.74192	5.47542

Mean scores of the comprehension questions were not much different from the scores as in the first activity. A further t-test analyzed was implemented and the results are as follows;

Table 5. T-Test for Comprehension Scores

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Score	Equal variances assumed	.581	.454	1.024	24	.316	7.69231	7.51068	-7.80897	23.19 358
	Equal variances not assumed			1.024	23.905	.316	7.69231	7.51068	-7.81222	23.19 683

T-test analysis of the comprehension scores for both groups indicated that there was no significant difference in scores for experimental group (M = 44,61, SD = 18,53) and control group (M = 36,92, SD = 19,74; $t(24) = 1,024$, $p = 0.316$, two-tailed).

3. Findings and Discussion

The Research Question 1 (Can listening task difficulty in long listening texts be overcome by dividing the text into phases?)

T-test analysis has indicated that there is no difference for comprehension between listening long texts with phases (1:30 minutes at most) and listening them all at once (03.37; 03.42 minutes). This shows that text length cannot be a single determining factor of listening difficulty.

Khuziakhmetow (2016) claims that ‘The listening activities used in teaching in most cases only test learners how well they can listen without actually teaching them how to listen’. The findings have supported his claim in that Turkish students might not know listening strategies. They focus on single words and cannot keep up with long texts. Gilakjani & Ahmadi (2011) states that even if students can understand single words when they hear them separately, they have trouble in comprehending them when they are spoken at typical conversational rates by native speakers. They further suggest that students should be exposed to slower conversational rates in different English accents. Therefore, more studies are needed in order to investigate relationship between text length and other factors that contribute to task difficulty such as strategies, pronunciation and intonation.

Research Question 2 (What other difficulties apart from text length do Turkish students have when they listen to long listening texts?)

According to reflection reports of students on the difficulties that they had while listening to a long text, text length ($f = 5$) is a less determining factor among other factors such as focusing on single words ($f = 14$) and speech rate ($f = 9$). Focusing on single words might be an indicator of Turkish students’ lack of listening strategy. A student reported that she could not comprehend the text because she could not understand each word in the text. In some reports, speech rate and lack of strategy were given in a single sentence as follows;

Excerpt 1; “The text was difficult because I couldn’t sort out the words and some parts were fast.” (Theme 1).

Speech rate was considered as a factor for difficulty together with pronunciation and intonation in some reports as in the following excerpt;

Excerpt 5; “I had difficulty because I couldn’t understand the words as English people do not pronounce some syllables and some letters and they speak fast” (Theme 3)

In order to answer comprehension questions, students did not have to understand every single word in the text. However, reflections clearly indicate that they think that they have to understand every word for better comprehension. As a result, using listening strategies might be a more determining factor in listening difficulty. Speech rate is another factor and in many reports it was stated along with pronunciation and intonation. That might be due to the fact that in our classes, we do listening exercises from course books therefore; they are all samples of Received Pronunciation; British accent. The effects of listening long texts with different accents and with lower speech rate can be investigated for in a further study.

Length was considered as a factor for difficulty in five reports. However, it was not taken as single factor as it can be seen from the following excerpt;

Excerpt 6; “Long listening texts are difficult both for me and for many of my friends because we forget what we hear at the beginning towards the end.” (Theme 4)

Excerpt 7; “Even if I understand the sentences at the beginning, as the listening is long, I forget them towards the end.” (Theme 4)

From these two excerpts, it can be understood that students associate length with remembering the content. This might be due to students' lack of note-taking skill which is an effective listening strategy. As students' papers, on which they answered the comprehension questions and wrote the key words, were analyzed, no form of efficient note taking was detected. Students may not have the necessary training and practice on how to take notes while listening to something and it causes them trouble particularly when they listen to long texts.

The findings of the students' reflection reports suggest that students have difficulty in long listening texts due to lack of knowledge and practice of listening strategies and fast speech rate and difficult pronunciation and intonation patterns.

4. Conclusion

The researcher has decided to investigate whether text length can be a single difficulty determiner due to his own experiences in teaching. On many occasions, while choosing appropriate listening activities for students, teachers consider long texts as inappropriate and they might waste all other good qualities. It is an undeniable fact that long texts make students bored as they cannot keep their focus on the text for long time. However, the question of whether a text can be judged as difficult just because of its being long has stimulated the researcher to conduct the present study.

The comprehension scores that students got from the experiment which was done by dividing a long listening text into manageable phases (1 minutes 30 seconds at most) has shown that there is no statistically significant difference between listening to a long text all at once or in phases. It is clear from the finding that text length cannot be considered as a single factor for task difficulty. According to students' reflection reports, they have difficulty in long listening texts respectively due to; focusing on single words, which might mean a lack of listening strategy, fast speech rate, native pronunciation and intonation, text length, technical problems and affective factors. Three most common difficulty factors have been found as focusing on single words, speech rate and pronunciation and intonation. This finding suggests that teachers should consider the quality of listening texts by considering all these factors together rather than just judging it to be difficult because of its length. Using authentic listening texts with different accents and rates might help students overcome the difficulties they have. An explicit listening strategy training might also help students be better at listening in English as a lack of strategy training is clear from the reflection reports.

The study has implications for language teachers who have difficulties in choosing right listening texts for both assessment and practice. Some studies have investigated the issue holistically however the present study has investigated the subject analytically by taking text length as the only variable for difficulty (Chen, 2005; Mohamadi, 2013; Mendelsohn, 1994; Robinson, 2001). Furthermore, as contextual factors might also determine the difficulties for listening tasks, reflection reports of Turkish students have provided some ideas for English teachers in Turkey.

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Anlama zorluğunun tek belirleyicisi olarak dinleme metinlerindeki uzunluk

Öz

Metin uzunluğunun dinleme aktivitelerindeki zorluğa sebep olan faktörlerden biri olduğu birçok araştırmacı tarafından düşünülmektedir (Chen, 2005; Mohamadi, 2013; Mendelsohn, 1994; Robinson, 2001). Fakat öğretmenler bazen metin uzunluğunu bir aktiviteyi zorlaştıran tek faktör olarak görmektedirler. Metin uzunluğunun, dinleme aktivitesindeki zorluğun tek belirleyicisi olup olmadığı veya eğer varsa diğer faktörlerin ne olduğu konusunda fazla çalışma bulunmamaktadır. Alana katkıda bulunmak için, bu çalışma hem nitel hem nicel veriler kullanarak, metin uzunluğunun zorluğun tek belirleyicisi olup olmadığını incelemiştir. Dinleme aktivitesinin zorluğu hakkında öğrencilerden alınan dönütler nitel veriyi oluştururken okuduğunu anlama sorularına verdikleri cevaplar karşılığı aldıkları puanlar nicel veriyi oluşturmaktadır. Deney grubuyla iki uzun dinleme aktivitesi daha üstesinden gelinebilecek sürelerle bölünüp uygulanmış, kontrol grubuyla ise aynı dinleme aktiviteleri bölünmeden yapılmıştır. İki grubun okuduğunu anlama sorularına verdiği cevaplar için verilen puanlar T-test analizi ile karşılaştırılmıştır. Bulgular, metin uzunluğunun dinleme aktivitesinin zorluğunu belirleyen tek faktör olmadığını ortaya çıkarmıştır. İki grubun yapılan uygulamadan aldıkları puanlar istatistiksel öneme sahip bir fark göstermemiştir. Öğrenci dönütlerine göre, öğrenciler uzun dinleme metinlerinde dinleme stratejileri hakkında bilgi eksikliği, konuşma hızı ve telaffuz nedeniyle zorluk çekmişlerdir. Bu nedenle, metin uzunluğu, bu faktörlerle birlikte düşünülmelidir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Dinleme eğitimi; metin uzunluğu; dinleme aktivitesi zorluğu

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