

## **Exploring EFL learners' beliefs about listening comprehension difficulties: A qualitative approach**

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### **Abstract**

This study presents an investigation into Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about listening comprehension difficulties they experience while listening to English aural texts in a non-collaborative setting like that of a classroom lecture. The data were elicited from learners' self report through the procedures of semi-structured interviews (N=86). The collected data were qualitatively content analyzed. The learners' beliefs about their listening comprehension problems were categorized under the four major characteristics of input, listener, task, and learning context. Multiple factors within these categories were identified by learners to influence their listening comprehension. Many of the factors identified were related to input and listener characteristic. To find out whether learners' beliefs about listening comprehension difficulties were related to levels of language proficiency, learners were divided into two language proficiency groups of pre-intermediate and intermediate. The two groups were found to share similar beliefs regarding the listening problems they had and their underlying contributing factors. The findings of the study

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indicate that learners are aware of range of factors influencing their listening comprehension even though they are not equipped with the necessary strategies to tackle their listening problems. Possible implications for EFL listening instruction are discussed.

**Key words:** learners' belief, listening comprehension, listening difficulty, language proficiency

## 1. Introduction

Listening, once regarded as “the Cinderella” of the four skills (Mendelsohn, 1994, p.9), has rightly accrued a central role in second/foreign language (henceforth referred to as L2) learning. Listening is now recognized to play an active role in L2 learning (Dunkel, 1991; Feyten, 1991; Oxford, 1993; Vandergrift, 2008) as it provides the learners with the necessary aural input for purposes of language acquisition and for message comprehension (Byrnes, 1984; Rost, 2002). As Rost (2002) suggests listening internalizes the rules of language and facilitates the emergence of other language skills. Listening is now viewed to be an active and complex process in which listeners focus on selected aspects of aural input, construct meaning, and relate what they hear to existing knowledge (O'Malley, Chamot, & Kupper, 1989).

Listening is usually assumed to be a difficult skill for L2 learners to learn because of its unobservable and ephemeral nature (Vandergrift, 2008). This, in turn, has encouraged several theoretical and pedagogical studies to point out dimensions of difficulties and constraints L2 listeners face, and to describe the factors that may influence learners' listening comprehension of spoken language (e.g., Boyle, 1984; Brown, 1995; Byrnes, 1984; Dunkel, 1991; Joiner, 1991; Oxford, 1993; Rost, 1990; Ur, 1984). Yet, theoretical explanations of listening comprehension provide us with little clues about the problems which learners face when they listen to an aural text. These insights cannot account for an in-depth explanation of these problems (Hasan, 2000) as “theories, ideas, and research are as good as teachers and textbook writers make them” (Nunan, 1991, p. 38). In fact, “research that documents empirically the relationship between what theories say and what learners actually know” is warranted

(Vogely, 1995, p.41). Therefore, to focus on language learners as active participants in the language learning experience and to bring their contribution to learning listening skills to the fore, information is needed on the beliefs learners bring to a listening task particularly when they perceive listening as a difficult skill to progress in.

Exploring language learners' beliefs about their listening comprehension problems is important because learners hold their beliefs to be true and these beliefs then guide how they interpret their experiences and how they behave (Cotterall, 1995; Horwitz, 1999; White, 2008). Learners' beliefs can influence their general approach to language skills including listening skills and activities in the classroom (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). A growing body of evidence also suggests that any invalid beliefs held by the learners about language learning may hinder their learning progress (Horwitz, 1987; Mantle-Bromely, 1995). These unconstructive beliefs often have negative outcomes such as making learners indifferent towards learning and creating classroom anxiety that lead to failure in learning performance (Victori & Lockhart, 1995). Therefore, if, for instance, learners wrongly believe that comprehending an aural text entails understanding the text word for word, their failure to understand a particular word or phrase heard can be a suddenly-dropped-barrier to their comprehension. As a result, they become discouraged and feel that listening is the most difficult skill of all to learn.

The important role that belief can play in determining learners' language learning behaviors and the degree of success achieved in language learning lend credence to the necessity of research on learners' beliefs about listening, now conceived as a primary vehicle for language learning (Rost, 2002). In light of the importance of conducting studies on learners' belief, and the findings that show listening comprehension is a difficult skill to be developed particularly at early stages of learning an L2 (Chang & Read, 2006; Graham, 2002), the objectives of the present study was to investigate Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about listening comprehension difficulties. More specifically, the present study aimed at examining the beliefs held by pre-intermediate and intermediate language learners about the listening difficulties they may encounter in "non-collaborative" settings where the listener cannot or do not have an

opportunity to interact with the speaker (Buck, 2001, p. 12). A qualitative approach was employed to achieve the objectives of this study.

## 2. Background

While there is a large body of research on learners' beliefs about language learning in general (see Bernat & Govzdenko, 2005; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003), comparatively few studies have looked at beliefs about listening (Goh, 1997, 1999, 2000; Graham, 2006; Hasan, 2000). Goh (1997) investigated beliefs that Chinese ESL learners had about their listening. She found that many of the learners expressed definite beliefs about three aspects of listening: (a) their role in the listening process, (b) the demands of listening tasks, and (c) the strategies they employed while listening. In the first area, learners believed that their own presumed shortcomings, such as inefficient memory and limited vocabulary knowledge influenced their listening comprehension of spoken English. In the second area, learners identified factors related to listening tasks, including different types of input, vocabulary, and speakers' accent as key factors affecting their comprehension of aural texts. In the third area, Goh claimed that learners showed an awareness of a range of bottom-up and top-down strategies for assisting comprehension and developing their listening.

Goh (1999) scrutinized learners' diaries and small group interview responses to re-examine the factors that the Chinese ESL learners believed influenced their listening comprehension. Goh's main purpose was to identify the extent to which the learners themselves were aware of these factors. She also tried to find out whether the degree of awareness about factors influencing comprehension was in any way linked to listening abilities. The explicit knowledge of two groups of learners with different listening abilities was thus compared. The five factors, vocabulary used in the text, prior knowledge of the text theme, speech rate, type of input, and speaker's accent were mentioned by two-thirds of the learners to influence their listening comprehension. Goh also found that higher ability listeners cited a wider range of factors (i.e., 12 factors) than lower ability listeners who listed only four. While the high ability listeners saw the listening process as an interaction between the listener, the text, and the listening environment, the low ability listeners tended to

perceive comprehension as mainly influenced by text-based factors. Goh suggested that this contrast in metacognitive knowledge about listening may, therefore, shed some light on the cognitive characteristics that differentiate these two groups of listeners.

Goh (2000) adopted a different approach to further analyze the same data set. She examined her learners' perceived listening problems within the three cognitive processing phases of perception, parsing, and utilization proposed by Anderson (1995, cited in Goh, 2000). Goh claimed that most of the problems reported were perceptual processing problems arising from failure in word recognition and ineffective attention. Parsing problems included learners' various difficulties with a coherent mental representation of words heard. In the utilization stage, learners had difficulty with understanding the intended message of the speech. Both the high and low ability listeners were shown to share some similar problems; however, the low ability listeners appeared to have more low-level processing problems such as speech recognition. Goh concluded that the range of the problems learners identified could be the result of resorting too much to such bottom-up processing as pre-occupation with knowing the meaning of certain content words, or could be due to insufficient and ineffective use of top-down processing.

Hasan (2000) investigated how intermediate Arab EFL learners perceived their difficulties in English listening. The learners reported listening problems pertinent to the features of aural texts, including unfamiliar words, difficult grammatical structure, and text length. The learners also identified natural speech full of hesitation and pauses, fast speech, and unfamiliar accents as speaker characteristics making comprehension of aural texts difficult for them. Hasan argued that learners' problems may arise from their lack of interest in the spoken text and from their inability to do certain listening tasks. He associated learners' listening problems with bottom-up processing, such as dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary, unclear pronunciation, hesitation, and rapid speech. Based on these findings, Hasan suggested that listening instruction should focus on helping learners move away from merely focusing on bottom-up processing to focusing on top-down strategies that would allow learners to notice the relevant parts of the message, ideas and how these ideas are linked to form underlying meanings and conclusions.

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He emphasized that in designing listening activities, the practitioners need to consider the degree of interest and involvement they generate as uninteresting activities may not develop learners' listening comprehension.

More recently, Graham (2006) probed into the perceptions of English students about their listening comprehension in French and the reasons behind their success or failure. Learners believed that their main difficulties in listening were coping with the speed of delivery of texts, recognizing individual words in a stream of spoken French, and understanding any words identified. Most learners attributed their difficulties in listening to their own perceived low ability in the skill and to the difficulty of the listening tasks and texts they are set. The learners' beliefs indicated a sense of passivity and helplessness in learners, in that little or nothing can be done about the difficulty of the listening task. Graham suggested that to counteract such maladaptive beliefs about listening and to help learners address the problems they encounter, teachers need to notice how their students listen, and gain insights into their beliefs about listening comprehension and about themselves as listeners. Addressing how of listening should include activities which allow learners to draw upon both bottom-up and top-down processes. Learners need to be provided with activities that allow them to use their non-linguistic knowledge to overcome any gaps in their linguistic knowledge.

In sum, the foregoing literature indicates that there is a relationship between learners' beliefs about listening and the way they approach it. However, such a relationship in a context of foreign language learning has received little attention. Therefore, further research is needed to systematically investigate the possible effect of learners' beliefs on their performance in L2 listening comprehension in such a context. Moreover, more in-depth studies are particularly required to compare beliefs held by learners with different language ability about their perceived L2 listening comprehension difficulty. To address these issues, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What listening comprehension problems do Iranian EFL learners believe they have when listening to English aural texts?

2. To what extent are the beliefs of pre-intermediate and intermediate learners different or similar?

### **3. Methodology**

Semi-structured interviews were used as the method to gather the required data for the purposes of this study. Interviews are found to be efficient and valid ways of collecting information in studies aimed at understanding perception of research participants (Berg, 2001; Maxwell, 2005) as they allow researchers to “enter into the other person’s perspective and to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind” (Patton, 2002, p. 295). Since beliefs have been viewed as cognitive entities to be found inside the minds of language learners (Kalaja, 1995), and as it is difficult to get inside their minds, interviews were conducted in the current study to explore EFL learners’ beliefs about their listening comprehension difficulties in English and their underlying contributing factors.

#### **3.1 Participants**

Eighty-six EFL learners (73 females and 13 males) volunteered to participate in the interviews. Participants were undergraduate Iranian students of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at Islamic Azad University, South Tehran Branch who had already taken a course of ‘English Listening Comprehension’ at university. On the basis of their scores on an original Preliminary Test of English (PET) (University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, 2007), the participants were divided into two approximately equal groups of English language proficiency levels, i.e., Pre-intermediate (n=42) and Intermediate (n=44).

#### **3.2 Instrument**

A written interview guide was developed (see Appendix) as a framework to direct the semi-structured interviews. The guide contained a set of questions designed to elicit learners’ perceptions of their English listening comprehension problems and their underlying contributing factors. To construct and validate the interview questions, the guidelines suggested by

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Berg (2001), Dornyei (2007), Patton (2002), and Richards (2003) were employed.

The interview questions were generated from two sources: Firstly, the literature on L2 listening comprehension (e.g., Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Boyle, 1984; Rost, 1990; Rubin, 1994) was surveyed and any existing information on learners' listening problems in an L2 was looked for. Secondly, EFL learners' short essays (n= 30), in which the learners expressed their beliefs about their listening challenges in English, were examined. The learners were undergraduate EFL students studying in the same major as the participants of the current study. Based on the elicited data from these two sources, 10 questions were developed.

A series of content questions (Patton, 2002) like "What do you believe to be your difficulties in comprehending English aural texts?" were included in the interview guide to solicit participants' (a) opinion and values, (b) feeling, and (c) experience. These questions, as Berg (2001) suggests, are essential questions that were exclusively concerned with the central focus of the study. Various probing questions were included to generate further explanation, clarification or elaboration from the participants, to increase the richness and depth of responses, and to give clues to the interviewees about the level of response that is desired (Dornyei, 2007; Patton, 2002). Finally, the closing question, "Do you think there is anything you would like to further comment on?" was written to allow the interviewees to have the final say.

The quality and quantity of the interview questions were checked with two experts in the field. After applying their comments, the modified questions were translated into Persian, i.e., the learners' native language in which the interview was intended. The translated questions were then back-translated into English to ensure the two versions were conceptually equivalent. To further ensure the accuracy of the translated version of the questions, and to make sure that the questions were really eliciting the information the researchers intended, a pilot interview was conducted with 3 learners who shared similar characteristics with the participants in the present study. In light of the feedbacks received, the interview questions were finalized.



### 3.3 Data collection procedure

Semi-structured interviews with individual EFL learners were conducted in Persian, so that learners would not be prevented from expressing themselves by language barrier. To organize and conduct successful interviews, the researchers followed the guidelines for gathering interview data proposed by Dornyei (2007). Each interview was audio-recorded with the consent of the participant. All interviews were later transcribed. All data were treated confidentially and are reported in this paper anonymously. The interviews took place in the academic year, 1387-1388 (2008-2009), and ranged in length between 15 to 30 minutes.

### 3.4 Data analysis

A qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the interview data. The procedures proposed by Dornyei (2007), Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), and Weber (1990) were followed. The suggested procedures were systematic, thorough, and grounded in the data which centered on the following stages: (a) pre-coding, (b) coding, (c) assessing reliability, (d) growing ideas, and (e) interpreting the data and drawing conclusions. Each stage is briefly discussed below.

**Stage 1: Pre-coding.** At pre-coding stage, researchers conducted several preliminary readings of interview transcripts and organized the data into basic units of ideas. Any meaningful unit that could express a learner's perception, feeling or behavior about listening comprehension difficulties was searched. These units were identified as a word, a phrase, a sentence or a paragraph and were boldfaced.

**Stage 2: Coding.** The coding process basically involved two coding steps: *initial coding* and *second-level coding* (Dornyei, 2007). At the initial coding step, the researchers reviewed the data line by line to assign a category label to each previously-unitized data. Category development was done both inductively and deductively since blending the two methods can help researchers to fully query the data (Strauss, 1987). An inductive approach was employed to identify the analytic units that conceptually matched the phenomenon represented in the collected data. To generate categories deductively, the research questions, relevant

literature, and prior studies of the learners' beliefs about listening comprehension difficulties were consulted.

A second level coding was performed to capture patterns in the data. The list of initial codes and identified categories were re-examined and compared based on their existing similarities and differences. Conceptually related categories were identified, integrated, and grouped into more encompassing concepts that could include several subcategories. For instance, categories related to learners' attitudes and emotions about listening were subsumed under the category of affective barriers, which, in turn, was subsumed under the broader category of listener factors.

To arrive at a more integrated understanding of the data, and to obtain the most comprehensive thematic organization of ideas, the researchers went through the data set several times until saturation was reached (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). That is, no other themes or patterns were found in the data in any further analysis.

The coded data were loaded onto qualitative data processing software, QSR NVivo8 (Quality Solutions and Research Pty., 2009). The program is designed primarily as a search and retrieval system for handling large amounts of qualitative data. The NVivo program thus allowed the researchers to efficiently organize the large amount of interview data gathered in this study and helped them develop the analysis further.

**Stage 3: Assessing reliability.** To increase the credibility of the content analysis through minimizing investigator bias, inter-coder reliability was estimated. Twenty-three percent of the interview transcripts (i.e., 20 of the 86) were coded by an independent rater. Inter-rater reliability based on simple percentage agreement was 83%. Disagreements over the remaining data were discussed until a consensus was reached. Necessary modifications were then made to the coding schema.

**Stage 4: Growing ideas.** The researchers developed analytic memos in NVivo8 throughout pre-coding and coding stages of data analysis to record their observations and ideas about the collected data. The memos were consulted frequently to grow ideas and develop them into the final main theme(s).

**Stage 5: Interpreting the data and drawing conclusions.** During this stage, categorization of coded themes, identified regularities and patterns, as well as tentative conclusions recorded earlier in memos were examined. Inferences were made based on these data and conclusions were drawn. To verify the conclusions made, the literature was consulted and the results were compared with the pre-existing findings about the issue under study.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

The participants' beliefs about their listening comprehension problems were categorized under four major categories: *input*, *listener*, *task*, and *learning context*. An overview of these categories and their sub-categories in addition to the number of learners who reported them are shown in Table 1. It should be noted that since each interviewee cited more than one contributing factor to his or her listening problems, sum of frequency and that of percentage exceed 100 in the first two categories listed below.

Selections of quotations taken from the interview transcripts are also provided to ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis and to establish an audit trail allowing others to confirm resources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each learner's quotation cited here is presented with 'Pn'. 'P' stands for participant and 'n' refers to the number assigned for each participant's interview transcript. To address the two research questions raised earlier, the findings of the current study are discussed for each of the questions in turn in the sections that follow.

**Table 1:** Learners' (N=86) beliefs about factors influencing their listening comprehension

Category	Factors	Frequency	Percentage
Input	a. accent	77	89.53%
	b. speech rate	65	75.58%
	c. text length	62	70.09%
	d. text genre	58	67.44%
Listener	a. affective barriers	65	75.58%
	b. attention	62	72.09%
	c. memory	69	80.23%
	d. vocabulary knowledge	66	76.74%
Task	On line and retrospective tasks	57	66.27%
Learning context	Environmental factors, such as noise and classroom condition	25	29.06%

#### 4.1 Learners' beliefs about factors influencing their listening comprehension

##### 4.1.1 Learners' beliefs about input factors

For the purpose of this study, *input* is defined as the target language discourse that reaches the learners' auditory system (Rost, 1990) in non-collaborative settings where the accurate and coherent communication of the message is of significance (Richards, 1990). *Accent*, *speech rate*, *text length*, and *text genre* are input features which were most frequently cited by learners as factors influencing their listening comprehension. Learners' views about these variables are discussed below.

**Accent:** A substantial number of learners (i.e. 89.53%) associated their listening comprehension problems with the speakers' accent. The term accent here refers to "a regional variation in speech pattern" (Rost, 2002, p. 272). Learners preferred some English accents to listen to and found some others difficult to understand. Some learners believed that the British accent is a very difficult variety of English to understand. These learners believed that the British accent considerably differed from the English variety that they had already been taught. Learners felt dismayed

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at their failure to understand the British English. Some other learners, however, found the American English intelligible and preferred it on aesthetic grounds:

P10: "I prefer to listen to texts with American accent. I think it is easier to understand the American English. I like the American accent more than the British accent."

P26: "When I listen to American English, I feel more comfortable because I think it is easier to understand."

The fact that so many learners reported speaker's accent a major obstacle to their listening comprehension shows it was a dominant perception among the learners. The view that accent is an important factor in language learners' listening comprehension has also been supported by Boyle (1984), Goh (1999), Tauroza and Luk (1997), and Harding (2008).

The socio-linguistic EFL situation in Iran can be suggested as a possible reason for the outcomes of learners' belief about the difficulty of comprehending Standard English in general and the British accent in particular. In such a situation, learners have few chances to hear native English speakers outside the classroom if they do not watch or listen to English TV or radio channels. It is then more likely that the learners' main exposure to spoken English is through hearing the English variety that is spoken by their teachers and the speakers in the classroom listening texts. EFL teachers usually have L1-accented English and the non-authentic classroom listening materials cannot provide the learners with sufficient exposure to native English. Therefore, learners are deprived of the phonological knowledge necessary for comprehending native British and American English and are prone to experience comprehension problems when listening to speakers with these accents. In fact, learners who are mainly exposed to one variety of English are at a disadvantage. As Ur (1984) maintains, learners who do not have any experience in listening to and understanding a number of different accents are less likely to be able to cope with accents dissimilar from the ones they are used to.

**Speech rate:** The rate of speech was believed by 75.58% of learners to influence their listening comprehension. Here are two excerpts illustrating this belief:

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P45: "Speech rate is the most important factor affecting my listening comprehension."

P86: "Fast speech can make 80% listening comprehension difficult."

Learners believed that fast speech leads to a number of other problems for them. They argued that when speakers speak fast, they miss many parts of the texts such as the details or the unfamiliar words they hear. As a result, they lose their concentration.

The learners also supplied a range of reasons for the perceived speech rate cost. Majority of learners believed that when speakers speak fast, they mishear the words spoken too fast and that their inability to recognize the words correctly could be a source of difficulty in listening comprehension. Others believed that when words run together in fast speech, they cannot recognize the words they hear and this makes listening comprehension difficult. Some cited that when listening to rapid speech, they cannot keep up with the speed of delivery and they, therefore, neglect what follows. They are only able to figure out what the beginning of the text is about. A few learners believed that they have difficulty understanding fast speech because they have not developed an ear for listening yet.

Similar results were found in studies conducted by Goh (1997, 1999, 2000), Graham (2006), and Hasan (2000) in the sense that learners in these studies regarded the speed of text delivery as a key factor affecting their listening comprehension. They blamed speakers' rapid speech rate for their failure to comprehend.

Learners' lack of processing automaticity could be the source of the problem. The listeners may not be automatic enough in their ability to segment and parse the speech stream into morpheme and syntactic units. Hence, fast speech seems less comprehensible to them. Buck (2001) suggests that as learners learn to process the language more automatically, speech seems to become slower to them and consequently more understandable.

**Text length:** A large number of the learners (i.e., 70.09%) regarded text length as a barrier to listening comprehension. The learners believed that listening to a long text makes them feel so tired that they would lose track of the text content. This, in turn, caused the listening comprehension to break down. To majority of these learners any aural text longer than 5

minutes is considered difficult to comprehend. Here are two reports describing these beliefs:

P1: "Listening to a long text makes me tired. It is difficult to keep track of the earlier subjects in a long text. This lowers the level of my understanding of the text."

P11: "If a text is more than 4 or 5 minutes long, it makes me feel tired and this will make comprehending the text difficult."

While the majority of learners considered an absolute role for length of an aural text in making listening comprehension a demanding task, a few learners believed that long texts are difficult to understand if (a) learners are not familiar with the words in the texts; (b) the topic is not interesting; (c) learners are not familiar with the accent of the speakers; or (d) the text includes many and varied topics.

Long texts usually contain complex sentences with long subordinate clauses. When learners listen to such texts, they need to devote extra resources to language processing. This imposes increased load on learners' working memory. The memory load thus results in learners' having less capacity for holding longer stretches of language for integrating with incoming information and thinking about the wider contextual environment with which to interpret the text (Randall, 2007). In addition, when listening to a long text, learners may need to exert more energy than usual to be able to concentrate for a long period of time. This may result in learners' fatigue and they may run out of necessary energy to absorb and interpret the unfamiliar sounds they hear (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Ur, 1984). This undermines learners' ability to comprehend long aural texts.

**Genre:** Text type or genre was considered by more than half of the learners (i.e., 67.44%) to play an important role in comprehending aural texts. These learners reported that some genres presented more challenges (e.g., news broadcasts (43.10%), scientific texts/ documentary (41.40%) and movies (10.30%)) than others (e.g., conversations (5.20%)). Learners reported that documentary texts with scientific and political subjects were difficult for them to understand.

More than half of the learners who reported that the above genres are difficult to comprehend enumerated several reasons for their perception. They mostly attributed their difficulty in comprehending the news

broadcasts and documentaries to their unfamiliarity with the special words and topics dealt with in these text types. They particularly believed that the unfamiliar accent of English news reporters was a reason for making the listening comprehension of news broadcast difficult.

Similar results were obtained by Shohamy and Inbar (1991) and Goh (1999) in the sense that learners in these studies also reported text type as a source of difficulty in comprehending aural texts. Shohamy and Inbar (1991) found that for language learners dialogs were easiest to understand, short talks were moderately difficult, and news was the most difficult genre to comprehend. Learners in Goh's study considered conversation the easiest type of input to understand.

The learners' opinion about the effect of text genre on their listening comprehension can be explained from two perspectives: First, the discursual and pragmatic features of each genre can hinder or facilitate learners' comprehension. Since written texts such as news broadcasts are more syntactically complex, less redundant, propositionally denser, and use fewer pauses than spoken texts, they are "cognitively taxing" (Rubin, 1994, p. 204). Therefore, listeners have to adopt an intensive pace of data processing to comprehend written texts as such (Shohamy & Inbar, 1991). This makes listening comprehension of written texts such as news broadcasts challenging for learners. From the pragmatic standpoint, it can be speculated that such pragmatic dimensions of oral texts as familiarity and interaction with the audience may make comprehension of the oral texts easier than that of the written texts (Shohamy & Inbar, 1991).

Second, the learners' limited exposure to certain genres can contribute to listening difficulty. Learners are more exposed to such text types as dialogs, monologs, and narratives than news broadcasts or documentaries through the listening input they receive in the classroom. Hence, learners are not adequately familiar with distinctive and recognizable patterns and norms of organization and structure of news broadcasts or documentaries and do not have enough knowledge of these genre's typical communicative functions. This lack of familiarity makes listening comprehension of these text types difficult for learners. The results stress the proposition made by Rost (2002, p. 126) that "learning materials should include a range of genres that learners are likely to encounter in their contact with the target language."



#### 4.1.2 Learners' beliefs about listener factors

Learners' believed certain variation in their personal characteristics would influence their comprehension of aural texts. These beliefs are classified under *listener factor* category in this study. The mostly cited factors identified by learners within this category are: *Affective barriers*, *attention*, *memory*, and *vocabulary knowledge*, which are briefly discussed below.

**Affective barriers:** Learners' beliefs about obstacles to listening comprehension pertaining to EFL learners' attitudes and emotions were subsumed under the category of affective barriers. Affective influences, such as anxiety, distress, and frustration were reported to impede the learners' listening comprehension. A considerable number of learners (i.e., 75.58%) believed that their emotional status before and while listening has a major impact on their listening ability.

Learners had a negative belief about their listening ability. Before initiating a listening task, they felt anxious about being incapable of comprehending the aural text. Such a negative listening self-concept (Joiner, 1991) hindered them from concentrating on the text which would result in their failure to follow the speech right from the beginning. Learners also reported that when they come across a problem during listening, they tend to give up and stop listening in face of incomprehension. The following extracts elaborate the range of feelings the learners have before and during listening to an aural text:

P21: "I fear that something might draw my attention and I cannot keep track of the text."

P69: "I feel stressed and worried before listening starts. I fear that the aural text has many unfamiliar words and I won't understand what the speaker will say."

P11: "If I don't get one part of the text, I lose my self-confidence and will stop listening because I think the part I have missed is related to other parts."

P9: "If I don't understand the beginning of a text, I won't listen to the rest of the text because I feel confused."

Comparing listening skill with reading, writing, and speaking skills, the learners believed that listening is the most difficult and the most important skill of all. They believed that listening is so difficult that it is hardly possible for them to achieve an appropriate level of listening

proficiency. The following extracts illustrate the idea:

P57: "Listening is such a difficult skill that I think I can never do listening tasks completely."

P40: "Listening is important because I think if we have good listening skill, we can have good speaking skill too."

The learner's responses suggest that when anxiety strikes, they find their attempts to understand the text doomed to failure. Apprehension created by the fear of misinterpreting results in further reduction of learners' listening ability. This might eventually prevent learners from transferring even the most basic first-language coping skills to the second language (Meyer, 1984, cited in Oxford, 1993) and create a sense of fatigue. Listening may deteriorate during the communication event as learners realize that the material is difficult or confusing. Information that is difficult to process tends to accumulate as "cognitive backlog" and subsequently creates additional anxiety and mental blocking (Brownell, 1996, p. 88).

**Attention:** A high percentage of learners (i.e., 72.09%) believed that one of their many challenges when listening to spoken English is to control their focus of attention. These learners reported several factors related to *text* and *listener* that competed with the verbal message and prevented them from focusing their full attention on the message at hand. Learners believed that such text factors as text length, noise in the text background, unfamiliar words, and many varied subjects included in long texts could impede their attempts to concentrate. Listeners' fatigue, lack of interest in the topic, and inability to realize the listening purpose were listener-related factors that the interviewees accounted for their inability to concentrate.

The interviewees' responses show that the learners in this study are good at determining when they are being distracted or what is distracting them, even though they cannot act upon this knowledge. Learners' lapses in concentration could be due to their inability to attend selectively to the incoming input. Rost (2005) argues that attention is essentially a process of guiding selection of input so that intake of meaning will become more efficient. Because our working memory is quite limited both temporally and semantically, an L2 listener processing language in real time must decide continuously what to process further. If the listener experiences an

attentional blink, a detectable disruption in rhythms of the brain which indicates impairment in processing, he/she will subsequently experience discomfort with processing and difficulty with input-related tasks (Metsala, 1997).

**Memory:** A considerable number of learners (i.e., 80.23%) believed that it was difficult to retain certain aspects of the English aural text in their memory both during and after listening. Learners viewed remembering such details as numbers, dates, and proper names challenging. One of the most commonly cited problem was that while listening, learners could not remember the meaning of the new words that they were taught in the pre-listening phase. They also believed that remembering the content of long aural texts was a real challenge. Here are two reports describing this:

P26: “When a text is long, after listening I forget what I had listened to.”

P29: “When a text is long I cannot retain the information in my mind. When the new information is added to the old one, I forget the information I heard earlier.”

A possible cause is the learners’ working memory constraint. Difficulty in comprehension occurs when the amount of available working memory is too small to cope with the demands of storage and computation. Learners especially at the beginning stages of learning where language processing is partly automatic focus their attention to low-level processes such as word recognition. These unfamiliar tasks occupy much working memory capacity, preventing learners from building the words into higher level meaning. In such circumstances, failure in comprehension is frequent (Buck 2001; Field, 2004; Tyler, 2001).

**Vocabulary knowledge:** A surprising number of learners (i.e., 76.74%) expressed the belief that their listening ability directly depend on their knowledge of words. They regarded vocabulary knowledge a prerequisite to successful listening comprehension. Learners’ responses revealed that both breadth (i.e., the number of words a learner knows) and depth (i.e., what the learner knows about these words including its form, meaning and use) of word knowledge affect their listening comprehension (Nation, 2001; Staehr, 2009). The following extracts illustrate this notion:

### EFL learners' beliefs about listening difficulties

P45: "Not knowing enough number of words can make listening comprehension difficult."

P29: "If I knew more words, I could have a better listening comprehension."

P57: "I misunderstand the text because I am not familiar with the correct pronunciation of the English words I know."

P86: "When the words are unfamiliar, I don't understand the text. The problem is that because the word is unfamiliar I am not sure if I have heard it correctly. So I do not look it up in a dictionary."

Learners considered vocabulary knowledge as a key factor that affects their listening comprehension because they believed that meaning solely resides within the words they hear in the aural texts. Learners believed that comprehension failure occurs when they cannot understand every single word of aural texts. A general belief held by majority of learners was that "If you know the words, you can comprehend what the text is all about." This implies that learners have been taught English in a way which has given more emphasis to accuracy than fluency and which has been more concerned with mastery of the forms of language rather than with how it is used (Underwood, 1989). This further indicates that the learners tend to rely heavily on bottom-up information. Hence, their focusing attention at word level occupies much working memory of learners and does not allow higher-level processing to occur.

#### 4.1.3 Learners' beliefs about task factors

More than half of the learners (i.e., 66.27%) believed that certain English listening tasks can present them with varying degrees of complexity. Learners believed that "online" tasks such as filling the grid (performed while listening) and "retrospective" tasks like summarizing (performed after listening with a focus on organization and recall of the text) (Rost, 1990, pp. 125-128) were particularly difficult to do.

P1: "Summarizing is difficult because when I start writing a summary I write the last things I have heard. I mean I forget what was said at the beginning of the text; therefore, I just write the last things I have heard."

P12: "Filling gaps is difficult because if I cannot fill in one of the gaps correctly, I think I cannot do the rest. Therefore, I will lose my self-confidence and listening comprehension will be difficult for me."

P75: "It is difficult for me to listen and fill in a grid at the same time. If there are two gaps, I can do the task but if they are more than two, I can't."

For doing online tasks learners are required to produce an immediate response while listening to the aural text. Responses while listening are subject to conditions of time pressure that may affect one's ability to reflect upon meaning carried by the overall text. This will constrain the learner's response (Rost, 1990) making the task demanding for the learners.

Summarizing an aural text is kind of an evaluative listening task. Listeners need to decide which items of information should be included in the summary and which ones need to be omitted (Anderson & Lynch, 1988). Therefore, summarizing often requires large amount of condensation of thoughts. This can make summarizing a challenging task for learners.

#### **4.1.4 Learners' beliefs about factors related to Learning context**

A number of learners (i.e., 29.06%) believed that environmental factors, such as presence of noise, inappropriate acoustic condition of the classrooms, as well as poor quality of the audio CDs could impede their listening comprehension.

P20: "I think I can understand aural texts better when listening at home because I listen to them in a very quiet room, wearing headphones. Nothing thus distracts me."

P45: "My problem is that there is usually a lot of noise in the corridors or from other classes which interfere with my understanding of the aural text."

Unclear sounds resulting from poor classroom condition, outside noise or poor quality CDs take learners' mind off the content of the listening passage and on the source of distraction. Much of the learners' attention space is thus taken up with this shifting focus. This adversely affects the learners' ability to make immediate sense of the incoming language stimuli which depends on the attention to the data specific to the language and the rejection of other data (Randall, 2007).

#### **4.2 Beliefs held by listeners of different language proficiency**

To find out whether the learners' beliefs about listening comprehension difficulties were linked to levels of language proficiency, the interview transcripts of two groups of learners (i.e., pre-intermediate and

## EFL learners' beliefs about listening difficulties

intermediate) participating in the current study were compared. The examination of learners' responses revealed that both more- and less-proficient learners believed in similar factors influencing their listening comprehension of English texts (Table 2). In essence, the two proficiency groups did not show any notable difference in their beliefs about factors that influence listening comprehension. However, the only major difference could be found in learners' beliefs about factors pertinent to learning context. More number of pre-intermediate learners found such factors as outside noise, poor quality audio CDs, and poor classroom condition as an obstacle to their comprehension of aural texts than intermediate learners did.

**Table 2:** Pre-intermediate (N=42) and intermediate (N=44) learners' beliefs about listening problems

Category	Factors	Proficiency level	Frequency	Percent within proficiency group
Input	a. accent	Pre-intermediate	39	92.85%
		Intermediate	38	86.36%
	b. speech rate	Pre-intermediate	39	60.00%
		Intermediate	31	47.69%
	c. text length	Pre-intermediate	30	48.38%
		Intermediate	32	51.61%
	d. text genre	Pre-intermediate	31	53.44%
		Intermediate	27	46.55%
Listener	a. affective barriers	Pre-intermediate	33	50.76%
		Intermediate	32	49.23%
	b. attention	Pre-intermediate	29	46.78%
		Intermediate	33	53.22%
	c. memory	Pre-intermediate	35	50.72%
		Intermediate	34	49.27%
	d. vocabulary knowledge	Pre-intermediate	34	53.12%
		Intermediate	32	48.48%
Task	On line and retrospective tasks	Pre-intermediate	33	57.89%
		Intermediate	24	42.10%
Learning context	Environmental factors	Pre-intermediate	20	68.96%
		Intermediate	5	17.24%

The results obtained here are partly consistent with Goh's (2000) findings, in that similarities were found in the difficulties experienced by both the low and high ability listeners. The results are also in line with the previous studies in which the relationship between learners' beliefs about different aspects of L2 learning and language proficiency was investigated (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003). That is, in all these studies no difference was observed between beliefs held by learners with low and high language proficiency. It can thus be concluded that proficiency is not a contributing factor in shaping learners' beliefs.

## **5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications**

This research has investigated learners' perceptions of listening comprehension problems across two levels of language proficiency (i.e., pre-intermediate and intermediate). The findings show that almost all EFL learners interviewed reported experiencing difficulty in listening comprehension of English aural texts. The analysis also revealed that learners were aware of their listening problems and were capable of distinguishing some of the factors that affect their listening comprehension. Learners attributed their English listening problems to multiple factors rather than single ones. The identified factors were related to the features of the aural input they receive, their own roles as listeners, as well as the characteristics of the listening task and the learning environment. The comparison of the two groups of learners with different language abilities showed similarities in their beliefs regarding the variables influencing their listening comprehension and the listening difficulties they encounter.

The findings thus suggest that language learners are capable of evaluating their own listening performance and articulating what their shortcomings are. This simply demonstrates the importance of surveying EFL learners' beliefs about listening success. There is, therefore, a need for language educators and materials designers to examine learners' beliefs about listening to uncover what listening skills learners think they need to enhance their listening comprehension. Incorporating learners' beliefs in the process of materials development would allow the practitioners in the field to design and create activities that deal with the learners' actual needs, not merely perceived ones (Berne, 2004).

**EFL learners' beliefs about listening difficulties**

With regard to the learners' beliefs about listening problems, difficulties associated with bottom-up processing such as problems resulting from deriving meaning solely from perception or comprehension of the sum of all discrete sounds, syllables, words or phrases (Ur, 1984) were mostly reported. Such beliefs seem to underpin the actions learners take when experiencing comprehension failure. In other words, learners tend to seek an immediate recourse to bottom up strategies when facing difficulties. This suggests that there seem to be a gap in learners' knowledge in terms of what strategies they should be using. Therefore, instruction in top-down compensatory strategies is recommended. And one way to close this gap, as Vogely (1995) suggests, is through strategy training that emphasizes the process rather than the outcome of listening comprehension.

The obtained results regarding learners' negative feelings toward their listening ability provide further justification for the necessity of training learners in top-down processing strategies. More positive listening self-concepts need to be created to reduce learner's anxiety. This can be created by helping students realize that to understand an aural text; low-level processing such as word-for-word comprehension is not necessary and that they need to incorporate top-down processing such as guessing and hypothesis-testing (Oxford, 1990). In addition, to help learners reduce their L2 listening anxiety, educators should train them in a variety of mental techniques, such as deep breathing, providing personal motivation through positive self-talk before and during a listening task, and getting engaged with self-encouragement and self-reward by making positive statements about their listening ability (Oxford, 1990; Vandergrift, 1997).

A major problem identified by learners was their inability to comprehend certain English accents. If listening comprehension is affected by different accents to which learners are likely to be exposed, teachers should consider ways to prepare them to understand a range of different L2 accents. The language educators and curriculum designers are thus suggested to expose L2 listeners to speech produced by multiple speakers of multiple language backgrounds so that they can take advantage of this knowledge in comprehending L2 aural texts (Kennedy & Trofimovich, 2008). This, therefore, suggests a crucial need for more



comprehensive consideration of accent in EFL programs. Such an approach should enable English language learners to hear, analyze, and compare key features among a variety of accents. This will eventually increase accent intelligibility and listening comprehension.

Another serious challenge for L2 listeners in this study was shown to be their inability to selectively focus their attention on the aural input that reaches their auditory system. Lack of attention can be a serious problem in L2 listening (Oxford, 1993) which needs to be adequately addressed by the language educators. Attention can be increased by active intention and action during the listening process. To this end, learners should be taught to set long-term goals and short-term objectives for L2 listening, make personally meaningful mental associations while listening, identify the purpose of L2 listening tasks before listening, and consciously decide to look for clues while listening (Oxford, 1993). In particular, learners should be engaged in interesting listening activities and materials, and be frequently reminded to focus their attention while listening by ignoring irrelevant distractions and deciding in advance to attend to specific details that facilitate comprehending the aural text.

Memory was also found to be an issue for the learners in the current study. Learners need to be helped overcome the listening comprehension problems arising from memory constraint. Trainings in cognitive strategies such as note-taking are thus recommended. It is suggested that taking notes can assist learners with comprehension and memory processes in the L2 through subsequent reconstruction of key ideas and information (Rost, 2005). Referring to the notes already taken, learners are able to replay the content in working memory and reconstruct long-term representations of the content. Because working memory is known to be of limited capacity (Randall, 2007), it is essential that any listener learn to chunk complex information into key words or abbreviated propositions that can later be reconstructed (Rost, 2005). Therefore, EFL listeners need to be instructed in taking accurate, relevant, and clear notes.

In conclusion, the findings of this study can inform both L2 pedagogy and theoretical models of L2 listening comprehension. Information obtained is critical for the preparation of listening materials and instruction. It can help language practitioners better understand what needs to be emphasized in the process of teaching L2 listening. Any

theory of listening comprehension is expected to account for what can be comprehended during listening. Findings of this study can inform the theory by highlighting the particular factors that can enhance or inhibit L2 listening comprehension. However, further research is required to probe the learners' decision-making processes when experiencing difficulties with listening in L2.

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## Appendix

### Interview Guide

#### Essential questions

1. What do you believe to be your difficulties in comprehending English aural texts?

2. If applicable, what factors do you think can make comprehending an English aural text difficult for you?
3. Consider the listening tasks you did this term, which one was difficult for you to do? Why?
4. How do you feel before and while doing a listening task? Does this feeling affect your listening comprehension? If yes, can you describe how it does?
5. Why do you think you have such a feeling?

**Potential probes if little or no response**

6. Is there any aspect of an aural text that you believe can make its comprehension challenging for you?
7. Do you think there is any speaker characteristic that can affect your comprehension of an aural text?
8. How difficult or easy do you believe it is to concentrate on what you are listening? Why?
9. How difficult or easy do you believe it is to remember what you listen to? Why?

**Closing question**

10. Do you think there is anything you would like to further comment on?