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A Study of Factors Affecting EFL Learners' English Listening Comprehension and the Strategies for Improvement

Abbas Pourhossein Gilakjani
School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia
Email: abbas.pouhossein@yahoo.com

Mohammad Reza Ahmadi
School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia
Email: mr.ahmadi2720@yahoo.com

***Abstract*—Listening plays a significant role in daily communication and educational process. In spite of its importance, listening has long been the neglected skill in second language acquisition, research, teaching, and assessment. However, in recent years there has been an increased focus on L2 listening ability because of its perceived importance in language learning and teaching. The study tries to find the factors influencing English listening comprehension and the strategies to be taken that might improve students' listening comprehension. The paper focuses on four main issues. First, it discusses the definition of listening, significance of listening. Second, it reviews the process of listening comprehension, strategies of listening comprehension. Third, analysis of listening comprehension problems is reviewed. Fourth, teaching methods for listening comprehension will be discussed. Fifth, researchers review teaching listening activities. Sixth, general principles in teaching listening comprehension are discussed. Findings based on the review of the literature along with analysis of the data are of great significance and can be advantageous to improve EFL learners' English listening comprehension skill.**

***Index Terms*—listening comprehension, importance, process, strategies, problems, methods, principles**

I. Introduction

Listening plays an important role in communication as it is said that, of the total time spent on communicating, listening takes up 40-50%; speaking, 25-30%; reading, 11-16%; and writing, about 9% (Mendelsohn, 1994). Although the teaching of listening comprehension has long been "somewhat neglected and poorly taught aspect of English in many EFL programs" (Mendelsohn, 1994, p. 9), listening is now regarded as much more important in both EFL classrooms and SLA research. Listening involves an active process of deciphering and constructing meaning from both verbal and non-verbal messages (Nunan, 1998). Thus, the label of passive skill applied to listening is a misnomer. This misunderstanding may stem from the fact that superficially learners seem to only sit in a language lab quietly, listen to pre-recorded dialogues, and write the answers to some questions related to the oral stimulus. It is evident, then, that listening is not as 'passive' as it has been claimed to be as it demands a number of complicated processes on the part of the learners. There are two subsuming cognitive processes: bottom-up (data-driven) and top-down (conceptually-driven). The bottom-up processing involves constructing meaning from the smallest unit of the spoken language to the largest one in a linear mode (Nunan, 1998). Thus, the learners attempt to understand a spoken discourse by decoding a number of sounds to form words. Next, a nexus of words are linked to form phrases, which make up sentences. These sentences build a complete text, the meaning of which is then constructed by the listeners. In addition to the grammatical relationships, such suprasegmental phonemes as stress, rhythm and intonation also substantially contribute to this data-driven processing (van Duzer, 1997). Learners can be trained to perform this processing, for instance, by activities that require them to discriminate two sounds or distinguish rising and falling intonations. The top-down processing, on the other hand, refers to interpreting meaning as intended by the speakers by means of schemata or structures of knowledge in the mind (Nunan, 1998). This view emphasizes the prominence of background knowledge already possessed by the learners in making sense of the information they hear. In the aural perception, the prior knowledge may facilitate their attempt to grasp the incoming information by relating the familiar with the new one, and significant lack of such knowledge can hamper their efforts to comprehend a particular utterance. It is, therefore, essential that learners are accustomed to performing this processing, usually by extracting the gist of the exchange they listen to.

Due to the fact that the communicative approach is increasingly used in EFL situation, we, therefore, stress the importance of students' communicative competence. The need for competence in listening in EFL English language learners is increasing, so that listening teaching has attracted considerable attention. Unfortunately, the teaching of listening skills is still neglected in the English language teaching process. EFL learners have serious problems in

English listening comprehension due to the fact that universities pay more attention to English grammar, reading and vocabulary. Listening and speaking skills are not important parts of many course books or curricula and teachers do not seem to pay attention to these skills while designing their lessons. EFL English language learners have limited listening comprehension. Listening levels of learners are different from each other, because listening is affected by crucial factors. The most important factors that should be emphasized are: the significance of listening, the study of listening teaching theory and use of the most advanced listening teaching methods. In many English language classes, grammar-translation method is used for teaching. This method has been found inadequate to the demands for producing efficient English speakers and listeners. So a new teaching method should be used to meet the needs of students. This new method is called communicative approach. English must be taught as a tool for communication. It is now widely accepted that students' listening ability must be at the core of teaching practice, and it is the area in which teachers need to concentrate their own efforts to improve their teaching. This is a significant challenge for English teachers; however, it is crucial in the development of English language communicative competence. The purpose of this approach is to improve the students' English overall linguistic capability and oral and aural competence. The researchers attempt to discuss the definition of listening, importance of listening. Then, they review the process of listening comprehension, strategies of listening comprehension. Analysis of listening comprehension problems is reviewed. Then, teaching methods for listening comprehension and teaching listening activities will be discussed. Finally, general principles in teaching listening comprehension are discussed. Findings of this study will be beneficial to EFL learners to improve their English language listening comprehension ability.

II. Definition of Listening

According to Anderson and Lynch (1988), arguing what is successful listening, "understanding is not something that happens because of what a speaker says: the listener has a crucial part to play in the process, by activating various types of knowledge, and by applying what he knows to what he hears and trying to understand what the speaker means"(p.6). Underwood (1989) simplified the definition of listening to "the activity of paying attention to and trying to get meaning from something we hear" (p. 1). Mendelsohn (1994) defines listening comprehension as "the ability to understand the spoken language of native speakers." O'Malley, Chamot, and Kupper (1989) offer a useful and more extensive definition that "listening comprehension is an active and conscious process in which the listener constructs meaning by using cues from contextual information and from existing knowledge, while relying upon multiple strategic resources to fulfill the task requirement"(p.19). Mendelsohn (1994) points out that, in listening to spoken language, the ability to decipher the speaker's intention is required of a competent listener, in addition to other abilities such as processing the linguistic forms like speech speed and fillers, coping with listening in an interaction, understanding the whole message contained in the discourse, comprehending the message without understanding every word, and recognizing different genres. Listeners must also know how to process and how to judge what the illocutionary force of an utterance is- that is, what this string of sounds is intended to mean in a particular setting, under a particular set of circumstances – as an act of real communication (Mendelsohn, 1994).

Purdy (1997) defined listening as "the active and dynamic process of attending, perceiving, interpreting, remembering, and responding to the expressed (verbal and nonverbal), needs, concerns, and information offered by other human beings" (p. 8). Listening comprehension is an inferential process (Rost, 2002). Linguistic knowledge and world knowledge interact as listeners create a mental representation of what they hear. Bottom up and top down processes are applied to get to this mental representation and achieve comprehension. Rost (2002) defined listening as a process of receiving what the speaker actually says, constructing and representing meaning, negotiating meaning with the speaker and responding, and creating meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy. To listen well, listeners must have the ability to decode the message, the ability to apply a variety of strategies and interactive processes to make meaning, and the ability to respond to what is said in a variety of ways, depending on the purpose of the communication. Listening involves listening for thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Doing so requires active involvement, effort and practice (Shen, Guizhou, Wichura, Kiattichai, 2007). To sum up, it is widely admitted that listening comprehension is not merely the process of a unidirectional receiving of audible symbols, but an interactive process (Brown, 2001). In the eight processes of comprehension (Clark & Clark, 1977; Brown, 2001) the hearer, after receiving the information, assigns a literal meaning to the utterance first and then assigns an intended meaning to the utterance. A key to human communication is the ability to match perceived meaning with intended meaning.

III. Significance of Listening

Listening is the most frequently used language skill (Morley, 1999; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Bird (1953) found that female college students spent 42 percent of their total verbal communication time in listening while they spent 25 percent in speaking, 15 percent in reading, and 18 percent in writing. A study conducted by Barker, Edwards, Gaines, Gladney, and Holley (1980) confirmed Bird's view of the primacy of listening and showed that the portion of verbal communication time spent by college students was 52.5 percent in listening, 17.3 percent in reading, 16.3 percent in speaking, and 13.9 percent in writing. According to Devine (1982), listening is the primary means by which incoming ideas and information are taken in Gilbert (1988), on the other hand, noted that students from kindergarten through high

school were expected to listen 65-90 percent of the time. Wolvin and Coakley (1988) concluded that, both in and out of the classroom, listening consumes more of daily communication time than other forms of verbal communication. Listening is central to the lives of students throughout all levels of educational development (Coakley & Wolvin, 1997; Feyten, 1991; Wing, 1986). Listening is the most frequently used language skill in the classroom (Ferris, 1998; Murphy, 1991; Vogely, 1998). Both instructors (Ferris & Tagg, 1996) and students (Ferris, 1998) acknowledge the importance of listening comprehension for success in academic settings. Numerous studies indicated that efficient listening skills were more important than reading skills as a factor contributing to academic success (Coakley & Wolvin, 1997; Truesdale, 1990). However, Dunkel's (1991b) study reported that international students' academic success in the United States and Canada relied more on reading than listening comprehension, especially for those students in engineering, psychology, chemistry, and computer science. Thus, the importance of listening in classroom instruction has been less emphasized than reading and writing. Nevertheless, it is evident that listening plays a significant role in the lives of people. Listening is even more important for the lives of students since listening is used as a primary medium of learning at all stages of education.

IV. The Process of Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension is regarded theoretically as an active process in which individuals concentrate on selected aspects of aural input, form meaning from passages, and associate what they hear with existing knowledge. Cognitive psychology defines comprehension as information processing. Schemata are the guiding structures in the comprehension process. The schema is described by Rumelhart (1980, p. 34) as "a data structure for representing the generic concepts stored in memory. It can be used to represent our knowledge about all concepts: those underlying objects, situations, events, sequences of events, actions and sequences of actions." According to the cognitive comprehension theory, "schema" means an abstract textual structure that the listener uses to make sense of the given text. The listener makes use of linguistic and situational cues and also the expectations he/she has about the new input to evoke schemata. When a schema has been evoked, it will become a guiding structure in comprehension. If the incoming information is matched with the schema, then the listeners have succeeded in comprehending the text; if they are not compatible, either the information or the schema will be discarded or modified. The principle of schema leads to two fundamental modes of information processing: bottom-up processing and top-down processing. These two processing intersect to develop an interactive processing. Thus, models for listening process fall into three types.

Bottom-up processing (the first type of models) is activated by the new incoming data. The features of the data pass into the system through the best fitting, bottom-level schemata. Schemata are hierarchically formed, from the most specific at the bottom to the most general at the top. It acknowledges that listening is a process of decoding the sounds, from the smallest meaningful units (phonemes) to complete texts. Thus, phonemic units are decoded and connected together to construct words, words are connected together to construct phrases, phrases are connected together to construct utterances, and utterances are connected together to construct complete, meaningful text. That is to say, meaning is arrived at as the last step in the process. A chain of incoming sounds trigger schemata hierarchically organized in a listener's mind— the phonological knowledge, the morphological knowledge, lexical and syntactical knowledge (syntactical knowledge aids to analyze the sentence structure). Thus, the listener makes use of "his knowledge of words, syntax, and grammar to work on form" in the bottom-up processing (Rubin, 1994, p. 210). This process is closely associated with the listener's linguistic knowledge. However, bottom-up processing has its weak points. Understanding a text is an interactive process between the listener's previous knowledge and the text. Efficient comprehension that associates the textual material with listener's brain doesn't only depend on one's linguistic knowledge.

Top-down processing (the second type) is explained as employing background knowledge in comprehending the meaning of a message. Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) point out that in top-down processing, the system makes general predictions based on "a higher level, general schemata, and then searches the input for information to fit into these practically satisfied, higher order schemata". In terms of listening, the listener actively constructs (or reconstructs) the original meaning of the speaker employing new input as clues. In this reconstruction process, the listener employs prior knowledge of the context and situation within which the listening occurs to understand what he/she hears. Context and situation involve such things as knowledge of the topic at hand, the speaker or speakers, and their correlation with the situation, as well as with each other and previous events. We must realize if the incoming information the listener hears is unfamiliar to him, it can't evoke his schemata and he can only depend heavily on his linguistic knowledge in LC. Besides, although the listener can trigger a schema, he might not have the suitable schema expected by the speaker. Thus, only relying on top-down processing may result in the failure of comprehension (p. 557).

The interactive processing (the third type) overcomes the disadvantages of bottom-up processing and top-down processing to augment the comprehension. In the early 1980s, it was the tendency that only top-down processing was acknowledged to improve L2 (second language) listening comprehension. However it is now more generally accepted that both top-down and bottom-up listening processing should be combined to enhance LC. Complex and simultaneous processing of background knowledge information, contextual information and linguistic information make comprehension and interpretation become easy. When the content of the material is familiar to the listener, he will employ his background knowledge at the same time to make predictions which will be proved by the new input. As

opposed with this, if the listener is unfamiliar with the content of the listening text and deficient in language proficiency, he can only depend on his linguistic knowledge, especially the lexical and syntactical knowledge to make sense of the information. From the cognitive perspective, Anderson (1985) elaborates that comprehension consists of perception, parsing and utilization. Perceptual processing is the encoding of the acoustic or written message. In listening, this covers chunking phonemes from the continuous speech stream (Anderson, 1995, p. 37). During this stage, an individual pays close attention to input and the sounds are stored in echoic memory. While the input is still in echoic memory, some initial analysis of the language code may start, and encoding processes may transform some of the input into meaningful representations (Anderson, 1985). It seems probable that the same factors in perceptual processing that attend to auditory material excluding other competing stimuli in the environment also attend selectively to certain key words or phrases that are important in the context, attend to pauses and acoustic emphases that may offer clues to segmentation and to meaning, or attend to contextual elements that may fit with or support the interpretation of meaning such as the listener's goals, expectations about the speaker's purpose, and the type of speech interaction contained (for example, a conversation or a lecture). In the second LC process— parsing, words are converted into a mental representation of the combined meaning of these words. The basic unit of LC is a proposition (Anderson, 1985). Complex propositions may be differentiated into simpler propositions that can be regrouped by the listener to produce new sentences whose basic meaning does not alter. Therefore, through parsing, a meaning-based representation of the original sequence of words can be stored in short-term memory; this representation is an abstraction of the original word sequences but can be employed to reproduce the original sequences or at least their planned meaning. The size of the unit or segment (or "chunk") of information processed will rely on the learner's knowledge of the language, general knowledge of the topic, and how the information is presented. The main clue for segmentation in LC is meaning, which may be represented syntactically, semantically, phonologically, or by any combination of these. Second language listeners may have some trouble in understanding language spoken at typical conversational rates by native speakers if they are unfamiliar with the rules for segmentation, even though they may comprehend individual words when heard separately. Findings from research with second language learners show that memory span for target language input is shorter than for native language input (Call, 1985). Complex input materials may be especially difficult to comprehend in a second language because they need combining of parsed segments in the process of comprehension, thus putting an extra burden on STM (short-term memory) which already may be burdened with un-encoded elements of the new input. The third process, utilization, is composed of associating a mental representation of the auditory meaning with existing knowledge. Existing knowledge is retained in long-term memory as propositions or schemata. Connections between the new input meaning and existing knowledge take place through spreading activation in which knowledge in LTM (long-term memory) is activated so that it is associated with the new meanings in STM. Comprehension occurs when input and knowledge are matched with each other. Perception, parsing and utilization stand for different levels of processing. Of the three levels of processing, perception is the lowest. All three phases are recursive and connected closely, and can occur simultaneously during a single listening event. Coakley & Wolvin (1986) suggest that listening comprehension in a L2 (second language) is the process of receiving, focusing attention on, and assigning meaning to aural stimuli. It includes a listener, who brings prior knowledge of the topic, linguistic knowledge and cognitive processes to the listening task, the aural text, and the interaction between the two. Fischer and Farris (1995) regard listening comprehension as a process by which students actively form a mental representation of an aural text according to prior knowledge of the topic and information found within.

V. Strategies of Listening Comprehension

One of the methods learners can become actively involved in controlling their own learning is by using strategies. Vandergrift (1999) showed "Strategy development is important for listening training because strategies are conscious means by which learners can guide and evaluate their own comprehension and responses." In O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, and Russo's (1985) study, high school ESL students were randomly assigned to receive learning strategy training on vocabulary, listening, and speaking tasks and the result indicated strategy training can be effective for integrative language tasks. Nakata (1999) studied the influence of listening strategy training on Japanese EFL learners' listening competence, and it showed that the effect of listening strategy training was more discernible on perception than on comprehension, especially for those students who received low scores on the G-TELP.

Research into speech perception has shown that listening comprehension involves far more than mere decoding of the sounds. Rivers (1983b) in her discussion of speech perception identifies three stages. First, the listener must recognize that the sounds are an actual message and not just noise. This recognition means to the listener that the sounds are elements of the language system. In the second stage the listener identifies sounds along with lexical and syntactic forms by segmenting and grouping them. The third stage involves recoding in order to retain the auditory message in long-term storage. These stages are necessarily rapid and overlapping. Whether the process of listening comprehension is as described above or in some other form, it is certainly an active process involving cognitive processing (pp. 80-83).

Native speakers and highly proficient second language learners complete the complex process of speech comprehension smoothly. Second language learners at lower levels of language proficiency whether it be due to a lack of auditory experience with varying accents, limited vocabulary, imperfect control of the syntactic and semantic structure of the language, or other limitations with regard to the elements necessary for communicative competency

need to rely on listening strategies to assist them in comprehending the aural communication. Brown (1995) quite appropriately compares strategies to "battle plans": Strategies are specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information. They are contextualized "battle plans" that might vary from moment to moment, or day to day, or year to year (p. 104).

Among all the strategies for listening, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) claimed three main types of strategies: meta-cognitive, cognitive and social strategies. The meta-cognitive strategy was a kind of self-regulated learning. It included the attempt to plan, check, monitor, select, revise, and evaluate, etc. For example, for meta-cognitive planning strategies, learners would clarify the objectives of an anticipated listening task, and attend to specific aspects of language input or situational details that assisted in understanding the task (Vandergrift, 1999). Generally, it can be discussed through pre-listening planning strategies, while-listening monitoring strategies, and post-listening evaluation strategies.

The cognitive strategies are related to comprehending and storing input in working memory or long-term memory for later retrieval. They are investigated from the aspects of bottom-up strategies, top-down strategies. For bottom-up processing, it refers to using the incoming input as the basis for understanding the message. Comprehension begins with the received data that is analyzed as successive levels of organization-sounds, words, as a process of decoding. For bottom up strategies, Henner-Stanchina (1987) engaged in a similar study and pointed out that effective listeners were good at using their previous knowledge and experience to raise hypotheses about a text, integrating new information into their ongoing interpretations, making influences to bridge gaps, assessing their interpretations, and modifying their hypotheses, if necessary. On the other hand, top-down processing went from meaning to language (Richards, 2008). Learners can try to predict what will utter by the signal. However, Chiu (2006) claimed that listening comprehension was neither only top-down nor bottom-up processing. Simultaneously, Lu (2008) summed up that the scholars believed the listeners not only utilized bottom-up but also top-down processing models. In sum, Thompson & Rubin (1996) indicated the effects of meta-cognitive and cognitive strategy instruction on the listening comprehension performance of American university students learning Russian. They found that the subjects who received strategy instruction in listening to video-recorded texts improved significantly over those who had received no instruction.

For social/ affective strategies, Vandergrift (2003) defined the strategies as the techniques listeners used to collaborate with others, to verify understanding or to lower anxiety. Habte-Gabr (2006) stated that socio-affective strategies were those which were non academic in nature and involve stimulating learning through establishing a level of empathy between the instructor and student. They included considering factors such as emotions and attitudes (Oxford, 1990). It was essential for listeners to know how to reduce the anxiety, feel confident in doing listening tasks, and promote personal motivation in improving listening competence (Vandergrift, 1997). According to O'Malley & Chamot (2001), among the four strategies of management strategies, social strategies, cognitive strategies, affective strategies in listening comprehension, both social and affective strategies influenced the learning situation immediately.

A great deal has been written about language strategies. These strategies have been categorized as learning strategies and communication strategies. Ellis (1985:181) has stated that, "Communication strategies are problem-oriented. That is they are employed by the learner because he lacks or cannot gain access to the linguistic resources required to express an intended meaning." They are "short-term answers" while learning strategies Ellis points are "long-term solutions." In general, discussion of and research on these communication strategies have focused on the learner's behavior when his production in the second language shuts down. Little research has focused specifically on strategies employed when the learner finds he cannot comprehend the auditory message. This research specifically intended to address the question of what strategies the listener employed to solve the problem when he/she failed to comprehend the message he/she was listening to. The listener's level of language competency was considered an important variable in the listener's choice of strategy. Paterson (2001:90) states that "Strategy use varies with proficiency and so the relationship between strategy use and proficiency level is an important one."

VI. Analysis of Potential Listening Comprehension Problems

Underwood (1989) states seven causes of obstacles to efficient listening comprehension. First, listeners cannot control the speed of delivery. He says," Many English language learners believe that the greatest difficulty with listening comprehension is that the listener cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks" (Underwood, 1989, p. 16). Second, listeners cannot always have words repeated. This is a serious problem in learning situations. In the classroom, the decision as to whether or not to replay a recording or a section of a recording is not in the hands of students. Teachers decide what and when to repeat listening passages; however, it is hard for the teacher to judge whether or not the students have understood any particular section of what they have heard (Underwood, 1989, p. 17). Third, listeners have a limited vocabulary. The speaker may choose words the listener does not know. Listeners sometimes encounter an unknown word which may cause them to stop and think about the meaning of that word and thus cause them to miss the next part of the speech. Fourth, listeners may fail to recognize the signals which indicate that the speaker is moving from one point to another, giving an example, or repeating a point. Discourse markers used in formal situations or lectures such as "secondly," or "then" are comparatively evident to listeners. In informal situations or spontaneous conversations, signals are more vague as in pauses, gestures, increased loudness, a clear change of pitch, or different intonation patterns. These signals can be missed especially by less proficient listeners. Fifth, listeners may lack contextual knowledge. Sharing mutual knowledge and common content makes communication easier. Even if listeners

can understand the surface meaning of the text, they may have considerable difficulties in comprehending the whole meaning of the passage unless they are familiar with the context. Nonverbal clues such as facial expressions, nods, gestures, or tone of voice can also be easily misinterpreted by listeners from different cultures. Sixth, it can be difficult for listeners to concentrate in a foreign language. In listening comprehension, even the shortest break in attention can seriously impair comprehension. Conversation is easier when students find the topic of the listening passage interesting; however, students sometimes feel listening is very tiring even if they are interested because it requires an enormous amount of effort to follow the meaning. Seventh, students may have established certain learning habits such as a wish to understand every word. Teachers want students to understand every word they hear by repeating and pronouncing words carefully, by grading the language to suit their level, by speaking slowly and so on. As a result, they tend to become worried if they fail to understand a particular word or phrase and they will be discouraged by the failure. It is necessary for students to tolerate vagueness and incompleteness of understanding (Underwood, 1989).

VII. Teaching Listening Activities

Listening is a highly-complex solving activities (Barnes, 1984) in which listeners interact with a speaker to construct meaning, within the context of their experiences and knowledge. When students are made aware of the factors that affect listening, the levels of listening, and the components of the listening process, they are more likely to recognize their own listening abilities and engage in activities that prepare them to be effective listeners. Karakas (2002) states that listening activities try to prevent failure so that they can support the learner's interpretation of the text. Listening activities are usually subcategorized as pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening activities.

A. Pre-listening Activities

Schema theory provides strong evidence for the effectiveness of pre-listening activities which includes the outline for listening to the text and teaching cultural key concepts. Listening teacher may select certain words, difficult grammatical structures and expressions to be explained through the discussion about the topic **,** and may also ask students to predict the content or what speakers are going to say, based on the information they have already got. Pre-listening activities usually have two primary goals: (a) to help to activate students' prior knowledge, build up their expectations for the coming information; and (b) to provide the necessary context for the specific listening task. The teacher could follow with a listening comprehension activity, such as two people having a conversation about their daily life. Students must answer true or false questions based on the previous listening activity. An example of a controlled practice activity could be a drill activity that models the same structure or vocabulary (Karakas, 2002).

B. While-listening Activities

Listeners who participate actively in the listening experience are more likely to construct clear and accurate meaning as they interpret the speaker's verbal message and nonverbal cues. During the listening experience students verify and revise their predictions. They make interpretations and judgments based on what they heard. Listening teacher may ask students to note down key words to work out the main points of the text. Students answer comprehension questions while listening to the text and select specific information to complete the table provided with the text. While-listening activities usually have some of the following purposes: to focus students' comprehension of the speaker's language and ideas; to focus students' attention on such things as the speaker's organizational patterns; to encourage students' critical reactions and personal responses to the speaker's ideas and use of language. An open-ended activity could follow that allows students to have the freedom to practice listening comprehension in the class about their daily life and asking for further information. Listening comprehension should begin with what students already know so that they can build on their existing knowledge and skills with activities designed on the same principle. A variation on the "filling in the missing word listening activity" could be to use the same listening materials, but to set a pair work activity where student A and student B have the same worksheet where some information items are missing (Karakas, 2002).

C. Post-listening Activities

Post-listening activities are important because they extend students' listening skill. Post-listening activities are most effective when done immediately after the listening experience. Well-planned post-listening activities offer students opportunities to connect what they have heard to their own ideas and experiences, and encourage interpretive and critical listening and reflective thinking. As well, post-listening activities provide opportunities for teachers to assess and check students' comprehension, and clarify their understandings; to extend comprehension beyond the literal level to the interpretive and critical levels. Different comprehension questions can be assigned for students to discuss after listening, students then swap information to complete the "whole class chart", correlating what each student has heard to arrive at the big picture. If there are any questions that remain unanswered during the first or second listening, and after the information swap activity, the whole class can listen to the tape again. The students will then try to find the answer to the questions that have not been previously understood, rather than the teacher providing the answers straight away (Karakas, 2002).

VIII. Teaching Methods for Listening Comprehension

Some of the teaching methods for improving students' listening comprehension skill are as follows:

A. Cultivating Students' Listening Skills

Cultivating students' listening skills is one of the most difficult tasks for any ESL teacher. This is because successful listening skills are acquired over time and with lots of practice. The demands of the task are often frustrating for students because there are no precise rules, as in grammar teaching. Speaking and writing also have very specific exercises that can lead to improvement. However, there are quite specific ways of improving listening skills but these are difficult to quantify. Teachers must develop students' micro skills of listening comprehension. Brown (1994) identifies seventeen listening comprehension micro skills. Some of the more important of these skills are discussed here. For beginners, the most important listening skill is discrimination in English pronunciation, intonation and language flow. They need to acquire the crucial skill of identifying the main information. Wu Zhengfu (1991) recognizes that when students acquire basic discrimination ability, they can select and analyze the meaning of what they hear and grasp the main content. In the teaching process teachers should cultivate students' ability to select main information and instruct students to control the general meaning of listening materials on the whole. In class, for example, teachers can ask students to listen to the general meaning of the passage, and to sum up key points and main information. Predictive ability is also an extremely important listening micro skill. In everyday communication, people continually make unconscious predictions about what speakers will say, and these predictions are made on the basis of their knowledge of the context in which the communication is made. The development of predictive ability has many aspects. Before listening training, teachers might ask students questions related to listening materials, or introduce relevant background knowledge to enlighten students' thinking to allow students a clear recognition of the goals and requirements of listening training. The ability to guess the meaning of words is also an important listening micro skill. Listening comprehension does not mean understanding every word, but some words do play a crucial part in listening comprehension. It is a normal phenomenon not to understand every word that is uttered. However, students may guess the meaning of new words on the basis of the topic being discussed and gain some understanding of the probable linguistic items on the basis of the context of discourses, the grammatical structure and the background knowledge of the topic.

B. Textbook-based Learning and Other Listening Contexts

Listening lessons require listeners to concentrate on the content and make fast responses to what is heard. If students are passive and apprehensive during listening training, they will probably feel nervous and wary of taking chances. Teachers need to take a non-punitive approach and structure lessons that are varied, vivid and interesting. Teachers need to select a wide range of materials to increase listening content besides using textbooks. Students need to listen to different levels of English in order to be exposed to natural, lively, rich language, such as listening to English songs, seeing films with English text. In these ways it is possible to raise students' enthusiasm, cultivate their listening interests, and achieve the goals of learning English.

C. Passing on Cultural Knowledge in Language Teaching

Understanding that language is controlled by particular cultural experiences is a necessity for the language learner. If the cultural differences between the students' own culture and that of the language they are to learn is excessive, learners will usually keep some distance from the target language in their efforts to maintain their psychological comfort level. As a consequence the operating processes of memory and input will certainly be limited (Cheng Huaiyuan, 1999). Thus teachers need to be aware that breaking down the barriers is a significant part of cultural teaching and forms an important aspect of the whole process of language teaching. The aspect of cultural knowledge transmission is an equal part of language improvement and development of work in listening development has the potential for achieving a powerful influence on the formulation of students' thinking habits and the application of foreign language expressions. Cultural teaching, then, has direct and concrete influences on intercultural communication. When students gain an intimate knowledge of the culture of the target language they begin to understand how the language is used to reflect the thoughts, behaviors and customs of that society. In teaching English listening, teachers need to develop students' consciousness about intercultural communication and they need to energize students' capacity for wanting to engage with a different culture. Great care needs to be taken when selecting listening material and auxiliary texts, since these are a crucial aspect of the cultural factors in listening teaching. The selection of material related to British and American cultural background knowledge is of particular importance, since these tend to be the focus of much of the classroom time when students' thinking ability and intercultural awareness is being cultivated.

D. Combining "Intensive Listening" with "Extensive Listening"; Focusing on Listening

Intensive listening requires students to understand the meaning of each discourse and, ultimately, to understand every sentence and word. Generally, intensive listening requires students to listen to a text several times, or divide the text into paragraphs and sentences to understand each one; or by doing dictation word by word. The goal is for students to understand every sentence. Alternatively, extensive listening does not require students to understand every sentence, and every word, instead, students are encouraged to grasp the general meaning of the passage. The key point of

listening is to understand the content. The purpose of intensive listening is to build basic listening skills, while extensive listening is to strengthen and enlarge effectiveness of intensive listening in order to improve overall listening ability. In listening teaching, both intensive and extensive listening should be combined with cultivating students' basic skills, the development of the productive listening habits of active thinking and the ability to understand the text. Therefore, teachers must encourage students to engage in intensive listening in class, requiring students to understand the general meaning and also to become familiarized with English pronunciation, intonation and the changes in language flow. In activities outside the class students need to engage in extensive listening; listening to many different variety of language phenomena and gaining more knowledge through TV programs, radio, the Internet and as many other kinds of exposure to listening training they can find. Exposure to demands of listening should include aspects of everyday life, science and technology, and academic lectures. Teachers must create language-learning environments that stimulate students' interests and raise students' passion and enthusiasm for learning English.

E. Combining Listening with Other Skills

According to language acquisition theory, human capacity for discrimination between language intention and language content is a crucial step in the language acquisition process. Thus listening comprehensive ability plays an important role in acquisition and improvement of language skills. Therefore, in listening teaching, there is a need to combine the development of listening ability with the development of other skills such as reading. In order to improve listening ability it is necessary to listen frequently to a teacher reading well, since it is very difficult to generate a high quality output without appropriate input. Secondly, students need to practice reading aloud among themselves. By such activity students will learn to combine the act of listening with reading. Students must be actively engaged in producing language of high quality if they are to improve their English proficiency levels. Similarly, by combining listening with writing, teachers can divide the work into two parts. First, students might answer teachers' questions in written English after listening to spoken language material. It is also important to remember that good listening entails recalling the essence of the material rather than the precise detail. Thirdly, teachers should combine listening activities with speaking in ways that bring out the basics of oral communication. Inevitably, listeners will lose the information resources without speaking; speaking will lose its objective without careful listening and, as a result, speaking ability will not be acquired. Listening and speaking rely on each other and regulate each other. It is important to strengthen listening through speaking and to improve speaking through listening. Students need to retell and discuss the material they have just heard in order to synthesize their understanding. In this way they learn to combine listening with speaking properly. Students who are able to do this are able to overcome their passive response to the situation and gradually they learn to feel safe when they respond. In order for this to happen, a truly interactive and penalty free listening class is required. Teacher/student and students/student exchanges should be emphasized as opportunities for a free exchange of opinions when participants can consolidate their listening approaches and skills during the process of communication. Through a variety of listening-reading, listening-writing and listening-speaking activities, students can not only strengthen their language skills but also sharpen their interests and raise their motivation to improve their learning efficiency.

IX. General Principles in Teaching Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension (LC) lessons must have definite goals, carefully stated. These goals should fit into the overall curriculum, and both teacher and students should be clearly cognizant of what they are.

1. Listening comprehension lessons should be constructed with careful step by step planning. This implies, that the listening tasks progress from simple to more complex as the student gains in language proficiency; that the student knows exactly what the task is and is given directions as to "***what to listen for***, ***where to listen***, ***when to listen***, and ***how to listen***."

2. LC lesson structure should demand active overt student participation. The "most overt student participation involves his written response to the LC material," and that immediate feedback on performance helps keep interest and motivation at high levels.

3. LC lesson should provide a communicative urgency for remembering in order to develop concentration. This urgency, which along with concentration is a key factor in remembering, should come not from the teacher, but from the lesson itself. This is done by giving the students the writing assignment before they listen to the material.

4. Listening comprehension lessons should stress conscious memory work. One of the goals of listening is to strengthen the students' immediate recall in order to increase their memory spans. "Listening is receiving, receiving requires thinking, and thinking requires memory; there is no way to separate listening, thinking, remembering."

5. Listening comprehension lessons should "teach," not "test." This means that the purpose of checking the students' answers should be viewed only as feedback, as a way of letting the students' find out how they did and how they are progressing. There should be no pass/fail attitude associated with the correction of the exercises (Paulston & Bruder, 1976).

X. Suggestions for Improvement of English Listening Comprehension Teaching among EFL Learners

A. Suggestions on Teaching

1. Listening approach

When students need to use their prior knowledge to interpret the text and to create plausible expectations of what they are about to hear, they will activate knowledge-based processing. On the other hand, they also need to decode the linguistic input rapidly and accurately and to map the input against these expectations to confirm consistencies and to refute implausible interpretations which are referred to as text-based processing. It is acknowledged that listening strategies should be integrated explicitly and treated pedagogically to improve listening ability.

2. Classroom procedure

2. 1. Preparing students to listen

Students can make use of analogy to predict and interpret language with past similar experiences. They have a range of schemata knowledge about particular people, places, situations and text-types which they can call up and use as points of comparison with what is currently being heard and experienced. Prediction is an important process in English listening. EFL learners use their perception of the key features of context and their knowledge of the world to limit the range of possible utterances they are about to hear. This ability helps students to process the message for deviations from what was expected, reducing their memory load in order to monitor the incoming message more efficiently. At the beginning stage, it is the teachers' task to guide students to gradually develop how to predict from the known information of the text. Visual support and transcript are two important sources of support to students. In the form of pictures, graphs, diagrams, maps, etc., the visual support can help students to predict incoming listening materials easily by supplying cultural information. It can provide support by reinforcing the aural message and training them to listen to some difficult specific information. To some students, what is heard is kind of "sound" or "noise" instead of meaningful information and they are very reluctant to pay attention to the overall message but understand every single word. For these reasons a transcript is valuable for it allows students to go back after the initial attempt so that they can check to make sure they can hear and understand everything, increasing their interest and confidence in further listening.

2. 2. Providing students with positive feedback

Providing positive feedback for students means ensuring an experience of success, which helps remove the mental block of the type discussed by Krashen (1982). In contrast, repeated failure can result in a panic and a real psychological barrier to effective listening. If there is a failure for understanding, diagnosing the cause of the failure is so important that remedial action can be taken. Neglecting the failure for a moment is unreasonable for it pushes students to slide into confusion and even into further failure.

3. Raising meta-cognitive awareness

Students are capable of observing their own cognitive processes in their listening and also verbalizing their theories about learning to listen in English. The listening notes by students and pre-listening and post-listening discussions are very helpful in this sense. These activities are very useful by involving students in thinking, not just about the content of listening, but more importantly, about the process of listening. By doing so, they can have chances to share with one another's thoughts and strategies so that they can improve their own listening ability. More importantly, they will be aware of what leads to their success and failure and then work out their own effective strategies in listening.

B. Suggestions on Textbooks and Teacher's Books

(1) Teacher's books should introduce some information about theories on listening training, so that teachers can base their teaching on these necessary theories. The information can cover the nature of listening, such as information processing, listening strategies, problems students may face, and how to solve them.

(2) Listening teaching should be a student-training program covering all listening strategies identified to be involved in listening, which should be systematic. Detailed information of the strategies to be practiced should be given for both teachers' benefits and students' benefits. Suggestions about how to teach each strategy should be as complete as possible, so that even new teachers can have a good lesson plan.

(3) Discourse processing should be encouraged from the very beginning, which is also the way students naturally process a listening text. So the first thing students are asked to do with a text should be to consider it as a whole. Then, exercises can gradually involve more detailed comprehension by analyzing the text to a greater depth.

(4) Textbooks and teacher's books should provide or at least suggest a framework of activities which are integrated with listening strategies: pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening. As the words pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening show, they are to be performed at three different stages in the classroom teaching of a listening text. Pre-listening activities can be subdivided into "readiness activities" and "guidance activities" (Medley, 1977). "Readiness activities" aim at activating students' prior knowledge by reading the title, new words of the text, sometimes by looking at the pictures given before the exercises in textbooks, and also by asking provocative questions or introducing some background knowledge. "Guidance activities" are intended to guide students' attention to specific aspects of language input by letting them bear certain purposes in mind in advance, that is to say, letting students know what task or tasks they are going to do with the text, or letting students themselves decide what they want to do with the text. As these exercises are designed for students to practice certain strategies, at the beginning stage, teachers should present students with the value and purpose of these strategies, and teach them how to use the strategies and monitor their own use as one part of guidance activities. In the second stage of classroom teaching, while-listening activities are designed for students to practice those strategies considered beneficial when actually receiving acoustic input, and to help to develop a good habit of actively participating in the understanding process instead of just passively receiving

what is coming into the ears. At the beginning of strategy training, one activity usually focuses on one strategy so that students can have a good practice of this certain strategy and make full use of it in listening. As time goes by, activities are then designed to integrate with these strategies. By constant controlled practice with strategies integrated with one listening activity, students will gradually have an effective automatic processing of being able to listen to texts by using various listening strategies, and will thus greatly improve their listening ability. The final stage of teaching a text involves post-listening activities, which cover two kinds of activities: "comprehension activities" (Medley, 1977) and evaluation activities. Comprehension activities focus on checking understanding of English itself and interpretation of the text. Students are asked to do some question-oriented exercises, which test students' comprehension and memory, and the questions are usually offered by textbooks. Evaluation activities aim at developing students' self-evaluation strategy in order to make them more efficient listeners. In order to let students have a chance to practice oral English in a functional situation, we can have one more kind of post-listening activities: production activities, which are intended to promote students' oral ability.

XI. Conclusion

The researchers attempted to review some of the factors that influence students' English listening comprehension skill and the strategies for improving their listening comprehension. Students do not have an innate understanding of what effective listeners do; therefore, it is the responsibility of teachers to share that knowledge with them. Perhaps the most valuable way to teach listening skills is for teachers to model them themselves, creating an environment which encourages listening. Teachers can create such an environment by positive interaction, actively listening to all students and responding in an open and appropriate manner. Teachers should avoid responding either condescendingly or sarcastically. As much as possible, they should minimize distractions and interruptions. An emphasis on listening comprehension as well as the application of listening strategies will help students to decode English input and to achieve greater success in English learning. We must shift our listening classroom from a teacher-centered classroom to a student-based one. To improve students' listening ability, teachers should base their teaching on theoretical principles. And because of the limitations in resources and teacher training, both textbooks and teacher's books should take the responsibility of guiding teachers throughout their teaching, which should inform teachers of relevant theories, and offer suggestions on what activities should be carried out in listening classes and how to train students in various listening strategies. English listening competence is a complex skill that needs conscious development. It can be best developed with practice when students reflect on the process of listening without the threat of evaluation. Guiding students through the process of listening provides them with the knowledge from which they can successfully complete a listening task; it also motivates them and puts them in control of their learning. By focusing on the process of listening, students can acquire a useful tool to raise their English comprehensive competence. Listening comprehension levels affect the capacity for improvement in other language skills such as speaking, reading, writing and translating. The study suggests sound reasons for emphasizing listening comprehension, which highlights the importance of spending much more time doing it. It is important for the teacher to provide numerous opportunities for students to practice listening skills and to become actively engaged in the listening process.

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Abbas Pourhosein Gilakjani is a Ph.D. student of SLL at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia. He is also a faculty member of English Translation Department at Islamic Azad University of Lahijan, Iran. He has taught English courses for over 11 years at 3 open universities in Guilan, Iran.

Mohammad Reza Ahmadi is a Ph.D. student of SLL at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia. He received his M.A. in English Language Teaching (ELT) from Islamic Azad University of Garmsar, Iran. His main interests include listening skill and motivation.