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The Problems Young Learners Encounter During Listening Skills

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Abstract

Listening is still a handicap for EFL learners though it seems a skill not hard to handle. There are many various causes that many students in Turkey complain during the comprehending stage of the listening texts. This study aims to examine the frequency of the problems seen in three listening categories of the problems based on teachers, the problems based on students' own strategies and the problems based on learner psychology. After these categories are separately examined, the outcomes of a study conducted in a Turkish public primary school are shared. The results of this study and the problems to overcome the problems in listening in EFL classes are also discussed

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1. Introduction

1.1. Listening In Efl

Listening is one of the most fundamental pieces of learning and teaching English. In order to be successful in listening, learners should come up with some strategies such as taking notes during listening, making practice, or having methods for feeling themselves relaxed during listening. According to Kurita (2012) developing learners' own strategies for listening enables them to be successful in listening. Vandergrift (2004) explains that learners should learn to listen so that they can better listen to learn. Yagang (1993) reports that listening comes through four variables; the message, the speaker, the listener and the physical setting. That's why when there is a problem in

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listening, it may seem hard to find out as there are a lot of factors which can easily affect the performance of listening. In this paper, the problems in listening will be examined according to sections as the results of the study. Because it's vital to understand the source of problems to eradicate them.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Problems In Listening

Listening is an inseparable skill of learning second language without doubt. Though it's very significant, the problems about listening have newly started to be examined. In order to have success in listening, problems about listening in second language should be firstly identified.

When we look at the common problems in listening in ELT identified by researchers in this area, we can see them categorized by groups. It is vital to identify these problems confronted by students and to find solutions to these problems. According to Goh (1999) the most common problems faced by students in listening in the order of frequency are quickly forgetting what is heard, not recognising the words they know, understanding the message but not the intended message, neglecting next part while thinking about meaning, unabling to form a mental representation from words heard. Apart from that, Goh also emphasizes the problem of concentrating and missing the beginning of text. Goh also suggests doing more investigations about learners' attitudes to their listening problems and how they deal with these problems.

Underwood (1989) organizes the major problems as follows:

- lack of control over the speed at which speakers speak,
- not being able to get things repeated,
- the listener's limited vocabulary,
- failure to recognize the "signals,"
- problems of interpretation,
- inability to concentrate,
- established learning habits.

Problems in listening emphasized by Field (2003) are those: Learners know the word, but get the wrong sense. Phonetic variation of a word mislead them. (reduction, assimilation, elision, cliticization, resyllabification). Learners know the word in written form but not the oral version. Learners have difficulty to catch the word from a connected speech such as a dialogue.

Yiching (2005), however, thinks that some barriers cause problems in listening such as belief barriers, material barriers, habitual barriers, information processing barriers, English proficiency barriers, strategic barriers and affective barriers. He introduces forgetting to activate strategies, regarding strategies as extra burdens to information processing, being challenged by the complex nature of the strategy, having problems conducting the proper strategies and even being unable to comprehend the text after applying strategies.

Yousif (2006) mentions more about psychological barriers in listening, the importance of speech rate in listening and giving breaks during a long listening activity. According to him, lecturers should be more aware of their students' listening problems and adjust activities to their students.

Kurita (2012) also gives different suggestions for advanced and low level learners in listening after examining researches done recently. She suggests dictation especially for young learners while she sees reducing anxiety useful in listening for both learners to high extent.

3. Method

The study was conducted in Turkan Soray Primary School in İstanbul in Turkey among 4th grade students in the ages of ten and eleven in order to throw a light into problems of young learners with listening and offer solutions to the problems in listening. This study was applied in three different classes in order to compare the results and improve the reliability of the study.

One of the groups (4-A) is composed of nineteen students, seven of which were girls and the rest of them were boys. The other group (4-B) has got nineteen students again including ten girls and nine boys. The group 4-C also has ten girls and eight boys. But, in the study, the effect of gender didn't show any variability or an important addition to results. A questionnaire with four options was used in the study as it was more suitable for young learners to be objective and give precise answers to the questions. The students were asked to circle the problem or problems which they faced during the listening activity.

A children song with post-listening activity was chosen taking into account children's levels, ages and the subject they newly learned. There were eight verbs which children learned a week ago in the song. Post listening activity was a "fill in the blanks sheet" with some free time activity verbs from the song. However, it included two phases. In the first phase, the students were asked to write down these eight verbs after listening each one from the song. In the second phase, a ready copy with verbs in wrong order was distributed to students. They were asked to reorder them according to the order in the song.

The aim of why post listening activity was composed of two phases was to allow the review of the answers and increase the reliability of the activity. This activity is also counted as a kind of retrospection allowing learners to reach reflections about themselves just after the task, which increases reliability.

After post listening activity, a questionnaire was applied to the students giving four options they could choose in order to understand the problems they faced during listening their song. They could have chosen more than one problem if they had faced more than one. The problems given in the questionnaire were:

- a) I cannot understand clearly as the speaker in the song are speaking so fast
- b) I know the words, but I cannot remember immediately when I hear.
- c) I know the words, but I feel so anxious and under pressure to fill in the activity.
- d) The speakers utter the words in a different way than we have learned.

If the problems are categorized in general headings, then we can say:

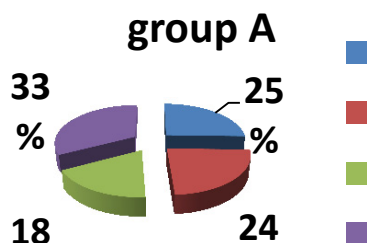
The first problem might be considered to belong to problems based on speakers at first, but as an easy and suitable listening activity is chosen matching with the levels of students, it's better to categorize it within the problems based on learner. (As it depends on learners to have more practice in target language) The second problem is a problem again based on learners' own strategies, the third one is categorized in psychological problems based on learners. The fourth one is categorized within phonological problems in listening. (The phonetics that teacher is expected to teach)

4. Results

According to the results, it seems that there is no effect of gender. The results are demonstrated in the pie charts below. In the charts below, the percents of each problem stated by students in the questionnaire of each class are given. Then, the percents of total problems stated by all the students are represented.

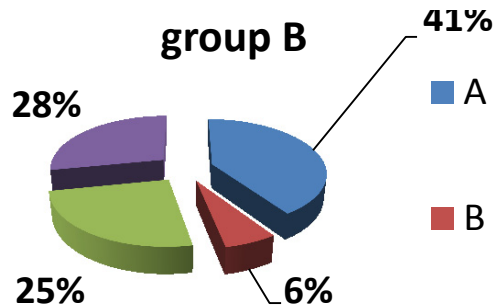
In group A's diagram, (figure 1) it's seen that question D (The speakers utter the words in a different way than we learn.) is the most circled question. Question D is categorized as the problems based on phonology and the teachers indirectly because teachers are expected to teach students correct phonetics and sounds in order to minimize problems in perceiving the sounds uttered by native speakers. But when compared to other questions, it can be understood that there is not huge differences between D and other problems. Then, question A comes with the statement of "I cannot understand clearly as the speakers in the song are speaking so fast". This statement refers to problems based on lacking skills of practice in listening. It can be categorized as the problems based on learners.

Figure 1. Percentages of questionnaire in group A



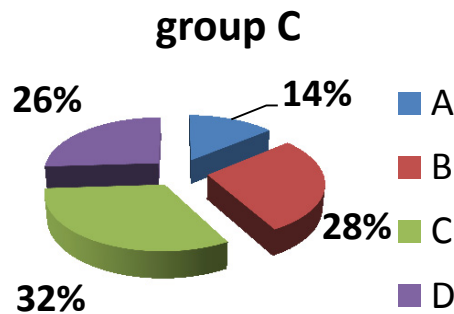
In group B's diagram, (Figure 2) we see that question A is the first question compared to the others, which is an outcome various than the other groups. It seems that there are considerable differences between A and other questions. It enlightens us that students seriously need practice and input in listening. As they do not have proficiency in listening skill, they have problems in catching up with the native speakers in listening activity. Secondly question C and D are the problems faced by students.

Figure 2. Percentages of questionnaire in group B



As it's seen from the chart above that students of group C states question C the most. (Figure 3) That data is quite various from other data collected in other groups. It shows that these students have problems based on some psychological reasons in listening skill. Their anxiety level is the highest one of all groups. It's seen that they do not feel relaxed during listening activities. Secondly stated question is B "I know the words, but I can not remember immediately when I hear." It refers to the problems based on learners' again. However, it is a problem of lacking practice in listening apart from psychological reasons.

Figure 3. Percentages of questionnaire in group C



4.1. Revising Total Outcomes

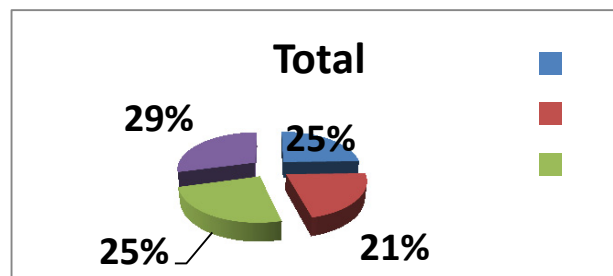


Figure 4. Total percentages of all questions chosen by all groups

Total percentages of questions chosen by total students are given in the diagram above.(Figure 4) Although there are not giant differences between all questions in total, we can realize that the most stated one is question D with the percentage of 29% . Option C and A follow it as second question sharing the same percentage of 25%,which is very surprising. The least selected question is B with the percentage of 21%.

The question stated the most shows us that there are problems in teaching the correct sounds in listening. It is included in the category of problems based on phonology. Despite the fact that this problem seems to be related with only teachers, it depends more on teaching phonetics in correct and efficient ways. “Phonetics” is unfortunately an element mostly neglected by teachers in teaching listening in Turkish public schools. That option presents us that teachers do not utilize much from phonetics alphabet in listening activities. If they were doing so, students would not have the problems in distinguishing the sounds and matching the pronunciations of the words with the words they know.

Second questions sharing the same percentage are C and A. A is a problem directly related with learners’ deficiencies of practice in listening. Learners should be exposed to target language as much as possible through songs, listening texts and films. If they do not have enough practice chance in developing their listening skills, they will surely have problems in catching up utterances made by native speakers.

Question C as mentioned in the revision of each group refers to problems based on psychological basics. These psychological problems are directly related with learners. The anxiety they feel during the listening activity, the idea of being perfect and the fear of being unsuccessful build up barriers in their minds blocking their ability to catch the words and understand what they hear.

The least stated question B can be counted in the same problems category with the questions D and A. It is the result of both problems based on learners and the teachers. It demonstrates us that learners still need practice in listening in terms of both practice with phonetics and having necessary input in listening through listening activities.

5. Conclusion

As seen from the results obtained from the study done in Turkish primary school among fourth grades in İstanbul, it’s been understood that the biggest deficiency in listening as a problem is learning and teaching phonetics. Sounds in phonetic alphabet should be taught with enjoyable listening activities at the beginning of learning English. Sounds which are similar to each other or similar pairs should be examined with special attention. Apart from that, learners should be well equipped with authentic language as much as possible. Settings in which learners can get practical input should be supplied to the learners such as international blogs where they could meet their peers, digital games, theatre games in English, drama activities and speaking lessons. Especially public schools which are lack of conditions in terms of technology should be supported more.

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