

LISTENING COMPREHENSION SKILL: THE FORGOTTEN SKILL IN THE SAUDI CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

Listening plays a very significant role in language acquisition and language learning. The more input kids and students get, the faster and easier it will be for them to acquire and learn any new language. Unfortunately, over a long period listening didn't receive enough attention by curricula designers, teachers, and students which affected the output and labelled listening as a difficult skill to teach and understand. This study intends to draw the attention to listening through answering three important questions related to the importance of listening, the challenges that face teaching it and suggestions for enhancing this important skill. To this end, the researchers chose all secondary and intermediate students in Jeddah as a population and fifty male and female students as a sample. A survey of twenty- two items was used as a data collection tool. The findings of the study showed clear enthusiasm for listening comprehension and an urgent need to overcome the challenges and reconsider suggestions to improve this skill including training teachers, facilitating it, and increasing the weight in the schedules. The study recommends giving more attention to listening and including it in any English language test.

Keywords: KSA, KAU, intermediate students, listening comprehension, oral skills

INTRODUCTION

While ample attention has been directed towards the development of reading, writing, and speaking skills in Saudi EFL classrooms, the skill of listening has often been relegated to the periphery. This oversight is concerning, as listening plays a pivotal role in effective communication and language proficiency. It is also considered an integral component of language learning, serving as the foundation upon which all other language competencies are built. It is through listening that learners are exposed to authentic language input, enabling them to comprehend and interpret spoken English accurately. Furthermore, listening skills are indispensable for effective communication in

various academic, professional, and social contexts. In today's interconnected world, where English serves as a global lingua franca, the ability to understand and respond to spoken English is crucial for successful communication. In Saudi Arabia, a country known for its dedication to education and an increasing demand for English proficiency, it is imperative to recognize the significance of developing listening skills among EFL learners. However, the traditional approach to English language instruction in Saudi EFL classrooms has focused primarily on grammar and vocabulary acquisition, leaving listening instruction neglected. This imbalance in instructional priorities has resulted in a deficiency in the listening abilities of Saudi EFL learners. Listening plays a vital role in language acquisition as it serves as the foundation for all other language skills (Goh, 2008). According to (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012), listening comprehension is crucial for overall language proficiency, as it facilitates vocabulary development, grammar acquisition, and pronunciation improvement. Moreover, listening skills are essential for effective communication in various academic, professional, and social contexts (Brown, 2008). As English continues to be a global lingua franca, the ability to understand and respond to spoken English is crucial for successful communication (Rost, 2014). Traditionally, Saudi EFL classrooms have focused primarily on grammar and vocabulary instruction, with limited attention given to listening skills (Al-Hmoud, 2009). This imbalance in instructional priorities has resulted in a deficiency in the listening abilities of Saudi EFL learners.

Several factors contribute to the neglect of listening skills in Saudi EFL classrooms. First and foremost, teachers often face challenges in incorporating listening activities into their lessons due to a lack of appropriate resources and training. The scarcity of listening materials specifically designed for EFL learners in Saudi Arabia poses a significant hurdle. Additionally, the lack of professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their knowledge and pedagogical skills in teaching listening further exacerbates the problem. Moreover, the traditional teacher-centered instructional approach prevalent in Saudi EFL classrooms tends to prioritize teacher talk, leaving little room for students to actively engage in listening activities. The focus on grammar and vocabulary drills often sidelines the development of listening abilities, resulting in a passive learning environment. This lack of emphasis on listening not only hampers the overall language development of EFL learners but also diminishes their confidence and proficiency in understanding spoken English.

To address this pressing issue, it is crucial to revisit and revitalize the role of listening in Saudi EFL classrooms. By employing effective listening strategies and techniques, educators can create a more learner-centered classroom environment that promotes active engagement and interaction. Incorporating

authentic listening materials, such as podcasts, videos, and audio recordings, can expose learners to real-life language use, enhancing their listening comprehension skills. Furthermore, it is essential for Saudi EFL teachers to receive professional development opportunities that focus specifically on teaching listening skills. Training programs and workshops can equip teachers with the necessary knowledge and pedagogical techniques to effectively integrate listening activities into their lessons. Additionally, collaboration among teachers, both within and across institutions, can foster the exchange of best practices and innovative ideas for teaching listening.

It goes without saying that the neglect of listening skills in Saudi EFL classrooms hampers the comprehensive language development of learners. Henceforth, it is crucial to recognize the importance of listening as a fundamental skill in language learning. By revitalizing listening instruction, Saudi Arabia can equip its EFL learners with the necessary skills to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and English-dominated world. This article aims to shed light on the current state of listening instruction in Saudi EFL classrooms, identify the challenges hindering its implementation, and propose practical strategies to revive this forgotten skill.

METHODS

The population of the study is all intermediate and secondary schools' males and females' students in Jeddah KSA, aged between thirteen and eighteen years old. They are from public schools as teachers in public schools are mainly fresh graduates and didn't receive enough training and follow up. The researchers chose this age as they are aware of the importance of the listening comprehension skill and can answer the survey questions. The sample of the study is fifty male and female students chosen randomly from the population.

The data collection tool of the study is a survey consisting of twenty-two items that fall under three categories. The first category is about the importance of listening as an academic and life demand. The second category is about the barriers and challenges against facilitating the listening comprehension skill in the Saudi classroom. Items related to possible solutions and suggestions that may bring listening comprehension back to the scene are shown in the third category. The survey is validated and piloted on a group of students outside the sample and sent to google forms. The pie charts resulted after answering the survey were grouped into bar-charts for later analysis in the findings and discussion.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

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Moreover here the three bar charts reflecting the respondents' answers with regard to the three main questions of the study related to the importance of listening comprehension, the barriers that face incorporating listening comprehension in the classroom, and suggestions for improving this skill. Each bar chart is labelled and explained thoroughly in a paragraph below.

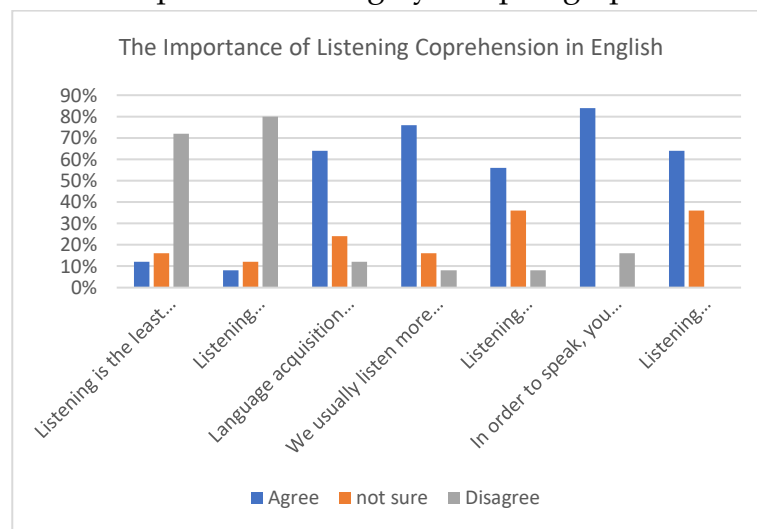


Figure 1. The respondents' answers with regard to the first question "What is the importance of listening comprehension"

Figure 1 above illustrates the results related to the importance of listening comprehension. It is clear in the table that the majority of respondents disagreed that it is not important (70%, 80%). It is also apparent in the chart that there is unanimous agreement that listening comprehension is important among other skills and in daily life. The other items also show students enthusiasm that listening is an unavoidable step for language acquisition (62%) and before speaking (73% and 82%). It is also an important component in the main international exams IELTS and TOFEL (58%). Those who disagree completely disappear in the last item about the importance of listening comprehension in job interviews.

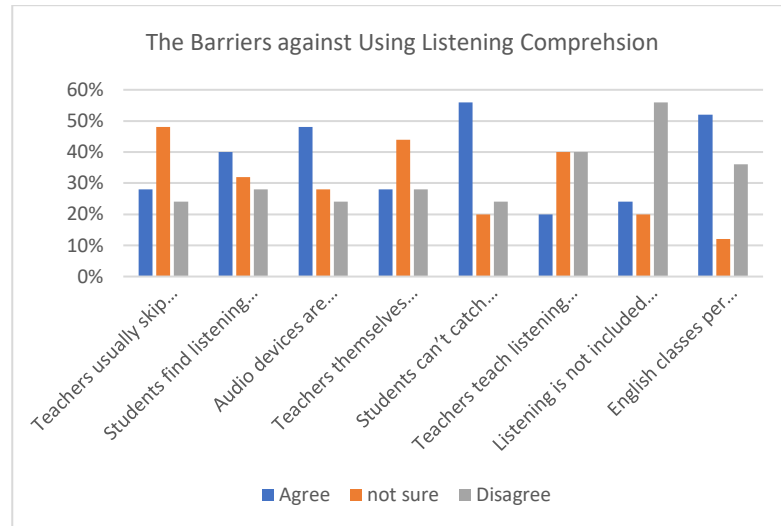


Figure 2. The respondents' answers with regard to the second question "What are the barriers against incorporating listening comprehension in the English language classroom?"

Figure 2 above shows the results of the survey in terms of the barriers that face teaching listening comprehension in the English language classroom. It is very clear in most of the items that uncertainty about the answers dominates the majority of the items (49%, 32%, 28%, 44% and 40%) respectively. Items three and five shows unanimous agreement among respondents with regard to the absence of audio devices and the difficulty of native English (48% and 58%). A goof percentage of respondents disagree that listening is not included in exams or teachers are not willing to teach listening.

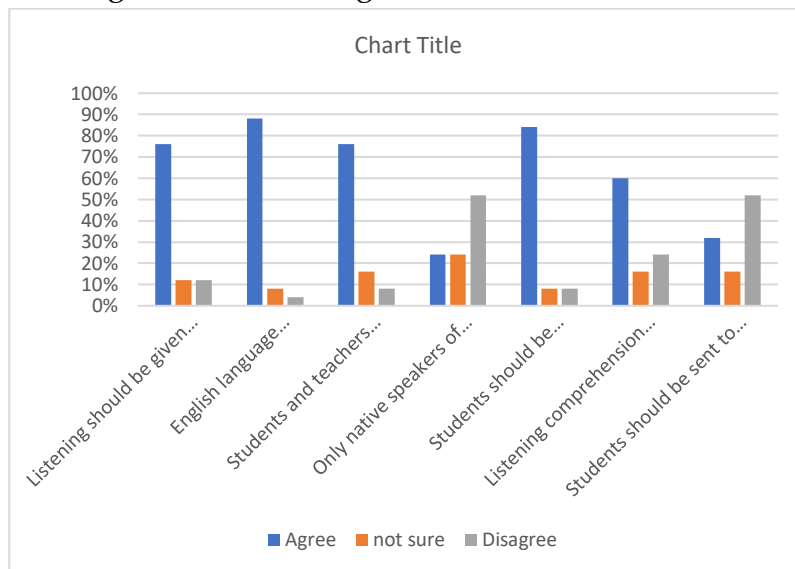


Figure 3. The respondents' answers with regard to suggestions for improving listening comprehension in the Saudi classrooms

Figure 3 illustrates the respondents answers to the survey with regard to suggestions for improving English listening comprehension in the Sudi classrooms. Except for items four and seven, the respondents agreed unanimously that listening comprehension should be given more attention in terms of weight, supervision, awareness, and practice outside the classroom.

Respondents showed good percentage of disagreement with regard to only native speakers should teach English language listening at schools and students should go to English speaking countries.

This study used a survey as a data collection tool. The survey was answered by a sample of fifty male and female intermediate and secondary students chosen randomly from a population of all intermediate and secondary students in public schools in Jeddah/KSA. The items of the survey were classified under three subtitles: The importance of reading comprehension, the barriers that face incorporating listening comprehension in the English language classroom and suggestions for improving listening comprehension.

The respondents' answers to the three categories of the questionnaire reflect awareness and maturity towards the importance of listening comprehension. Few years ago, listening comprehension was thought to be a luxury and decoration in the English language syllabus. Teachers used to skip listening thinking that reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar are more important (Oxford & Shearin, 2016); (Brown, 2008). Currently with the emergence of the communicative approach and language acquisition theories and learner centered approach, listening starts to gain more importance in the teaching learning process. Respondents to the first category of the survey showed unanimous disagreement for the first two items that listening comprehension is the least important among other skills or in daily life. Items three to seven about the importance of listening in language acquisition, in IELTS and TOEFL; in addition to job interview and the importance of listening for speaking witnessed good percentages of agreement among respondents. This is justified by the students' awareness of the need to communicate with other nationalities as Jeddah is a cosmopolitan city as well the new challenges in finding a job and work requirements.

The findings related to the second question with regard to the barriers against including listening in the English language classroom showed that respondents were confused in nearly all items. This shows that students don't know that these barriers are justified or not or who is responsible of these obstacles. They also agreed that lack of experience, training, and logistics; in addition to not taking listening comprehension seriously are possible reasons behind ignoring listening. Teachers go to the field directly after graduation and don't take training seriously although the Ministry of Education dedicates a big budget for training and improvement.

Suggestions for a better listening comprehension at schools received contradicting results from respondents. Giving more weight to English language, more attention by supervisors, increasing awareness about the importance of the listening comprehension skill, practice outside the classroom and incorporating

listening in English language tests gain unanimous agreement by respondents ranging from 60% to 88%. This means that students feel the responsibility toward listening comprehension and welcome any suggestion to improve this skill which is encouraging as students are a very important component in the teaching/learning process. What shows students' maturity and credibility is their little enthusiasm to allowing only native speakers to teach English listening comprehension at public schools and sending students to English speaking countries to improve their listening comprehension.

Surprisingly, everybody feels the importance of Listening comprehension and how urgent it is to be competent as it is now one of the preconditions for any job, nevertheless, the key performance indicators for the school stage are still below expectations. This calls for transforming this enthusiasm into action through motivating students and teachers to stop ignoring listening comprehension and to consider it as important as other skills. Supervisors play an important role in this context through their follow up and intensive care. Their visits to schools should be welcomed and looked at as instant help and a seat belt to save listening from extinction.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated three major questions related to listening comprehension with regard to the importance of listening, the barriers against incorporation listening comprehension in the English language classroom and suggestions for better listening comprehension. The respondents' answers to the survey showed clear understanding of the three questions and enough enthusiasm that listening should be given more attention from all the people concerned (students, teachers, parents, and the Ministry of Education). It is worth mentioning that the Ministry of Education is doing its best with regard to logistics and audio devices, but the output is still below expectations. Accordingly, someone or some area should sound the alarm to highlight listening comprehension and motivate teachers, students, and supervisors to facilitate teaching listening at public schools. The study is limited by the small sample size and the data collection tools; observation might be the right tool for this study to know exactly what is going on in the classrooms and how teachers and students deal with the listening tasks.

More research should be conducted about teaching oral skills (listening and speaking) as they are the most ignored in public schools. Supervisors should reconsider their school visits agenda to include monitoring oral skills. Knowing that students are test oriented, teachers should include listening comprehension in any English language test. Furthermore, curricula designers should provide

listening comprehension context that is appealing and motivating for students and teachers as well.

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