

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTERMEDIATE EFL LEARNERS' LISTENING PERFORMANCE AND LISTENING ANXIETY

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ABSTRACT

Listening has changed its position from a passive activity as which deserved less class time to an active process through which language acquisition takes place and it has obtained much attention both in language pedagogy and in research (Vandergrift, 2004). The present study investigated the relationships between listening anxiety and listening performance. The population was 56, male and female, Iranian MA EFL learners studying TEFL in Islamic Azad University of Zanjan. In order to make the participants homogeneous, Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was run and 30 learners were selected as the final participants. After homogenizing the students as intermediate ones, a valid questionnaire of Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) by Kim (2000) was administered to the 30 intermediate students. Having administered the questionnaire, the researcher asked the subjects to sit for an IELTS listening test taken from Cambridge ILTS. The data collected from the questionnaire and as well as the scores of their listening performances were analyzed through SPSS (21.00). Results indicated that there was a significant and negative relationship between listening anxiety and learners' listening performances. The results of this study may provide insights into helping EFL learners to reduce their listening test anxiety and also increase the level of their confidence.

Key words: *Listening anxiety, listening performance*

INTRODUCTION

Human beings live with different important characteristics. One of the main characteristics of human beings is the apprehension/ anxiety they feel while embarking on listening in exams. Lots of the educational investigators are interested in variables that affect the success/ failure of the learners in their task performance. Learner's performance in tests or examinations is one of the considerable variables that evaluate a student's success or failure in academic or school activities. The aim of every educational program is to make certain that the learners achieve an acceptable and successful outcome. One of the main concerns for an education scientist is to make a good and non nerve-racking environment to make students achieve success. Test anxiety is one of the important obstacles to reaching this goal. Feelings of anxiety toward test have existed for many years and it is a vital variable which influences listening performance

of learners. Different learners have different levels of anxiety which cause a negative effect on their listening performances.

LISTENING ANXIETY

Foreign language anxiety has been defined as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, p. 128). It's believed to be a crucial factor causing failure in second language acquisition (Horwitz, 2001; Dornyei, 2005). Kondo and Ling (2004) also emphasize the potential problems that may arise for language learners due to learning anxiety. According to Horwitz (2001) there is a positive correlation between anxiety and students' poor performance in language learning. Those students feeling anxious learning a foreign language would not enjoy the experience which in turn would lead to poor performance (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). Most studies on foreign language anxiety carried out in the past concentrated on oral anxiety; however, the focus has been shifted toward other skills such as listening which is an inevitable part of foreign language learning (Kimura, 2008). Bekleyen (2009) defines foreign language listening anxiety (FLLA) as a kind of anxiety aroused in situations which need listening. Scarcella and Oxford (1992) have noted that learners experience listening anxiety in situations that they perceive as too much difficult or unfamiliar. Young (1992) states that listening comprehension would result in too much anxiety if students cannot comprehend the discourse. Some researchers believe that insufficient focus on listening, poor teaching methodologies, unsuitable and less-effective listening strategies besides learners' lack of vocabulary are important factors that may result in students' poor performance on L2 listening (Arnold, 2000; Vogely, 1998; Young, 1992).

LISTENING COMPREHENSION

Listening is the most fundamental skill of language learning that almost all children learn to listen as part of their first language (L1) acquisition process. Similar to the essential role listening plays in L1 acquisition, it is certainly not less important in second language (L2) learning (Rost, 2011). Brown and Yule (1983) described listening comprehension as a process of understanding, repeating what was heard, figuring out the meaning of an exact word, and then knowing what an expression refers to. Rost (2011) explained listening comprehension as a process of attempting to understand what spoken language refers to in one's experience or in the real world.

There have been several studies that focused on listening comprehension's problem in the Iranian context (Bozorgian, 2012; Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Hayati, 2010; Sadighi & Zare, 2006). For example, Sadighi and Zare (2006) explored the effect of background knowledge on listening comprehension and they realized that background knowledge and topic familiarity would improve students' performance in listening comprehension. Similarly, Hayati (2009)

investigated the effect of cultural knowledge on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension, and the findings of the study indicated that familiarity with culturally-oriented language material promotes the Iranian EFL learners' listening proficiency. Moreover, Gilakjani and Ahmadi, (2011) investigated the problems of Iranian EFL learners in listening to a text. Taking into consideration the significance assigned to the skill of listening, the existence of varied problems hindering the comprehension of listening texts by many foreign learners and students, and the role of listening apprehension in aggravating the process of listening, the current research study attempted to investigate the relationship between the psychological factor of listening apprehension with the listening comprehension of intermediate Iranian EFL students.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between Iranian English language learners' level of listening anxiety and their listening comprehension performance while sitting for the exam.

The findings of this study could help the EFL learners to find out how they could achieve the best performance in their listening comprehension tests without stress. The results of this study might also provide insights into helping EFL learners to reduce their listening test anxiety and also increase the level of their confidence.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND NULL HYPOTHESIS

Is there any significant relationship between intermediate EFL learners' listening anxiety and their listening comprehension?

H0. There is no significant relationship between intermediate EFL learners' listening anxiety and their listening comprehension.

The participants were 56 EFL students (male and female) at Islamic Azad University of Zanzan and were selected on the basis of convenience sampling. Having been homogenized via a proficiency test (Cambridge Placement Test, 2010), 30 learners with Intermediate level were selected. Their age ranged between 25 and 45. The study was an ex-post – facto design, since there were two independent variables (listening anxiety and metacognitive awareness strategies) and one dependent one (listening comprehension performance). To obtain reasonable answers to the research questions mentioned earlier, the following steps will be taken:

First, a Cambridge placement test was distributed among EFL students of Islamic Azad University of Zanzan to determine the homogeneity of the participants and select the intermediate language learners. Total score is 120. After conducting and analyzing the placement test, 30 students receiving the scores from 61 to 80 were selected.

Then the FLLAS questionnaire by Kim (2005) which includes 33 items was distributed among them. To respond to the statements, the learners were asked to indicate whether they strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), no idea (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5) to the mentioned statements.

Afterwards, the participants were requested to sit for an IELTS mock listening exam. The listening comprehension test was selected from Cambridge IELTS book and included 40 questions. Scoring was based on IELTS rubric for listening comprehension test.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A Pearson correlation was run to probe any significant relationship between listening anxiety and listening performance. Based on the results displayed in the Table 1 below ($r(28) = -0.78$, $P < .01$ representing a large effect size) it can be concluded that there was a significantly negative and large correlation between listening anxiety and listening performance. Thus the null-hypothesis **was rejected**.

Table 1

Pearson Correlation; listening anxiety with listening performance

| | | Listening Performance |
|---------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| | Pearson Correlation | -0.78 ^{**} |
| Anxiety | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 |
| | N | 30 |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Results illustrated that there was a negative and large relationship between listening anxiety and listening performance. In other words, the more anxious learners did more poorly in their listening performances. In accordance with the findings of Mohammadi Golchi (2012), this research proved that listening anxiety inversely affects listening strategy use and consequently listening comprehension. This study was congruent with the assertion of Scarcella and Oxford (1992) that there is a positive relationship between anxiety and poor performances of students. In accordance with Tavakoli and Amiryousefi (2011), this study confirmed that there is a significantly inverse relationship between test anxiety and test performance. High level of anxiety during test, conspicuously leads to poor performances of students. This study also proved Cassady's (2004) and Cassady and Johnson's (2001) beliefs that the impact of cognitive test anxiety on the learners performances is significant and there is also a strong negative correlation between performance and the scores of cognitive anxiety scales. In line with Birjandi and Alemi (2010), it was proved that there is an inverse correlation between test performance and test anxiety.

However, this study disproved In'nami's (2006) claim that there isn't any relationship between aspects of test anxiety and test performance. Moreover, the outcomes of this study were

not in line with the result of a study by Shomoossi and Kassaian (2009) that showed no significant difference between test anxiety before and after the listening comprehension test.

CONCLUSION

The study came up with the conclusion that listening anxiety aversely correlated with listening performance. In other words, a negative relationship was found between the two variables. The lowly anxious learners outperformed the highly anxious ones. This could be advocated by Oller & Perkin (1978) asserting that affective factors influence how effectively one learns. This is also backed up by Dornyei and Skehan (2003) who emphasized that affective factors play pivotal role in the quality of learning.

In terms of the effect anxiety has on learning, the conclusion of the study is in the same direction with the assumptions of the cognitivism as they suggest anxiety involves unconscious processes that reflect the structure of an individual's inner side that controls the language learning (Michie, Glachan & Bray, 2001). The conclusion in this regard also adheres to the humanistic notion of worthiness, which reads feeling unworthy makes the learners slow down in how well they learn a language (Brown, 1994).

The findings of the present study have demonstrated that more concentration should be placed on the psychological factor of anxiety in order for it to be eradicated and also to enhance students' listening performance. Based on the outcomes of the study, it could be concluded that students suffering from a very high level of anxiety did poorly in their performances as compared with those lacking such high degree of anxiety. The findings of this study depict that the students could be more thriving in their performances if they lower their anxiety. This strategy can be helpful for all Iranian English students who wish to be competent of prefect performances especially in their listening comprehension performances.

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