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PROSPECTIVE EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION PROBLEMS IN TURKEY

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Abstract

Listening skill has been called as the 'Cinderella Skill' which is overlooked by its elder sister speaking in language learning. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to reemphasize the importance of listening skill in ELT context and to determine prospective English teachers' perceptions of listening comprehension problems. The study was conducted at ELT Department at a state-run University in Turkey and subjects were 124 prospective English teachers. The questionnaire on the 'Beliefs on English Language Listening Comprehension Problems' was used to collect data to assess prospective teachers' beliefs about the English language listening comprehension problems they could encounter in unidirectional listening. The data was analyzed in SPSS program. The study revealed that participants used top-down processes effectively during the listening process, but they were not so good at using bottom-up processes. In addition, no significant difference was found in terms of genders' perceptions of listening problems.

Keywords: Listening Problems, Prospective English Teachers' Listening Skill, Listening Perceptions, Turkish EFL Teachers' Listening Problems.

Introduction

The act of listening plays a vital part in our daily life. Celce-Murcia (1995) states that listening is the most frequently used skill in our daily life compared to the other three skills. 45% corresponds to listening, 30% to speaking, 16% to reading and 9% to writing (Hedge, 2005). Morley (1991:82) maintains that "we can expect to listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read, and five times more than we write in our daily life". However, Nunan (1997) comments that listening is the "Cinderella Skill" which is overlooked by its "elder sister speaking" in second language learning. Brown (1987) asserts that the number of published books on listening comprehension and its classroom practices in many countries demonstrate that listening is regarded as the least important skill in language teaching.

Until 1950s and 1960s, language learning and teaching were limited to grammar, reading and literacy. Later on, primarily The Direct Method and then The Audio Lingual Method highlighted the oral skills, listening and speaking. From 1970s on, instructional programs expanded their focus on pragmatic skills to include listening and other language skills (Osada, 2004). Researches into listening over the past three decades have emerged that listeners need to integrate phonetic, phological, prosodic, lexical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic information to comprehend spoken messages (Celce-Murcia, 1995).

Review of Literature

Listening Process

Helgesen (2003: 24) states that "listening is an active, purposeful process of making sense of what we hear." There is traditional name for listening as a passive skill. But listening

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has been called as an active skill that involves many processes. Byrnes (1984) characterizes listening comprehension as “a highly complex problem-solving activity that can be broken down into a set of distinct sub-skills.” A listener benefits from guessing, anticipating, checking, interpreting, interacting and organizing and accommodating their prior knowledge of meaning and form (McDonough and Shaw, 1993).

Rost (1990) maintains that “listeners co-author the discourse and they construct it by their responses.” Rost also (1994) points out that listening plays a key role in the language classroom because it can be considered a source of input for the learner. If a learner does not comprehend the input correctly, any learning cannot be realized. Therefore, listening is vital for speaking.

Some researchers have proved that comprehensible input and output are equally important for language acquisition (Swain, 1995). According to Rost (2001), the main difference between more successful and less successful language learners is their ability to use listening skill as a means of acquisition.

Language learners may encounter some difficulties in understanding the incoming speech. Hedge (2005) divides these difficulties into two as internal and external problems. Internal problems can be listed as the lack of motivation, high level of anxiety, lack of knowledge of the topic under discussion and unknown vocabulary of what is being heard. On the other hand, external problems are related to listeners’ failure in understanding as a result of the speakers’ characteristics and environmental noises. According to Luchini (2009), there are also other external factors which can be a real obstacle for aural comprehension in terms of phonology like the diversity of speakers’ accents, the substitution, omission, and addition of certain sounds and differences. In addition, the length of listening taped-texts, the low quality of the recordings, the distance between the students and the tape recorder and the lack of knowledge of some listening strategies also hinder comprehension.

Luchini (2009: 322) also makes some suggestions to overcome comprehension problems. These are “guessing from context, avoiding listening to word by word, using knowledge of the language to understand key words and activating general knowledge”.

Listening Strategies

Buck (2001:104) defines strategies as “the thought of ways in which a learner approaches and manages a task.” He classifies strategies as cognitive and metacognitive. For him, “Cognitive Strategies are the mental activities related to the comprehending and storing input in working memory or long-term memory for later retrieval” (Richards 2008:11). This group consists of three processes as Comprehension Process, Storing and Memory Processes, Using and Retrieval Processes. On the other hand, “Metacognitive Strategies are conscious or unconscious mental activities that perform an executive function in the management of cognitive strategies” (Richards 2008:11). These are assessing the situation, monitoring, self-evaluating and self-testing.

Approaches to Listening

Researchers mainly have paid attention to top-down and bottom-up processing in listening comprehension. Kurita (2012:32) defines top-down and bottom up processing as “the use of background knowledge in understanding the meaning of a message. Bottom-up processing, on the other hand, refers to using the incoming input as the basis for understanding the message.” According to (Vandergrift, 2007), top-down and bottom-up processes usually interact to make spoken input sensible.

Anderson (2009) proposes a different model of language comprehension and divides the language comprehension process into three stages as perception, parsing and utilization. “The first stage is encoding the spoken message; the second stage is the parsing stage, in which the words in the message are transformed into a mental representation of the combined meaning of the words. The third stage is the utilization stage, in which listeners use the mental representation of the sentence’s meaning. If the sentence is a question, they may answer; if it is an instruction, they may obey.” (Anderson 2009 cited in Kurita 2012: 33).

Methodology

The purpose of the study is to determine prospective English teachers' perceptions on their English language listening comprehension problems. Since listening skill is a vital part of daily life communication, determining the obstacles in listening comprehension can help prospective English teachers to reach a better comprehension in the target language. In this study, following research questions will be answered:

1. What are the most common listening problems which prospective English teachers encounter during listening process?
2. Do the listening comprehension problems differ in terms of gender?
3. What are the factors affecting effective listening comprehension and to what extent do each factor influence this process?

Instrument

The questionnaire on the "beliefs on English Language Listening Comprehension Problems" was used to collect data to assess prospective teachers' beliefs about the English language listening comprehension problems they may encounter in unidirectional listening (Lotfi, 2012). There are forty-items in the questionnaire with six distinct factors. The six factors and their Cronbach's alpha values are as follows. Process (.90), input (.86), listener (.87), task (.84), affect (.72) and context (.66). The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire is (.95).

Subjects

The study was conducted at a state-run University, English Language Teaching Department in Turkey. The participants were 124 prospective English teachers majoring English Language Teaching and taking up the lecture of teaching language skills during 2012-2013 academic year. The group had similar characteristics with respect to age and educational background. Gender distribution was 86 females and 38 males.

Findings and Results

Table 1 presents the three items with the highest and lowest means.

Table 1. Items reported with the highest and lowest means

Items	N	M	sd
1 Before listening, it is difficult for me to predict from the visuals what I will hear.	124	2,66	0,65
5 I have difficulty with finding out what the main purpose of the listening task I am going to do is.	124	2,64	0,62
10 I have difficulty to check my understanding of the text based on what I already know about the topic while listening	124	2,51	0,71
18 I find it difficult to understand the listening text when speakers speak with varied accents	124	1,41	0,71
13 I find it difficult to understand listening texts in which there are too many unfamiliar words	124	1,37	0,7
14 I find it difficult to understand the meaning of words which are not pronounced clearly	124	1,34	0,68

Participants mostly disagreed with item 1 saying before listening; it is difficult for me to predict from the visuals what I will hear. This item has a mean of 2,66. Next disagreed item with the highest mean, 2,64, was the item 5 explaining I have difficulty with finding out what the main purpose of the listening task I am going to do is. Following this, participants were against the item 10 with a mean of 2,51 stating they have difficulty to check their understanding of the text based on what they already know about the topic while listening. On the other hand, As of the three items which participants disagreed the least, item 14 saying I find it difficult to understand the meaning of words which are not pronounced clearly had a mean of 1,34. Next, item 13 came with a mean of 1,37 citing I find it difficult to understand listening texts in which there are too many unfamiliar words. Finally, participants disagreed with the item 18 at a mean of 1,41 that I find it difficult to understand the listening text when speakers speak with varied accents. All in all, while the most disagreed items were related to process, the least disagreed items were about input.

Table 2 displays the items which were reported with the highest and lowest means to male.

Table 2. the items which were reported with the highest and lowest means to male.

Items	N (31%)	M	sd
6 when I listen to texts in English; I experience difficulty with listening for the main idea of the text	38	2,65	0,1
5 I have difficulty with finding out what the main purpose of the listening task I am going to do is	38	2,57	0,1
9 I find it difficult to make a mental summary of information gained through listening	38	2,55	0,1
7 I find it challenging to focus on the text when I have trouble understanding	38	1,52	0,76
13 I find it difficult to understand listening texts in which there are too many unfamiliar words.	38	1,52	0,79
21 I have difficulty understanding speakers with unfamiliar accents	38	1,52	0,79

In this group, there were totally 38 (31%) male subjects. They mostly disagreed with item 6 when they listen to texts in English; they experience difficulty with listening for the main idea of the text. This item has a rate of 2,65. Next, item 5 got the highest mean, 2,57, stating 'I have difficulty with finding out what the main purpose of the listening task I am going to do is'. Following this, participants disagreed with item 9 at a rate of 2,55 that they find it difficult to make a mental summary of information gained through listening. On the other hand, three items, which got the lowest means at a rate of 1,52 each, are items 7,13,21. In item 21, participants maintained that they have difficulty understanding speakers with unfamiliar accents. As for item 13, subjects disagreed with the idea that they find it difficult to understand listening texts in which there are too many unfamiliar words. Finally, item 7 cited that they find it challenging to focus on the text when they have trouble understanding. All in all, while all the items with the highest means were related to process, the items with the lowest means were generally about input.

Table 3 indicates the items which were reported with the highest and lowest means to female.

Table 3. The items which were reported with the highest and lowest means to female.

Items	N (%69)	M	sd
1 Before listening, it is difficult for me to predict from the visuals what I will hear	86	2,73	0,6
5 I have difficulty with finding out what the main purpose of the listening task I am going to do is	86	2,67	0,67
2 It is difficult for me to relate what I hear with something from an earlier part of the listening text	86	2,54	0,71
40 Unclear sounds resulting from poor acoustic conditions of the classroom interfere with my listening comprehension	86	1,4	0,74
16 I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast	86	1,36	0,64
18 I find it difficult to understand the listening text when speakers speak with varied accents.	86	1,34	0,64

In this group, there were totally 86 (69%) female subjects. They mostly disagreed with item 1 saying before listening, it is difficult for me to predict from the visuals what I will hear. This item has a rate of 2,73. Next, item 5 got the highest mean, 2,67, stating 'I have difficulty with finding out what the main purpose of the listening task I am going to do is'. Following this, participants disagreed with item 2 at a rate of 2,54 that it is difficult for me to relate what I hear with something from an earlier part of the listening text. On the other hand, three items, which got the lowest means were as follows: In item 18, at a rate of 1,34, participants maintained that I find it difficult to understand the listening text when speakers speak with varied accents. As for item 16, subjects disagreed with the idea at a rate of 1,36 that I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast. Finally, item 40 stated that unclear sounds resulting from poor acoustic conditions of the classroom interfere with my listening comprehension. All in all,

similar to male group, while all the items with the highest means were related to process, the items with the lowest means were generally about input.

The first factor, labeled process, consists of 12 items and reflects learners' beliefs about listening problems associated with different aspects of listening comprehension process. Process here refers to "the way in which learners use different kinds of signals to interpret what they hear" (Rubin, 1994). In fact, items loading on this factor describe learners' beliefs about problems related to two types of processing identified by Rubin, that is, using cognitive and metacognitive strategies while listening. These strategies deal with the difficulties learners believe they have in applying cognitive strategies of between-parts inferencing, prediction, personal elaboration, linguistic inferencing, summarization, contextualization and listening for the main idea (Lutfi, 2012). The others deal with the difficulties learners believe they have in using metacognitive strategies of planning, monitoring and evaluation. In this questionnaire, while items 4,5,7,10,12 were about metacognitive strategies, items 1,2,3,6,8,9,11 were on cognitive strategies.

Table 4. Process

Items	Strategy type	N	M	sd
1 Before listening, it is difficult for me to predict from the visuals what I will hear	cognitive	124	2,66	0,65
5 I have difficulty with finding out what the main purpose of the listening task I am going to do is.	metacognitive	124	2,64	0,62
10 While listening, I have difficulty to check my understanding of the text based on what I already know about the topic.	metacognitive	124	2,51	0,71
6 When I listen to texts in English, I experience difficulty with listening for the main idea of the text.	cognitive	124	2,5	0,75
2 It is difficult for me to relate what I hear with something from an earlier part of the listening text.	cognitive	124	2,49	0,73
9 I find it difficult to make a mental summary of information gained through listening	cognitive	124	2,49	0,73
3 While listening, I have problems making meaningful personal associations with the new information	cognitive	124	2,21	0,87
12 After listening, I find it difficult to evaluate the overall accuracy of my comprehension.	metacognitive	124	2,2	0,79
8 While listening, I find it difficult to guess the meaning of unknown words by linking them to known words	cognitive	124	2,16	0,84
11 I find it difficult to use the context to guess those parts of a listening text that I cannot hear clearly	cognitive	124	1,91	0,88
4 During listening, I have difficulty checking whether I correctly understand the meaning of the whole chunks of the listening text	metacognitive	124	1,78	0,84
7 I find it challenging to focus on the text when I have trouble understanding.	metacognitive	124	1,54	0,81
Total			2,25	

In this factor, the item which got the highest mean was item 1 at rate of 2,66 mean. That is, participants mostly disagreed that before listening, it was difficult for them to predict from the visuals what they heard. Next highest mean, 2,64, had item 5 saying I have difficulty with finding out what the main purpose of the listening task I am going to do is. Following this, participants disagreed with the idea at rate of 2,51 that while listening, they have difficulty to check their understanding of the text based on what they already know about the topic. As for items with the lowest means, item 7 citing I find it challenging to focus on the text when I have trouble understanding was marked at a rate of 1,54 mean. After this, participants disagreed with item 4 at rate of 1,74 mean that During listening, they have difficulty checking whether they correctly understand the meaning of the whole chunks of the listening text. Finally, item 11 saying I find it difficult to use the context to guess those parts of a listening text that I cannot hear clearly was scored at a rate of 1,91. The average of 12 items in this factor was 2,25.

The second factor, labeled input, consists of nine items and represents learners' beliefs about problems related to different aspects of aural input. Input here is defined as the target language discourse that reaches the learners' auditory system in unidirectional listening (Field, 2008). This factor contains learners' beliefs about problems related to such input characteristics as vocabulary, speech clarity, and grammatical structure of the text, speech rate, prosodic features, accent, and pause and text length (Rubin, 1994).

Table 5. Input

Items	characteristics	N	M	sd
15 I find it difficult to understand listening texts which have difficult grammatical structures.	structure	124	1,8	0,88
20 I find it difficult to interpret the meaning of a long listening text.	text length	124	1,79	0,85
19 I find it difficult to understand the listening text when the speaker does not pause long enough.	pause	124	1,61	0,77
17 Unfamiliar stress and intonation patterns of English interfere with my listening comprehension.	prosodic features	124	1,56	0,8
21 I have difficulty understanding speakers with unfamiliar accents	accent	124	1,46	0,75
16 I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast.	speech rate	124	1,44	0,69
18 I find it difficult to understand the listening text when speakers speak with varied accents.	accent	124	1,41	0,71
13 I find it difficult to understand listening texts in which there are too many unfamiliar words.	vocabulary	124	1,37	0,7
14 I find it difficult to understand the meaning of words which are not pronounced clearly.	speech clarity	124	1,34	0,68
Total			1,53	

In this factor, Item 15 had the highest rate of mean,1,8. In other words, participants disagreed that they find it difficult to understand listening texts which have difficult grammatical structures. The next item which got the highest mean, 1,79, was item 20 saying I find it difficult to interpret the meaning of a long listening text. As for the items with the lowest rates, item 14 had a mean of 1,34. In this item, participants disagreed with the idea that they find it difficult to understand the meaning of words which are not pronounced clearly. Following this, item 13 stating 'I find it difficult to understand listening texts in which there are too many unfamiliar words' had a mean of 1,37. The average of all the items in this factor is 1,53.

The third factor, labeled listener, comprises 10 items and reflects learners' beliefs about listeners' characteristics identified in the literature as having considerable impact on L2 learners' listening comprehension. Therefore, the factor contains learners' beliefs about problems associated with characteristics, such as attention, attitude and memory (Rubin, 1994; Hasan, 2000).

Table 6. Listener

Items	characteristics	N	M	sd
23 I am slow to recall the meaning of words that sound familiar.	memory	124	2,37	0,77
25 During listening, although some words sound familiar, it is difficult for me to recall their meaning immediately.	memory	124	2,29	0,85
26 When I hear the new words, I forget the content which was mentioned before.	memory	124	2,29	0,83
31 I have difficulty understanding a listening text because I cannot understand every single word I hear.	attitude	124	2,27	0,85
30 I have difficulty comprehending the listening text because I don't know which strategy to use while listening.	attitude	124	2,26	0,81
29 I find it difficult to really concentrate on listening.	attention	124	2,22	0,84

24 I find it difficult to quickly remember words or phrases I have just heard.	memory	124	2,19	0,83
27 I lose the flow of speech because I concentrate very hard on understanding every word or phrase I hear.	attention	124	2,12	0,87
22 When thinking about meaning of unfamiliar words, I neglect the next part of the listening text	attention	124	2	0,88
28 I find it difficult to remember the meaning of a long listening text	memory	124	1,8	0,88
Total			2,18	

In this factor, in item 23 participants disagreed at a rate of 2,37 mean that they are slow to recall the meaning of words that sound familiar. Next highest mean, 2,29, belonged to the item 25 saying 'during listening, although some words sound familiar, it is difficult for me to recall their meaning immediately'. As for the items with the lowest means, in item 28, participants disagreed at a rate of 1,8 mean that they find it difficult to remember the meaning of a long listening text. Following this, item 22 had a mean of 2 stating when thinking about meaning of unfamiliar words, they neglect the next part of the listening text. All in all, the average of all items in this factor was 2,18.

The fourth factor, labeled task, includes three items and reflects learners' beliefs about problems associated with characteristics of listening tasks. Task characteristics refer to "variation in the purpose for listening and associated responses" (Rubin, 1994). Items on this factor represent learners' beliefs about listening problems associated with task type and type of responses demanded when answering global and local questions.

Table 7. task

Items	characteristics	N	M	sd
34 I find it difficult to answer Wh-questions in a listening task.	task type	124	2,36	2,36
32 I find it difficult to do listening tasks, such as filling a grid, for which I need to draw on specific information from the text.	local questions	124	2,25	2,25
33 I find it difficult to do listening tasks for which I need to combine information to make generalization while listening to the text.	type of responses	124	2,23	0,82
			2,28	

In this factor, while item 34 had the highest mean as 2,36, item 33 had the lowest mean as 2,23. In item 34, participants disagreed at a rate of 2,36 mean that they find it difficult to answer wh-questions in a listening task. In item 33 with a mean of 2,23, participants find it difficult to do listening tasks for which they need to combine information to make generalization while listening to the text. All in all, the average of three items in this factor is 2,28.

The fifth factor, labeled affect, consists of four items and reflects learners' beliefs about problems related to affective dimension of listening. Learners' beliefs about their affective responses to instances of comprehension failure are reflected regarding the level of anxiety they experience in L2 listening.

Table 8. Affect

Items	characteristics	N	M	sd
37 I find it difficult to reduce my anxiety before doing the listening task.	level of anxiety	124	2,24	0,84
35 I stop listening when I have problems in understanding a listening text.	comprehension failure	124	2,18	0,83
38 Before doing listening comprehension tasks, I fear that I cannot understand what I will hear.	level of anxiety	124	2,06	0,94
36 If I don't arrive at a total comprehension of an oral text, I feel disappointed.	comprehension failure	124	1,7	0,82
			2,0	

In this factor, participants disagreed at a rate of 2,24 in item 37 that they find it difficult to reduce their anxiety before doing the listening task. On the other hand, item 36 had the

lowest mean in this factor stating If they don't arrive at a total comprehension of an oral text, they feel disappointed. Finally, the average of four items in this group was 2,0.

The sixth factor, labeled context, reflects learners' beliefs about unfavorable characteristics of the learning context affecting listening comprehension. The factor contains two items reflecting learners' beliefs about the adverse effect of distracters available in the learning context on their listening comprehension.

Table 9. Context

Items	N	M	sd
39 Unclear sounds resulting from a poor-quality CD-player interfere with my listening comprehension.	124	1,41	0,67
40 Unclear sounds resulting from poor acoustic conditions of the classroom interfere with my listening comprehension	124	1,41	0,74

The items under this factor specifically reflect learners' belief about the listening difficulties caused by such contextual features as inferior machine to play recordings and acoustically unsuitable rooms for the use of recorded materials. In this factor, the mean and average of both items was 1,41 which could be considered a low value in comparison with other factors.

Discussion and Conclusion

Listening comprehension is a highly complex problem solving activity that can be broken down into a set of distinct factors like process, listener, input, task, affect and context. According to the data collected, participants do not have any problems in finding out the main idea of the listening task and checking what is already known about a topic. In other words, participants use top-down processes effectively during the listening process.

On the other hand, participants have difficulties in understanding the words which are not pronounced clearly and spoken with varied accents. In addition, presence of too many unfamiliar words in text is a reason for the failure in comprehension. In other words, participants are not good at using bottom-up processes effectively. Juan and Abidin (2013) explored the English listening comprehension problems of university international students from China and their study revealed that the lack of prior knowledge in English vocabulary inhibited their understanding in the listening process.

Richards (2008;6) suggests the following examples of tasks that develop bottom-up listening skills in the classroom. "a) identify the referents of pronouns in an utterance, b) recognize the time reference of an utterance, c) distinguish between the positive and negative statements, d) recognize the order in which words occur in an utterance, e) identify sequence markers, f) identify key words that occurred in a spoken text, h) identify which modal verbs occurred in a spoken text."

As for gender's perceptions on listening comprehension problems, both groups mostly do not have any difficulties in terms of process, but they generally have difficulties about input in listening comprehension. Similarly, while metacognitive and cognitive strategies are used effectively by the participants; accent, speech rate, speech clarity etc. hinder effective listening. Al-Alwan et al (2013) investigated metacognitive listening strategies awareness and its relationship with listening comprehension on tenth-grade EFL learners and they reached similar results with the findings of the present study. They revealed that students have an average level of metacognitive listening strategies awareness. They suggested that metacognitive strategies awareness should be emphasized in listening comprehension activities.

It can be maintained that participants use different kinds of signals to interpret what they hear. They plan, monitor, evaluate, infer, predict, summarize and listen for the main idea. However, they have problems with input characteristics like vocabulary, speech clarity, structure of the text, accent and speech rate.

As for listener factor, subjects generally do not posit problems. In other words, memory, attitude and attention contribute their effective listening comprehension. Listeners should listen with a purpose and listen to things that interest them. It keeps the motivation and attention high (Rost, 1990; Morley, 1991).

As to task, participants generally are positive on task type and types of responses demanded when answering local questions. The language should involve a real discourse such as hesitations, rephrasing, and variety of accents. Level of difficulty can be determined by the selection of the task (Rost, 1990; Morley, 1991).

In terms of affect factor, anxiety level of the participants does not influence listening comprehension negatively. The data collected also proves that unfavorable characteristics of the learning context have a negative effect on the participants.

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