

**The relationship between input modification and listening comprehension among intermediate Iranian EFL learners**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to identify Iranian EFL learner's awareness degree of listening factors and strategies and the effect of input modification in improvement of listening comprehension. Since listening is a mental process and is not directly observable I had used qualitative method and sought to subjective data not objective one. Two groups of boys and girls in intermediate level had been selected and interviewed with open-ended questions concerning the difficulties which they encounter in listening comprehension and factors which they were aware of them. I had made a categorization from the obtained findings of interviews and suggested strategies to solve or at least reduce the problems. I had investigated the effect of input modification in two different listening texts; the results indicated that the use of input modification had a high positive relation with students' level of listening comprehension.

**Keywords:** listening factors, listening strategies, qualitative method, subjective data, objective data, input modification

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**Introduction**

One of the most significant current discussions in learning a foreign language is listening comprehension difficulties among students. There are a variety of mental processes that can be broadly described as listening comprehension strategies. As it is obvious that the most important step and the most complicated part in learning a foreign language is listening comprehension but unfortunately the least attention has been paid to it in Iran education system, I got encouraged to

study in this area to uncover some solutions for improving listening comprehension. Most of Iranian EFL learners encounter with such complicated barriers that inhibit them from acquiring listening comprehension and even got disappointed of attempting to overcome this difficult task. Although language knowledge – the competence of listening and speaking, and the ability of reading and writing have a high correlation and all together are crucial components of being a competent language user, but they get complete under the listening shadow and it takes the longest time to be completed. In speaking, reading, and writing we have the opportunity to think, hesitate, correct and also return to previous sentences, but in listening we face with a multicomplex task and don't have any opportunity to think and return back. In comparing to other competences of language from my point of view the major problem in listening comprehension is short of time, it is like a rapid movement which does not stop for us to react; it needs enough practice to find out our drawbacks and use appropriate strategies to become so professional to overcome it.

There are many factors which influence on listening comprehension and many authors and researchers have categorized them in different ways, but most of the researchers within this field subscribe to the belief that vocabulary, prior knowledge, speech rate, type of input, and the speaker's accent are the main factors which effect on language learner performance to get a high or low listener. From what insight which factors can be considered, the aim is to provide a theoretical framework that takes into account learners difficulties and needs and to suggest practical ideas for developing learners ability to facilitate and improve their own listening comprehension.

### **Literature review**

It is clear from the literature within this field that providing practical strategies for improvement of listening comprehension is very important. Some researchers such as O'Malley, Chamot, and Kupper, (1989), Vandergrift (1997), Goh (2002), Vandergrift (2003) and Liu (2008) among others investigated the relationship between listening strategy employed by students and their listening abilities. They focused on mental processes of listeners (perception, parsing and utilization). As indicated by Song (2008), listeners often do not handle listening tasks in an effective way utilizing these strategies successfully. They are not aware of listening strategies. Chamot (2005) pointed out that less successful language learners do not have the knowledge

needed to select appropriate strategies. Vandergrift (2003) investigated the relationship between listening proficiency and listening strategy used, the study showed that the more proficient listeners employed meta-cognitive strategies more frequently than the less proficient listeners, and the variations in this type of strategy use had a statistically significant relation across the listening ability. Liu and Goh (2006) found that when students were asked to direct their own listening after they had learned something about strategy use, their independent use of cognitive strategies, particularly inferencing strategies and contextualization strategies, increased substantially.

As I have observed between most of the EFL learners of the language department which I am one of the intermediate level teachers there, listening section of lessons and exams are so tiresome and dreadful for them that mostly try to avoid it and almost the least grade in exams is related to listening section, and some of the learners have never thought how encounter with their listening barriers and improve it. Despite the awareness of learners from major role of listening for being successful but they had not showed enough attempts in this area and suffer from it as a result of their inability to make use of listening comprehension strategies; I thought to examine the barriers by help of themselves and find out an appropriate way to change their attitude to listening and encourage them to listen with a higher motivation, mind concentration, and mental management to enjoy this difficult task and feel it as energetic and useful section instead of tiresome and dreadful.

### **Methodology**

As cognitive processes that take place during listening comprehension are not normally observable directly, I preferred to work on the qualitative method and focus on subjective data rather than numerical and objective ones. Another reason for me to use qualitative method was lack of sufficient care of students in answering questionnaires especially in multiple-choice ones; they just choose one of the items without thinking because they feel it is not an assessment of their abilities and its outcome is not important for them, even some of the students don't feel themselves responsible to do such a time-consuming task so simply refuse to answer.

I have investigated two 15 number EFL learners groups of boys and girls aged 14-17 in intermediate level to find out the effective factors and strategies which they are aware in

listening comprehension, as its starting point I asked them to participate in open-ended interviews. I had interviewed 12 informants, 6 participants from each 15 number groups of boys and girls; they were selected randomly both from high and low ability listeners. I asked several general questions like: what are your difficulties in listening? What strategies do you use to solve your difficulties? What happens for you when you hear something unfamiliar? And some specific ones like: how long does it take to process active and passive sentences? What make it possible for you to better understand the meaning of a word? What makes you more confused in informal style listening texts? When are you more pleased with the result of your listening comprehension?

Each interview lasted about 20-30 minutes, at first I was trying to record their voice but then I felt it cause to anxiety and decreases the reliability of the answers, so I decides to provide the friendliest context with the lowest affective filter and just took notes from their answers. I will partly mention their answers in the following sections of this work.

Some of the interviewees were extremely weak in listening comprehension and some of them were highly competent; their degree of awareness of involved factors in listening was examined and the obtained information showed that just a limited number of participants were aware of the influencing factors in listening comprehension and the strategies which they could take into account for being a successful listener. When sufficient data was obtained about agent factors which cause difficulties and appropriate strategies which can be used for improvement I analyzed the effect of input modification in increasing degree of listening comprehension competence in an experimental method. I have took two listening texts from VOA site and offered them to the participants in two different ways and investigated the effect of input modification variety, I presented input modification to one of the groups each time and compared them together. One of the texts which I used was 4 minutes about impure water affects and the other was 5 minutes about the political issues, when I asked questions about the text which they have heard that group which was doing the task by input modification was more successful in both of the texts. so the variable of input modification have been analyzed to find the degree which it can influence on improving listening comprehension, and encourage language learners and teachers to take it into account.

### **Effective factors and strategies in listening comprehension**

There is a variety of factors which influence on listening comprehension that can be categorized from different point of views or perspective; for example individual factors, environmental factors, the context in which listening occurs, the purpose of listening, accent, the style of spoken English, are some main issues which have been outlined. Also each of these issues can be widely investigated from different points regarding to the aim of the study. For example individual factors can be examined in terms of learner s motivation, interest, purpose of listening, listeners physical and psychological state, his/her level of anxiety, nervousness, fatigue, the listener s characteristics, bottom-up processor or top-down processor, ...

As I mentioned although there are a variety of factors which influence on listening comprehension, there is a general agreement that vocabulary, prior knowledge, speech rate, type of input, and speaker s accent are the most significant ones. I will explain them shortly in the following paragraphs. Regarding the large number of influencing factors, there are also a large number of strategies corresponding to each factor, so I tried to briefly explain each factor with its corresponding strategy.

### **Vocabulary**

Although lexicon especially the content words knowledge plays a major rule in all four language skills- speaking, reading, listening, and writing but it is a dominant factor among ESL learners because for many learners when they are listening to a text it is crucial to know the meaning of all words and thinking about the meaning of unfamiliar and new words at the same time cause to miss rest of the text and don't understand the overall message. Suggested practical strategies for this problem are to catch only the main ideas don't stop to think to meaning of an individual word and concentrate on whole. I mean don't be too sensitive to details, in other words it is better to use bottom-up processing. It is also noticeable that a high knowledge of vocabulary without correct pronunciation is useless and would not help in any way; unfortunately Iranian students learn a wrong pronunciation of words in schools which get fossilized in their long-term memory and cause misunderstanding in listening comprehension.

### **Prior knowledge**

It is obvious that a high public knowledge helps us in every aspects of life; consequently in listening comprehension task those learners with a high prior knowledge about the subject of text

are more successful. Research in both first and second language comprehension has shown that human beings frequently make use of prior knowledge when trying to understand information. To understand well social, political, and cultural knowledge of the target language are necessary, some students reported how their comprehension suffered due to the absence of particular types of prior knowledge.

### **Speech rate**

Griffiths (1991) suggested that different languages have different “normal rates”, thus it is possible what normal rate is for a competent English speaker being considered abnormal or fast by EFL learners with different mother tongues. There is no measure of speech rate, it depends entirely to individuals perception of how fast or slow the speakers are speaking, for example take CNN or BBC news announcers speech rates and Hollywood actors or actresses speech rates into account, it is clear that there is an obvious difference in their speech rates. Because speech rate changes individually, then there is not any practical strategy to overcome speech rate drawbacks except more practice and strengthening the mind and ears to correspond with different speech rates.

### **Type of input**

It is very likely that because of the limited capacity in working memory of learners it is not possible for them to cope with all types of input at once. There are a number of styles in English language; formal, informal, slang, which slang is the most difficult one for a language learner to comprehend. EFL learners being taught “standard type” but they face informal and slang styles more than formal one with many differences which cause to confusion; especially EFL learners suffer from a critical issue in understanding of idioms because it is really a difficult task to memorize the idioms and hold them in long term memory, there is no doubt that even in mother tongue speakers have difficulty in understanding the idioms. Also it is possible to study type of input from another point of view, direct face-to-face communication has the advantage over the indirect listening tasks because in face-to-face conversations facial expressions, repetitions and hesitations help to guess the meaning and follow the speaker, the listener can stop and ask for clarification; consequently most of the students found conversations easier to understand than other types of input. One reason given was they were able to make use of other types of

information from the speaker (e.g. facial expressions) to assist comprehension. Another reason was that they could always ask the speaker to repeat or clarify. The practical strategy which can be used regarding to this factor is to make learners familiar with all styles of speech and idioms from the beginning levels of learning. Despite the fact that grammar does not play an important role in listening, but enough knowledge of structures enjoys a tremendous impact in listening comprehension; for instance consider active and passive forms in different terms, in a normal way it takes longer time for parsing passive sentences than actives, so it is necessary to have sufficient grammar competence in listening comprehension.

### **Speaker's accent**

Accent is the variety of spoken English, weather it is British, American, or others; it includes features of speech that learners notice as being different from the type of "standard" English they were familiar with. It is essential for EFL learners being capable to discriminate between British and American accents; despite apparently partial differences in pronunciation and a list of words, it seems differences get larger in real contexts, and in many cases for Iranian EFL learners it is more difficult to comprehend British accent than American. Although Accent is an important factor in language learners' listening comprehension but it is more achievable than other factors if the learners take active part in communication and listening.

### **Instances of answers of the interviews**

Behdad Rastegar 16 years old says: pronunciations of some of the words in listening texts are different from what we have learnt at school. Unfortunately the wrong pronunciation which most of the students learn in English subject classes in school due to shortages of some teachers transfer to their long-term memory and fossilizes there, it led to students don't recognize meaning of the words while they hear a word which apparently is new but in fact they knew it.

Setayesh Ghazvini 15 years old says: I have little familiarity with geographical, political, cultural, and social issues of US and England, and when I hear a proper noun, name of a place or a festival for example I get confused if they are content words or not.

Saba Doosti 17 years old says: I don't have concentration to what I hear, outside noises break my concentration and cause to lose the whole text. Also I feel speakers don't let each other to

complete their dialogs and most of what I hear is not complete and I fail to recognize their purposes.

Mohammad Rabbi 15 years old says: I could only catch the main ideas because of the new words; when I try to find the meaning of unfamiliar words I stuck there and suddenly the text finishes.

Roya Afshar 14 years old says: I can't remember the whole sentences I quickly forget what is heard, I mean I am not able to utter long statements.

Salar amidi 16 years old says: I am mostly confused about the key ideas in the message; I don't understand the purposes of speech. It seems there is something beyond surface meaning.

Fatemeh nosratabadi 14 years old says: I get so nervous in listening tasks; I feel a high pressure on my mind because I think I don't understand anything when I am listening.

Salar Aghili 15 years old says: Most of the listening exercises are not interesting and I don't have a specific purpose for listening, I mean I don't know what the goal is and what I should get from the text.

### **Input modification**

Liu and Goh (2006) found that when students were asked to direct their own listening after they had learned something about strategy use, their independent use of cognitive strategies, particularly inferencing strategies and contextualization strategies, increased substantially.

The aim of input modification is to provide a theoretical framework that takes account learners difficulties and needs to suggest practical ideas for developing learner s ability to facilitate and improve their own listening comprehension. From my point of view I can regard input modification as what does a mother do to feed her child, when the child doesn't like to eat mother uses a kind of input modification strategy; she cooks the child's favorite dish, decorate it in colorful and funny shapes in order to solicit the child's relish to eat with enjoyment; it similar in listening comprehension, when factors like the learners needs, psychological state and prior knowledge are taken into account and the listening text has been chosen according to them it is easier for learners to cope with this complicated task.



When the learning objective of a language class is explained to students, they can better focus on specific vocabulary acquisition, grammar practice, listening for different purposes, and so on. This clear explanation by the teacher of a lesson's pedagogic goals will help learners to further develop specific objectives in a shorter amount of time. For instance, by informing students that the lesson will be about giving directions, they can consciously focus on remembering the vocabulary used in that activity. Many researchers believe that more-proficient listeners are able to focus on what is being heard, to plan what to listen for, and to interact with both bottom-up and top-down processes; whereas less-proficient listeners would use predominately bottom-up processing, listening for single words, and utilizing strategies randomly (Liu, 2008).

Input modification focus on improving listening comprehension skill in terms of what learners already know; warm-up activity is one of the effective practices in input modification, as it is clear from meaning of the word it is a kind of pre-exercise to get ready for a more difficult or complicated task, same as group sports basketball, volleyball, football, or individual ones which requires to warm up body- muscles, before starting to exercise or play. In a similar way input modification warms up the listeners and makes them ready to accomplish the task. In warm-up activity students could be asked to think to a specific topic and retell to the class what do they know or remember about it; there would be a short free discussion about the topic, it is a pre-listening activity which generates related linguistic knowledge to listening text. In fact the teacher tries to activate the learners existing knowledge of the topic by asking questions and making connections with existing knowledge, discussing opinions, making predictions, etc. In input modification it is so helpful to pre-teach the keywords and ask learners to repeat the new words, it is better to have written the key words on the board. If learners are being told what they will have to do after they have finished listening so they can focus on forthcoming task; in other words it is more effective to set realistic short-term and long-term goals to make clear in advance which parts of the text to concentrate on.

Listening comprehension improves if supported by visual materials, it is helpful to learners being able to see videos, pictures, or diagrams of what is being talked about; it is often more effective to choose visual listening texts especially in intermediate level, also it is highly noticeable that non-verbal output of speakers including intonation, pauses, facial expressions, body language and etc., could positively influence on listening comprehension. To summarize it is more

effective to expose EFL learners to the language which is comprehensible to them; according to learners' knowledge and competence level the teacher must pay enough attention to choose a listening text which is suitable for them content that is familiar is easier to comprehend than content with unfamiliar vocabulary or for which the listener has insufficient background knowledge. It is really unrealistic to expect learners complete comprehension of large chunks of spoken English which is not modified for their needs or supported by visual materials.

Idioms, colloquialisms, euphemisms and jargon are likely to be difficult to comprehend or completely incomprehensible to most of the EFL learners, it is reasonable that the teacher pre-explain these points and give enough clear examples to make learners brain ready to process and make a sense of at least some parts of what they hear. Also it is often helpful to give a brief summary at beginning of the task on what is going to be covered in the lesson, and then to clearly signpost each section. For example: "now we have talked about some effects of vitamin c, I want to ask you which fruits contain it."

## **Results**

This study has shown that successful listeners use appropriate strategies to overcome their listening comprehension difficulties, the results of investigations in this area indicated that there is a positive relationship between listening proficiency and listening strategies employed by EFL learners (in this study the intermediate level learners); these skills should be developed and inculcated as early as possible in the teaching and learning processes because listening is the main step in learning a language and in many cases learners don't be a competent language user for lack of sufficient competence in listening comprehension.

There are many strategies to be used by EFL learners in this study I studied about input modification and the results has shown input modification helps the EFL learners to take a greater control of their listening development and formulate answers in their minds for what they should concentrate on; visual support, such as video, pictures, diagrams, gestures, facial expressions, and body language, can increase comprehension if the learner is able to correctly interpret it.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The present study discussed that Listening skill is the most difficult of all the language skills because students do not receive training to develop their listening skill, according to the important role which listening plays in learning a language it is essential to provide students with training in listening comprehension that will prepare them for effective functioning outside the classroom. It investigated what problems do intermediate learners of English as a foreign language encounter in listening comprehension and what strategies do they use to overcome their difficulties. Based on findings of this study intermediate EFL learners require earning sufficient training and practice strategies to overcome the listening difficulties to be successful in real-life situations. In other words this study attempted to discuss briefly about the most important problems and possible strategies to solve them. It aimed to find out the effect of input modification strategy on improvement of listening comprehension and concluded that input modification considers a large number of difficulties which learners encounter in listening comprehension and it is a reasonable and useful strategy to be a successful listener.

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