



## Exploring English Language Students' Difficulties in Listening Comprehension

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### Abstract

Listening skill is one of the four major skills of language that most language learners desire to get mastery in order to communicate effectively in different contexts. It is one of the most challenging skills for many students. The main aim of this study, therefore, was to explore English language students' listening comprehension difficulties. I employed a survey research design as a research method. Randomly selected sixty male and sixty female students studying English at three community schools of Rupandehi district, Nepal took part in this study as research respondents. They all were from secondary level. A closed ended questionnaire with 24 items on students' listening problem was administered to elicit the data from the respondents. The results of questionnaire indicated that content of the listening text (e.g., unfamiliar words, idiom, feeling fatigue while listening to the long text) was the major source of listening difficulties for the students. The second source of difficulty was related to the listener that included lack of concentration with long listening text and existence of noise in the place. The third difficulty included linguistic features such as complex grammatical structures, pronunciation and problems in distinguishing the word boundaries. And the last source of listening problem was concerned with speaker's speed of speech and different accents. The findings also raise awareness of both teachers and students regarding the listening comprehension problems.



## Introduction

Listening is an invisible mental process. Among the four language skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing, listening is considered as the most important skill in the field of English language teaching and learning. It is the most frequently used language skill in daily life. In this regard, Luo, (2008) mentioned that listening is the major skill of social interactions, and people receive new messages mainly via listening than reading. As mentioned by Krashen (1985), sufficient input is required in the process of language acquisition which is only possible because of listening. Therefore, students need to listen repeatedly and continuously if they want to communicate properly, meaningfully, and naturally. It means that without listening, students cannot acquire language as listening provides language input.

In the context of listening, Hamouda (2013) stated listening skill is very important in acquiring understandable input; learning does not occur if there is not any input. The same claim was supported by Rost (1994) who confirmed that listening is vital in language classrooms because it provides input for learners. Similarly, Brown (2001) also defined that listening is an interactive process involving a number of different cognitive, psychomotor, and affective mechanisms. As an input, listening skill plays a crucial role in students' language development. Thus, language acquisition is achieved mainly through receiving understandable input, and listening ability is the critical component in achieving understandable language input.

Even though listening skill holds a major role in learning English language, it has gained less attention in the literature (Nunan, 1997). In the past, listening has been considered as a passive or receptive skill (Saha, 2008), second language teachers believed that listening is a skill that students can develop it on their own. However, many researchers opined that listening is not a passive skill but a complicated active process of building meaning from a stream of sounds. In this context, Gebhard (2000) pointed out that listening is an active skill. In two-exchange communication, people are active at the time they respond what they hear or see, or agree with an idea. In the same fashion, Wolvin and Coakley (1996) mentioned that listening comprehension is the process of receiving, attending to, and assigning meaning to aural and visual stimuli, evaluating, and responding. Similarly, Vandergrift (1999) wrote:

*“Listening comprehension is a complex, active process in which the listener must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intonation, retain what was gathered in all of the above, and interpret it within the immediate as well as the larger sociocultural context of the utterance”.*

Therefore, listeners comprehend the oral input through sound discrimination, previous knowledge, grammatical structures, stress and intonation, and the other linguistic or non-linguistic clues. In the same line, Hamouda (2013) defined listening comprehension as an interactive process in which listeners are involved in constructing meaning. Hence, listening comprehension is the various processes of understanding and making sense of spoken language.

In the context of Nepal, listening skill is taught from primary to secondary level. Here secondary level refers to class 9, 10, 11 and 12. Also, certain mark is allocated for the listening test. As the English curriculum of secondary level suggests, 10% mark is allocated for the listening comprehension for class nine and ten. In the same way, according to the new English curriculum for class 11 and 12 that is supposed to be implemented from the academic session -2077 B.S. / 2020 A. D. , out of 25 marks, 6 marks is allocated for the listening comprehension in the internal evaluation. This indicates that the English curriculum of secondary level has given focus on listening skill. Yet, the present situation is far from satisfactory. As an English teacher, I have been teaching listening skill to my students for a few years. My experiences in listening class reveal that most of the students are reluctant in engaging in listening task. They opine that very little mark is allocated for listening test, and they have difficulties to attain the message by following the speakers. I often find the students whispering each other and looking at others' answer sheet to solve the questions instead of paying attention to the speakers. They consider listening as one of the most difficult skills to learn because they need to understand the messages immediately.

Regarding listening, Yang (2009) stated students are frustrated and helpless against listening. In the same fashion, Hamouda (2012) argued pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, lack of concentration, anxiety are the major listening comprehension problems. Hasan (2000) indicated that unfamiliar words, difficult grammatical structures, and the length of the spoken passages are the most important factors that cause problems for learners' listening comprehension. It is considered that in order to do well in listening, the listeners must have sufficient knowledge of the language. Listening is often used in together with the other skills of speaking, reading and writing. Listening helps students to acquire good speaking habits as a result of the spoken English they have absorbed, and helps them to improve their pronunciation. However, English language students, in the contexts of Nepal seem to neglect this major

language skill to learn. Hence, I realize that it is necessary to explore the difficulties that English language students face while dealing with the listening comprehension.

## **Literature Review**

Under this heading, I discussed listening processes, problems related to listening, and major listening strategies and the previous studies relevant to listening skill. I also discussed the gap that I identified in the literature.

### ***Listening processes***

The listening process is the continuing construction of interpretation to the spoken input. For the native speakers of Nepali, English listening input is not natural as in the first language. It requires conscious effort and attention. In Buck's (2001) words L2 listeners need to intentionally decode the subtle elements and construct the meaning of the listening input.

As stated by Gebhard (2000) there are two distinct processes involved in listening comprehension: bottom-up and top-down processes. Bottom-up processing in listening refers to a process of decoding a message that the listener hears through the analysis of sounds, words and grammar. Top-down process in listening refers to the process of using background knowledge to comprehend a message. The background knowledge can be in the form of previous knowledge about the topic, in the form of situational knowledge, and in the form of 'schemata' or plans about the overall structure of events and the relationship between them.

### ***Listening Problems***

Listening problems are defined as the internal and external characteristics that might interrupt text understanding and real-life processing problems directly related to cognitive procedures that take place at various stages of listening comprehension (Goh, 2000). As listening comprehension is an intricate ongoing process that includes the interaction of various factors, many learners find it hard to understand, and have little awareness of why that difficulty occurs. Flowerdew and Miller (1992) reported that the students' difficulties in listening comprehension include the fast speed of delivery, new terminology and concepts, lack of concentration, and problems related to the physical environment. In Anderson's (2000) words the problems in listening are associated with perceptual (low-level) processing, such as word recognition and attention failure, while relatively few problems are linked to inefficient parsing and failure in utilization (high-level processing). Moreover, Graham (2006) opines that the speedy delivery of text, failure in identifying and recognizing words in a stream of input, fast speech rate and unfamiliar words create problems in understanding the listening text.

In the same line, Rahimirad and Zare-ee (2015) noted that numerous difficulties that can be confronted in listening tasks consist of unknown vocabulary, unfamiliar topics, fast speech rate, noise around and unfamiliar or different accents. Also, when students are involved in a listening activity and they cannot understand the learners cannot complete the listening task on time. As my experience in listening class, when students are involved in a listening task, in the majority of the cases they want me to speak slowly, and play the audio material more than twice. So, the major problems with listening are related to the content, linguistic features, physical environment, and topic, psychology of the students, accents of the speakers and the rate of the speech.

### ***Listening Comprehension Strategies***

Listening strategies refer to the ways or techniques that listeners use to manage or solve the problems while involving in listening activity. These strategies are very crucial to be learnt on the part of learners to make their learning more effective and meaningful. Success in listening

also relies on the strategies that students adopt while engaging in a listening task. In the same context, Goh (2000) stated that listening strategies should be taught to the students before they are directly involved in the listening activities. Hence, teachers should increase learners' knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and phonology in advance. As mentioned by Azmi, Celik, Yidliz, and Tugrul (2014), there are three types of strategies in listening comprehension: cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective. They have been discussed below.

### *Cognitive Strategies*

Cognitive strategies are mental processes that are consciously implemented in order to accomplish a specific objective. These strategies involve the understanding and gathering knowledge and skills in short term memory or long-term memory for later use. In this same vein, Buck (2001) stated "Cognitive strategies are mental activities related to comprehending and storing input in working memory or long term memory for later retrieval" (p.104). Cognitive strategies manipulate the material to be learnt or apply a specific technique to a listening task. Regarding this, Abdalhamid (2012) expressed that cognitive strategies are related to the learning activities and include direct utilization or change of the learning materials. Language learners use cognitive strategies as a help for processing, storing, and remembering new information (Goh (2000)).

### *Metacognitive Strategies*

Metacognitive strategies refer to techniques used to help students understand the way they learn. These strategies are applied to manage or control learning through planning, assessing, and changing. In this strategy, learners are always aware when they listen to the texts. In the same context, Salataci (2002) stated that metacognitive strategy in the listening process helps learners learn faster, and enhance their self-confidence, motivation, and ability to complete the activities. In this strategy, learners learn how to plan, monitor, and evaluate the collected information from the listening part. There exist two types of metacognitive skills: knowledge of cognition which is related to learners' awareness of what is going on (i.e., knowing what), and the other is regulation of cognition (i.e., knowing how) which is concerned with what learners should do to listen effectively (Baker & Brown, 1984; Abdalhamid, 2012).

### *Socio-affective Strategies*

Socio-affective strategies describe the techniques listeners use to collaborate with others, to verify understanding or to lower anxiety. Regarding it, Wilson (2003) mentions that socio-affective strategies are related to students' interaction with other speakers and their reactions towards learning. In the same line, Habte-Gabr (2006) claims that in socio-affective strategy, students should know how to decrease anxiety, feel confident during listening activities, and raise motivation in improving listening skill.

Listening comprehension has been widely researched in the field of English language teaching. It is shown that during the process of listening comprehension, various factors may affect learners' listening ability. Osada's (2004) study highlighted that most of the students have serious difficulties in listening comprehension. Students act poorly in listening course. Since they do not understand the spoken content of the lessons, they are not able to comprehend spoken naturally. Some students lose their confidence exposed to this situation.

Similarly, Graham's (2006) study on 'English students' perceptions toward listening comprehension in French' showed that listening comprehension is the skill in which many students feel that they are least successful. The major problems included failure in coping with the rate of delivery of speech, low level of perceived listening skill, and being unaware of the role of listening skills and strategies. In the same vein, according to Teng (2002), there are four

factors called listener factors, speaker factors, stimulus factors, and context factors that impact students' listening comprehension.

Furthermore, Hamouda (2012) explored the listening problems faced by a group of first year English major students of Qassim University in Saudi Arabia. The results of the study obtained from the questionnaire and interview with sixty students showed that accent, pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, and different accent of speakers, lack of concentration, anxiety, and bad quality of recording are the major listening comprehension problems.

To my knowledge, in Nepal, little research has been done in the area of listening comprehension. The studies I discussed above were carried out in the international scenario focusing on the university students' listening problems with their listening courses. Therefore, in this study, my major attempt was to explore the listening difficulties of secondary level students in the context of Nepal.

## Methods

This study was a survey research design where the primary sources of data were employed. It was carried out to analyze the listening difficulties of secondary level English students. The respondents of the study consisted of 120 secondary level English students of three community schools located in Rupandehi district of Province No. 5, Nepal. Out of 120 respondents, sixty were male and sixty were female. Twenty male students and twenty female students were selected from each school by using random sampling technique, whereas the schools were selected purposively where students were actively involved in listening activities. The respondents were all native speakers of Nepali language. A closed-ended questionnaire was used to elicit the data from the respondents. It consisted of 24 items with four constructs: (a) content of the listening text (b) linguistic features (c) factors related to listener and (d) factors related to speaker. The questionnaire was designed based on a 4-point Likert scale (never, sometimes, often, always), and the respondents were asked to choose just one item that best described their own problem. The collected data was tabulated and analyzed descriptively and statistically using percentage.

## Results and Discussion

The results are presented and discussed below in the four categories of the difficulties with listening: content of the listening text, linguistic features, factors related to listener, and factors related to speaker.

### A. Difficulties related to the content of the listening text

Secondary level English students' difficulties in listening comprehension related to the content of the text are presented in the following table.

Table 1. Listening Difficulties Related to the Content of the Listening Text

S. N.	Items	Never %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
1.	I face many unfamiliar words including jargon, idioms and phrases.	00	52	36	12
2.	I have difficulty because the texts contain many complex grammatical structures.	25	37	19	19
3.	I feel bored and distracted while listening to a long text.	17	44	25	14

4.	I stop listening to the texts while encountering unknown words, and I start to think about the meaning of the word.	19	28	30	23
5.	I have difficulty in inferring the meaning of an unknown word while listening.	27	29	27	17
6.	I have problem in encountering with the presentation of long spoken texts.	19	42	17	22
7.	The texts are not as interested as I expect.	44	35	11	10
Listening difficulties related to the content of the listening text.		21.58	38.14	23.57	16.71

According to the results presented in table 1, for the item 1 slightly more than half of the respondents (52%) reported that they sometimes have problem with too many unfamiliar words. Thirty six per cent of students often have problems in this issue. But 12% of the students always feel difficult to face with many unfamiliar words including jargon and idioms. No students reported that they never have this issue. Regarding the second item, only 19% of the students state that the presence of complex grammatical structures can always interfere with their listening comprehension, but 19% reported that complex grammatical structures often make listening difficult for them and 37% believed that complex grammatical structures sometimes interfere with their listening comprehension. For 25% of the students it is not interfering at all. Regarding the third item of the questionnaire, "feeling bored and distracted while listening to a text," 25 % of the participants have chosen "often" option, near half of the participants (44.0%) reported that they sometimes have this difficulty . For 14.0% of the students always feel bored and distracted while they have to listen to a long text. Similarly, 17% students never feel bored and distracted with this type of listening text.

Concerning item 4, 28% students sometimes stops listening while encountering with unfamiliar words. Similarly, 30% went in favour of 'often', 23% for 'always' and 19% students reported that they never stop on the way to listening. Analysis of students' responses to item 5 showed that 17% of the students always, 27% often and 29% sometimes have difficulty in inferring the meaning of unknown words while listening, but 27% students reported that they never have this problem. The result of analysis in item 6 showed that 22% of the students always, 17% often, and 42% sometimes have difficulty in encountering with the presentation of long spoken texts, but 19% of the students reported that they never face this issue while listening. In item 7, only 10% of the students always, 11% often, and 35% sometimes find the listening text beyond their interest, but 44% students find it interesting to them.

In conclusion, among the respondents 16.71% of students always, 23.57% often, and 38.14% sometimes suffer from the listening comprehension problems related to the content of listening text, whereas only 21.58% of the respondents never have problem related to the content of the listening text.

#### *B. Difficulties related to the linguistic features*

Secondary level English students' difficulties in listening comprehension related to the linguistic features of the text are presented in the following table:

Table 2. Listening Difficulties Related to Linguistic Features

S.N.	Items	Never %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
8	I have the problem to understand the pronunciation	45	25	16	14
9	I become failure in recognizing the signals related to movement of speaker from one point to another	12	37	25	26
10	I feel difficulty to recognize the word boundary in streams of speech.	34	32	17	17
Listening difficulties related to linguistic features		30.33	31.33	19.34	19

As the results presented in table 2, 25% students declared that they sometimes have problems to understand the pronunciation. 16 % of the students often, 14% always and 45% never have problems in word recognition with familiar pronunciation. Regarding item 9 of the questionnaire, ‘Failure in recognizing the signals related to movement of speaker from one point to another’, 37% sometime have difficulty in understanding every single word of incoming speech. 25% often, 26% always and 12% never have problems to recognize signals which indicated that the speaker is moving from one point to another. In item 10, ‘lack of recognizing word boundary in streams of speech’, 17% of the students have chosen always option, 32.0% often option, 39% sometimes option and 12.0% never option.

In conclusion, among the participants 19.0% of students always, 19.34% often, and 31.33% sometimes have problems related to the linguistic features, whereas 30.33% of respondents never have such a problem.

### C. Difficulties related to the listener

Secondary level English students’ difficulties in listening comprehension related to the listener are presented in the following table.

Table 3. Listening Difficulties Related to the Listener

S. N.	Items	Never %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
11.	I lose concentration because I try to search for answers while listening.	30	36	18	16
12.	I get disturbed due to the noises around.	12	51	26	11
13.	I lose concentration when the text is too long.	20	42	25	13
14.	I lose concentration due to poor quality of recording.	19	44	25	12
15.	I have problem in understanding the spoken text from the first listening.	14	36	29	21
16.	I have difficulty in predicting what would come next during listening.	22	29	31	18
17.	I have difficulty in recognizing the words from the way they are pronounced.	20	32	19	29
18.	I have difficulty in comprehending the meaning without transcripts.	27	28	26	19
Listening difficulties related to the listener		20.50	37.25	24.88	17.37

According to the results presented in table 3, for the item 11, 36% respondents reported that they sometimes lose concentration while listening. Likewise, 18% participants often, 16 % always and 30 % never lose concentration while listening. Regarding the item 12, 51% participants sometimes, 26% often, 11% always and 12% never get disturbed due to the noises around. In response to the item 13, 42% of the participants sometimes, 25% often and 13% always lose their concentration in listening when the text is too long, but 20% never have this problem. Regarding the item 14 of the questionnaire, 44% of the participants have chosen ‘sometimes’ option. Similarly, 25% of the participants have often, 12 % always and 19% never lost concentration due to the poor quality of recording. In response to the question ‘problem in understanding the spoken text from the first listening’, 36% participants sometimes, 29% often, 21% always and 14% never have problems in understanding the spoken text from the first listening.

Likewise, in response to the question in item 16, 29% participants feel difficulty in predicting what would come next during listening. In the same way, 31%, 18 % and 22% of the participants have chosen the options ‘often’, ‘always’ and ‘never’ respectively. When the participants were asked the question ‘about the difficulty in recognizing the words from the way they are pronounced’, 32% participants sometimes have this problem whereas 19% often, 29% always and 20% never have this case in listening. Regarding the item 18, 28% participants sometimes have a problem to comprehend the meaning without listening scripts. Similarly, 26%, often, 19% always and 27% never have this problem.

Finally, among the participants 17.37% of students always, 24.88% often, and 37.25% sometimes and 20.50% of participants never have difficulties related to the listener.

#### *D. Difficulties related to the speaker*

Secondary level English students’ difficulties in listening comprehension related to the speaker are presented in the following table.

Table 4. Listening Difficulties Related to the Speaker

S. N.	Items	Never %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
19.	I have problem due to the presence of hesitation and pauses on the part of the speaker.	54	15	19	12
20.	I have problem because of the speaker’s unclear pronunciation.	53	11	26	10
21.	I fail to understand the meaning without seeing the speaker’s body language.	55	22	13	10
22.	I have difficulty in understanding the text when the speaker speaks too fast.	12	14	21	53
23.	I feel difficulty in understanding the text if there is no repetition.	14	29	42	15
24.	I have difficulty to understand when the speakers speak with a variety of accents.	31	27	21	21
Listening difficulties related to the speaker		36.50	19.67	23.67	20.16

According to the results presented in table 4, for the item 19, 15% of students sometimes, 19% often, 12% always and 54% have problems due to the presence of hesitation and pauses of the speaker. Likewise, 26% respondents often, 10 % always, 11% sometimes and 53% never feel difficulties due to the speaker’s pronunciation. Regarding the item 21, 55% of the students



never fail to understand the meaning without seeing the speaker's body language, whereas 22% sometimes, 13% often, 10% always understands the meaning. In response to the item 22, 14% of the respondents sometimes, 21% often and 53% always and 12% never feel problems if the speaker speaks too fast. Regarding the item 23, 42% of the respondents often, 29% sometimes and 15% always feel difficulty in understanding the text if there is no repetition. But, 14% of the respondents never have such a problem. In response to the item 24, 21% students often, 27% sometimes, 21% always and 31% never have difficulty to understand when the speakers speak with a variety of accents. In conclusion, among the participants 20.16% of respondents always, 23.67% often, 19.67% sometimes, and 36.50% of respondents never have difficulties related to the speaker.

## Conclusion

On the basis of the results of the study, the major listening difficulties of the secondary level students are related to content (e.g., unfamiliar words, idioms); similarly, related to listener as the second source of problem (e.g., lack of concentration encountered with long listening text); related to the linguistic features as the third source of difficulty (e.g., complex grammatical structures, pronunciation); and related to speaker as the fourth source of problem (e.g., speed of speech, different accent). The results of this study have obvious implications for both teachers and students. Teachers need to be aware of the sources of listening comprehension problems. They need to first identify the problems and then find solutions to them. As listener-related factor is one of the main sources of problem for listening comprehension among students, students need to follow listening processes and the strategies, for example, improving concentration and memory, using both bottom- up and top-down processing, using schemata stored in their background knowledge and avoiding bad listening habits.

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