Enhancing Listening Comprehension through Testing; a Case Study.

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Abstract

Listening comprehension is one of the important skills in foreign language learning, however, there has been relatively little research in this field. For that matter, testing listening skill has not had a long history either. Currently the situation is different and the listening test has been given sufficient weight in language testing and assessment. Almost all standardized and proficiency English language tests throughout the world include listening component (e.g. TEFOL, ILETS, various Cambridge Exams). Certain universities have even included a listening component in their entrance examination (e.g. in Japan); while other educational institutions have made an English proficiency certificate (which has a listening component) a graduation requirement (e.g. HCT in UAE).

This study aims at investigating the effect of 'pre-test preparation' on test achievement. The subjects were a group of 3rd year university students on a B.A. degree programme in English, in Kurdistan region, Iraq. The project extended over a period of three months; during which the students were being prepared to sit for two proficiency (standardized) listening tests, namely Cambridge Preliminary (known as PET). Results of the first test, as expected, were rather unsatisfactory. The students were made aware of their mistakes through analysis of their test results. After a period of two months the students were put through another listening test of the same level of proficiency to find out if their familiarity with the test processes and procedures would affect their test achievement. The results showed remarkable improvement.

It is hoped that this study and the suggestions that are made, would be of benefit for teachers and test-takers alike, in tackling some issues related to listening comprehension.

Part one

Review of Research on Listening Comprehension

1.1   Introduction to the history of teaching listening

It is commonly agreed by educators and applied linguists that the study and research in listening comprehension is relatively recent (as compared to other language skills) Brown (2010), Bloomfield, et al., (2011a), Rost (2011). The interest in this field of language teaching can go back to early 20th century. The development in recording technology in the early 1900s gave birth to a new science, Acoustic phonetics, listening was defined in terms of reliably recording acoustic signals in the brain for later use. Interest in listening continues as a result of emergence of new technologies in telecommunications and later in computer sciences. These changes were also reflected in teaching languages as the recording industry made it possible to bring native speakers' voice (sounds) into classrooms. This enabled language learners to listen to authentic conversations of the speakers of the target language. (Rost, 2011)

Brown (2007) relates the reason for the delay of giving importance to listening skill to human beings "natural tendency to look at speaking as the major index of language proficiency". Consider, for example, our commonly used query, 'Do you speak Japanese?' Of course we don't mean to exclude listening comprehension when we say that, but when we think of foreign language learning, we first think of speaking. In the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, language-teaching methodology was preoccupied with the spoken language. Language teachers were busy with oral drills, repetitions and miming tasks. It was not uncommon for students to practice phrases orally they didn't even understand. (Richards 2008).

1.2   The role of listening in language education

Listening plays an important role in communication, yet it is arguably, as claimed by Nation & Newton (2009: 17)." the least understood and most overlooked of the four skills (L, S, R and W) in the language classroom". It is believed that of the total time spent on communicating, listening takes up 40-50%; speaking, 25-30%; reading, 11-16%; and writing, about 9% (Gilakjani and Ahmadi, 2011, cited in Hamouda, 2013). Nation & Newton (2009: 17) reiterated Nunan's, (1998) similar views on the time spent by L2 learners on listening, claiming "that over 50 percent of the time that students spend functioning in a foreign language will be devoted to listening" (cited in Nation & Newton, 2009).

There is a collective agreement among linguists and educators that listening is the first skill acquired in the process of learning the first language (L1). Listening, as pointed out by Nation & Newton (2009: 37) "is the natural precursor to speaking; the early stages of language development in a person's first language (and in naturalistic acquisition of other languages) are dependent on listening ". It takes a child up to 6 months or more of listening to his/her surrounding to produce his/her first simple syllable of the CV pattern, e.g. pa, ma, ba . The child continues with this process until he/she develops proper spoken form of the language, with the continuous help from adults in correcting him/her. It is through listening that speaking is developed and later language acquisition takes place.

A similar process to that of learning L1 also occurs in the classrooms of learning the second language. Students always do more listening than speaking. Listening competence, as Brown puts it, "is universally "larger" than speaking competence. It is not surprising then, that in recent years a

great emphasis has been placed on listening comprehension by the language-teaching profession (Brown, et al. 2012: 161).

Our knowledge and understanding of this sophisticated and complex behaviour is still very limited. Brown (2013:1) claims "that even after decades of study, we may just be scratching the surface of a deep understanding of the fundamental processes and mechanisms that underpin our ability to communicate with members of our own species". This view also echoed by other researchers in the field of language learning as Bloomfield et al. state "Despite its importance in the development of second language (L2) proficiency, there is little research on listening comprehension in a second language" (Bloomfield et al. 2011)

In view of Richards (2008) to understand the nature of listening processes, "we need to consider some of the characteristics of spoken discourse and the special problems they pose for listeners. Spoken discourse has very different characteristics from written discourse, and these differences can add a number of dimensions to our understanding of how we process speech. For example, spoken discourse is usually **instantaneous**. The listener must process it "online" and there is often no chance to listen to it again." (ibid: 3)

Listening is also an area that is interconnected with numerous areas of inquiry and development. Listening is quite apparently relevant in humanities and applied sciences such as linguistics, education, business and law, and in social sciences such as anthropology, political science, psychology and sociology. At the same time, the processes of listening are relevant to natural sciences such as biology and chemistry, neurology and medicine, and to the formal studies of computer sciences and systems sciences. (Brown, 2011)

1.3   Defining listening

When an argument is about to reach a deadlock, the speaker may ask the listener 'would you listen to me?' What is meant here is ' can you try to understand me, or comprehend what I am saying'. Generally speaking, listening can be defined as the ability to identify and understand what a speaker is saying among people who 'speak' same language (including those who have learnt that language as a second language).

To Rost (2011) the process of listening "involves overlapping of four types of processing; neurological processing, linguistic processing, semantic processing, and pragmatic processing. A complete understanding of listening needs to account for all four types of processing, indicating how these processes integrate and complement each other". The above definition requires understanding the speaker's accent or pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and comprehension of meaning; all happening simultaneously. In simple terms an able listener of a particular language community is capable of identifying and analysing the sound waves produced by a speaker belonging to the same community; then decoding these into meaningful elements.

1.4   Assessing Listening

In their 'Preface' to Gary Buck's (2009) *Assessing Listening*, Alderson & Bechman claim that "The assessment of listening abilities is one of the least understood, least developed and yet one of the most important areas of language testing and assessment". Because of this complexity "the testing of listening comprehension presents considerable problems" Buck (2001). Developing listening comprehension is important for understanding spoken discourse in the second or foreign language. In situations where tests of speaking can not be administered for practical and logistical reasons, "it is crucial to test listening" instead, Alderson & Bechman in Buck's (2009).

1.5   Listening Comprehension Problems

Problems relating to listening comprehension of L2 learners seem to be occurring worldwide. Goh (2008) reports that "All language learners face difficulties when listening to the target language." Types of these problems (as well as recommendations to tackle them) are documented by numerous researchers in the field (Hamouda, 2013, Goh, 2008, Bloomfiel et al., 2011a). Goh (2008) lists a range of listeners' problems and difficulties that have been investigated "from text structure and syntax to personal factors such as insufficient exposure to the target language, and lack of interest and motivation. It is not, however, the aim of this study to review these problematic issues. It is suffice to say here that since listening involves a cognitive process, remedies and solutions to them are not readily available.

1.6   How Listening is assessed

As it was pointed out earlier, listening is a cognitive activity, meaning that we cannot see what is happening inside the brain. The question that could be raised here is 'how can we measure something that we can not see?' Brown and Abeywickrama's (2010: 159) answer is to "rely as much as possible on *observable* performance in our assessment of students. *Observable* means being able to see or hear the performance of the learner". Brown and Abeywickrama classified the four language skills according to their observable performance, as illustrated in the following table.

Can the teacher directly observe …		
	the Process ?	the product?
Listening	No	No
Speaking	Yes	No *Yes
Reading	No	No
Writing	Yes	Yes

Observable performance of the four skills (adapted from Brown and Abeywickrama's. 2010)

*Except in the case of an audio or video recording that preserve the output

The table shows that neither the process of performance nor the product of listening and reading, i.e. the **'receptive skills'** can be observed. This means that when we communicate and get a response, whether verbally, in an action or written output, we are observing the **result** of the listening. "You can no more observe listening (or reading) than you can see the wind blowing", that is to say observing "the result of the wind by noticing trees waving back and forth" (Brown and Abeywickrama 2010: 160). Speaking and writing **'productive skills'**, on the other hand, can be heard and seen; and their products can be kept 'permanently observable, as "meaningful intake somewhere in the brain" – or as recorded speech. In conclusion Brown and Abeywickrama claim that "all assessment of listening and reading must be made on the basis of observing the test-taker's speaking or writing (or nonverbal responses), not on the listening or reading itself. Thus, basically, all assessment of receptive performance must be made by **inference**! (my emphasis)" (ibid).

To clarify the above argument further Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) explain that "we have developed reasonably good assessment tasks to make the necessary jump through the process of inference, from unobservable reception to a conclusion about comprehension competence", i.e. the actual performance is made "behind the scenes". The argument leads to the fact that listening is "often implied as a component of speaking" and "the overtly observable nature of speaking renders it more empirically measurable than listening" (ibid: 161).

Part two

2.1. Effect of familiarising students with a standardised listening test on test results

There is a strong belief that factors such as "motivation and familiarity with test formats, do affect test performance" Rost (2011: 221). Large scale examining bodies and testing institutions annually publish instructional approaches and testing preparation guidelines to help students perform well on tests.

This part explores the processes and procedures that were undertaken to conduct two standardised (proficiency) listening tests, and then analyse and compare their results. The tests were past papers of the listening component of Cambridge's Preliminary English Test (known as PET). The aim was to find out the effect of 'familiarity' with the test on the test results.

The listening component of PET carries 25% of the total test marks, conducted in 30 to 36 minutes. The other components 'Reading, Writing and Speaking' each also carries 25% of the test marks.

PET, as claimed by Cambridge "is equivalent to Level B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages **(CEFR)** which is labeled as an intermediate level.

The following is the list of 'Can Do' statements (descriptors) from the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 66, cited in Rost 2011).

Level	Descriptor
B1	Can understand straightforward factual information about common every day or job-related topics, identifying both general messages and specific details, provided speech is clearly articulated in a generally familiar accent. Can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure etc., including short narratives. Can understand enough to be able to meet needs of a concrete type provided speech is clearly and slowly articulated.

The reason I selected PET was because PET is a standardized test prepared by well-established and worldwide known examination board, which takes English language tests seriously in terms of principles of language assessment (namely Practicality, Reliability, Validity and Authenticity). Another reason was/is my personal background; I am quite familiar with the test procedures and administration requirement. In addition I had worked as an oral examiner for the speaking component of PET for 11 years.

2.2. Helping students prepare for tests

It is a natural phenomenon for test-takers to feel anxious before taking a test. In order to help students to overcome such anxiety the following steps were taken:

1.   The format of the test was explained to the students
2.   The sample test of Cambridge English PET was used as a mock test to familiarize the students with the content of the test.
3.   The test results were given back to the students pointing out the areas of difficulty and correct answers for positive washback effect.
4.   Questions and concerns were discussed and a date was allocated for a real-like listening test.

There was a general feeling that these steps helped to alleviate anxieties the students felt about the test.

2.3. Result of the first test

Considering the linguistic background of the students and their knowledge *about* English language, it was expected that most of them would do well in the test. The results however showed the opposite. The overall results of the whole test could be seen in the following chart.
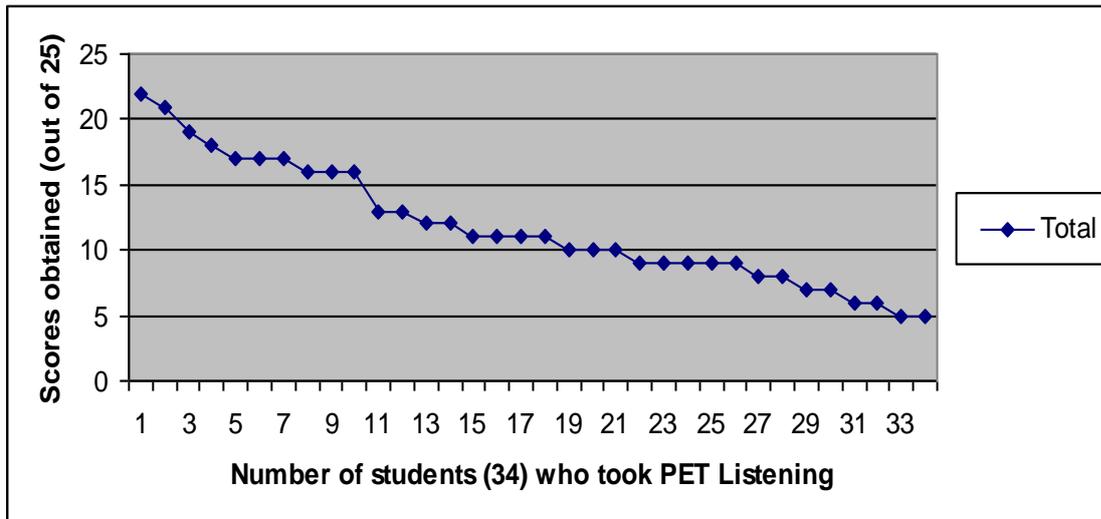
Overall results of the 'PET – Listening' carried out by 34 students

The breakdown of the range of the marks obtained is as follows:

Result of the first PET Listening Tests

Range of marks obtained	0-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25
Number of students	2	14	8	8	2

If we consider the passing mark to be 50%, i.e. 12.5 marks for this test, the result will be as follows:

The Pass and fail marks

	Marks obtained 12 and below (Fail)	Marks obtained 12.5 and above (Pass)
Number of students	22	12
Percentage of 34 students	65%	35%

2.4. Statistical Analysis of Item Difficulty and Item Discrimination

A Simplified form of item analysis, recommended by Miller et al. (2009) and Brown & Abeywickrama (2010), was applied to determine item difficulty and item discrimination for the items in parts 1 & 2. (Items in Parts 3 & 4 were excluded in this analysis because part 3 required production response (in writing), and part 4 required 'True and False' answers in which guessing and 'luck' could play a large role (50% chance). The results of an item analysis, as claimed by Miller et al. (2009: 351) "can be useful in identifying faulty items and can provide information about students' misconception and topics that need additional work". In this analysis my intention was not to identify "the faulty items", but rather to find out which test items caused difficulties for the students.

In this analysis the group under investigation consisted of 34 students; for procedural analysis responses of the 10 highest-scoring students was compared to the responses of the 10 lowest-ranking students (29% for each), leaving 14 middle range students (42%) which were not used in the analysis.

2.5. Determining Items of Difficulty & Discrimination

Item difficulty (also known as **item facility**) Miller et al., (2009: 355), Brown & Abeywickrama (2010: 70) - a statistic used to examine the percentage of students who correctly answer a given item - was calculated by using the following formula:

Item Difficulty = Number of students answering correctly **divided by** total number of students in the upper and lower groups (20 students in this case). Result of this operation would indicate that 85% or higher would be considered as very easy item, while 15% or lower would be considered as very difficult item.

Item Discrimination - a statistic that indicates the degree to which an item separates the students who performed well from those who did poorly. That is to say it shows the difference between the number of students in the upper and lower groups who got the answer right. (High discriminating power would approach a perfect 1.0, and no discriminating power at all would be zero.)

Example: interpretation of the analysis of item 2, part 1 of the test:

Test	PET Listening							
			Alternatives					
	Dates used	Students	A	B	C	Omits	Difficulty %	Discrimination
Item 2		Upper 10	1	0	**(9)**	0		
		Lower 10	5	3	**(2)**	0	55	0.70

Embolden figures between parentheses are the correct answers.

Item of difficulty = 9+2/20 = 11/20 = .55 or 55%; this item is moderate.

Item discrimination = 9-2/10 = 7/10 = (.70).

The advantage of having 10 students in each upper- and lower-scoring groups could help to easily make mental calculation (Miller et al., 2009: 356).

Embolden figures between parentheses alternatives are the correct answers.

Test		PET Listening						
				Alternatives				
	Dates used	Students	A	B	C	Omits	Difficulty %	Discrimination
Item 1	March-2012	Upper 10	4	(6)	0	0		
		Lower 10	0	(0)	10	0	30	0.60
Item 2		Upper 10	1	0	(9)	0		
		Lower 10	5	3	(2)	0	55	0.70
Item 3		Upper 10	0	(10)	0	0		
		Lower 10	3	(6)	1	0	80	0.40
Item 4		Upper 10	1	(9)	0	0		
		Lower 10	4	(2)	4	0	55	0.70
Item 5		Upper 10	(6)	2	2	0		

		Lower 10	(1)	5	4	0	35	0.50
Item 6		Upper 10	1	1	(8)	0		
		Lower 10	7	2	(1)	0	45	0.70
Item 7		Upper 10	2	1	(7)	0		
		Lower 10	4	4	(2)	0	45	0.50

Table 1. Item analysis of PET Listening result of Part 1 .

In Part one of the test which consists of 7 items, students of the upper scoring scale got 48 correct answers out of possible 70 i.e. 69%

Students of the lower scoring scale got 12 correct answers out of possible 70, i.e. 17%

A glance at the table shows that item No. 1 (with zero response from the lower-scoring group) was the most difficult and item No. 3 was the easiest.(with 100% responses from the upper group and 60% responses from the lower group). The rest of the items were of moderate difficulty.

Item No. 3 had the lowest discriminatory power (.40), and items 2 & 3 had the highest discriminator power (.70).

The following table shows the analysis of part two of the test

	Dates used	Students	Alternatives			Omits	Difficulty %	Discrimination
			A	B	C			
Item 8		Upper 10	3	(5)	2	0		
		Lower 10	5	(2)	3	0	35	0.30
Item 9		Upper 10	(8)	1	1	0		
		Lower 10	(1)	4	5	0	45	0.70
Item 10		Upper 10	1	1	(8)	0		
		Lower 10	1	8	(1)	0	45	0.70
Item 11		Upper 10	(9)	1	0	0		
		Lower 10	(0)	3	7	0	45	0.90

| Item 12 | Upper 10 | 1 | (9) | 0 | 0 | | |
	Lower 10	7	(2)	1	0	55	0.70
Item 13	Upper 10	3	2	(5)	0		
	Lower 10	8	0	(2)	0	35	0.30

Table 2. Item analysis of PET Listening result of Part 2

Part two of the test consisted of 6 items. Students of the upper scoring scale got 51 correct answers out of possible 60, i.e. 85%.

Students of the lower scoring scale got 10 correct answers out of possible 60, i.e. 17%

2.6 Results of PET listening Test 2

Results of the second listening test showed remarkable improvement, especially among **the middle range** students. The following chart shows the overall results of Teat 2.
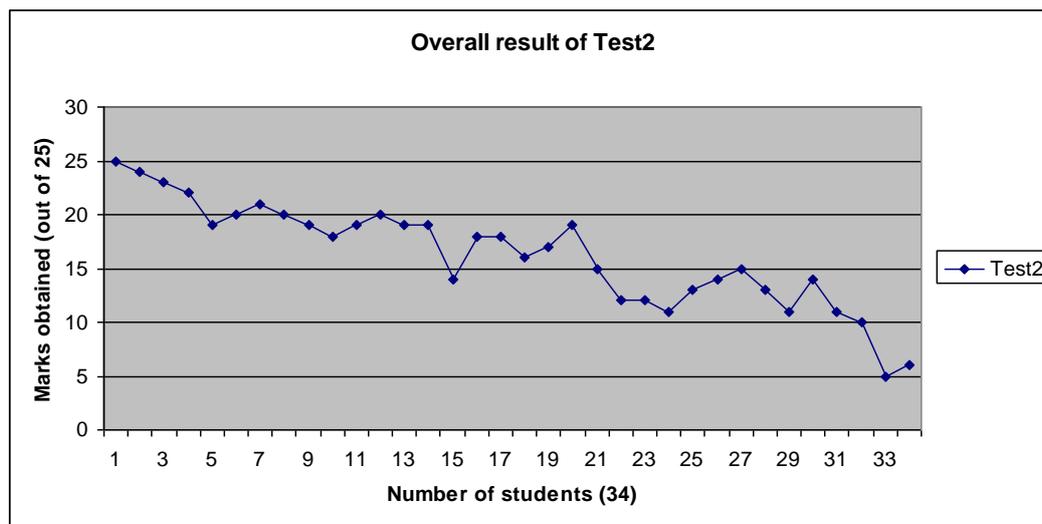
**Comparison of the results of the two PET Listening Tests**

The following table shows the difference in the range of marks obtained in the two tests.

Ranges of the Marks obtained

	0-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25
Test 1: number of students	2	14	8	8	2
Test 2: number of students	1	2	12	14	5

Table 3. Results of two PET listening tests and the range of the marks obtained.

The overall results of the two test are compared in the following graph.

Comparison between results of test 1 & 2

Marks obtained (out of 25)

Number of students (34)

Legend: Test1, Test2
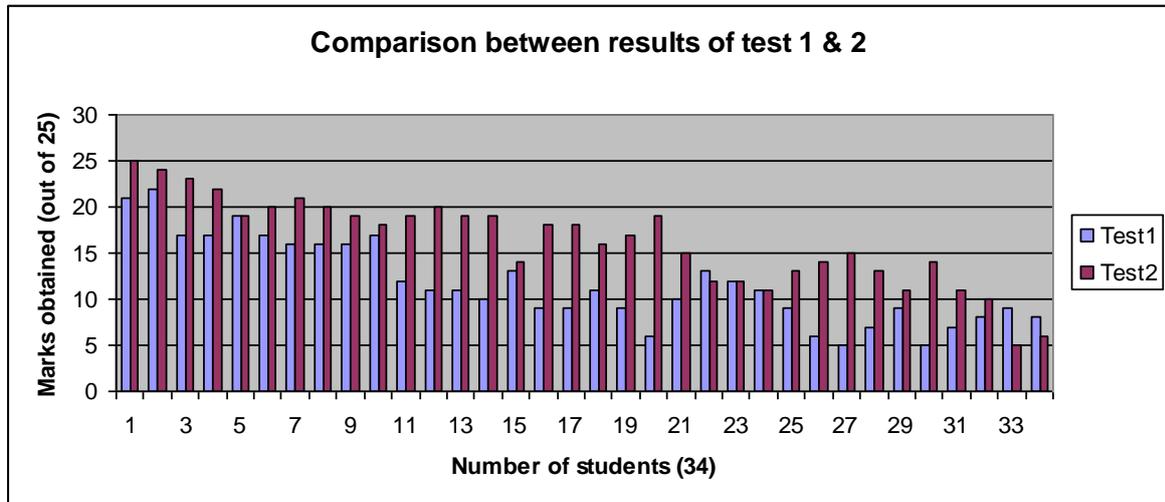
The overall results (i.e. all four parts of the tests) of the two listening tests showed great improvement in the students' performance, as shown in Table 4.

The Pass and fail marks

	Marks obtained 12 and below Fail		Marks obtained 12.5 and above Pass
Test 1 - Number of students	22		12
Percentage of 34 students	65%		35%
Test 2 - Number of students	8		26
Percentage of 34 students	24%		76%

Table 4. Comparison of results of test 1 & 2, marks obtained from 25 items each carrying one mark. Those who got less than 12 marks are considered as 'Fail', i.e. less that 50%. Those who got above 12.5 marks are considered as 'Pass'

2.7. Problems Reported

Problems relating to listening comprehension of learners of a second language seem to be global, as Goh (2000) claims "All language learners face difficulties when listening to the target language". Brown et al. (2010) and Goh (2008) list a range of problems and difficulties that have been investigated; these range from text structure and syntax to personal factors such as insufficient exposure to the target language, and lack of interest and motivation.

As I mentioned before I used the listening test as part of my continuous formative assessment of the students' listening comprehension ability. Since the results of the first test were not satisfactory, I allocated enough time for feedback sessions and washback effect. While doing so I also talked and listened to what the students considered to be 'pitfalls' for their listening comprehension problems.

Most of the comments I got from the students were similar to those reported in similar studies (Hamouda 2013, Goh 2008, Bloomfield et al. 2011b), these include:

The speech rate in the recoding was too fast. This is related to linguistic features of 'connected speech', such as *elision*, *assimilation* and *weak forms* in the spoken discourse of native English speakers. Distinguishing individual sounds and word boundaries in the stream of speech can cause a great deal of comprehension problems to L2 learners.

Students could not recognize certain vocabulary when spoken by a native speaker, though they knew the meaning of the word when it was presented in its written form.

Listening to recording was difficult due to the lack of a clear context as well as paralinguistic features such as body language, facial expressions and gestures.

Some students expressed difficulty in concentrating on the meaning of every word while at the same time attempting to understand the whole message.

Students' exposure to spoken English is limited to the classroom, so most were accustomed to one type of discourse; teacher talk, which is normally spoken too clearly. Exposure to authentic language of native speakers in 'real-life' situations should be given consideration

After the results of the first test were made known to the students, I went through the test items one by one in a 'slow motion manner', playing the recording a few times, while also helping the students with clues for the correct answers. Some of the students were surprised to notice how they had missed out the correct answers during the test. The answer was obviously clear, time factor, especially for Parts 2, 3 and 4, in which students had to do a lot of READING while listening to the text, i.e. 'parallel comprehension'.

The 'slow play back' of the recording was also useful for part 1, as I stopped the tape after each item and students had the chance to check their memory with less interruption, as it was the case in the test.

2.8. Limitations of the study
During the period between the two tests the students were using *Cambridge's Interchange 3* as a supplement for their course (Conversation), and they depended on the listening texts in the book for listening practice purposes. They were also advised and encouraged to use extra listening resources for practicing their listening skills, e.g. listening to native English discourse whenever their time allowed.

Standardised or proficiency listening tests are part of a whole test, therefore preparation for the test should include revision of grammatical items and the vocabulary range that are normally expected to be had for that particular test level. In most listening tests test-takers require to read certain parts of the test while listening to the text, strategies for enhancing the reading skill should also be revised before taking a listening test.

The listening device used in the classroom was a medium size portable loud speaker, in a rather large room. The only means of testing the acoustic efficiency of the device was by asking the students who were sitting at the back of the class about the sound quality and the clarity of the text. A better audio system (with at least two speakers, one on each side of the room), would have provided better acoustic opportunity to the students.

Test-takers should also have a clear view of the purpose for taking a proficiency test. For those who intend to study abroad, take employment or emigrate they need to prepare for a test that is recognized and valid in the host country, for example UK Visas & Immigration have their own testing format for people who intend to settle in the UK.

Conclusion

Listening comprehension is a complex process and many educators and experts in the field believe that there is a lot to be done in order to understand it better. Because of this complexity learners of an L2 face problems in their language learning process. However, listening comprehension skill, like any other language skills can be developed. In this study I investigated the progress of the students through familiarizing them with the 'Listening Component' of a standardized test, Cambridge Preliminary (PET), using past exam papers. This made the students aware of what to expect in the test. Results of two tests were compared and the outcome was encouraging and promising.

As a final comment here is a quote from Goh (2000: 74) "there is a great deal more to be known about real-time comprehension problems." Perhaps it would be relevant to add that "Listening is challenging because it is meaning-making, and that's a process that is difficult to view directly" Helgesen & Brown (2007). Their recommendation to understand listening better teachers need "to think hard about listening and apply or adapt the ideas they find most useful for their classroom." (ibid: 187)

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