

Mapping students' listening problems and strategies

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ABSTRACT

Listening is crucial to understand spoken language and to support the other language skills mastery; however, some students find several problems related to listening. This study aims to determine students' listening problems and listening strategies they apply to overcome. The research type is qualitative research using questionnaires and interviews as research instruments. This research used descriptive statistics to analyze the data obtained from the questionnaires and an interpretation of coding to analyze the interview transcript data. The respondents were 31 pharmacy students involved in the English for Pharmacy class, and there were three of them engaged in a structured interview session. The findings of this study were: (1) the students were moderate-level in listening problems of perception ($M=2.91$), parsing ($M=3.18$), and utilization ($M=2.95$) phase, (2) the students were high-level strategy users in cognitive, meta-cognitive, and socio-affective strategy, (3) the students mostly experienced difficulty in the parsing phase compared to two other problems and applied cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies than socio-affective strategy.

Keywords: listening skill, listening problems, listening strategies

Article History. Received: 26 Dec. 2020, Final revision: 8 Feb. 2021, Published: 28 Feb 2021.

Introduction

Listening is the ability to understand spoken languages. It is the process in accepting all the speakers say, make and show the purpose of the speakers, negotiate the meaning with them and provide answers. Listening is essential to learn appropriately as a part of having excellent and active communication in English. It is a crucial skill in language because listening provides input for language learners. To understand a situation in a specific language, we are required to listen what the speakers say. When we understand it, it will be easier to improve other language skills and get confidence. Thus, listening plays a crucial role in receptive and spoken language proficiency development (Hamouda, 2013; Renukadevi, 2014).

Listening is still often considered a passive activity. At the same time, listening is an active process because the listener is required to recognize the several sounds differences, and at the same time to understand vocabulary and language structure by knowing the meaning of the words/sentences heard. In listening, there are also activities to collect information that is quite long in the listeners' minds. Thus, listening is not that passive; it is a complex and challenging activity that requires listeners to think hard. There is a

process to create meaning with participation, creativity, and compassion (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Serri, Boroujeni, & Hesabi, 2012).

In listening, the listener needs to understand the speaker's pronunciation, language rules, vocabulary, and meanings. The process in listening involves auditory discrimination, aural grammar, choosing the important data, remembering it, and making the relations to the process between sounds and meaning forms.

Listening activities involve several complex processes such as hearing process, understanding process, evaluation process, and responding process. With various processes and activities in listening, most English learners find it challenging to learn and master it. The students tend to have a hard time remembering the meaning of the words quickly and failed to recognize signals even though they are familiar with some terms. They also found it challenging to understand the message in question even though they are quite familiar with the literal meaning of the words and cannot concentrate on the listening text (Bakar, 2018; Ai-hua Chen, 2013; Hamouda, 2013; Yilmaz & Yavuz, 2015).

All those problems occur during the three phases of listening, including perception, parsing, and utilization. Perception problems refer to the students' difficulties in understanding different intonations, stresses, and accents; problems in parsing phase are about the difficulties in syntax and semantics including quickly forgetting what was heard, failing to represent the word they heard, not understanding the next part of the input due to the problems previously faced, and missing other parts of the message due to lack of capacity in their short-term memory processing (C. C. M. Goh, 2000); and problems in utilization phase are about pragmatic and discourse when the listener understands the meaning of the word but fails to express the intended purpose and when the listener fail to understand the flow of ideas in the continuous nature of speech.

To overcome the problems, the students are applying some some strategies to improve their listening skills, namely cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and socio-affective strategies, according to O'Malley and Chamot (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Cognitive strategies are related to the students' level of English; metacognitive strategies are strategies used to organize, plan, and evaluate the application of cognitive strategies; and the socio-affective strategy related to community activities related to other people. The cognitive strategies including bottom-up, and top-down methods and for the students at the expert level, top-down is more often used (Ai-hua Chen, 2013; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Yurko & Styfanyshyn, 2020). Related to metacognitive strategy, students who use this strategy can learn faster and integrate the knowledge they have; they are also very constant recipients and understand the situation, and they have the confidence to receive help from peers, teachers, and families, observe and assess themselves, and increase their motivation (Cao & Lin, 2020; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; C. Goh, 2008; Zheng, 2018). For those who apply socio-affective strategies, they are able to work together with other people to check their understanding and reduce or remove their anxiety and worries and they know better how to reduce stress, have self-confidence during listening activities, and increase motivation to improve their listening skills (Parra, 2010; Serri et al., 2012).

In short, studies on listening strategies showed that raising the students' awareness on their listening problems and using effective listening strategies during their listening processes are

helpful to achieve successful listening (Ai hua Chen, 2013). The listening problems existed among the students are related to the the proper strategies applied by them (Namaziandost, Ahmadi, & Keshmirshekan, 2019; Rajab & Nimehchisalem, 2016), and the effective strategies they choose play an important role in developing their listening proficiency (Bozorgian & Pilla, 2013; Coskun, 2010). It means that when they are aware of their listening problems and they choose the effective strategy to overcome, they may be able to improve their listening proficiency.

Accordingly, the researcher's purpose of this study is to map the listening problems faced by the students and the strategies used by them in listening. By mapping the students' listening problems and strategies, it will help the teacher to prepare listening classes, including appropriate learning procedures and tasks regarding the different levels of understanding between the classes.

Research Method

This research used a descriptive quantitative method to answer the research questions. The respondents were 31 Pharmacy Students joining English for Pharmacy Students. The participants were all 100% female with a minimum and maximum age of 19 to 23.

The research used both questionnaires and interviews to collect the data. The researcher adopted the questionnaires of some references (Hamouda, 2013; Lotfi, 2012; Nowrouzi et al., 2015). There were 15 items of listening problems and 15 items of listening strategies on a five-point Likert scale. The researcher obtained an acceptable Cronbach's alpha coefficient of (0.87) for listening problems and (0.83) for listening strategies for the questionnaire's internal reliability.

The students carried out a listening activity before administering the questionnaire. Their experience in the real listening task can base their questionnaire responses. After the data were obtained, then they were analyzed using a descriptive statistical method such as percentage, means, and standard deviations. The descriptive statistics results were then categorized into three levels (low, moderate, and high). The 'low' level was a mean of 1.65 or below, meanwhile, the 'moderate' level was a mean between 1.66 and 3.35. A mean of 3.36 or higher then was considered a 'high' level for listening problems and listening strategies.

Besides the questionnaires, this research also used interviews to obtain the data. The results of the interview support the data obtained through the questionnaires. Of 31 students, three students were getting the top score of the listening test conducted before administering the questionnaires involved as respondents to interview. The interview was conducted in a structured interview. It means that the researcher had prepared questions to be answered by the respondents.

Results & Discussion

Results

The first questionnaire is listening problems, and the second is listening strategies. The former is divided into three, namely Perception, Parsing, and Utilization; while the latter is divided into Cognitive strategy, Metacognitive strategy, and Socio-affective strategy. The following table shows the results of the analysis.

Table 1.Listening Problems (n = 31)

Phase	Statements	Means	St. Deviation	*Level
Perception	I think the text is speedy to listen.	3.23	0.99	Moderate
	I often miss the beginning of a text.	2.68	0.87	Moderate
	I find many unfamiliar words and expression	3.35	0.84	Moderate
	I am unfamiliar with many words and sounds in English.	2.16	0.69	Moderate
	I experience difficulty in concentration	3.23	0.99	Moderate
	As I listen, I miss the next part while thinking about the meaning.	2.68	0.87	Moderate
	Total		2.91	0.84
Parsing	I just easy to forget the phrase and words that I have just heard	3.03	0.71	Moderate
	I find it difficult to guess the accurate meaning of words in sentences.	3.19	0.87	Moderate
	I get confused about the unfamiliar topic.	3.26	0.82	Moderate
	I find it difficult to understand a lot of new information in a short time.	3.39	0.76	High
	I find it difficult to understand the specific meaning of the sentences	3.16	0.93	Moderate
	I find it challenging to determine detailed information about what I just heard.	3.03	0.55	Moderate
	Total		3.18	0.77
Utilization	I experience difficulty in getting the order of ideas	2.9	0.7	Moderate
	I get confused about the main idea.	2.94	0.68	Moderate
	I experience difficulty in getting the relationship among ideas.	3.00	0.68	Moderate
	Total		2.95	0.69

From Table 1, we can see that the mean value of each item is at the “moderate” level, and the overall mean value is (2.91), which is also at the “moderate” level. It means that the learners have

reported experiencing moderate levels of listening problems in the Perception phase as fast speech rate, concentration (missing the beginning of the text, disregarding the next part), and finding

unfamiliar sounds & words. It also presents the difficulties in the Parsing phase.

The table also shows that only item number 9 (I find it difficult to understand a lot of new information in a short time) falls into the “high” level with the mean (3.39). In contrast, this category's overall means value is (3.18), which falls into the “moderate” level. It means that the learners have experienced moderate to high levels of learning problems at the Parsing phase, including forgetting phrases & words they heard,

guessing accurate meaning, unfamiliar topics, and understanding new information in detail.

As seen in the table, all listening problems at the Utilization phase fall into a “moderate” level with an overall means value (2.95). It means that the students have experienced a moderate level of getting the order of ideas in the text, getting the main idea, and getting the ideas' relationship. We can see the summary of each listening problem phase's mean and levels in the total rows Table 1 (bolded).

Table 2. Listening Strategies (n = 31)

Strategies	Statements	Mean	St. Deviation	*Level	
Cognitive	I try to imagine the conversation setting to understand what the speakers are talking about.	3.45	0.72	High	
	I use the words I know to help me guess the meaning of the words I don't know.	3.81	0.87	High	
	I use the text's central idea to guess the words' meaning that I don't know.	3.9	0.91	High	
	When listening, I compare what I know with what I already know about the topic.	3.74	0.82	High	
	When listening, I adjust my interpretation if I realize that it is not correct.	3.84	0.86	High	
	Total		3.75	0.84	High
Metacognitive	Before I listen, I think of similar texts that I may have listened to.	3.48	1.06	High	
	Before listening, I have a plan in my head for how I am going to listen.	3.97	0.95	High	
	When listening, I occasionally ask myself whether I am satisfied with my comprehension level	3.61	0.84	High	
	When listening, I have a purpose in my head.	3.94	0.93	High	
	When guessing the meaning of a word, I think back to everything else that I have heard previously to see if my guess correct.	3.71	0.94	High	
	After listening, I think back to how I heard and what I might do differently next time.	3.48	1.06	High	
	I focus more on the text when I find it difficult to understand it.	3.9	0.83	High	
	I think listening in English is challenging.	4.26	1.13	High	
	Total		3.75	0.96	High

Socio-affective	When listening, I try to relax	3.48	0.93	High
	As I don't understand something, I try not to feel anxious about it.	3.55	0.99	High
	Total	3.52	0.96	High

Table 2 shows the mean, standard deviation, and level of cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies related to listening strategies. From the table, we can see that all items in Cognitive strategy fall into the "high" level. The students have applied strategies picturing (imagining), guessing the meaning, and adjusting interpretation as part of cognitive strategy. Regarding metacognitive listening strategy, it can be seen in the subsequent rows. They show that all items in the Metacognitive strategy also fall into a "high" level, meaning that they have applied Metacognitive strategies such as having planning, goals, and reflections of listening texts they heard. The socio-affective listening strategy is shown in the table. It shows that the level of applying the socio-affective strategy is at the "high" level. The students have tried to relax and avoid feeling worried (controlling anxiety) as part of the socio-affective strategy.

Regarding the interview results, as already discussed previously, the interview was carried out with three students. It was a structured interview asking about the issues of listening problems and strategies in the questionnaire. However, in the interview, the respondents would express their opinions to the interviewer freely. The interview was recorded through Voice Note on WhatsApp android application. The interview was carried out in Indonesian as the students' native language. It was to encourage the interviewee to express their opinion as honestly as they can. The results of the interview were then written in transcript and translated into English. The results of the interview were divided into some categories, including 1) level of skill, 2) opportunity, 3) previous listening experience, 4) listening problems, 5) listening strategies.

The first category is about the level of skill. The students were asked to evaluate the listening proficiency level, from "poor," "moderate," or "good." Two students thought their listening skill levels were "moderate," and the rest thought her listening skill level was "poor."

The second category was the opportunity to listen. The three students gave different opinions. Two students still deepen their listening skills by watching drama, films, speech, or listening to

music in English. In contrast, one student only deepens her listening during English class because she does not watch movies or listen to music. However, related to having direct conversations with native speakers, all three have the same experience, that they have never interacted directly with native speakers.

I do not (deepen listening skills) recently because I have no time to restudy the vocabularies. I also do not like watching western movies or listening to English songs, so (I) just watch videos or information in English, then I try to find and learn the new vocabulary. (R2.2)

In the third category, a past learning experience, two of them had pleasant experiences while learning English. One of them had no particular expertise related to learning English. Meanwhile, for the fourth category, namely listening problems, the three considered that the lack of English vocabulary they mastered. They also think that the way of pronunciation of native speakers is unfamiliar to them, that they find it challenging to catch what the native speakers say. Besides, two students stated that the native speakers' rate of speech also affects their listening fluency. Two of them even considered that they had problems related to the length of the conversation/listening text they listened to. The longer the text, the more difficult for them to catch the content.

The difficulty is that vocabularies and pronunciation are different. I got confused. The word said was this, (but) the pronunciation was different. (R1.6)

.... (the problem) is that the native speaker speaks too fast, in my opinion, it is also fast that I find it difficult to understand quickly and precisely what he is saying (R3.6).

Meanwhile, the fifth category is the listening strategies used by the students. The strategies are to learn vocabulary and those with similar pronunciation one to another, use application/Google translation to show meaning and pronunciation, use the internet to search and practice listening, watch videos on YouTube, and play listening play several times. One of the

students also makes scripts from the play she heard to describe the difficulties she faced.

In facing listening tests, I watch YouTube about listening questions, and (I) often search for questions (from other websites). (R1.7)

The way I learn is to memorize some vocabulary. With the help of Google translation, I listen, so I know the vocabulary in writing and in pronunciation or how to speak (them) correctly. (R2.7)

Besides, after I have listened to the record, I describe the conversation I heard. So I write the description (script) according to what I heard. (R3.4)

Discussion

This study examined two research questions, namely listening problems and listening strategies. Regarding the listening problems, the respondents experience difficulties in the Perception, Parsing, and Utilization phases at a "moderate" level. It means that the students sometimes experience listening problems related to tempo and concentration, missing the text's beginning (Perception), easy forgetting what was heard, failing to represent the word they heard, not understanding the next part of the input due to the problems previously faced, and missing other parts of the message due to lack of capacity in their short-term memory processing (Parsing); and getting failed to express the intended purpose of topics/ideas either guessing, sorting, or determining the relationship of the ideas (Utilization).

Meanwhile, from the results of the interview, listening problems are more related to the lack of mastery of similar pronunciation of some words (Parsing), to the speed rate & long spoken which often make them miss the play (Perception), and to the topics and the organization of the topics discussed (Utilization).

Regarding the listening strategy, based on the results of the questionnaire, it can be seen that the respondents applied all strategies, including cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective. Respondents used the words they understood in guessing the meaning of words they didn't understand. Respondents also searched for meaning in their heads when listening to the listening text (Cognitive strategy). Regarding recalling, respondents often remember similar texts that they have heard before and plan how they will listen to the text, including thinking

about the next step in listening to listening texts (Metacognitive strategy). The students also try to relax when having a listening test and not worry when getting problems in listening (Socio-Affective). All is shown from the results of the total items for each category, which are at the "High" level.

From the results of interviews, the students tended to apply some cognitive strategies more than others. They are vocabulary translation, paying attention to spelling and pronunciation, reading subtitles to listen, and repeating listening texts several times. Those strategies were parts of Top-down strategies. Besides, guessing the listening text's answers, explaining the contents of listening with the descriptions and scripts they compiled and visualized (imagined) were parts of the Bottom-up strategy. The three students did not specifically explain Metacognitive or Socio-affective strategies in their answers. It shows imbalancing that the students are still dominant in implementing cognitive strategies and lacking in implementing the other strategies. Regarding a number of studies which find that students who are more proficient will apply metacognitive strategies more frequently than those who are less proficient, or that strategy selection is in line with individual students' learning motivation, it is necessary for teachers to increase their students' metacognitive awareness to be more able to plan, monitor, and evaluate their listening so that the students do not focus only on their cognitive abilities. This can be done by implementing appropriate strategies in teaching listening so that the students have more strategic abilities in solving listening problems.

Conclusion

In conclusion, pharmacy students' listening problems were moderate, while pharmacy students' listening strategies were high. For listening problems, the students mostly experience difficulty in the Parsing phase, followed by the Utilization phase and the Perception phase. They seem to do not fully understand the syntax, semantics, and ordering of the listening text topics.

However, most Pharmacy students also applied the Cognitive and Metacognitive strategies than the Socio-Affective strategy seen from the result of the mean showing that mean of Socio-Affective strategy is the lowest. It means

that the students tend to focus on learning vocabularies, phrases, and meaning rather than anxiety during the listening test. By mapping these problems and strategies in listening, the teacher can easily determine teaching strategies in a specific class regarding the different language acquisition levels between the classes and can lead them to apply the appropriate listening strategies to improve their listening proficiency.

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*Репрезентація Освітніх Досягнень, Мас-Медіа
Та Роль Філології У Сучасній Системі Наук
(1st. Ed), 1-10.*

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