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**Listening Comprehension Problems -  
Voices from the Classroom**

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**Abstract**

Listening ability is one of the important skills in foreign language learning. In spite of its importance, listening has long been the neglected skill in foreign language acquisition, research, teaching, and assessment. There has been little research on the listening problems that L2/FI learners experience in learning to listen to spoken English in the classrooms. The present study attempts to investigate the listening problems encountered by a group of first year English major students of Qassim University. 60 students who took the listening course in 20011/12 were selected for the study. Data was gathered by means of questionnaires and interviews. The results of the study showed that Accent, pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, different accent of speakers, lack of concentration, anxiety, and bad quality of recording were the major

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listening comprehension problems encountered by EFL Saudi learners. Understanding students' learning difficulties may enable EFL teachers to help students develop effective learning strategies and ultimately improve their English listening abilities. Suggestions are made for addressing problems regarding how teachers can help their students overcome listening comprehension problems. The results of this study may also be useful for those who are interested in this field.

**Key Terms:** listening, listening comprehension, listening problems

## **Introduction**

No one can deny the importance of listening skills in foreign language learning because the key to acquire a language is to receive language input. Krashen, Terrell, Ehrman, & Herzog (1984) claim that acquisition takes place only when students absorb enough comprehensible input. The same claim was supported by Rost (1994) who confirmed that listening is vital in language classrooms because it provides input for learners. As an input skill, listening plays a crucial role in students' language development. Krashen (1985) argues that people acquire language by understanding the linguistic information they hear. Thus language acquisition is achieved mainly through receiving understandable input and listening ability is the critical component in achieving understandable language input. Without understanding inputs at the right level, any kind of learning simply cannot occur. Thus listening is a fundamental language skill, and as such it merits a critical priority among the four skill areas for language students. As Hasan (2000) pointed out, "listening comprehension provides the right conditions for language acquisition and development of other language skills" (p.138). Listening, therefore, is essential not only as a receptive skill but also to the development of spoken language proficiency.

Listening plays an important role in communication as it is said that, of the total time spent on communicating, listening takes up 40-50%; speaking, 25-30%; reading, 11-

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16%; and writing, about 9% (Gilakjani and Ahmadi, 2011). According to Goh (2000), listening is the primary means by which incoming ideas and information are taken in. Gilbert (1988), on the other hand, noted that students from kindergarten through high school were expected to listen 65-90 percent of the time. Wolvin and Coakley (1988) concluded that, both in and out of the classroom, listening consumes more of daily communication time than other forms of verbal communication. Listening is central to the lives of students throughout all levels of educational development (Coakley & Wolvin, 1997). Listening is the most frequently used language skill in the classroom (Ferris, 1998; Vogely, 1998). Both instructors (Ferris & Tagg, 1996) and students (Ferris, 1998) acknowledge the importance of listening comprehension for success in academic settings. Numerous studies indicated that efficient listening skills were more important than reading skills as a factor contributing to academic success (Coakley & Wolvin, 1997). Nevertheless, it is evident that listening is more important for the lives of students since listening is used as a primary medium of learning at all stages of education.

In spite of its importance in foreign language learning, the teaching of listening comprehension has long been —somewhat neglected and poorly taught aspect of English in many EFL programs (Mendelsohn, 1994, p. 9). EFL learners have serious problems in English listening comprehension due to the fact that universities pay more attention to English grammar, reading and vocabulary. Listening and speaking skills are not important parts of many course books or curricula and teachers do not seem to pay attention to these skills while designing their lessons. Most teachers take it for granted and believe that it will develop naturally within the process of language learning. Persulesy (1988:50) states that one of the reasons for the opinion that listening is a skill that tends to be neglected is the feeling among language teachers that this skill is automatically acquired by the learner as he learns to speak the language. Most teachers also assume listening is synonymous to breathing— automatic (Ina Thomas and Brian Dyer, 2007). Another reason why this skill is not given serious attention is the fact that incompetence in it is easy to hide through nodding and shaking of the head, which may give the impression of understanding even there is none. Still another reason is that

audio-lingual courses give the impression that they are teaching listening when in fact they are teaching other skills. In addition to this, Nobuko Osada, 2004 reported that listening has not drawn much attention of both teachers and learners, they are generally less aware of its importance. In classrooms, teachers seem to test, not to teach listening. Meanwhile, students seem to learn listening, not listening comprehension. As a result, it remains the most neglected and the least understood aspect of language teaching (Glisan, 1985). In fact, listening is a complex mental process that involves perception, attention, cognition, and memory. Comprehending speech in a foreign language is a quite difficult task for language learners. When listening to a foreign language, many language learners face difficulties. In order to help students improve their listening ability, language teachers have to understand students' listening difficulties in comprehending spoken texts, and instruct effective listening strategies to help students solve their listening difficulties.

From his observation and experience of teaching the EFL listening skills for more than 15 years, however, the researcher has noticed that most of the students who enroll in the English Department of Qassim University have serious deficiencies in listening comprehension. This is especially observable when the students take the listening course entitled "Listening Skills" (ENG 121) at first year level. The researcher observed that many students performed poorly in this course. They are unable to comprehend natural spoken English delivered at normal speed because they do not understand the spoken content of the lessons. Frequently such students lose all confidence as foreign language practitioners. They have difficulty in concentration and maintaining concentration for a long time. This problem was noticed even by other instructors who were offering the same course to different groups. The same problem has also been observed in many countries (Buck, 2001 and Hayati, 2010). The results of these studies have proved that difficulties in listening in a foreign language are typical to listeners from different language background. For example, Underwood (1989) and Flowerdew and Miller (1992) stated that inability to concentrate "is a major problem because even the shortest break in attention can seriously impair comprehension." Goh (2000) reported learners'

difficulty in perception: students faced problems on recognition of familiar words. They stated that although they were familiar with some words, they were unable to remember their meaning immediately. They also expressed difficulty in understanding the intended message though they were familiar with literal meaning of words.

As is evident from the literature review, efforts have been made by a number of researchers to identify the difficulties experienced by second and foreign language listeners and how they deal with the difficulties. More empirical study, however, is needed to explore learners' own perceptions of their listening experience since listening cannot be observed directly and defined precisely. Learners' perceptions may offer clues to the sources of difficulties—how or why comprehension breaks down—and the strategies learners use to overcome the challenges.

This is what the present research tries to demonstrate. Taking into consideration the importance of the listening ability to language students and its dimensions of difficulty, the study reported here is an attempt to identify the LC problems as perceived by the Saudi students when listening to oral texts, and explore the strategies they use in response to the problems. It is also intended to raise teachers' awareness of these problematic areas in LC so that appropriate treatment measures can be taken. It is hoped that findings from this research will provide insights for the teaching and learning of LC skills

### **Research questions**

The present seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How can Saudi students perceive the importance of studying listening comprehension?
2. what listening problems do EFL students face when they listen to spoken English?
3. How can the teacher help your students overcome these listening comprehension problems?

### **Participants**

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This study was carried out with the participation of 60 first-year students majoring in English language and translation at Qassim University. Their ages range from 20 to 22 years old. The study took place during the second semester of the 2011/10 school year. The courses offered to the students include a listening component; they sometimes listened to audio cassettes and watched VCD's in English. Before starting their university education, all of the students had to take the placement Exam, which consists of multiple choice test items mainly focusing on reading, grammar and translation. The aural-oral skills are not the focus of attention in the placement Exam, that is, speaking is tested indirectly and listening is not included at all.

## **METHOD OF THE STUDY**

To fulfill the above aims, the study was carried out with quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. The instruments used in this study were: (1) a questionnaire, (2) a semistructured interview with the subjects. These instruments are described in detail below.

The first instrument which was employed in this study was questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to get information about the difficulties the students faced in EFL listening while taking the listening course at Qassim University. The questionnaire was designed after a review of the literature (Boyle, 1984; Yagang, 1994; Hasan, 2010;; Underwood, 1989; Rubin, 1994; Yagang, 1994; Dunkel, 1991; see also references of this research) about factors that influence listening comprehension.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section one contained 7 questions to collect subjects' English learning experience, the importance of listening skill and their self-rated English listening proficiency level. Section two included 35 items grouped into five categories: listening material, linguistic aspects, lack of concentration, speaker, listener, and physical setting. The answers were recorded on 4-point likert scale (never, sometimes, often, and always).

The initial draft of the English Listening Comprehension Problems questionnaire consisted of 45 questions. To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, it was given to four experienced teachers, (Dr. Zidan Jassim, Dr. Fahad Al Jumah, Dr. Abdlay, and Dr. Nour AlDin, all of whom have taught English listening for years in the same university where the present study was conducted, to examine the structure, logical flow of the questionnaire, the wording, clarity, length, and the order of the questions. The researcher then made some modifications based on the comments of the experts. For instance, items with semantic ambiguity were clarified or deleted, and items recommended by the experts were added.

## **2. Follow-up Interview**

The second data gathering instrument which was employed in this study was interview. The purpose of the interview was to triangulate the information that was obtained through the questionnaire; to obtain data on how the listening difficulties which had been identified through the questionnaire affected the learners' listening comprehension; to obtain information about the reasons behind the learners' difficulties of listening comprehension; and to find out if there are any other listening difficulties that affect the learners' listening comprehension. Moreover, by providing opportunities for learners to report in their own words, we might gain some insights into their understanding of and attitude towards some of these difficulties. The learner's voice can be very valuable to our understanding of their comprehension difficulties.

## **Techniques of Data Analysis**

The data obtained through the questionnaire and the interview were organized and analyzed. While the data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively, the data obtained from the interview were analyzed qualitatively. And

the results of the instruments identified the listening problems that affected the EFL learners of Qassim University.

## Results and Discussion

This section aims to present the statistical results and the data analyses in order to answer the research questions addressed in the present study respectively. Firstly, the results of the Saudi students' perception to the importance of studying listening comprehension are presented and analyzed quantitatively. The second section provides the results and analysis of listening comprehension problems encountered by the subjects. The third section deals with how the teacher can help his students overcome these listening comprehension problems. At last, recommendations for both teachers and students are given.

### First, Discussion of questionnaire results

The first section of the questionnaire is to answer the first enquiry:

**1. Research question.** How can Saudi students perceive the importance of studying listening comprehension?

In the first item of the questionnaire, the students were asked to evaluate their proficiency levels in listening skills. More than three quarters of the students rated themselves as “average, poor” in listening. Only 13.3% of the students think that their listening skills are ‘good’ whereas the other students (86.7%) think their listening performances are ‘average’ or ‘poor’.

Table 1 Students' general self-rating to listening proficiency

Statements	excellent %	Good %	average %	Poor %

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1. How do you rate your English listening ability when compared to others in class?		13.3	20	66.7
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This might be a reflection of their frustration caused by their previous failures or unhappy experiences in dealing with English because they had not received sufficient training in the first place.

### **Students' perception to the importance of the English listening skill**

As illustrated in Table 2, descriptive statistics are presented for the students' perceived importance of English listening skill.

**Table 2. Students' perception to the importance of listening skill**

Item no.	Statements	Never %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
2	I am more aware of the perceived importance of English listening skill.	10	6.7	25	58.3
3	I find that listening comprehension is difficult.	23.3	13.3	30.1	33.3
4	I find that listening comprehension is boring and not interesting.	75			25
5	I find that listening comprehension is exciting.	26	20	30	24
6	I receive sufficient training in English listening comprehension during your school.	83.3	10	6.7	
7	I never heard about listening strategy.	81.7	11.7	5.4	

When students were questioned on their own perceptions of listening skills taught, they responded in a variety of ways. Table 2 shows that most of the students (58.3 % always & 25% sometimes) were aware of the importance of listening comprehension. However, there were still a number (10%) of students who did not highly evaluate the role of listening skill.

When asked about the difficulty of the listening comprehension, 76.7% of the learners remark that listening comprehension is difficult. In addition to that, a small number of learners (25%) find that listening comprehension is boring and not interesting. Only 12% of learners find that listening comprehension is exciting. This is in line with a common problem that most students are unable to comprehend spoken English required at their beginning level.

As for item no. 6, we found out most of the subjects (83.3%) did not receive sufficient training in English listening comprehension during their school and tertiary stage. This may be attributed to the overemphasis on the teaching of reading and writing skills, which are assessed in the entrance exams to college. Sadly, most of the subjects did not gain proper training in English listening comprehension. Based on the collected data, 81.7% of the subjects never heard about listening strategy. The finding partly supports Bremnar's argument (1998), "Only by reaching a certain level will a student be likely to use a given strategy" (p.495).

To sum up, most of the subjects did not know much about listening strategies; accordingly, teachers had better introduce listening strategies specially defined in this study to students.

#### **4. Research question. What are the listening comprehension problems encountered by Saudi students when listening to spoken English?**

Factors causing students listening comprehension problems are categorized into different sources including problems related to the listening text, listening problems

related to tasks and activities, listening problems related to the listener and teacher's methodology which will be discussed in detail below.

#### 4.1. Problems related to the listening materials

The listening material may deal with almost any area of life. It might include street gossip, proverbs, everyday conversation, new products, and situations unfamiliar to the student. Also, in a spontaneous conversation speakers frequently change topics.

The material itself may be the main source of listening comprehension problems. In particular, unfamiliar words, difficult grammatical structures, and the length of the spoken text may present students with listening problems (Table 3).

Table 3: listening problems related to the content of the listening text

Item no.	Statements	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
8	I find it difficult to understand listening texts in which there are too many unfamiliar words including jargon and idioms.	15	25	26.7	33.3
9	Complex grammatical structures interfered with my listening comprehension.	16.7	23.3	26.7	33.3
10	Long spoken text interfered with my listening comprehension.	16.7	25	23.3	35
11	I find it difficult to interpret the meaning of a long spoken text.	16.7	35	25	23.3
12	I feel fatigue and distracted when I listen to a long spoken text.	15	25	26.7	33.3
13	I find it difficult to understand listening texts when the topic is unfamiliar.	13.3	16.7	36.7	35

14	I use my experience and background knowledge of the topic to understand the spoken text.	10	23.3	40	26.7
15	I find it difficult to understand every single word of incoming speech.	16.7	20	25	38.3
16	I find the listening passage difficult to understand.	10%	21.7%	26.6%	41.7%

#### **4.1.1 Problems pertaining to limited English vocabulary**

The first question was asked to know whether unfamiliar words, including jargon and idioms, interfered with the learners' listening comprehension. The great majority of the students 51/60 (85%) have responded that unfamiliar words, including jargon and idioms (sometimes, often, always) interfered with their listening comprehension.

This finding coincides with Muhammad Naeem Butt, 2010; and Hanoi, 2010 who reported that the major problem hindering listening comprehension was that the students' vocabulary was too limited to understand the message. The data also proves the theory realized by Underwood (1989) that lack of vocabulary is a big obstacle to most students in listening comprehension. The solution is to ask the students to practice as much as they can on these various materials. Therefore, they can get used to listening to the variety of topics without any difficulties.

#### **4.1.2 Problems pertaining to poor grammar**

The second question was asked to know whether complex grammatical structures interfered with the learners' listening comprehension. The great majority of the students 50/60 (83.3%) have responded that difficult grammatical structures (sometimes, often, always) interfered with their listening comprehension. The percentages point out difficult grammatical structures cause much trouble to students. This conforms to

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Vogely's study (1998) which shows that the difficulty in listening comprehension is partly due to the structural component of the text.

#### **4.1.3 Problems pertaining to the length of a spoken text**

In addition to the insufficiency of vocabulary and the difficulty of grammatical structures, the length of the listening text was one of the main reasons why the students can't understand most of the talk. Table (5) reveals that the majority of the students have responded that a long spoken text (35% sometimes, 25% often and 23.3% always) interfered with their listening comprehension. This result clearly shows that the length of the text can be one major factor that negatively affects the learners' listening comprehension. This confirms Ur's assertion (1984) which justifies that the difficulty in listening comprehension is partly due to the length of the listening text itself which bore listeners and distract their concentration. Therefore, it is possible to infer that long spoken texts interfere with the learners' listening comprehension.

From the result obtained above, it is possible to generalize that unfamiliar words, complex grammatical structures, and long text interfere with the listening comprehension of the great majority of the students. This might be due to completely relying on the bottom-up processing strategy in which learners make use of the analysis of words and sentence structure to enhance their understanding of the spoken text, and this might be due to the inadequacy of the top-down processing strategy in which learners make use of their previous knowledge, which is not directly encoded in words, that means, without examining words and structures.

#### **4.1.4 Problems pertaining to fatigue that may arise as a result of listening to a long spoken text**

"Fatigue" negatively influences a foreign language learner's listening to English. In academic listening especially, the listener will feel tired trying to "understand the unfamiliar sounds, lexis and syntax for long stretches of time". More than three quarters

of the learners mentioned that they felt fatigue and distracted when they listen to a long spoken text (25% sometimes, 26.7% often and 33.3% always). Thus, memory problems or even fatigue would distract listeners' attention from grasping the meaning of the text, and learners may miss the rest of the text when there is a lapse in concentration. However, this may be attributed to the fact learners do not pay enough attention to improving memory methods. Thus, many listeners' listening level still remains at the original level.

#### **4.1.5. Problems pertaining to understand every word in the text**

So students (25% often, 38.3 5 always) find it difficult to understand the meaning of every single word in the speech. This supports the claims of Muhammad Naeem Butt et al, (2010) who think that some foreign language learners try to understand every single word of incoming speech, but actually, doing so is both unnecessary and impossible. It is not even advisable because when they are trying hard to get every individual word or phrase, listeners are not seeing "the forest for the trees."

#### **4.1.6 Problems pertaining to unfamiliar topics**

From the above result, therefore, it seems reasonable to generalize that unfamiliar topic hinders the listening comprehension of the majority of the students. Table 5 indicates that many students (16.7% sometimes, 36.7% often, and 35% always) find it difficult to understand the listening text when the topic is unfamiliar. Familiarity with the topic of the lecture augments comprehension. This finding is consistent with Nuttall's declaration (1996) which shows that a more interesting requirement to understand a text is that the learner should share certain assumptions about the subject to the fact that students construct their understanding of the subject they listen on the basis of their experiences; problems arise, therefore, when there is a mismatch between the subject and the previous experience of the learner.

#### **4.1.7 Problems pertaining to basic background knowledge**

Background knowledge about a topic is also an important variable that can influence listening. Even if a person has mastered the skill of analyzing speech accurately and automatically, lack of basic background knowledge can cause reduced listening comprehension (Samuels, 1984). Table (5) shows that many students use their experience and background knowledge of the topic to understand the spoken text (23.3% sometimes, 40% often, and 26.7% always). This finding goes in accordance with that reached by Hasan (2000) who has suggested that associating newly heard information with prior knowledge is a powerful and very frequently used way to guess the meaning of a listening passage.

#### **4.1.8 Problems pertaining to difficulty of the material**

Table (5) also reflects that students (26.6% often, 41.7% always) find the listening material difficult to understand. These statistics show that the materials created certain difficulties for around two thirds of all students in listening.

In general, the above results indicate that the listening text itself can be the main source of listening comprehension problems. In particular, unfamiliar words, complex grammatical structures, long spoken text, a topic that cannot generate interest to listeners, complexity of sentences and unfamiliar topic pose listening difficulties to EFL learners.

### **4.2. Basic Linguistic Problems perceived by learners**

Linguistic challenges are those that result from the English language itself. They are caused by both Saudi students' lack of English proficiency and their professors' use of English in class. Research shows that some difficulties in understanding and remembering information from speakers may be due to the lack of English language skill itself. Brown (1994) points out several linguistic sources which make listening difficult:

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1) the use of colloquial language and slang; 2) the use of reduced forms; and 3) to strange accents and pronunciation. .

**Table 4. Listening problems related to Linguistic features**

Item no.	Statements	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
17	I find it surprising and difficult to deal with colloquial language and slang.	20	10	20	50
18	I find the pronunciation familiar but cannot recognize the words.	11.7	33.3	25	30
19	I find it difficult to recognize the signals which indicate that the speaker is moving from one point to another		34.3	26.7	40
20	When encountering an unknown word, I stop listening and think about the meaning of the word.	8.4	25	28.3	38.3
21	I find it difficult to infer the meaning of an unknown word while listening.	13.4	28.3	23.3	35
22	I find it difficult to follow the sequence of the spoken text when the sentences are too long and complex.	10	23.3	25	41.7

#### **4.2.1 Problems pertaining to the use of colloquial and slang expressions**

Colloquial language is a special challenge. If listening materials are made up of everyday conversation, they may contain a lot of colloquial words and expressions, such as stuff for material, guy for man, etc., as well as slang. Students who have been exposed mainly to formal or bookish English may not be familiar with these expressions. The uses of colloquial and slang expressions are likely to cause problems for non-native speakers



in understanding a lecture.

The results of this item show that 50.% of the subjects (always) agreed that the use of colloquial and slang expressions made it hard for them to comprehend a lecture, while only 20% of the subjects (never) disagreed with this statement.

The results indicate that students had problems with colloquial and slang expressions. This was probably because undergraduate students had less academic experience with colloquial or slang expressions or they lacked that type of vocabulary. This finding is in line with that reached by Brown (1992) who points out that ESL learners who have been exposed to standard written English and "textbook" language sometimes find it surprising and difficult to deal with colloquial language.

#### **4.2.2 Problems pertaining to the use of signal words**

Signal words help the listener to grasp the thread of thought in the material. The listener can predict what may come next by using signal words. If you hear a word that signals more of the same such as 'like-wise' 'moreover', you needn't worry about a new idea coming. If you hear such words as 'but' 'however' that signal a change is about to be made, you must be more careful. When you hear words like 'in a word' 'as a result' 'to sum up' that signal the main point of what has ever been said before is about to be summarized. That's the most important part that you should pay special attention to.

Unfortunately, many listeners (26.7% often, 40% always) may fail to recognize the signals which indicate that the speaker is moving from one point to another, giving an example, or repeating a point. Discourse markers used in formal situations or lectures such as "secondly," or "then" are comparatively evident to listeners. In informal situations or spontaneous conversations, signals are vaguer as in pauses, gestures, increased loudness, a clear change of pitch, or different intonation patterns. These signals can be missed especially by less proficient listeners (Gilakjani and Ahmadi, 2011).

#### **4.2.3 Problems pertaining to the use of unknown words**

When encountering an unknown word, many students (38.3% always, 28.3% Often, 25 Sometimes) stop listening and think about the meaning of the word. This interrupts the flow of speech and thus the students may miss some essential information. This tendency of seizing to listen and concentrating on the language word by word to work out its structure, and then decide on its meaning impairs comprehension (Underwood, 1989). Underwood also adds that failure to recognize words can also stem out of students inability 'to segment the word out of connected speech.

#### **4.2.4 Problems pertaining to an inferential process**

Moreover, many students find it difficult to infer the meaning of an unknown word while listening. This finding is in line with that reached by Rost (1990, p. 33) claims that:

"Understanding spoken language is essentially an inferential process based on a perception of cues rather than straight forward matching of sound to meaning".

Rost (1990) suggests that the L2 listener must perform various inferential processes while listening. As our learners are word-by-word processors, this inhibits their ability to infer meaning, as links between items will be missed.

#### **4.2.5 Problems pertaining to long and complex sentences**

In addition to the natural rapidness of their speech and their unclear pronunciation, some teachers use many long and complex sentences when delivering lectures. The use of long and complex sentences can make it hard for non-native speakers to understand a lecture. Table 5 shows that about 10% of the subjects (never) thought that their teachers' use of long and complex sentences did not make it hard for them to understand a lecture. But

90% of them agreed that the use of long and complex sentences did cause them problems in understanding a lecture. Long and complex sentences contain complicated structures and more information. They may create challenges for non-native speakers in understanding a lecture.

According to Brindley (1997), both linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge are required for one to understand a listening input. This accounted for the reason why many students could not understand their listening lessons.

### 4.3. Listening problems caused by the failure to concentrate

The fifth factor, which affects students listening comprehension, is concentration. During listening lessons students are required to be attentive since in a very restricted time they are required to process and understand a strand of newly introduced information. Failure to concentrate will result in the students missing some of the lecture content, which will eventually affect their understanding of the whole lecture.

Table 5 Listening problems caused by the failure to concentrate

Item no.	Statements	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
23	I lose focus of the talk when I have got an expected answer in my mind.	30	33.3	16.7	20
24	I am unable to concentrate because I search for the answers, and I listen to the dialogue at the same time.	15	33.3	26.7	15
25	I lose my concentration when the text is too long.	10	35	21.7	33.3
26	I lose my concentration if the recording is in a poor quality.	31.7	30	25	13.3
27	I lose my concentration when I think	23.4	33.3	25	18.3

	of another question.				
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#### **4.3. 1 Problems pertaining to focus loss which results from looking for an answer**

From the table No.5, learners pointed out that there are many reasons causing them unable to concentrate during the listening task. Besides simply not listening or paying attention, many students (33.3% sometimes, 16.7% often, 20 % always) stated that once they have got an expected answer in their mind, they tend to lose focus of the talk.

#### **4.3. 2 Problems pertaining to focus loss which results from thinking about another question**

Thinking about another question is another reason for losing concentration. Many students (33.3% sometimes, 25% often, and 13.3% always) may be thinking about another question; therefore, they will not concentrate too much on the text. Others claimed that they (35% sometimes, 21.7% often, and 15 % always) are not able to concentrate because they search for the answers, at the same time, listen to the dialogue.

#### **4.3. 3 Problems pertaining to focus loss which results from text length**

Text length is one of the major problems for listeners since they tend to lose focus after concentrating too long on the listening. The students (35% sometimes, 21.7% often, 33.3% always) stated that when the text is lengthy, they have difficulty remaining focused. According to Gilakjani, A.P. and Ahmadi, M.R. (2011) if the exercise is too long it would be more suitable to break it up into shorter parts by pausing or a change of the speakers.

#### **4.5. The Listener**

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Through the survey questionnaire, the respondents reveal that their problems may arise from their inability to recognize the main words in listening comprehension and understand the spoken text from the first listening.

Table 6: Listening problems related to listener

Item No.	Statements	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
28	I find it difficult to get a general understanding of the spoken text from the first listening.	10	23.3	30	36.7
29	At the time of listening I found it difficult to predict what would come next.	11.7	23.3	31.7	33.3
30	I found it difficult to recognize the words I know because of the way they are pronounced.	5	36.7	25	33.3
31	There were words that I would normally understand in writing, but when I heard them in a stream of speech, I found it difficult to tell where one word finishes and another begins.	13.3	16.7	33.3	36.7
32	I find it difficult when listening to English without transcripts.	6.6	25	41.7	26.7
33	I find it difficult to answer questions which require other than a short answer (e.g. why or how questions).	11.7	36.6	26.7	25

#### **4.5. 1 Problems pertaining to inability in getting a general understanding of the spoken text and predicting what would come next**

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As can be seen from Table (6), almost all of the students in the study (88.3% and 90%) have responded that they found it difficult to predict what would come next and to get a general idea from the first listening, respectively. More than half of the students (65% and 66.7%) have also responded that they often or always found it difficult to apply the aforementioned listening strategies (i.e., the predictive skills and the skills of getting the general idea, respectively).

From the above results, we can conclude that almost all of the students in the study had difficulty in applying predictive skills and skills of getting general idea of a text. This has also its own implication on listening comprehension. There are evidences which show that employing listening strategies promote listening comprehension while inability to employ listening strategies affects listening comprehension. For example, Rost (1991) studied the relationship existed between listening strategies and listening comprehension; they found a positive correlation between them. This is also in line with Harmer's opinion (2001) which shows listeners' success at understanding the content of what they hear depends to a large extent on their expertise in the listening strategies.

#### **4.5. 2 Problems pertaining to inability in recognizing the words they knew because of the way they were pronounced**

Table (6) shows that the majority of the students, i.e., 57 (95%) students out of 60 have responded that they often or always found it difficult to recognize the words they knew because of the way they were pronounced. And the majority of the students under the study have also responded that they "sometimes, often, always" encountered such problem.

From this result it is possible to generalize that most students find it difficult to recognize the words they knew because of the way they are pronounced. This result is also consistent with Ur's declaration (1984), which states that if a word is pronounced differently from the way it was said when it was learnt, the listener may not recognize it

as the same word, or may even miss its existence completely. At this point, this problem interferes with the learners listening comprehension.

#### **4.5. 3 Problems pertaining to inability in recognizing the words they knew in their written form when they hear them in a stream of speech.**

Table 6 shows that the great majority of the students, i.e., 70% of the students have responded that they often or always found it difficult to identify the words they knew in their written form when they hear them in a stream of speech.

From this result, we can conclude that there are words that most students normally recognize the words in their written form, but they find difficulty whenever they hear them in a stream of speech. In the Saudi case, when a student learns a new word or expression, it is believed the student usually learns both its written and spoken form. His recognition of the new word is linked to his knowledge of what it looks like on paper and what it sounds like when carefully pronounced by the teacher. If the student is not aware of what the new word sounds like when it is said quickly and juxtaposed with other words, the student may not realize that this may affect its pronunciation. This is also consistent with Ur's statement (1984) which shows that difficulty in listening comprehension is partly due to listeners' confusion that appears when they encounter juxtaposition of two words in which one of the sounds at the junction point has disappeared or is assimilated with the other. In this case, therefore, the learners fail to recognize the combined word.

#### **4.5. 4 Problems pertaining to questions**

Table 6 further shows that the majority of the students (88.3%) have responded that they (sometimes, often, always) found it difficult to answer questions which required other than short answer. From this result, it is possible to infer that many students find it difficult to answer listening questions which require longer answers (which demands

writing skills at the expense of listening). This confirms Ur's statement (1989) which justifies that the difficulty in listening performance is partly due to the provision of irrelevant tasks that demand the skills of reading, speaking and writing other than the skills of listening.

#### **4.5. 5 Problems pertaining to lack of transcripts**

The fact that learners find it difficult when listening to English without transcripts (41.7% often, and 26.7% always) but 6.6% indicates that written support in the form of transcripts provided before listening exercises never help them understand the text. It is clear that students' learning habit is the main cause to their listening problems. This may be due to the fact that transcripts allow listeners to check and make sure that they have listened to everything on the tape.

In general, the above results showed that listeners' factors can interfere with learners' listening comprehension. The learners' inability to apply listening strategies, their inability to grasp pronunciation, inability to manage challenging tasks, and frustration interfered with their listening comprehension. Moreover, the result pointed out that a listening text without visual support or the speakers' facial expressions and gestures interfere with learners' listening comprehension.

#### **4.6. The speaker**

Problems of listening comprehension related to speaking can be seen in relation to natural speech, pronunciation, varied accents, and a voice heard only on an audio-tape cassette recorder without seeing the speaker.

Table 7 Listening problems related to the speaker

Item no.	Statements	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always

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34	I find it difficult to understand the natural speech which is full of hesitation and pauses.	30	38.3	31.7	
35	I find it difficult to understand the meaning of words which are not pronounced clearly.	10	33.3	20	36.7
36	I find it difficult to understand the meaning of the spoken text without seeing the speaker's body language.	10	26.7	17.7	46.7
37	I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak with a variety of accents.		26.7%	43.3%	30%
38	I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast.	10	30	33.3	26.7
39	I find it difficult to understand the recorded material if I am unable to get things repeated..	10	26.7	33.3	30

#### **4.6. 1 Problems pertaining to hesitations and pauses**

Natural dialogues are full of hesitations, pauses, and uneven intonation. Table 7 shows that more than two thirds of students (sometimes or often, 70%) find it difficult to understand natural speech which is full of hesitations and pauses. This is in line with the findings of previous research which indicate that hesitations and pauses in spontaneous speech cause perceptual problems and comprehension errors for non-native speakers (Hasan, 2000). When people speak, they often hesitate, repeat themselves, say things that are ungrammatical and change their minds halfway through a sentence. These things are a natural feature of speech and may be either a help or a hindrance, depending on the

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students' level. So, the teacher's tasks when teaching listening will be to train students to understand what is being said in such conversations: to get them to disregard redundancy, hesitation, ungrammaticality and to be conscious of the speakers' changing their minds. (Harmer, 2001)

#### **4.6. 2 Problems pertaining to unclear pronunciation**

Unclear pronunciation of some speakers is also considered as a source of listening problem. Many students thought that unclear pronunciation causes much difficulty for them in understanding their English listening lesson. Results show that 36.7% always find it difficult to understand the meanings of words which are not pronounced clearly meanwhile 10% are never in that situation. The numbers above indicate that students' listening problem is partly due to unclear pronunciation.

#### **4.6. 3 Problems pertaining to variety of accents**

According to table 7, variety of accents causes difficulties to students in listening comprehension since they do not have much exposure to different accents. The result from table 2 demonstrates that many students (43.3% often and 30% a always) experience this kind of problem because they have got used to the accent of their own teachers and they are usually "surprised and dismayed when they find they have difficulty understanding someone else. Yagang (1994) asserts that the listeners have tendency to get familiar with the accents which they mostly listen. If listeners are exposed to standard British or American accents, they will face problems in understanding other accents. This suggests that a variety of accents of speakers create a great deal of troubles to students. The worse the students are at discriminating accents, the more likely they encounter difficulties in listening comprehension.

#### **4.6. 4 Problems pertaining to Speed of Delivery**

According to the students' responses, the number one problem that the students viewed as obstructing to their comprehension was undoubtedly the speed of speech. Faster speech rates, whether computer-manipulated or naturally produced, tend to have a negative impact on the comprehension of L2 listeners. Many students (90%, always, often, sometimes) point out that when the speaker speaks at a rapid speed, it is difficult for them to comprehend what is being said, even if the words spoken are the ones they are familiar with. On the other hand, a small number (10% never) of student did not consider it as a learning obstacle. As a result, the students absolutely encounter certain difficulties in listening comprehension since they lack control over the speed at which the speakers speak (Underwood, 1989). This coincides with the results of the studies done by Flowerdew and Miller (1992) and Hayati, A. (2010) who have reported that their subjects unanimously rated speed of delivery as one of the greatest obstacle to understanding. Griffiths (1992), Lin (2000) and Amber Bloomfield (2011) highlighted the same problem. They found that major difficulties encountered by the subjects include inability to keep up with the speaker's rapid delivery speed, unable to apply effective listening strategies to facilitate comprehension, and lack of concentration.

#### **4.6. 5 Problems pertaining to lack of visual support**

Another barrier of listening comprehension is lack of visual support. The majority of learners (90% always, often, sometimes) also reported that they find it difficult to understand the meaning of the spoken text without seeing the speaker's body language. This deprives them of some contextual clues which make the message easily understood as they cannot see the speakers' faces and gestures. Moreover, they have the added difficulty of remembering the setting and the individual speakers when the speakers are not seen. Visual support, whether it is in the form of pictures, a video, or writing helps students understand the text. This finding is in line with that reached by Yagang (1994) and Harmer (2001) who find that not seeing the speaker's gesture and facial expressions makes it more difficult for the listener to understand the speaker's meaning.

#### 4.6. 6 Problems pertaining to the inability to get things repeated

Another problem connected with listening is the fact that listeners cannot always make the speakers repeat what they have just said. Nearly two thirds of students find it difficult to understand the recorded material if they are unable to get things repeated. This is a serious problem in learning situations. In the classroom, the decision as to whether or not to replay a recording or a section of a recording is not in the hands of students. Teachers decide what and when to repeat listening passages; however, it is hard for the teacher to judge whether or not the students have understood any particular section of what they have heard (Underwood, 1989, p. 17).

If the recordings are under the students' control they can be played over and over again but this is not possible in everyday classroom environment where the teacher decides whether they will listen to the recording again or not (Chen,2002). Ur (1984) argues that learners should be exposed to the recording more than once in order to understand the discourse.

#### 4.7. Problems pertaining to physical settings

Not only the difficulties come from the message, the listener or the speaker but also come from the environment surrounding the students. According to Amber Bloomfield et al (2011), noise or distortion in the audio signal interferes with listening comprehension for listeners.

Table 8: listening problems related to the physical setting

<i>Item no.</i>	<i>Statements</i>	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
40	It is difficult for me to concentrate with noises around.		3.4	33.3	63.3
41	Unclear sounds resulting from a poor-		43.3%	33.3	23.4

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	quality CD-player interfere with my listening comprehension.				
42	Unclear sounds resulting from poor equipment interfere with my listening comprehension.		23.4	43.3	33.3

#### **4.7. 1 Problems pertaining to noise**

Noise is another environmental barrier to comprehension. Interior as well as exterior class noise is an obstacle to comprehension. Noise, including both background noises on the recording and environmental noises, can take the listener's mind off the content of the listening passage. With the noise coming from corridors and other classes some students experience difficulty in listening to the teachers' voices. Because of the noise in classroom and the poorly preparation of lab, a great number of students claim that they cannot be concentrated on listening to the recording material (96.6% always, often). If the listening task is carried out with noises around, it is for sure they will not have a good result in listening. First, they are distracted by the noise no matter how hard they try to focus on the task. Otherwise, the noise makes a complex of sounds instead of the solo recording being played. This interrupts the students from hearing and focusing on the task.

#### **4.7. 2 Problems pertaining to the poor- quality tapes or disks**

The majority of the students think the difficulties they encounter in listening comprehension are due to the bad recording quality / poor- quality tapes or disks. For example, the cassette may be recorded while there are noises around or the cassette is used for such a long time so the quality is worn out. Unclear sounds resulting from poor-quality equipment can also interfere with the listener's comprehension.

It can be drawn from the above figures that there are some main problems facing students when they listen to the tapes. Among these, keeping up with the speaking speed of the speaker is the most difficult for them. This is not surprising at all because students tended to work out the meaning of every utterance they heard in the second language. They were so busy trying to work out the meaning of one part that they missed the following one; consequently, they failed to grasp the overall meaning of the listening text. Furthermore, a lot of students were not good enough to comprehend what they were listening to. They often tried to catch everything they heard, so they felt panic when they failed to recognize a word or a structure.

## **Discussion of the interview results**

### **Key Analysis of listening problems encountered by the subjects**

As already discussed in the methodology above, interviews were carried out with 12 volunteer students, who gave additional evidence of the listening comprehension problems. These interviews were semi-structured around the issues of the listening comprehension problems in the questionnaire. Compared to questionnaires, the interview can give more freedom to both the interviewer and the interviewee to express their opinions freely and fully. These discussions were recorded. Twelve students volunteered to be interviewed but when they were asked to respond in English, they felt shy. So they are allowed to use their native language when this is necessary. Anyway, the interviewer attempted to encourage the interviewee to express their opinions as possible as they can. To present various views regarding different topics from interviewed students, the data were presented respectively under each question in the following section. The questions, some key comments and quotes were summarized and presented.

### **Q 1 How do you rate your listening skills?**

In the first question of the interview, the students were asked to evaluate their proficiency levels in listening skills. For the listening skills, the students think their

proficiency levels in listening skills are quite low. Only two of the students think that their listening skills are ‘good’ whereas the other students think their listening performances are ‘below average’ or ‘poor’.

Since the students identified listening as their area of least success, they were asked to explain their answers. Almost all of them told that their high school education focused on the preparation for the University Entrance Exam (UEE), which tested reading and writing directly. Language skills like listening and speaking were never tested and therefore less attention was paid to them. Listening, which was never tested in UEE, was generally always disregarded by teachers.

*“When I was in high school, we had only one purpose: preparing for the final exam. Our teachers were aware of this fact. So, our teachers preferred to read the passages aloud. I think they didn’t want to spend much time on listening. Because, in the final exam, listening wasn’t important at all.”* (interviewee 2)

Interviews also revealed that many students did not feel that listening skills in English were important for them to excel in schools as their English teachers often emphasized reading comprehension skills in the classrooms.

*“In my school, teachers always stressed on reading - not so much listening. They just did drilling in class . . . until we had to do University Entrance Test], then we did listening. They also focused on grammar, no listening . . . ”* (interviewee 11)

*I’ve never learned how to listen. In schools, the teachers didn’t teach us listening [skills].* (Interviewee 12)

The comments above show that language learning in high schools in Saudi Arabia focuses on preparation for the final exam and that both students and teachers try to improve skills that will lead to success in this exam. The backwash effect of the final

exam is quite important and, in a way, this test shapes the language courses presented in high schools.

#### **Q 4 What are the problems that affect your comprehension as listeners?**

Listening is a difficult task for EFL learners. The subjects interviewed reported the following difficulties in listening: delivery speed, intonation, accents, vocabulary, syntactic structures, and background knowledge, may influence their comprehension during listening. There are some good comments given by the subjects who complained about the obstacles of listening strategy use they have.

##### **A- Unclear Pronunciation**

Many students said they were not successful since it was impossible for them to make out what the speakers said because of their lack of pronunciation ability. The students recognized words in written texts but they couldn't understand what they heard. Interviewees 5, 7 and 8, for instance, complained about the difference between weak and strong pronunciation:

*"Sometimes consonants and syllables get lost or become almost inaudible, especially the auxiliaries can't be noticed."*

*"When I listen to native speakers, I feel that sounds change or blend with each other."*

*"In school, we pronounce the words one by one. The pronunciation is strong but, within a sentence, the words change and it becomes impossible to hear them."*

The comments presented above show that the students had difficulties in identifying words in continuous speech. Some students, on the other hand, thought they had been taught incorrect pronunciations of words. Interviewee (4) blamed his teachers for the difficulties he faced:



*"When I was in high school, some of my teachers pronounced words incorrectly. Now, I can't understand what I listen just because I don't know the correct pronunciation (of words)."*

## **B. Limited English vocabulary**

Lack of words was another major problem that impedes students' listening comprehension. This is clear in the comment of the interviewed students:

*"My vocabulary is poor; it is very difficult for me to understand what the conversation is, especially when the word that I don't know is a key word. Though I have tried to look it up in the dictionary, it's sometimes useless. I guess it's because my pronunciation is not good enough, too."* (Interviewee 11)

*"I am weak in listening because if there is a vocabulary I don't understand then I miss many main points".* (Interviewee 11)

(in answer to the question, "What are the main problems you have in listening?") ... *some difficult words and vocabulary, some terms...* (Interviewee 11) *"some vocabulary may not be understood".* (Interviewee 11)

## **Poor Knowledge of Grammar**

Some learners stressed the importance of grammar in relation to listening comprehension. For instance, Interviewee (11) says: *"I don't think 'knowing a lot of vocabulary' only is useful ability for me. . . . My ability to listen for complex sentences is too bad, and also I know my English grammar is as terrible as my ability to English conversation."* Similarly, Interviewee (12) states: *"My grammar is poor so my English isn't good. . . . They [listening, reading, and writing] all need grammar, vocabulary, and so on. . . . In the listening class, I feel this way, too."*

Although the learner did not explicitly illustrate the relationship between grammar and listening comprehension, the concern was there.

## **Difficulties related to listening strategies**

Learners sometimes forgot to apply listening strategies while they are engaged in listening. For instance, Interviewee (11) responded, *“I can't always remember the inferencing strategy and cannot use it often.”* Interviewee (18) attempted to use self-monitoring and directed attention strategy, but often forgot to employ them in listening process: *“sometimes I forgot to remind myself.”* This might imply that strategy use has not yet reached an automatic stage of learning for these learners, or might imply that strategies were not yet internalized as part of their existing listening skills.

## **Linguistic knowledge**

According to Brindley (1997), both linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge are required for one to understand a listening input. This accounted for the reason why the learners could not understand the lesson. It seemed that the main factor that obstructed them from understanding the lesson was their vocabulary knowledge.

*Student 4: “...I had the same problem again. I could not follow the lesson, and I did not know the vocabulary. I made guesses...”*

*Student 6): “...My problem was that I could not keep up with what the speaker was saying and I didn't know the vocabulary...I could not capture the main idea...”*

The students stated that their level of understanding English words was not always the same. Topic was an important factor determining their understanding. Word knowledge related to the students' familiarity with the topic will be examined in the next part.

## **Familiarity with the topic**

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Seven out of twelve participants stated that they couldn't understand some listening materials because they did not know anything about the topic. When the interview data were analyzed, it was found that this factor was actually related to the previous one, namely word knowledge. As seen in the comments of Interviewee 4:

*"Sometimes there are dialogs about different topics such as economy. I don't know any of the words related to economy."*

Most of these students were aware of the fact that they had to increase their lexical knowledge and they tried to increase their lexical knowledge by reading or listening.

### **Rate of speech too fast to comprehend**

Another problem that bothered the interviewees was the speech speed. Many students thought it was easier to understand speakers who had a slow rate of speech (2 out of ten) and difficult to understand speakers with a quick speech rate (10 out of twelve). Some students thought it was especially difficult to understand native speakers.

*"Native speakers speak too fast. Sometimes I hear all the words as a single unit."*  
(Interviewee 1)

*"The teacher speaks very quickly."* (Interviewee 10)

However, reasons given for this difficulty with speed of delivery included unfamiliarity with listening to native speakers:

*"In my secondary school, all the English teachers are Saudi, there was no chance for me to talk with foreigners".* (Interviewee 9)

Another reason was the need to translate into Arabic:

S21 (interview): *"I have to translate his English into Chinese so it takes many time to catch his meaning"*. (Interviewee 11)

### **The inability to concentrate**

Many students realized that attention was fundamental to listening and identified their lapses in concentration as another listening problem:

*"The main problem is that I can't concentrate well on those serious topic, maybe I need practising more."* (Interviewee 1)

Some students also said that whenever their attention was diverted from the input, they would miss a lot of information:

*"Because I did not concentrate too much I missed some points."* (Interviewee 6)

### **Different accents and dialects**

Some of the students felt confused because they thought English had different 'versions'. Especially the difference between British English and American English was an important contributor to this confusion. *"In school, our teachers try to teach British English but we always hear American English on television. The pronunciations and intonations are quite different."*  
(Interviewee 8)

Language spoken in different parts of the UK and USA may also cause difficulties.

*“I don’t understand English spoken by different ethnic groups. Uneducated people use different pronunciations and grammatical structures. I think they don’t complete their sentences.”*

(Interviewee 9)

These students thought they were trying to learn not only English language but also variations of it. This fact sometimes made it very difficult for them to understand the spoken language.

### **Problems pertaining to Length and difficulty materials**

Intelligibility is affected by factors such as sentence length and difficulty. When the learners encounter listening materials that were above their level to a certain degree, complaints were often made about the difficulties of the listening process as indicated by the following:

*“The speaker use long sentences.”* (Interviewee 8)

*“The lecturer says difficult English.”* (Interviewee 9)

Students have a difficult task listening to oral texts since they have limited exposure to lengthy connected speech.

*“Difficult to listen to long talk in English”* (Interviewee 1)

*“Teacher speak speak speak.”* (Interviewee 3)

*“I not understand long lecture.”* (Interviewee 6)

Presentation of a long series of sentences affects comprehension ( Hasan, 2000 ). The students may be weak at paying attention to the sequence of the passage because of unfamiliarity with the functions of the logical connectors. Inter-sentence connectives could be a source of difficulty as exemplified by the following:  
.....and so therefore this is what they did

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## Environmental variables

As a number of respondents commented comprehension is distracted by environmental factors inside and outside class. Climate was a common factor reported by the students to impede comprehension.

*“The weather very hot. ”* (Interviewee 5)

*“When the weather is hot I can’t follow the lecture.”* (Interviewee 10)

*“The hot weather forbids my listening.”* (Interviewee 4)

The classes are provided with tall glass windows and no curtains thus allowing the sun in most of the morning and although the college provides fairly effective air-cooling system, it fails sometimes and a period elapses before it is restored to action. The uncomfortable feeling resulting from heat affects the students' concentration and ability for input intake as well as the lecturers' command of passing information, particularly in midday lectures.

Noise is another environmental barrier to comprehension. Interior as well as exterior class noise is an obstacle to comprehension as apparent in these students' comments:

*“The voices of the students talking in corridors and other classes distract me. ”*  
(Interviewee 8)

*“Some of the students make loud noise.”* (Interviewee 12)

*“The shouting in the room.”* (Interviewee 3)

Classes are not well insulated against incoming sounds, and with the heat factor mentioned above, classroom windows and doors must be left open thus allowing various

sounds to interfere with and obstruct teacher talk. Thus heat and noise interact to make listening to lectures even a harder activity.

Surely, it is difficult to expect the students to learn to listen better when they are exposed to so many problems. The teachers' responsibility then is to find way to encourage their students to tackle the listening tasks with positive anticipation. Especially, for students at the early levels, teachers should present some key words and structures before allowing the students to do their listening.

**The fifth question: How can teachers help their student overcome their listening comprehension problems?**

Not all the problems described above can be overcome. Certain features of the message and the speaker, for instance, are inevitable. But this does not mean that the teacher can do nothing about them. S/he can at least provide the students with suitable listening materials, background and linguistic knowledge, enabling skills, pleasant classroom conditions, and useful exercises to help them discover effective listening strategies. Here are a few helpful ideas:

**1. Adapting and improving listening materials**

It is obvious that students differ in their learning styles and ability, therefore, teachers should adopt and adapt listening materials that match their students' interest and background since the listening materials only become stimulating and motivating them when they are slightly challenging to what they have already known and suit their interest.

It is true that natural speech is hard to grade and it is difficult for students to identify the different voices and cope with frequent overlaps. Nevertheless, the materials should progress step by step from semi-authenticity that displays most of the linguistic

features of natural speech to total authenticity, because the final aim is to understand natural speech in real life.

## **2. Activating your students' Vocabulary**

From the investigation, one of the great causes for the students in listening comprehension is their lack of vocabulary. The majority of all the students report not to have sufficient vocabulary in listening comprehension and a small number complains that their vocabulary is too poor to understand. It is, therefore necessary for teachers to equip students with certain key words needed for listening comprehension since lack of vocabulary becomes a great obstacle to them in listening comprehension, which is also realized by Underwood (1989) and Higgin (1995). However, it is better to activate students' vocabulary by asking them to guess the meaning of words used in the listening context before explaining the meaning to them, since whenever students are able to relate what they have already known to what they are supposed to listen for, they are likely to listen better or more effectively.

## **3. Using different kinds of input**

The teacher should also provide students with different kinds of input, such as lectures, radio news, films, TV plays, announcements, everyday conversation, interviews, storytelling, English songs, and so on.

## **4. Accents**

Make students aware of different native-speaker accents. Of course, strong regional accents are not suitable for training in listening, but in spontaneous conversation native speakers do have certain accents. Moreover, the American accent is quite different from the British and Australian. Therefore, it is necessary to let students deal with different accents, especially in extensive listening.

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## **5. Pronunciation**

The findings in the study show that incorrect pronunciation hinders at least many students from listening comprehension, so teachers need to help students expose themselves and get familiar with precise pronunciation of native speakers. By doing that the students' pronunciation capacity is much more improved, which will help students find listening to native speakers effective and efficient. Many teachers suppose that students' accurate pronunciation is of great help for them in listening acquisition. They also believe that one of the ultimate results of listening acquisition is to train students to produce accurate pronunciation.

## **6. Activating or building students' prior topical and linguistic knowledge.**

Activate the schemata by encouraging the learners to think about and discuss what they already know about the content of the listening text. Teachers can also provide the background needed for them to understand the text, and it can help them focus attention on what to listen for. Consequently, students begin to predict what they might hear and make connections with what they already know, increasing the relevance of the information.

## **7. Arousing interest and motivating students to attend to the spoken message.**

Students will be more willing to listen actively to what the speaker says if they are able to relate the listening experience to their own lives. Besides, teachers can create an environment conducive to listening and encourage effective listening behaviors that are necessary lifelong skills.

## **8. Encouraging prediction**

This technique can be employed in the pre-listening or while-listening stages. Students are asked to predict what the text is about or what the speaker is going to say next. In order encourage students to imagine and predict what they are going to hear, teacher may tell something about the topic of the listening text or something about the speaker(s). Besides, students can be asked to predict the grammar structures that are likely to be used in the listening text or make a list of words, phrases that relate to the topic and may appear in the listening text. By this way, they can familiarize students with key concepts and vocabulary before listening to spoken text. When students have certain vocabulary in mind, they will be more self-confident and thus ready to listen effectively.

### **9. Using slow rate of speech**

It has been a common belief in L2 teaching that a slower rate of speech would facilitate listening comprehension (Griffiths [10]). Lecturers need to be advised to slow their speech rate down to a level that suits their students.

### **10. Providing and trying to gain as much feedback as possible.**

During the course, the teacher should fill the gap between inputs and students' reply and between the teacher's feedback and students' reaction so as to make listening purposeful. This not only promotes error correction but gives encouragements as well. It can aid students to heighten their confidence in their ability to tackle listening problems. Students' feedback can assist the teacher to judge where the class is going and how it should be instructed.

### **11. Should teachers train students to use listening strategies?**

Training students to use listening strategies would be of great help as suggested by Goh (2000); however, strategy training alone might not lead to real improvement in one's comprehension. Language teachers also have to enhance learners' linguistic knowledge or the knowledge of the language e.g. structures, vocabulary, etc. Both

linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge is required for one to understand a listening input.

## **12. Improving the learning environment of listening skill**

Learning environment for listening skill, which is listening laboratory besides cassettes tapes, tape recorders and written listening texts, is a vital key affecting the quality of both learning and teaching listening skill. However, the findings of this study show that the students are not satisfied with the recent learning environment. Students argue that it still lacks well-equipped listening laboratory; consequently, the students find hard and challenging to concentrate while listening. It is, therefore, essential to upgrade the recent laboratory so that all of the students have equal and much chance to study listening skill in such a motivating environment for improving their listening skills.

In addition to what has been previously mentioned, various authors have discussed ways of helping learners improve their listening comprehension. Brown (1994) proposed a methodology that combined developing the learners' phonological code and helping them use contexts to make predictions. Buck (1995) proposed using pre-communicative and communicative activities, following a pedagogical framework by Littlewood (1981). This included helping learners develop a facility with fast natural speech and use good listening strategies. Field (1998) proposed an approach that took into consideration learners' listening problems and suggested a series of exercises for practising listening subskills in short micro-listening exercises.

I agree with Field (1998) that spending time on helping learners tackle their listening problems is an important part of teaching listening. In fact, I believe it is absolutely crucial that we include practice activities that can help learners overcome or cope with such difficulties so that they can have better control over their listening comprehension. However, to get the most out of these activities, we need first to identify our students' listening problems so that we can deal with each problem specifically. By

concentrating on only those areas that affect their comprehension most, we can use limited teaching time more profitably.

## **Conclusions**

Listening comprehension has been neglected in research and practice until quite recently. Even now, we can't say that Listening comprehension research abounds in the literature when compared to that of reading comprehension. This is why some researchers call listening "Cinderella skill" in second language learning (Nunan , 1997, p. 46). However it is true that listening is vital in language learning in that it provides input for the learner. Without understanding inputs, students can't learn anything.

However, being one of the assistant professors at Qassim University, I can clearly see the situation of teaching and learning English. listening comprehension seems to be the weakest skill and students encounter various kinds of listening problems. This study is done in the hope of finding out the factors causing their listening comprehension problems and contributing some recommended strategies for teachers and students employ in improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning listening comprehension.

Research results have allowed me to arrive at the following conclusions:

1. Students at Qassim University encounter various kinds of listening problems in learning comprehension such as unfamiliar words, the length of the spoken text, speed rate, a variety of accents, lack of concentration and pronunciation.
2. Some suggestions that could be employed for teachers and students to encounter listening comprehension problems include adapting and improving listening materials, and improving teachers' classroom techniques on the part of the teachers. As for students, they can alleviate their own difficulties by improving English proficiency, and improving listening strategies.

## Suggestions for further research

Future studies may consider the following directions:

1. The present study needs to be carried out with large sample because the sample size was too small to generalize an overall conclusion applying to all EFL learners.
2. The present study needs to be studied in different English learning contexts in Saudi Arabia.

It is hoped that the results of this study will contribute to improving the teaching and learning in the field of listening comprehension in Saudi Arabia.

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