Learners' Cognitive Aspects & Prospectives of Listening Comprehension'

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Abstract

The main purpose of the current paper was to investigate, in details, the cognitive processes involved in learning listening comprehension to determine to what extent, they account for language learning at university level, to identify ESL learners' real-time problems faced during listening. Examples and evidence are derived from a sample of second year students at the Faculty of Education, Damanhour University, Department of English language. **Zhang & Zhang (2011) scale is used to evaluate** students' listening dialogues and texts of listening comprehension. Language acquisition is, thus, seen as having certain cognitive prerequisites or co-requisites. Results of discussions showed that learners will not develop linguistic forms before acquiring the cognitive bases for those forms as there is a big gap between their needs and their real abilities. The current paper is organized as follows: firstly, some theoretical issues related to the cognitive aspects involved in listening comprehension, to the listening teaching / learning and to the evaluation of listening comprehension will be presented. Secondly, research results achieved will be described. Thirdly, some thoughts were developed, orientated by the objectives described

Key words: listening problems, listening comprehension, auditory memory, speed of response, linguistic competence.

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Introduction

Much attention in listening comprehension research has been paid to L2 learners' self-awareness of the difficulties encountered in listening. One spends a lot of times listening to others speaking or listening to songs, news, lectures, YouTube, or listening for academic purposes or obtaining necessary information at work. As for foreign language learning, listening is of paramount important since O'connor (1980) said that learning starts with our ears and Rost (1994) stated that it provides the language input. Listening comprehension is one of the vital skills in the language acquisition process. It is the ability to accurately receive and interpret messages in the communication process. It is an essential skill for students' academic success (Vandergrift, 2004). Listening is considered the first and most important skill responsible for learning and acquiring the other skills. Thus, listening comprehension – as Krashen (1989) confirms- provides the right conditions for language acquisition and the development of other language skills.

Second language listening comprehension is a complex process and crucial in the development of second language competence; yet, the importance of listening in language learning has only been recognized relatively recently (Nunan, 1998; Celce-Murcia, 2001). During listening in English, students – as Moradi (2015) confirms - are faced with greater difficulties because they should comprehend subject matter delivered in English as well as understand the speaker's accent, and speed of delivery. Their perception and awareness of their inability to listen well may prevent them from listening well. Other factor of their bad listening may be the teachers' inability to provide them with native like accent resulted in inability to improve listening by listening to natives, but only to non-native speakers which deepen their inability to adapt good listening habits. Additionally, listening comprehension requires understanding the speakers' intended message. Listeners do not passively listen to speakers to understand the meaning of the messages, but actively interpret the speakers' expected meaning and acquire meaningful information by assimilating sounds, words, and phrases (Woottipong, 2014). Therefore, listening comprehension is not only challenging for native speakers, but is even more challenging for foreign language learners. Therefore, its' development is of prime concern to language teachers (Dunkel, 1991).

Egyptian EFL university students in general and EFL freshman university students at Damanhour University, Faculty of Education have long been acknowledged to have trouble with listening comprehension. They face a difficulty in improving their listening skill within the traditional way of learning (Alakawi, 2016). Surveying many studies that investigated listening comprehension at the university level (e.g., Beehery, 2016; Hassan, 2015; Khalil, 2015; Mohammed, 2014; Salem, 2014; Al- Tonsi, 2013; and El-naggar, 2005), the researcher revealed that EFL university students encounter many problems in their listening skills in general and listening comprehension. A lot of researchers dealt with listening problems (Chen 2002). For successful language learning, there should be an amount of correct language input which if not enough cause a lot of problems in listening for learners. To help learners to become skillful listeners, factors behind learners' listening difficulties have been identified in many studies, for example, text types (Brindley, & Slatyer, 2002; Su, 2003), speech rate (Teng, 2002), and task types (Cheng, 2004), syntactical complexity (Chiang & Dunkle, 1992), topic familiarity and English proficiency (Vandergrift, 2006). The most effective of these problems are listed by Azmi Bingol, et.al, (2014) Poelmans, (2003) as follows:

1. Lack of control over the speed at which speakers speak besides not being able to get things repeated;which means the speed of receptive memory is not the same of auditory memory.
2. The listener's limited vocabulary is a second major problem that binds language fluency; where the learner's language storage is not enough to match the incoming language.
3. Failure to recognize the "signals," of native accent limits students' response for fear of committing mistakes.
4. Inability to concentrate, or establish a good listening habits with the anxiety of face to face group interaction which lead to inability to control over distraction.
5. Loss of interest or purpose for listening.
6. Cultural Differences Learners should be familiar with the cultural knowledge of language that has a significant effect on the learners' understanding. If the listening task involves completely distinct cultural materials then the learners may have critical problems in their comprehension.

   Listening problems are classified into another two distinct categories, but some related to the previous ones (Hasan, 2000) namely problems related to the listeners and listening materials and equipment like: a) Making prediction of what the speaker talks about, b) Guessing unknown words or phrases, c) Recognizing main points, d) Insistence to listen word by word. Of course, this process limits their concentration and prevents them from getting the task target and this of course consumes a lot of their attention which should be focused on other aims of the listening task, e) Linking words (Liaison and elision) as they get used to see words as separate units in the written text and bad speaking habits prevent them from perceiving the word linked to others through linking rules.
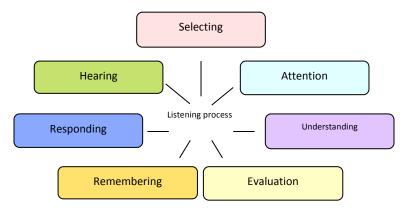
Other problems related to listening material like: a) Unfamiliarity of topics, b) Unfamiliarity with sound connections or intonation of spoken text, c) Ignoring listening in course work of studying, d) Speed of speech. If the listening text is too long they lose concentration as mind can't keep attention more than 10 minutes (*The length of time students listen may cause memory problems or even fatigue and this 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. This may be attributed to the short memory span for the target language. (Hasan, 2000: 143*).
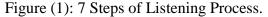
In addition to problems related to physical settings like: a) Noise: the surrounding environment, b) Poor equipment. Other problems emerge from the speech rate, vocabulary and pronunciation (Higgins, 1995). Prediction as being one of listeners problems is so important as Berman (2003) thought, would maintain the students' focus on their tasks; hence led to comprehension improvement. The interrelations between language, cognition, and development have always been a matter of considerable interest to language teachers, applied linguists and psycholinguists. As with oral communication, listening is an exclusively human ability. listening, or listening comprehension, is a highly complex phenomenon involving unexpected cognitive aspects; some of these are highlighted in this article.

   Focusing on the importance of this skill, Brown (2001) and O'connor (1980) suggest that learning starts with the ears; with an active process through which language acquisition takes place. Listening is more than merely hearing words, but an active process by which learners receive, construct meaning from, and respond to spoken messages. Hence, four various kinds of listening are identified; a) comprehensive listening; where learners listen for getting content of a message, b) appreciative listening; where learners listen for enjoyment, c) therapeutic listening where learners listen to support others but not judge them, and d) critical (evaluative) listening; where learners judge the message. (See: Buck, 2001; Rost, 2002; Vandergrift, 2004).

Thus, listening is the interaction between sound unit (s) -tied to each other according to certain rules of syntax, morphology and intonation patterns within the context of situational clues- accompanied by certain situational clues and a listener; where he interprets these sound units using complex web of cognitive procedures. Through listening, one can internalize and understand language which is the key tool for communication with our real world. In recent years the language teaching profession has placed a concerted emphasis on listening comprehension (Brown, 2001).

Brownell (1996) claims that listening skill requires conscious mental effort presented in some activities which are processes that effective listeners do during listening namely;1) Find relations between people, places, situations, and ideas, 2) Find meaning or determine what the speaker is saying about people, places, and ideas, 3) Make predictions by trying to determine what will be said next, 4) Make inferences by determining a speaker's intent between the lines, and 5) Reflect and evaluate by responding to what is heard and pass judgment. These features and processes can be represented in figure (1).

Figure (1): 7 Steps of Listening Process.

The figure shows that the listening process is continuous and each of the seven steps is based on the previous or/and the next one. Any of the learners can't select without hearing or paying attention. In addition, he can't evaluate unless he understands and remembers to connect ideas together. This process may be responsible for the creative use of the language where one can respond in new situations using the language he learnt before. As seen; they are all cognitive mental processes. Morley (1972) said listening involves auditory discrimination, aural grammar, selecting necessary information, remembering it, and connecting it to the process between sound and form of meaning. Thus, Goss (1982) defined listening as a process of understanding what is heard and organizing it into lexical elements to which meaning can be allocated.

Listening of course stimulates responses; which differ from each other and indicate understanding to what is received by giving appropriate response and consequently effective communication. This is called listening comprehension process which has four other processes represented in figure (2):
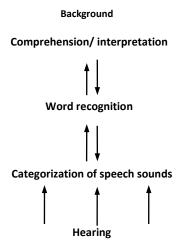
Background

Comprehension/ interpretation

↑ ↓

Word recognition

↑ ↓

Categorization of speech sounds

↑ ↑ ↑

Hearing

Figure (2): Simplified Overview of the Listening Process & Sub-Processes (Source: Poelmans, 2003.11)

Figure (2) shows that there is interaction and integration between the listening processes. At the same time, none of these processes are performed, but with and based on the others. As a result, researchers have presented more interest in listening comprehension which is treated as a fundamental skill in terms of language teaching (Osada, 2004). Listeners comprehend the oral input through sound discrimination, previous knowledge, grammatical structures, stress and intonation, and the other linguistic or non-linguistic clues. Comprehension begins with the received data that is examined as consecutive levels of formation and a process of decoding in the brain (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Most of their problems emerged as seen above from inappropriate use of one strategy namely Bottom-up strategy. They translate word-for-word, inability to follow the rate of speech made them unable to get even the main idea of speech, repeating the oral text but with incorrect accent spoiled the input information, thus, concentrating on prosodic characteristics of the text.

Listening is the most common communicative activity in daily life, however, we probably are not even aware of how complex it is. Listening as a skill forms a correct channel to inter additional information to mind storage through sets: *creating mental linkage, applying images and sound, reviewing well and employing action.* Cognitive operations like *reviewing, recognizing, reasoning, and creating ideas and perceptions in the listeners' mind in the form of inputs are the main target from listening to pave the way for comprehension feedback in the form of language output (speaking or writing*. Comprehension begins with the received data that is examined as consecutive levels of formation and a process of decoding during the previous steps. Rost (2002) defined listening as a complex process of interpretation in which listeners match what they hear with what they already know.

Listening is the most frequently used language skill; for 50 percent of learners time is spent in listening (Morley, 1999; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992, Jafari & Hashim , 2015). Bird (1953) As listening is not a passive process; it involves a lot of mental procedures to be appropriately done. The present research briefly shades light on what is involved in learning how to understand what one hears in a second language. The following micro-skills the listener should use are proposed by Richards (1983, cited in Omaggio, 1986, 126) to be involved in understanding what we hear:

- retain chunks of language in short-term memory (by reviewing)
- discriminate among the distinctive sounds in the new language (by recognizing)
- recognize stress and rhythm patterns, tone patterns, intonational contours. (by recognizing)
- recognize reduced forms of words. (by recognizing)

- distinguish word boundaries (by reasoning)
- recognize typical word-order patterns (by recognizing)
- recognize vocabulary (by recognizing)
- detect key words, such as those identifying topics and ideas (by reasoning)
- guess meaning from context (by creating)
- recognize grammatical word classes (by recognizing)
- recognize basic syntactic patterns (by recognizing)
- recognize cohesive devices (by recognizing)
- detect sentence constituents, such as subject, verb, object, prepositions, and the like (by reasoning)

Thus, recognition is the main process in comprehension whereas comprehension is the target of listening. Comprehension occurs when input (information received) and knowledge stored in brain are matched with each other. Perception, parsing and utilization stand for various levels of processing. Kintsch (1998, p. 13) stated that for one to be able to think, to understand and to perceive, mental interpretation is needed. Once it is assumed that listening involves forms of mental interpretation, what is being presumed is that listening requires several types, of memories. As mental representations are nothing more than the translation of what we perceive or intake from the surround environment and from our experiences into a language, how the storage mechanisms of this knowledge in the brain works must be understood. In other words: at the end, listening comprehension involves the way that neurons acquire, transfer and integrate information throughout the uncountable synapses available in the human brain. Memorization is the usual main strategy mostly used by learners.

Hence, reflections of the problems encountered by learners in listening constitute a part of their knowledge about listening processes (Cross, 2009; Goh, 2000; Wenden, 1991; Zhang & Goh, 2006). Analyzing students' opinions on the question why you don't understand native spoken English, their responses come astonishing. As indicated in figure (3); there are five main problems faced listeners in real time listening comprehension task.
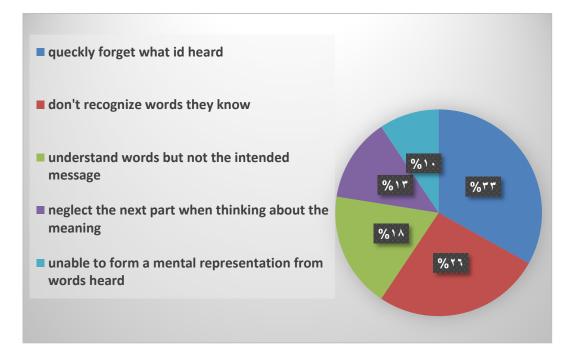
Figure (3): Types of real time problems facing listeners

About one-thirds of the students reported that they could not remember certain words and phrases they had just heard, they would forget them as soon as they began listening to another part of the message. ***When I listen to a text, I forget the contents which was mentioned before. (Noura)***

When I listen to TV news, I can understand most of words, but I forget the previous sentences after listening to the present sentence. (Ahmed)

A possible cause is the limited capacity of the students' short-term memory which is constantly cleared for new input and unless some form of association or fixation in long-term memory occurs immediately, the information will be forever wiped out from an individual's memory (Howard, 1983; Anderson, 1995). This appeared to have been the problem faced by the students.

As for the second problem 26% of students indicated that although some words sounded very familiar to them, they were unable to recall their meanings immediately. Consequently, they were unable to process the message using those words. ***"TV news is very easy. A lot of words sounded very familiar but I can't remember their meanings immediately. (Hanan)"*** "***many words I know quite well, and if I read them I can easily understand. (Asmaa)***
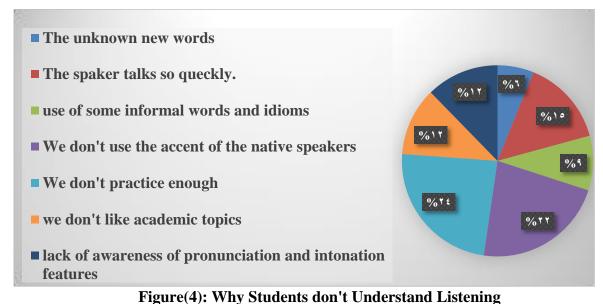
A probable reason for this slow recognition is that the students could not match the sounds they heard with any script in their long-term memory. Thus, they should speed up their reaction to heard sounds. As, they knew certain words by sight, however they could not recognize them by sound. This may be due to their learning habits where many of them said that they learnt by memorizing the spelling of words and often neglected to remember how the words sounded. Since so many years they are trained to be good at reading, to remember words by watching, by writing, so they gradually lost the familiarity to listening. Learners used to pronounce a lot of words incorrectly pronunced so when they listen to them correctly they are unable to repeat or recognize them and even if they did they don't store them in long term memory as they lose interest for lack of importance in their daily language use. Some of them reported that***" I already know the words but I couldn't understand the context this time (Khaled)". I can understand most of the words, but I can't join them together and understand whole sentences meaning (Omnia),*** which means that they are unaware of the pronunciation rules like linking or sentence stress. Another fundamental problem is cutting the flow of meaning when they got one word. They stop following the next part when they get the correct meaning of one word (Hassan said) ***I can't go on listening when I understand one word as I slow my speed or even stop listening for being unable to follow up the next in the same way***." "***The problem I found is that there are many words that I know well, but I can't think of their meanings immediately. It takes me several minutes to react (Hazem)***

. When I listen clearly to the first sentence and got its meaning, the second has come, so what can I do now it is quickly (Alaa)

They are unable to follow the accent or get the whole idea especially while listening to songs even if they already remember the musical rhyme of the song***. When I was listening to an English song tape, I could catch most words. But I could not put all the words into a full sentence to get a full idea (Hasnaa)*** they may recognize words but not key words. Naglaa reported" I don't know how to divide the long sentence into several parts. I don't know where to stop" this indicates that they don't know the speaking punctuation marks.

By analyzing the causes of learners' inability to comprehend the spoken text by listening and based on the Richerds' (1983) classification of previous micro-skills, one can deduce that the

loss of interest in the academic topics besides lack of enough practice lead to the inability to retain chunks of language in their short-term memory for motivation proved to be one of the best factors that activate memory (Heinrich,1968). As indicated in figure (4) students reported that a main cause of the problem for most of them is the lack of practice, either currently or in the past where they improve their language inputs information. The second reason is unfamiliarity with native accent as learners listen to their nonnative teachers all the time. Consequently, the speed of delivery where they can't stop or slow the speaker. Thus, the speech rate affects the listening comprehension process. **Hayati (2010) proved that natural speech rate improved the university Iranian learners.** Other minor reasons are also important and complete the figure for teachers to modify or add other techniques to solve learners' problems for sake of having a well and effective listening comprehension class. In addition to suggesting a lack of awareness of pronunciation and intonation features that are crucial for perception.

- The unknown new words
- The spaker talks so queckly.
- use of some informal words and idioms
- We don't use the accent of the native speakers
- We don't practice enough
- we don't like academic topics
- lack of awareness of pronunciation and intonation features

Figure(4): Why Students don't Understand Listening

The term "listening comprehension" has been defined by different authors. According to Brown and Yule (1983), listening comprehension means that a person understands what he/she has heard. Rost (2002) and Hamouda (2013) defined listening comprehension as an interactive process in which listeners are involved in constructing meaning. According to Nadig (2013), listening comprehension is the various processes of understanding and making sense of spoken language. These involve knowing speech sounds, comprehending the meaning of individual words, and understanding the syntax of sentences.

Auditory memory is the ability to remember words and sounds; the ability to recall information which was received verbally. According to Scliar-Cabral (2010), The word "memory", designates the general ability of the one's brain systems to acquire, retain and recover information stored because of listening experience. On the other hand, one can refer to the several types of memories, classified according to their functions. Following these criteria, we have the working memory and other memories. Working memory does not generate files, it is not considered a memory because nothing is stored in it in the brain in the **long term**. Its capacity is limited to the process of about seven chunks. Based on the information processing theory, once the language transferred to the long memory it is very hard to delete or modify.

Memories are classified according to the saved content; procedural memories are "knowing how" memories work, for example, the eyes movement while listening or the speaking apparatus movements during listening to conversation or listening attention. The knowledge our bodies have acquired about the necessary procedures to accomplish certain tasks is mainly unconscious and not translatable into words. This is the aspect that distinguishes procedural from declarative memories, or episodic (autobiographic) and semantic (linguistic) memories.

Types of mental interpretation needed to achieve listening comprehension involve five processes; receiving, understanding, evaluating, remembering, and responding. Firstly, a perceptual and a procedural representation related to the listening material are necessary. To be able to listen to spoken words or dialogues (or screen), the listener must receive clearly the spoken sounds until the sentence ends and to understand immediately the message sent, evaluating it, analyzing it, and forming structured response to it. Even when one is unconscious of those procedures, they were learnt at one point of a subject's life. Monolingual listeners of Arabic, for example, while listening to someone, perform differently because of the characteristics of their speaking system stored in the long-term memory and which was acquired during their life experiences, will be retrieved while listening to form appropriate response. In case the speaker requires knowledge not stored in the listener's mind, comprehension might not be achieved.

To understand listening, it is presumed that the listener has a representation of acts, to identify the speaker's intentions, build in the spoken words through the structure used, the lexical choices he made, the hidden and expressed meanings and several other subtleties that language and human actions have created and previously agreed upon using them. It is possible to argue that in listening comprehension it is necessary that an interpretation of the spoken genre in question, which will enable the listener to compare the elements stored in the spoken words with previous known ones and their characteristics, stored in the long term memory.

Listening comprehension requires the integration of knowledge brought from the spoken words together with the listener's previous stored knowledge. If some knowledge does not exist (heard for the first time) in the long-term memory, it is not possible to have access to it (restore). Therefore, in this case it is necessary for a mediator intervention; in the school listening, teacher's intervention is required. Sources of difficulties commonly can be the tape recordings, other times can be the concepts which cannot be accessed by the listener, or the world knowledge required by the spoken words might not be compatible to the listener's world knowledge, along with several other difficulties that the listeners might have to cope with. The spoken text to be listened to with the tape's assistance must have certain degree of challenge, but cannot turn into a complete frustration. The evaluation of comprehension is one crucial step in the listening teaching /learning process. Alternatively, the main goal while evaluating listening comprehension in the listening session is to identify the difficulties that are blocking the listening learning process allowing for a better planning of pedagogical approaches. Faculty life cycle of learning do not have the right to devote efforts only to the best students; their duty is precisely to care for all of them, despite their differences.

Implications

- Teachers should provide authentic and natural speech listening materials uttered by native speakers and appropriate to learners' needs, interests and levels to motivate them.
- Students should be provided with distinct types of listening input like lectures, radio news, films, TV plays, announcements, everyday conversation, and interviews.

- Students should be familiarized with the rules of pronunciation and imitate native speakers' accents.
- students should be provided with linguistic background knowledge while listening to different listening materials.
- students should gain necessary feedback on their performance because it can promote their error correction and increase their motivation, and develop their confidence.
- Students should have listening targets.
- Teachers should be appropriately trained in speaking skills and good pronunciation to help learners to become better listeners.

Conclusion

Listening is vital, not only, in language learning but also in daily communication. However, listening is not an important part of many course books and most teachers do not pay attention to this important skill in their classes. This research of mine has finished finding the common problems which the students in the Faculty of Education - English language department should avoid as teachers and at the same time experienced in their listening comprehension classes; to be part of suggested solutions and new teaching strategies. This knowledge of the problems can in turn help us trace the source of these difficulties in our learners. Knowing why some of the problems occur will naturally place us in a better position to guide our learners in ways of coping with or overcoming some of their listening difficulties. The problems revealed can provide insights into how well learners apply listening strategies to help them deal with comprehension difficulties. When teachers are aware of students' learning difficulties, they can help them develop effective listening strategies and solve their difficulties in listening to improve their listening comprehension abilities. This review of literature indicated the factors that caused some serious problems for learners' listening comprehension and offered some useful suggestions for teachers and students to improve their listening comprehension ability.

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Appendix (1)
Listening Comprehension Problem Scale (LCPS)

This Listening Comprehension Problem Scale (LCPS) is intended for you who are students of English as a foreign language (EFL). You will find statements about the problems that you might encounter while listening to English texts. Please read each one and choose a response from among 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 that best describes HOW TRUE OF YOU THE STATEMENT IS.

1. Never true of me;
2. Usually not true of me;
3. Somewhat true of me;
4. Usually true of me;
5. Always true of me.

Part A. Listening comprehension Problems

N	Listening comprehension Problems	1	2	3	4	5
1.	I feel nervous.					
2.	I am unable to concentrate.					
3.	I do not recognize the learned words.					
4.	I do not respond to words quickly enough.					
5.	I have difficulty in recognizing words due to own incorrect pronunciations.					
6.	There are too many new words.					
7.	I have difficulty in recognizing sounds due to fast speaking.					
8.	I have difficulty in recognizing sounds due to linking, assimilation, omission in speech.					
9.	I have difficulty in recognizing sounds due to speakers' accent and intonation.					
10.	I cannot recognize the words with similar sounds.					
11.	I tend to neglect the next part when thinking about the meaning of the utterances just heard.					
12.	I do not understand abstract concepts.					
13.	I do not understand long sentences.					
14.	I cannot chunk streams of speech.					
15.	I forget quickly what is heard.					
16.	I do not understand the word that has more than one meaning.					
17.	I do not understand the next part of the text because of problems I encounter earlier in it.					
18.	I miss out the beginning of texts.					
19.	I do not understand the intended message of some parts of a text.					
20.	I feel confused about the key ideas in the message.					
21.	I do not understand the intended message of an entire text.					

الجوانب المعرفية المرتبطة بفهم اللغة المسموعة لدي طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية بالجامعة
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ملخص البحث:

الغرض الرئيسي من هذه الورقة البحثية هو التحقيق بالتفصيل عن العمليات المعرفية المرتبطة بتعلم أهم المهارات اللغوية (الفهم السمعي) لتحديد علاقتها بتعلم اللغة في المرحلة الجامعية. وبالإضافة إلى ذلك، تحديد مشكلات الطلاب الانيه التي يوجهونها أثناء الاستماع. تستمد الأمثلة والأدلة التي تم جمعها في البحث من عينة من طلاب السنة الثانية في كلية التربية، جامعة دمنهور، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية. واستخدمت بعض الحوارات والنصوص للاستماع لتقييم درجة استيعابهم للنص المسموع. ومن ثم لابد من توافر جوانب معرفية معينة أو متطلبا مشتركا لفهم النص المسموع. تم استخدام مقياس تشانغ وتشانغ اللغوي Zhang & Zhang(٢٠١١). وأظهرت المناقشات انه لن يقوم الطلاب بتطوير أشكالا لغوية قبل فهمهم الأسس المعرفية لهذه الأشكال اللغوية لأن هناك فجوة كبيرة بين احتياجاتهم وقدراتهم الحقيقية لفهم اللغة المسموعة. تم تنظيم هذه الورقة البحثية على النحو التالي: أولا، سيتم عرض بعض القضايا النظرية المتعلقة بالجوانب المعرفية المرتبطة بفهم اللغة المسموعة، ثانيا، تم مناقشة بعض اراء الطلاب المشاركين في البحث. وأخيرا، تم تطوير بعض الأفكار والمقترحات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مشكلات الاستماع، الفهم السمعي، الذاكرة السمعية، سرعة الاستجابة، الكفاءة اللغوية.