

Effects of Listening Comprehension Anxiety from Saudi EFL Learners' Perspectives

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Abstract

Anxiety has been an important topic of discussion in foreign language learning. Listening comprehension anxiety can have negative effects on learners' performance. Therefore, this paper aims at exploring the effects of listening comprehension anxiety on Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners at Majmaah University, Saudi Arabia. This qualitative case study research design involves 15 participants. The findings show that the learners experienced high level of listening comprehension anxiety in their listening classes. Three main themes emerged from the interview data in relation to the effects of listening comprehension anxiety from the learners' perspectives: 1) personal effect: losing concentration, feeling depressed and avoiding listening skill classes, 2) social effect: isolating oneself from others and showing bad behavior, and 3) academic effect: getting low performance and achievement.

Keywords: listening comprehension anxiety, Saudi learners, personal effect, social effect, academic effect, English as a foreign language (EFL)

1. Introduction

A factor which has been found to be a major challenge to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners is language anxiety (Brown, 2007). Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) define foreign language anxiety as a “distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p.31). Similarly, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) define language anxiety as “the feeling of tension and apprehension, specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (p.24). The number of learners who experience anxiety while learning a foreign language is alarming. According to Worde (1998), one third of EFL learners experience anxiety when learning a foreign language. Language anxiety affects learners’ success in foreign language learning or acquisition. For example, EFL learners who feel anxious in learning a foreign language might find their study not interesting, which can affect their performance and achievement negatively (Liu and Huang, 2011). In other words, learners with high level of anxiety have been found to be underachievers while those who have low anxiety need to be consistent have better performance and achievement. Krashen (1982) explains how anxiety affects learners’ performance in language acquisition whereby anxiety forms mental blocks that prevent the information input to be acquired.

Anxiety levels may differ from one language skill to another. Some learners may experience high anxiety in a specific language skill. Several studies have investigated the relationship between language anxiety and language skills, such as foreign language reading anxiety (Saito, Horwitz and Garza, 1999), foreign language listening anxiety (Kim, 2000), foreign language speaking anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986) and foreign language writing anxiety (Cheng, 2004). Bekleyen (2009) conducted a study on language teacher candidates studying English language at Dilce University, Turkey in order to find the causes and effects of listening comprehension anxiety. He concluded his study that some EFL learners reported anxiety stemming from foreign language learning in general while other learners experience anxiety in a specific language skill. A research conducted by Al-Shboul, Ahmad, Nordin and Rahman (2013) found that the effect of foreign language anxiety on the learners’ performance varies according to the specific language skill. It has been highlighted that research on listening comprehension has been neglected because it is regarded as a passive skill which means that learners learn it when participating in other language skills (Vogely, 1999). Listening comprehension has been found to be an important language skill for learners in order to communicate effectively (Wang, 2010). Learners who begin to learn a foreign language have to listen frequently to the words of that language in order to recognize those words. However, listening comprehension is considered as a difficult skill due to its problematic nature. In listening skill, learners are not allowed to revise their answer and they have to answer within the time given while in other language skills such as reading or writing, the students have the time to revise and think of their answers. This complexity of listening comprehension may trigger anxiety and irritation for EFL learners (Graham, 2006). Anxiety associated with listening tasks has been found to be a problem for language learners. Some researchers found that listening leads to high level of anxiety among learners (Chang, 2010;

Vogely, 1998). Many researchers have discussed the effects of listening comprehension anxiety and found that listening comprehension anxiety affects learners' performance, achievement, and self-confidence levels (Elkhafaifi, 2005; Kim, 2000; Serraj and Noordin, 2013). Kimura (2008) argues that little research have been conducted on foreign language listening anxiety. Thus, more attention should be given to listening comprehension anxiety. Moreover, the effects of listening comprehension anxiety vary according to the culture or population (Kim, 2000). Therefore, more studies on different cultures could provide new insights on listening comprehension anxiety. The majority of research on listening comprehension anxiety have been carried out on learners from western countries while Arab contexts have seldom been explored (Al-Shboul et al, 2013). Research on students from Arab context might add something new to listening comprehension anxiety.

In Saudi Arabia, students have been found to have difficulties in listening comprehension (Hamouda, 2013). For example, a lot of students face problems when comprehending listening texts which could lead to poor performance, losing their concentration and having low self-confidence. The psychological factors are also discussed as factors affecting Saudi EFL learners such as boredom, anxiety and frustration which work as barriers on listening comprehension. Anxiety is one of these factors that is considered to be the main challenge which Saudi EFL learners faced (Alrabai, 2014; Hamouda, 2013). A study conducted by Al-Saraj (2014) on Saudi women taking English preparatory program found anxiety to be one of the main problems that they faced. Alrabai (2014) who also conducted a study on foreign language anxiety among Saudi students found that they expressed moderate to high levels of anxiety depending on the specific language skill. The majority of research in Saudi Arabia were carried out on foreign language anxiety in general or listening comprehension problems. However, very few research focused on anxiety specifically related to listening comprehension in Saudi Arabia. Thus, this study aims to contribute to the field of foreign language anxiety by exploring the effects of listening comprehension anxiety experienced by the Saudi EFL learners. This study seeks to answer the following research question: What are the effects of listening comprehension anxiety on the Saudi EFL students?

1.1 Listening Comprehension Problems

Listening is a significant skill in foreign language acquisition. Rost (2001) states that listening acquisition is an essential factor in learners' success because listening comprehension is basic to other language skills to be acquired. Hasan (2000) explains that listening is different from listening comprehension process whereby in listening process, the listener does not need to understand the speech comprehensively but listening comprehension is a process that demands for interpreting the text and requires comprehending the spoken text. In addition, Vandergrift (1999) stresses that "listening comprehension is a highly integrative skill. It plays an important role in the process of language learning/acquisition and facilitates the emergence of other language skills" (p.170). Studies on listening comprehension found that listening skill is a problematic area for EFL learners (Brown, 2007; Hamouda, 2013; Hayati, 2010). Research have found various reasons that may influence EFL learners in listening comprehension process, such as those related to linguistic competency,

speaker's accent nature, text characteristics, speed rate, repetition and paraphrasing, and difficult vocabulary (Hasan, 2000; Higgins, 1997).

Arab EFL learners have been found to face alarming problems in listening comprehension (Assaf, 2015; Hasan, 2000). Assaf (2015) classifies listening comprehension problems of Arab EFL learners into semantic, syntactic, and external factors such as listening quality. Research in Saudi Arabia have discovered almost the same problems of listening comprehension as those found in other Arab countries such as speed rate, anxiety, unfamiliar vocabulary and strange accents (Hamouda, 2013).

1.2 Foreign Language Anxiety / Listening Comprehension Anxiety

The affective domain which is the emotional side of human behavior includes anxiety, self-esteem, aptitude and motivation. It is closely associated with foreign language learning because people's feelings or emotions influence their responses (Brown, 2007). Learning a foreign language requires understanding the ideas of the target language and it might put learners in a challenging situation which lead to anxiety. Krashen (1982) in his Affective Filter theory explains that anxiety works as filters that could monitor language learning process through obstructing language signals to pass into the language learning parts in the brain.

Some researchers (Ehraman, 1996; Oxford, 1999) have discovered that students' behaviors and feelings play important roles in determining the success of foreign language learning. Research done on the relationship between affective factors and foreign language learning found that anxiety had been examined less than other affective factors (Gardner, 1997). Foreign language anxiety is considered as a form of situation-specific anxiety which means that this kind of anxiety is associated with specific foreign language learning situations (Baily, Daley and Onwuegbuzie, 1999). Studies have reported that foreign language anxiety is an individual apprehension in the language classes, i.e. this type of anxiety depends on the differences in the individuals' stress level and perceptions of the threat level.

Many studies have focused on foreign language anxiety in relation to various variables (Abu-Rabia, 2014; Dogan and Tucer, 2015; Wang, 2010). These studies found that foreign language anxiety influences negatively the students' performance and the academic achievement. For example, high competency of language skills are related negatively with anxiety levels on foreign language learning and positively with the academic achievement of the students (Arguman and Abu-Rabia, 2002).

Research have emphasized that foreign language anxiety can be linked to a specific language skill. Researchers found that a high number of EFL learners experienced listening comprehension anxiety (Arnold, 2000; Kim, 2000; Vogely, 1999). Wheelless (1975) describes listening comprehension anxiety as "a receiver's apprehension, fear of misinterpretation, inadequately processing or not being able to adjust psychologically to messages sent by others" (p.263). Two prominent studies highlighted the issue of foreign language listening anxiety. Kim (2000) discusses the impact of affective reactions on second language learners in listening skill. For her study, she developed Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale

(FLLAS) which found that the listeners experienced personal effects such as irritation, nervousness, and tension when listening to English language. She also found that language proficiency of the students associated negatively with foreign language listening anxiety which means that when learners' language proficiency increases, listening comprehension anxiety decreases or becomes lower. A study conducted by Vogely (1998) found that listening comprehension anxiety can be influenced by the nature of foreign language input, aspect of foreign language processing and instructional factors in which the students felt anxious when they had problems with nature of speed, level of difficulty, inappropriate strategy or lack of practice.

Other researchers (Arnold, 2000; Young, 1992) acknowledge the role of listening comprehension anxiety in foreign language learning as a significant factor in determining learners' success. Serraj and Noordin (2013) assert that anxiety is an important variable that influences EFL students' performance and achievement. In congruent with that, Elkhafaifi (2005) also found that both relate negatively to the learners' achievement in which when listening comprehension anxiety increases, learners' achievement becomes lower and vice versa. Other types of effects related to listening comprehension anxiety have been found such as behavioral and social effects. Bekleyen (2009) found that the main effects related to listening comprehension anxiety were physical symptoms and avoidance. Marzec- Stawiarska (2013) conducted a study on Masters' students in order to explore the causes and symptoms of listening comprehension anxiety. The study revealed two types of symptoms associated with listening comprehension anxiety: physical symptoms such as pounding heart and behavioral symptoms such as avoidance. Therefore, this study focuses on the effects of listening comprehension anxiety from the learners' perspectives, specifically the Saudi learners, with the hope to provide more insights into this phenomenon.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

A qualitative case study research design was employed in this study because the researcher wanted to understand the effects of listening comprehension anxiety phenomenon in specific details (Creswell, 2012). Furthermore, a qualitative research is also used to explore the feelings or perceptions of people which is suitable to this study (Creswell, 2012). A qualitative case study was chosen for this study because a case study is used when the phenomenon is still unclear (Yin, 2009). Studies on listening comprehension anxiety have not found any clear evidence for the effects of listening comprehension anxiety (Serraj, 2015).

2.2 Participants

The researcher in this study used purposive sampling to choose Saudi EFL students at Majmaah University as participants. Patton (1999) explains that the purposive sampling indicates the cases to which the researcher can learn a lot about the central issues related to the purpose of the research. The researcher selected the participants because they were suitable, available and had some characteristics the researcher needed for this study (Creswell, 2012). In order to select appropriate participants, the following criteria were followed: 1)

involved only first semester Saudi students who enrolled in Preparatory Year Program, 2) involved only male students because in Arabic traditions, men are not supposed to meet women face to face, 3) excluding students who had studied or stayed in native English speaking countries.

2.3 Data Collection

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 participants. Semi structured interview suits this study because it provides a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). The researcher conducted the interviews face to face with the participants. Each interview took about 25 to 30 minutes and was tape-recorded. The semi-structured interviews consisted of 15 questions and note-taking was used. The interview questions were developed after some adaptations from related studies and after consulting his doctoral supervisor.

2.4 Data Analysis

In analyzing the data, the researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim. The researcher followed the thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2013) to analyze the participants' interviews. First, the researcher read the verbatim transcription of the data to be familiar with the data. Second, the researcher developed the initial codes. Third, the researcher searched for themes. Fourth, the researcher revised the themes. Fifth, the researcher classified and named the themes. Sixth, the researcher wrote a report.

3. Results and Discussion

Having analyzed the participants' interview scripts with regards to the effects of listening comprehension anxiety from the Saudi EFL learners' perspectives, three main themes emerged: personal effects, academic affects and social effects. Table 1 shows the three main themes and their sub-themes.

Table 1. Effects of Listening Comprehension Anxiety

Theme	Sub-theme
Personal Effects	Losing concentration Feeling depressed Avoiding listening skill classes
Social Effects	Isolating oneself from others Showing bad behavior
Academic Effects	Getting low achievement and performance

3.1 Personal Effects

The participants associated anxiety in listening comprehension to having negative effects on them personally: losing concentration, feeling depressed and avoiding listening skill classes. Out of the 15 students who participated in this study, 5 admitted that they lose their concentration during listening tasks because they were anxious. Participant 8 said:

In listening tasks, I always lose my concentration because I feel anxious. Being worried makes me getting lost during the listening task. I can't focus with the speaker when I am stressful.

Participant 5 described his feeling of stressful during listening examinations. He said:

I always forget everything. I get confused because I am unable to comprehend the speech when I am afraid of listening. This worry leads me to think outside the context. For example, I become thinking how to relax or calm down. So, this leads me to lose the focus.

In terms of losing concentration, the participants admitted that being anxious affected their concentration during the listening tasks. This is in line with the point of view of MacIntyre and Grandner (1991) and Serraj (2015) who suggest that anxiety may reduce the listeners' ability to concentrate on linguistic input to interpret the speech.

The next sub-theme that emerged from this study is feeling depressed. A total of 4 participants mentioned that anxiety made them become depressed. Even though the students are provided with facilities inside and outside the university, they seemed to suffer from depression in their listening classes. This is clearly explained by participant 8 who said:

I feel depressed when I get anxious. I don't like to go gym or sit in the cafeteria. I feel that my life is falling down. I think that all my dreams will disappear despite of I am sure that I will pass and become an engineer at the end, but that feeling breaks all my positive thinking.

Another participant mentioned that he would feel sad whenever he had to sit for listening examinations. He also admitted of losing the interest or pleasure of doing his daily activities. Participant 12 said:

I become in a depressed mood because I am worried. I have also difficulty in sleeping and lose my energy. Sometimes, I lose interest in things that were bringing happiness to me.

With respect to depression, the Saudi EFL students said that they would be moody and depressed when experiencing listening comprehension anxiety. In the same vein, Valizadeh and Alavinia (2013) argue that EFL learners' lack of optimism lead to listening comprehension anxiety. This line of thought is also supported by Kimura (2008) who found that emotional factors such as dislike, discomfort and ignoring are related to listening comprehension anxiety.

The third sub-theme is avoiding listening skill classes. Seven participants admitted that anxiety affected them negatively and they began to dislike listening skill and they would avoid participating in listening classes. Participant 6 expressed avoidance to listening skill. He commented:

Because of anxiety in listening classes or quizzes, I hate this skill. I do not like to listen to English even outside the classroom because I remember the anxiety and other bad things happen to me in the classroom.

Other participants supported their peers' claims about avoiding listening skill. They requested to their teachers to make listening classes as optional because they did not like to attend listening classes. Participant 10 said:

I do not like listening because I feel stressful from the beginning of the class till the

end. I reported many times to our supervisor at English department in order to make the attendance in listening classes optional. In addition, I suggested reducing the marks for listening skill in compare with other language skills.

Similarly, participant 11 said:

I have many absences in English course at all, but the most absences in listening classes because I do not like it and escape from these classes. I have a negative picture about listening in my mind.

In this study, the participants expressed another personal effect which is avoiding listening skill classes. This effect is in line with Bekleyen (2009) and MacIntyre Gardner (1991) who found that avoidance is one of the major effects of foreign language listening anxiety.

3.2 Social Effects

The next main theme is on the social effects of listening comprehension anxiety. To be more precise, how the students' social life was affected by listening comprehension anxiety. Two sub-themes emerged from the main theme: isolating oneself from others and showing bad behavior. 9 out of the 15 participants admitted that listening comprehension anxiety had a negative effect on them which is avoiding contact with people, including their friends and families. The participants might have resorted to avoidance behavior in order not to create conflict with others or to avoid saving face issue. Participant 2 commented that he avoided talking to his friends after listening examinations because he was anxious and stressful. He said:

I have a big problem which is isolation after each exam. I avoid discussing with my friends. I prefer to be alone. It happens with me at home, too. I feel isolated.

Sometimes, I locked my room door to prevent anyone from talking with me.

Other participants 1, 4, 5, 8, 14, and 15 preferred to isolate themselves when they became apprehensive. They would keep away from their family, relatives and friends. Participant 5 said, "I leave home and stay in my car wandering in the streets." Participant 15 remarked, "I hate those moments because they affects my relationship with others." Participant 8 said, "I turn off my cell phone and stay alone in a place that no one knows it".

Another sub-theme which emerged from the main theme is showing bad behavior. Some participants (6 out of 15) admitted that listening comprehension anxiety caused them to do bad things such as cheating, and fighting with others. Participant 4 said:

In fact, I don't know why I do like this. I try to cheat from others because I have to achieve the task. The anxiety prevents me; therefore, I cheat from others. I also ask my friend to keep near from in order for giving me their help.

In similar vein, participant 5 commented:

I always cheat from my friends in the listening exams. I am afraid of listening too much so I do like this. In my opinion, the best solution for my case is cheating to achieve listening tasks.

In addition, participants 1, 9, and 10 mentioned that listening comprehension anxiety affected them to the extent of being angry or trying to fight with invigilators or other students in the classroom. They claimed that they become very aggressive. Participant 1 admitted that listening comprehension anxiety made him nervous and influenced him to fight with others.

I deliberately make noisy in the classroom. When I feel apprehensive, I rush out in

a very bad temper. So, I try to fight with proctors or any other student look at me.

Unfortunately, this problem makes me very aggressive.

In summary, the second type of effect is the social effects which are divided into two types: isolating oneself from others and showing bad behavior. In the first type, the participants commented that this problem caused them to isolate themselves from others either their friends or their family. This finding supports Maclytyre's (1998) finding which found that anxious learners are not interested to participate in interpersonal communication with others.

3.3 Academic Effects

The last main theme which emerged from the interview data is academic effects. This theme is related to low achievement and performance. Six out of the 15 participants stressed on this issue. Participants 2, 11, and 14 admitted that they were slow in doing their listening tasks because they often experienced anxiety which obstructed them from achieving their goals. Participant 2 said:

My teacher always complains from me because I am very slow in doing listening exercises. But I can't I need to answer correctly. That's impossible due to anxiety.

It makes me spend more time in thinking about the question.

Participant 11 said, "When I experience apprehension, I become low achiever student because I cannot complete all questions within the time given." In line with this view, other participants 5, 8, and 9 also admitted that listening comprehension anxiety affected their performance. As a result, they obtained low marks and bad evaluation from their teacher. For example, participant 8 said:

I talked to my friends that the reason behind my low grades in listening skill is the feeling of fear. Among the four English skills, I always get the lowest mark in listening because I feel apprehensive of listening.

Similarly, participant 9 commented, "I start thinking to change my major to avoid taking English courses especially listening. I am so scared from listening and that affects my results in the exams. I perform poorly in listening classes."

In summary, Academic effect is another type of effects which emerged from the data. Saudi EFL learners expressed their problem with low achievement and performance as a result of experiencing listening comprehension anxiety. This is in agreement with some previous studies (Al-Sawalha, 2016; Arnold, 2000; Bekleyen, 2009; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Serraj and Noordin, 2013) which found that listening comprehension anxiety undermines the students' achievement and performance.

To overall, the findings of this study have shown that listening comprehension anxiety affected the Saudi EFL learners in three ways: personal affects, academic affects and social affects.

4. Conclusion

This study was conducted in order to gain an understanding of the effects of listening comprehension anxiety from the Saudi EFL learners' perspectives. The present study found that the Saudi EFL learners were affected by listening comprehension anxiety in three ways: personal effects, academic effects and social effects. The first effect involves three sub-themes: losing concentration, feeling depressed and avoiding listening skill classes. The second one is the academic effect, that is, getting low achievement and performance. The last

effect is social effects which consist of two sub-themes: isolating oneself from others and showing bad behavior. The implications of this study is that the teachers teaching listening comprehension classes at Majmaah University should take into consideration the effects of listening comprehension anxiety. Listening comprehension courses should emphasize more on the psychological aspect of learning a foreign language. It is recommended that more studies be conducted from Saudi EFL learners' perspectives with different focus such as female students or graduate Saudi students.

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