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Enhancing Efficiency and Effectiveness in Listening-Comprehension Activities: Some Down-to-Earth Insights

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ble him/her to listen skillfully.

As for the complexity of the process of listening comprehension, the researcher spotlights the critical importance of continuous practice of indoor/outdoor listening activities, the necessity of adequate exposure to language as it is spoken by its natives or any other authentic speaker(s). In this regard, the researcher urgently calls upon teachers to use English not only during classes but also during their office hours; and to encourage their students to practice English inside and outside classrooms so as to help them accustom their ears to permanently hear, and understand English. Equally important, students have to acquaint themselves with active chances and situations of practicing the skill of listening through different channels of communication: different internet web-sites, TOEFL and/or IELTS tests, TV and radio programs/news, computer facilities, tape-records, and all the like.

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trying to translate a specific word. Some students convince themselves that they are not able to understand spoken English well and therefore create problems for themselves. A way to get around this problem is to present the listening activity within the context of the topic of a teaching unit. The key to assist students improve their listening skills is to convince them that no understanding is impeccably perfect; and that what they do need is listening to English as often as possible if they seriously intend to be good language users. This can be achieved gradually; i.e., short periods of listening time especially in the first stage of listening. Since the human brain works about four times as fast as the mouth, the remarkable and noteworthy point is that one can improve his listening skills by practicing the techniques and principles necessary for such skills. It is certain that our listening-comprehension activities will be more meaningful and interesting if the ideas about pre-listening activity, reasonable interpretation, material choice, and any other practical strategy are approved by the teacher and properly applied in the classroom. Then students will change their present impression and no more have boring listening-comprehension classes.

While it is important to teach each language skill separately, it is more important to teach the four language skills combined. In many countries, especially in Asian and South American countries, EFL seems to be taught with a special emphasis on reading comprehension and grammar. This, in the researcher's point of view, does not only mean that listening is given little attention but it also leads to undesired results regarding the inefficient use of language by students of those countries. In this respect, the researcher finds it urgent to look for powerful, efficient strategies that help students properly use all language skills simultaneously and jointly.

It seems to the researcher that, in all everyday life situations, the speaker, and the visual clues help the student drive home whatever spoken; and ena-

tening comprehension for the first- and second-year students majoring in English language. This sounds pretty good but not sufficient especially when it concerns EFL learners. As so, the use of other sources becomes especially urgent and crucial. In this respect, the internet engines (such as the web of 'Yahoo' where one can listen to fresh news by native speakers) samples of TOEFL and IELTS listening-tests in addition to the common means of Radio/TV programs are some examples of acquaintance with listening opportunities. The merits of using such materials in training listening ability are obvious. They bring authentic spoken English into the classroom. They help students make the transition from classroom English to real-life English easier and more effective. Moreover, such materials help compensate for the defect that only one accent is used in classroom teaching. This makes it very necessary to seize, in everyday life, the situation, the speaker, and the audio-visuals that help decode oral messages.

Now I would like to point out that listening material should not be limited to formal language. Informal English should be seriously taken into consideration, since it is the sociolinguistic variety that is used in the every day life situations in which learners' exposure is highly expected.

5. Conclusions

In nutshell, listening comprehension is the receptive skill in the oral mode. Speaking of listening really means listening and understanding what is heard. It is the language skill which learners usually find the most difficult. This is often because they feel unnecessary pressure to understand every word. To achieve the aims related to this skill, the teacher plays an important role in helping his/her students prepare for the listening task well.

One of the commonest inhibitors for students is often mental block. While listening, a student suddenly fails to understand what is being said. At this point, many students just tune out or get caught up in an internal dialogue

helps to understand the general ideas. Imagine that one English-speaking friend says, "I bought a very modern receiver; and now I can finally watch and listen to so many English programs." You don't understand what a 'receiver' is; you understand what the words mean. If you focus on the word 'receiver' you may get frustrated. This is a simple example but it demonstrates what you need to focus on: not the word you don't understand, but the words you do understand instead. If you understand, "Germany", "business trip", and "last year", you can assume that the person was speaking about a business trip to Germany last year. This may seem obvious to you, but remember that understanding the main idea will help you understand the details as the person continues to speak.

4.7 Creating our own means of listening

When we feel that the above mentioned factors do not suit our ability in listening comprehension, we can create and think of one way or another that helps us follow and grasp what we listen to. This may oblige us to vary the means we create in accordance with the nature, situation and other contexts of listening. Our own invented strategies and those of other people will be new experiences to be positive additions to the literature germane to the skills of listening. But, in all cases, we should listen for main ideas. The main ideas are the most focal points the speaker desires to run through. They may be mentioned at the start or end of a talk, and repeated severally. If we are not absolutely sure, we have fully understood what the speaker said, we just ask. It is a good idea to repeat in our own words what the speaker has said to ascertain that our understanding is optimal.

4.8 Decoding oral messages

In many universities and colleges, English news programs from different TV channels and radio programs are used as teaching material for training in lis-

til they have understood the main ideas.

Two extremely pivot hallmarks can be recognized here. First, translating creates a barrier between the listener and the speaker. Second, most people repeat themselves constantly. By remaining calm and relaxed, one can impeccably understand what the speaker says.

4.4 Translation creates a barrier

When one is listening to another person speaking English; there will be an immediate and dramatic temptation to translate into one's native language. This temptation becomes much stronger when one hears a word he/she does not understand. This is particularly reasonable as one wants to understand everything said. Translating into one's native language means focusing attention away from the speaker and concentrating on the process of translation to take place in brain. This would be fine if one can put the speaker on hold. In real life, however, a person continues talking while another person translates. This situation obviously leads to lesser -not more- understanding. Accordingly, translation leads to a kind of mental block which sometimes hardens to understand anything at all!

4.5 Listening to something enjoyable

Probably the greatest advantage of Internet to improve the skills of listening is that one can choose what one likes to listen to and how many times one likes to listen to it. By listening to enjoyable things, one is also likely to know a plethora of the vocabularies.

4.6 Listening for context and the use of visual and aural environmental keys

Ur (1984: 20) states that many foreign-language learners seem to lack the ability to use clues to get at the meaning of an imperfectly grasped phrase. That is because they analyze words in isolation and not linking them to the context or accompanying visual stimuli. The use of key words or phrases

more professional topics can be introduced.

4.3.4 Other Strategies. Teachers are said to be masters of all class situations. This makes them responsible of preparing their classes and students to what they are supposed to learn. They should motivate students to be ready to learn by preparing every facility that may help them accomplish this end. As regards listening comprehension, teachers are critically invited to stimulate their students to be good listeners. Plausibly, this is impossible to achieve in one day; i.e., it needs both the teacher and the student to devote considerable time and exert a great deal of efforts to realize such a goal. The role of the teacher may be shaped as pieces of advice, recommendations, instructions and the like rather than harshly obliging his students to do this and not to do that. We probably imagine that the teacher may ask his/her students that "once they have begun to listen on a regular basis, they might still be frustrated by limited understanding. What should they do?" Below are some fundamental recommendations (suggested in The Internet TESL Journal, 2002) to overcome such frustrations on students' part. They should be trained how to:

- * get accustomed to situations when they find themselves unable to thoroughly understand the material.
- * give their full attention to the person who is speaking; and distract themselves with various things if they are supposed to be listening.
- * try to finish listening before they begin to speak! They can't really listen if they are busy thinking about what they want to say later.
- * keep self-controlled and relaxed when they do not fully understand - even if they continue not to understand for some time.
- * avoid translating into their native language.
- * look for the gist of the conversation rather than concentrating on detail un-

stages where they will find themselves able enough to communicate with (out) having previous knowledge or background information related to the topic(s) of communication.

4.3.3 Suitability. What has been discussed so far focuses on the content of the material. But that is not enough. There are accumulated compelling reasons to take into account students' language ability. We cannot assume that a news item full of new terms and unknown vocabulary items, no matter how interesting it is and how familiar the topic may be, will appeal to the students. The teacher should choose those items that he thinks are most suitable for his students. Like any other teaching material, news items used for teaching listening comprehension should be carefully chosen and graded according to students' various stages of competence.

It is doubtless that it is easier to understand the news when the speaker speaks clearly and slowly. However, this stage should not last very long. The teacher should help the students make the transition from slow and clear English to normal-speed English as quickly as possible.

In the early stage of listening, all the speakers should speak with a relatively similar accent, either British English or American English. As the course progresses, they may be exposed to tapes with more than one speaker and with more than one accent. A news program or any other form of language read over by one speaker and characterized by clear, formal English is suitable for our first- and second-year students. As they further progress, recordings of live commentaries, news conferences, radio plays, etc., can be introduced in the classroom.

News items chosen for our first-year students should be short and easy, including few new vocabulary items and technical terms. As their comprehension ability improves, longer, more difficult, more sophisticated, and even

their own affairs. In news reporting, they are more interested in what is happening in their own countries than in other areas. In our situation, the following topics seem to be of greatest interest to our students.

a. News items that are not broadcast on our national radio but from English radio broadcasts. Students usually find greater interest in such news than non-English learners.

b. World-wide events may not be interesting topics for our students, but their interest may be aroused when something unexpected or unusual happens. For example, the news related with wars and other critical situations such as the scandal incidents, international games of sports, scientific discoveries, earthquakes and political crises all over the world are of great interest and attract a great deal of students' attention.

4.3.2 Familiarity. Closely related to interest, news items and any other kind of materials particularly chosen for teaching listening comprehension should be more or less familiar to students. Generally speaking, students like to listen to those items of news or things that are familiar to them. Familiar topics may (not) be interesting, but the important factor is that students find them easier to understand. Brown (ibid) says that it ought to be easier for a student to understand the content that he/she is more familiar with. But why do familiar topics make our listening much more easier? The reason may lie in the fact that when we listen to a familiar topic, we already have some background knowledge in our mind. This prior knowledge helps us expect and predict what may be said next. Even if there are some unknown words in what we hear, this background knowledge of the topic we are listening to can help us guess what they might be.

Nevertheless, familiarity must be confined to be limited to the early stages of learning. This preliminary procedure aims at preparing learners to coming

Third, the teacher should ask global, rather than narrow, comprehension questions. Specific and detailed questions are asked only after the students have recognized the major ideas in the news item. What is more, and in order to help the students understand that they do not need to have absolute comprehension, the teacher should preserve a flexible approach and not always insist on a unique correct response. The teacher must simply demand a response that is sensible within the context.

The teacher's flexible approach towards students' answers is very important. It can help students not only to avoid thinking they must have optimal comprehension, but also to build up confidence in listening.

4.3 Choosing Material

The most common problem facing the teacher is how to choose and grade the material. English television programs, for instance, vary in content and cover a wide range of topics. Which are the ones to be chosen? According to the researcher's experience, the following principles are noteworthy when choosing teaching material.

4.3.1 Interest. Every teacher knows that interesting material can activate and stimulate students' learning, while uninteresting material will make the whole work boring and insipid. This remains true when we use news programs as teaching material. The teacher should choose those news items that will arouse the students' interest. It is true that different students have different interests, and it is, in principle, impossible to find material that will interest everyone. But this does not mean that there are no topics of common interest. Brown (1977) finds that people are always ready to talk about the perennially interesting conversations presumably concerned with death, power, sex, and danger. In different cultures and societies, people may have different interests. But generally speaking, people are mostly concerned with

ample, students will inevitably come across new words or phrases, which often panic them. The traditional way of presenting assumed new words and phrases before listening does help students to a certain extent. However, since the words are given as separate items, and decontextualized, students have to make efforts to fit them into the text while listening. A word list given in this way does not seem to help much in listening comprehension. In a pre-listening activity, however, we can put new words and phrases into context. All these activities, linguistic and nonlinguistic, prepare the students for the coming listening text, and make the listening more purposeful, meaningful and fascinating. All the new words will come out naturally in the discussion. If not, the teacher can give some hints and try to bring out relevant ideas. In this regard, synonyms and paraphrases are very useful.

4.2 Reasonable Interpretation

When listening to radio/TV news broadcasts, there is no need to memorize the exact words or sentences that are said. Instead, the major idea of the news is usually grasped. This principle can also be applied to our listening activities in English. First, it must be made clear to our teachers that listening comprehension does not mean exact and comprehensive correct understanding of the original text. In listening to English news broadcasts, it is the general ideas, the subject matter and the meaning, not the individual words and forms, which we are going to remember.

Second, various kinds of techniques or exercises can be used to lead the students to focus on the general idea and the subject matter of the news to which they are listening. Concentrating on and understanding the topic will make the entire listening text predictable. Discovering repeated and stressed words can help bring out the subject matter. Directed listening helps the students to extract the relevant information from the spoken discourse.

These are as follows:

4.1 Pre-listening Activity

In his book: *Communicative Language Teaching*, Littlewood (1981) points out that, "listening demands active involvement from the learner and in order to reconstruct the message that the speaker intends, the hearer must actively contribute knowledge from both linguistic and nonlinguistic sources." The purpose of the pre-listening activity is to elicit the learner's background knowledge and prepare him for what is going to be said. One critically important step is to encourage students to anticipate what they are going to hear.

Pre-listening activity makes it possible for all students to share common background knowledge before listening. We cannot, for example, expect all students to have the same level of knowledge about a particular world event or artifacts. Some students who are concerned with or interested in international affairs and read newspapers regularly will know more than those who are not and do not. The pre-listening activity makes it possible for the students to pass on the information they have to others, and thus all students can share common background knowledge before listening. Pre-listening activity can help elicit from the students their own background knowledge. When all the students are aware of the event they are going to listen to, the teacher may put some more questions for them to discuss in pairs or in groups. In this regard, the students' own background knowledge, questions which provoke discussion, or, in Richards's (1985) term: the event script, will come into play.

Another advantage of pre-listening activity is that it makes it possible to contextualize "new" vocabulary items. In listening to news reports, for ex-

go back to that report on thumbs. When you hear that no two are alike, think about what that might mean. You might think, "Maybe this means that the pattern of stripes is different for each thumb".

c. Judging. When you are sure you understand what the speaker has said, think about whether it makes sense. Do you believe what you have listened to? You may think, "How could the stripes be different for every thumb?" But then again, the fingerprints are different for every person. I think this seems believable."

3.2 Levels of Listening Comprehension

Providing some model activities to stimulate teachers to produce their own, Kailani & Muqattash (1995:13) put forward three types of activity: an elementary level activity in which students learn to identify sound patterns, meanings of words, phrases, or expressions, and to recognize grammatical elements or communicative acts, an intermediate level activity where students practice aural comprehension to select from short conversations the elements which give the gist of a particular message, and an advanced level activity where aural material is utilized to deduce meanings or outlines from a lengthy spoken discourse.

4 Effective and Interesting Listening Activities

To make listening more successful, one ought to take into account some general guidelines in teaching listening comprehension as the ones suggested by Kailani and Muqattash (1995: 7). Listening comprehension lessons must have well-defined goals, be constructed with careful step-by-step planning, require active overt students' participation, provide a communicative urgency, stress conscious memory work. These guidelines should teach not just test. To accomplish such principles, and to catch up the experience of the writer, I find that the points suggested by Yi (1989:28-29) are suitable.

repetitions, or slower speech tempi from our conversation partner. Non-interactive listening situations include listening to radio, TV, films, lectures, or sermons. In the latter situations, we usually don't have the opportunity to ask for clarifications, slower speech tempi or repetitions.

To listen effectively requires that you maintain a considerable amount of self-control and concentration. It is little wonder that you may have found yourself nodding off in class or wondering why you seem to gain very little from attending lectures when we consider these facts.

3.1 Steps in the Process of Genuine Listening

Ferre and Sanabria (2004) suggest three steps for listening: listening for the main idea(s), listening for details, and reacting to the listening. However, it seems to the writer that genuine listening as an active involuntary process does require three basic steps; but these steps should be progressively accomplished, since they are sequentially related. These steps include the following:

a. Listening. One of the strongest inhibitors for students is the mental block. While listening, a student suddenly discovers that s/he comes not to understand what is said. Listening only means concentrating enough to catch what the speaker is saying. For example, you were listening to a report on thumb prints, and the speaker mentioned a fact that no two persons' thumb prints are alike. If you can repeat the fact, then you have successfully listened to what has been said. Students should often listen, but they should listen for short periods - five to ten minutes. This should happen four or five times a week. Even if they don't understand anything, five to ten minutes is a minor investment.

b. Understanding. The second part of listening happens when you take what you have intensively listened to and understood it in your own way. Let us

someone is saying. For example, Weather and Parker (1985) give listening 45% of language use as compared with the other aspects of talking (30%), reading (16%), and writing (9%). Similarly, Ferre and Sanabria (2004) give priority to listening when talking about how to develop the four skills of language. Each letter of the word 'listen' will guide you toward becoming a better listener. Attentive listening is the process of thinking and acting in ways that connect the listener with the speaker. Active listening usually happens naturally when we are very interested in what someone is saying, we can also choose to listen actively whenever we want to maximize the quality of our listening, both in terms of the effect it has on us and the effect it has on those we are speaking to. Contrariwise, if people have "multi-task" while someone speaks, they rarely listen eagerly and effectively.

There are good reasons to believe that teaching listening skills is not an easy task for any ESL/EFL teacher. It is often frustrating for teachers because of the lack of certain rules and specific, integrated and effective exercises that can lead to improve skills as in teaching the other aspects of language. This is closely bound up with the general conclusion that successful listening skills are something acquired over time and with a great amount of practice. This very feature renders it urgent for both teachers and learners to look for effective, successful and interesting listening resources.

There are two kinds of listening situations in which we find ourselves: interactive, and non-interactive. Interactive listening situations include all face-to-face conversations and telephone calls, in which we are alternately listening and speaking, and in which we have the chance to ask for clarifications,

Students find such activities boring and the questions difficult to answer. Furthermore, many writers such as Ur (1984), Lund (1991), Ellis (1994), Kailani and Muqattash (1995), and Rieger (2003) ascribe such a kind of negligence to the limited exposure to conversational English, the shortcomings inherent in the audio-lingual methods which consider this skill a passive activity, and to the lack of listening materials. Other writers such as Geddes (1989), Lynch (1990), and Ur and Andrew (1992) hold that one of the most common problem facing the teacher is how to choose and grade the material of listening skills.

I personally believe that such a complex topic as listening comprehension is extremely critical and urgent and requires profound investigation. The present paper is intended to highlight the difficulties EFL learners face when trying to acquire skills of listening. It is an attempt to find effective means that help them overcome such difficulties dealing with listening as an essential skill or factor in the process of more attractive, interesting and successful interpersonal communication.

3.The Skill of Listening

Listening is an acquired skill. Acquiring listening skills, however, is generally frustrating. That is due to the fact that successful listening skills are acquired over a relatively long span of time and with lots of practice. It is frustrating for students because there are no rules (of thumb) as in teaching grammar. This does not amount to say that there are no ways of improving listening skills. Such skills, however, are difficult to quantify. This is why listening is usually defined as the lost art of hearing and understanding what

that the majority of them ascribe listening inefficiency to the lack of practice, training and ideal listening classes. Almost all interviewees criticize the way their teachers perform their tasks. They claim that the majority of teachers insist on using Arabic during the lecturing and communicating with their students during their office hours. They regard such drawbacks in both indoor and outdoor practices of language as an additional reason behind this inefficiency in listening skills.

Some learners, however, get surprised and dismayed when they find that they have difficulties in understanding English spoken by native speakers. It will be more surprising when speakers use a non-native English accent. These difficulties are not easy to overcome in a short time limit. It is not enough to draw the teacher's/ learner's attention to the presence and seriousness of such problems and obstacles which hinder the process of successful listening.

Kailani and Muqattash (1995: 5) think that the skill of listening "is often neglected in English classes, especially in those where conventional methods and techniques are still used." It is found that many teachers conduct the lesson in nearly the same way; that is, listening to a tape-recording. Before listening to the tape recorder, they present and explain some vocabulary items, which are assumed to be new to the students, then play the tape once or twice. After that, they ask students a series of questions on the factual content of the text, and typically these questions are evenly distributed throughout the text without regard to whether they are crucial or trivial. Such an exercise, in my humble view, is a test of memory rather than comprehension.

discussions concerning this lively and relevant-to-all topic. The paper has exclusively theoretical import based on researcher's personal experience in the field of ELT. In§ 2, the importance of listening comprehension in the overall language learning process is discussed. In §3, listening comprehension, its skills, types and situations are overviewed. In§3.1, the researcher puts forward, the steps required in the process of genuine listening. In§4, the issues of effectiveness and interestingness in listening comprehension activities are pondered over. The main conclusions are summed up in the final section § 5.

2 Introduction

Studies have long and succinctly shown that we actually spend fifty percent more time listening than we do talking. We often take listening for granted, without ever realizing that it is a skill that can be learned. Although we use listening skill more than any other skills of communication, listening is rarely taught separately. Kailani and Muqattash (1995: 5), for instance, state that "despite its [i.e., listening skill] importance as an essential language-learning skill, listening comprehension is probably the least stressed skill in the language classroom."In our first language, we adults have all the skills and background knowledge necessary to understand what we listen to or hear. Actually, we are most often not even aware of how complex the process of listening is. Such complexity is reflected in the horrifying results of listening tests designed for undergraduate students at the departments of English in many universities. Interviewing a considerable number of university students, estimated to graduate in the near future the writer of this paper finds

tening properly especially when they are exposed to real communicative situations with fluent speakers of English, including their teachers who entertain different degrees of fluency. Unlike grammar in having a strict application of rules, listening is referred to as an acquired set of skill realized through continuous practice of language. Therefore it needs long time and much effort to be exerted by both the teacher and the learner. The study presents various techniques that may be viable for the purpose of overcoming whatever forms of inefficiency and difficulties learners are eventually faced with when trying to acquire listening skills. It also recommends getting use of the different means of practicing listening skills available in our daily life in such a way that motivates learners and helps them acquire listening skills eagerly and effectively.

1 Preamble

It is extremely common among people who speak languages other than English to make recourse to the latter as the most powerful instrument of communication. Unfortunately, however, most of us do not realize the importance of listening as an effective means of communication. The present study aims at proposing an account of the efficiency and effectiveness in listening comprehension activities. It no ways provides any survey of earlier research projects about listening. It, however, relies on some important insights form different sources to place listening comprehension activities at the centre position. This paper presents only a voice in the vigorous ongoing

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ملخص

يهدف هذا البحث في مجمله إلى تقديم دراسة لموضوع الاستيعاب السمعي لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة ثانية. تسلط الدراسة الضوء على أهمية الاستيعاب السمعي لدى طالب اللغة الإنجليزية من الناحيتين الأكاديمية والعملية وتؤشر مدى الضعف والقصور الرهيب لدى طلابنا فيما يتعلق بإمكانياتهم اللغوية على أداء مهارة أو مهارات الاستيعاب السمعي عند أية محاولة للاتصال مع متحدثي اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أم أو حتى مع غيرهم ممن يتحدث هذه اللغة على اختلاف درجات طلاقتهم ومن ضمنهم الأشخاص الذين يقومون بتدريسهم والإشراف عليهم. وتتطرق الدراسة إلى أن الاستيعاب السمعي مهارة لغوية يتم اكتسابها من خلال الممارسة وليس لها قواعد أو قوانين تحكمها كما هو الحال مع جوانب اللغة الأخرى كالقواعد والنحو والصوت وما شابه. يتطرق البحث الى المعوقات الأساسية التي يعاني منها متعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة ثانية وهو يتعرض إلى مواقف يعجز فيها من استيعاب اللغة التي يتحدث بها من يجيد اللغة الإنجليزية بطلاقة، و يبحث في السبل التي من شأنها معالجة مثل هذه المعوقات والتغلب عليها سواء أكان ذلك ما يتعلق بالطالب نفسه أم من يقوم بتعليمه وتوجيهه لاكتساب هذه اللغة ومهارة استخدامها. وتقدم الدراسة العديد من الآليات الذاتية والتقنية الحديثة التي يمكن الاستفادة منها لجعل الاستيعاب السمعي مهارة مؤثرة وفاعلة، مشوقة وممتعة، ضرورية ونافعة لتعزيز ثقة الطالب وتحفيزه المستمر لممارسة اللغة كلما دعت الحاجة والضرورة إلى ذلك وخاصة في أوقات الدرس وغيرها من النشاطات والممارسات التي تتطلب ذلك وهذا هو الغرض الذي دفع بالباحث للقيام بهذه الدراسة التي يأمل منها أن تكون ذا نفع وفائدة لتحقيق المزيد من البحوث والدراسات اللغوية الأخرى .

Absract

This study in its overall thrust is devoted to deal with listening comprehension as a very important topic for teachers and learners of English as a foreign language. It highlights the importance of listening skills in both academic and practical aspects for EFL students. It addresses the extent of students' lack of proficiency and inability in demonstrating the skill(s) of lis-

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