

The Effect of Teaching Experience on English Language Teachers' Perceptions of Learners' Listening Comprehension Problems

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Abstract—Most of the studies on listening in a foreign language focus on the learner perspective, whereas research on teacher perspective is quite limited. The purpose of the study reported in this paper was to focus on listening from the teachers' perspective and investigate the effect of teaching experience on English language teachers' perceptions of learners' listening comprehension problems. The participants of this study were 148 English language teachers in Turkey, 81 of these participants were pre-service teachers studying their final semester in the English language teacher education department of a state university, and 67 of them were English language teachers working at public schools for at least five years. The data collection instrument was a perception questionnaire, Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis was used as the main data analysis method, and Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients and independent-samples t-tests were also used in order to better interpret the findings. The results of the study suggested that pre-service teachers have more optimistic perceptions of learners' listening comprehension problems as they think learners experience problems less frequently when compared to their in-service colleagues.

Index Terms—listening comprehension, teacher perceptions, teaching experience, English teacher education

I. INTRODUCTION

Listening had been one of the most neglected skills in English language teaching, especially before the introduction of the communicative and learner-centered approaches to instruction. With the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching in the 1970s, teaching English for communicative purposes became a vital goal in most language teaching contexts around the world, and the importance of listening comprehension started to rise (Morley, 2001; Richard & Rodgers, 2001; Rivers, 1981). Vandergrift (2007) suggests that listening is now accepted as the heart of the language; and Richards (2005) states that "the status of listening in language programs has undergone substantial change in recent years. From being a neglected skill relegated to passing treatment as a minor strand within a speaking course it now appears as a core course in many language programs" (p. 85).

With the increased attention on listening in language teaching, many studies have been conducted on various aspects of this language skill. Some researchers specifically focused on the effective ways of developing listening comprehension (Vandergrift, 2007; Goh, 2002; Kalidova, 1981), whereas some others studied learners' listening comprehension problems (Butt, M. N., Sharif, M. M., Naseer-ud-Din, M., Hussain, I., Khan, F., & Ayesha, U, 2010; Graham, 2006; Yousif, 2006; Goh, 2000; Hasan, 2000).

However, most of these studies focused on listening from the learner perspective, and research on teacher perspective of this issue is limited (Yildirim, 2013). The purpose of the study reported in this paper was to focus on listening from the teachers' perspective and investigate the effect of teaching experience on English language teachers' perceptions of learners' listening comprehension problems. In other words, the study aimed at finding out whether there is a difference between English language teachers who have been teaching for more than five years and teacher candidates who were about to graduate from the English language teacher education department of a state university in Turkey in terms of their perceptions of language learners' listening comprehension problems. The results of the study were expected to provide guidance for English language teachers and teacher trainers.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As a language skill, listening has been defined by The International Listening Association (1996) as the process of receiving, constructing meaning from and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages. Listening, unfortunately, is often regarded as a passive skill although it requires the listener's complete involvement as an active process in which individuals concentrate on selected aspects of what they hear and associate it with existing knowledge (Fang, 2008; Lindsay & Knight, 2006; Littlewood, 1981).

Wallace, Stariha and Walberg (2004) state that through listening students receive information and gain insights, and therefore, listening skills are quite important for learning purposes. Nunan (1998) suggests that listening is the basic skill in language learning, and Rost (1994) explains the importance of listening in language classroom as follows (p.

141-142): (a) Listening is vital in the language classroom because it provides input for the learner, learning cannot begin without understanding the input; (b) spoken language provides a means of interaction for the learner, learners must interact to achieve understanding. (c) authentic spoken language presents a challenge for the learner to understand language in the way it is actually used by native speakers; (d) listening exercises provide teachers with a tool for drawing learners' attention to new forms (vocabulary, grammar, new interaction patterns) in the language.

The importance of listening as a language skill makes teaching listening comprehension a crucial aspect of the English language instruction (Cahyono & Widiati, 2009; Morley, 2001). However, it was one of the neglected skills in the language classrooms for a long time, language teachers paid more attention to reading and grammatical skills and teaching listening was not accepted as a significant feature of the language learning process (Richards & Rodgers, 2001); instead it served as a means of introducing new grammar through model dialogues (Field, 2008).

In the 1970s, with the rise of Communicative Language Teaching, listening started to gain the importance it deserved. With increased emphasis on individual learners and individuality of learning, listening was started to be seen as a nonpassive receptive process and listening comprehension was started to be considered a fundamental language skill (Morley, 2001). Since then, there have been many improvements in teaching listening over the years as teachers and researchers have understood the significance of the listening skill in language learning and its role in communication, and as they have started to pay more attention to teaching this skill in language classrooms (Yildirim, 2013; Field 2008; Vandergrift, 2007; Rost, 2002; Vandergrift, 1999; Rubin, 1994).

With this increased attention on listening, some studies started to focus on the challenges students and teachers face during the process of teaching listening. Mendelson (1994) states three points that made teaching listening a challenging task: (a) listening was not accepted as a separate skill to be taught explicitly for a long time; (b) teachers felt insecure about teaching listening; and (c) there had been a deficiency of the traditional materials for teaching listening comprehension. Looking at the issue from the learners' perspective, some researchers suggested that listening is one of the most difficult skills for language learners (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Goh, 2000).

Learners encounter many problems while they are listening to texts in the target language (Hamouda, 2012; Graham, 2006; Goh, 2000; Hasan, 2000). Underwood (1989) states that speed of delivery, not being able to have words repeated, limited vocabulary, failing to follow signals and transitions, lack of contextual knowledge, and trying to understand every word are among the difficulties students encounter while listening in the target language. Ur (2007) adds the following items to that list: hearing sounds, understanding intonation and stress, coping with redundancy and noise, predicting, understanding colloquial vocabulary, and understanding different accents. In another study, Goh (2000, p. 59) investigated the listening comprehension problems of a group of Chinese students learning English as a foreign language and identified the most common problems as follows: quickly forget what is heard, not recognizing words already known, understanding words but not the intended message, neglecting the next part when thinking about meaning, and being unable to form a mental representation from words heard.

One of the ways of providing solutions to English language learners' listening comprehension problems can be focusing on teachers' perceptions of listening comprehension problems. The number of studies focusing on the teacher perspectives of listening comprehension problems is quite limited. In one of the studies that focused on the issue from that perspective, Yildirim (2013) investigated teachers' perceptions of university level students' listening comprehension problems and compared them with the learners' perceptions. The study reported in this paper focuses on pre-service and in-service teachers' perceptions related to English language learners' listening comprehension problems.

III. METHOD

A. Participants

The participants of this study were 148 (F = 97, M = 51) English language teachers in Turkey. 81 (F = 56, M = 26) of these participants were pre-service teachers studying their final semester in the English language teacher education department of a state university, and 67 of the participants were (F = 41, M = 26) English language teachers working at public schools for at least five years. Pre-service teacher participants of the study had been teaching as a requirement of their program for one year at public schools at least one hour a week under the supervision of the university instructors and mentor teachers. The data for the study were collected towards the end of the second semester, which indicates that the pre-service teacher participants were about to graduate and become in-service English language teachers soon.

B. Instrument

The data collection instrument used in this study was adapted from a perception questionnaire developed by Hasan (2000) for investigating English language learners' perceptions of listening comprehension problems. The instrument was adapted and used in the Turkish context for investigating English language teachers' perceptions of listening comprehension problems by Demirkol (2009) and Yildirim (2013).

There are 30 items in the questionnaire and the participants answer the questions by using a five-point scale of frequency ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The questionnaire has five sections named as message, task, speaker, listener, and strategy. The message section includes items focusing on message related listening comprehension problems (e.g. interpreting the meaning of a long spoken text, unfamiliar words); the task section is related to task related listening comprehension problems (e.g. predicting what is going to be said, filling a chart or graphic while

listening); the speaker section is about speaker related problems (e.g. pronunciation, varied accents); the listener section includes items related to listener based comprehension problems (e.g. feeling nervous, quickly forgetting the words); and the strategy section focuses on strategy related listening comprehension problems (e.g. predicting the words, paying attention to the topic markers).

The validity of the instrument for this particular research context was ensured by taking expert opinion from six university professors in the field of foreign language teacher education, and six English language teachers working at Turkish public schools for more than ten years. For reliability, Cronbach's alpha was computed and found as .783, which indicates good internal consistency (reliability) for this administration of the instrument.

C. Data Collection and Analysis

The data for the study were collected at the end of the spring semester in 2013-2014 academic year. The participants were instructed that they should answer the questions by considering an intermediate level listening class. The pre-service teacher participants of the study answered the questionnaire in their class time whereas the in-service teachers answered it in the schools they work. Only the volunteering participants answered the questionnaire; to ensure anonymity, the participants were not asked to give their names.

For data analysis, first, mean scores were calculated for the overall instrument and for all five sections. Then, Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis was used as the main data analysis method. Six different multiple regression models were used for analyzing the data, one model for each calculated mean score from the questionnaire. The dependent variables used in the regression models were the overall mean score from the questionnaire, and the mean scores from five sections. The independent variables used in each regression model were the same, and they were entered into the model in the same order: gender, GPA, and teaching experience. In each regression model, experience was entered into the model as the final independent variable in order to see the unique effect of teaching experience above and beyond the other independent variables. Gender, and teaching experience were dichotomous variables and the following dummy codes were used when the data related to these variables were being entered into the statistical analysis software (SPSS, version 20): 0 was used for female, and pre-service teacher; 1 was used for male, and in-service teacher. Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients and independent-samples t-tests were also used in order to better interpret the results of the Hierarchical Multiple Regression analyses.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the correlation coefficients among the dependent variables used in the study and the independent variable of teaching experience.

TABLE 1:
CORRELATION MATRIX – DEPENDENT VARIABLES AND EXPERIENCE

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Instrument Overall	-						
2. Message	.583*	-					
3. Task	.775*	.273*	-				
4. Speaker	.653*	.425*	.474*	-			
5. Listener	.857*	.386*	.579*	.342*	-		
6. Strategy	.701*	.328*	.407*	.247*	.542*	-	
7. Experience [#]	.876*	.490*	.706*	.583*	.755*	.582*	-

* – significant at the .01 level

– 0 = pre-service; 1 = in-service

As Table 1 indicates, there was a significant strong positive correlation between experience and overall mean score from the instrument ($r = .876$), which indicates that, as compared to the perceptions of pre-service teacher participants, the in-service teacher participants of the study tended to think that English language learners experience listening comprehension problems more frequently. The results were similar for the subsections of the questionnaire, for each subsection there was a significant strong positive or moderate correlation between the subsection mean score and the experience variable.

Presenting the results of six different Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses, Table 2 draws a better picture in terms of understanding the effect of teaching experience on English teachers' perceptions of learners' listening comprehension problems.

TABLE 2:
MULTIPLE REGRESSION RESULTS FOR OVERALL INSTRUMENT MEAN SCORE AND MEAN SCORES FROM SUBSECTIONS

Dependent Variable	R Square (Model) ^a	F (Model) ^a (df: 3, 144)	R Square (Change) ^b	F (Change) ^b (df: 1, 144)
Instrument Overall	.772	162.651*	.744	470.304*
Message	.240	15.188*	.236	44.691*
Task	.530	54.196*	.461	141.447*
Speaker	.342	24.954*	.327	71.550*
Listener	.571	63.915*	.562	188.792*
Strategy	.341	24.792*	.335	73.128*

* – significant at the .01 level

a – independent variables (in the order entered in the model): gender, GPA, experience

b – independent variable: experience

According to Table 2, in the first regression model, which had the overall mean score from the instrument as the dependent variable and age, GPA, and teaching experience as the independent variables, the R Square was found as .772, and the R Square change was found as .744, both significant at the .01 level. These results indicate that the independent variables of the study altogether significantly explain 77.2 percent of the variation in the mean scores, and teaching experience itself, controlling for gender and GPA, significantly explains 74.4 percent of the variation of the mean scores. The same tendency has been observed for five multiple regression models designed for the subsections of the instrument. In each model, R Square for the model and R Square Change value for the teaching experience variable were found to be significant at the .01 level. The highest R Square Change value (.562) was found for the Listener section of the questionnaire, indicating that 56.2 percent of the variation in the Listener subsection mean scores can be explained by teaching experience. Listener subsection was followed by the task, strategy, speaker, and message subsections, respectively. These results from the Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses indicate that teaching experience had a significant and a big effect on the participants' perceptions of English language learners' listening comprehension problems.

Results from the independent-samples t-tests corroborate the results of the multiple regression analyses. Table 3 presents the mean score differences of the two participant groups according to overall instrument score and scores from subsections of the instrument.

TABLE 3:
MEAN SCORE DIFFERENCES

	Pre-service (n = 81)		In-service (n = 67)		df	t
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Instrument Overall	2.75	.22	3.63	.26	146	-21.989*
Message	2.95	.81	3.75	.54	146	-6.785*
Task	2.72	.50	3.87	.65	146	-12.029*
Speaker	2.71	.48	3.35	.39	146	-8.676*
Listener	2.76	.44	3.72	.38	146	-13.929*
Strategy	2.68	.55	3.57	.69	146	-8.464*

* – significant at the .01 level

As Table 3 indicates, there was a significant mean difference between pre-service and in-service teacher participants of the study for the overall instrument score and the scores of the subsections. In each of these differences, in-service teacher participants' mean scores were significantly higher than those of the pre-service teacher participants. These results indicate that in-service teachers' perceptions of English language learners' frequency of experiencing listening comprehension problems were higher as compared to pre-service teachers. In other words, as compared to in-service teachers, pre-service teachers think that English language learners experience listening comprehension problems less frequently.

All in all, the results of this study suggest that pre-service teachers have more optimistic perceptions of learners' listening comprehension problems as they think learners experience problems less frequently when compared to their in-service colleagues. However, the related literature on language learners' listening comprehension problems corroborates the in-service teachers' perceptions. Goh (2000) found that language learners frequently experience problems in the three phases of listening process: perception, parsing, and utilization. In the perception phase, learners experience problems like not recognizing words they know, neglecting the next part when thinking about meaning, or concentrating too hard or being unable to concentrate; in the parsing phase they quickly forget what is heard, are unable to form a mental representation from words heard, or do not understand subsequent parts of input; and in the utilization phase they understand words but not the intended message, or feel confused about the key ideas in the message. In another study, Hasan (2000) explored learners' perceptions and beliefs about their listening comprehension problems and found that ineffective usage of listening strategies, the listening text itself, the speaker, the listening tasks and activities, the message, and listeners' attitudes were the sources of the frequently experienced listening comprehension problems. Finding similar results, Graham (2006) revealed that dealing with the delivery of the spoken text and trying to hear and understand the individual words were the frequently experienced listening comprehension problems reported by the learners. In addition, Hamouda's (2012) study indicated that the students' frequently experienced

listening comprehension problems were pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, different accents of speakers, lack of concentration, anxiety, and bad quality of recording.

In addition, recently Yildirim (2013), using the same questionnaire used in the current study, conducted a study which focused on Turkish university instructors' perceptions of English learners' listening comprehension problems. Although Yildirim's study reports only item-based mean scores, not the subsection mean scores, the results show that in 21 of the 30 items in the questionnaire, the instructors' mean score was over 3.5, and in seven of the remaining nine items the mean score was over 3.0. These results corroborate the in-service teacher participants of this study whose mean score from the overall questionnaire was 3.63, and mean scores from four of the five subsections were over 3.5; on the other hand, in the current study, pre-service teachers' mean scores from all the subsections (and therefore from the overall instrument) was under 3.0.

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of teaching experience on English language teachers' perceptions of learners' listening comprehension problems. The study compared a group of pre-service English language teachers' perceptions of English learners' listening comprehension problems with those of in-service teachers who had been working as English teachers for at least five years. The results of the study indicated that as compared to in-service teachers, pre-service teachers think that English language learners experience listening comprehension problems less frequently.

Although it can be considered normal for in-service teachers to have more realistic perceptions than the pre-service teachers because of their experience in the job, the large and significant mean score differences may suggest that English language teachers graduate with very optimistic perceptions about listening comprehension problems, which may affect the quality of their listening classes negatively in the future. In order to address this potential problem, one of the strategies English language teacher education programs can use may be to increase the number of hours student teachers teach during their teaching practicum process. Spending more time in a real language classroom, teacher candidates can have better and more realistic perceptions of the real language teaching environments they will start teaching in very soon. In addition, the effect of listening comprehension problems on listening comprehension should be emphasized in the methodology courses teacher candidates take during their teacher education process. Putting specific focus on the types of listening comprehension problems experienced by language learners, and the strategies for teachers to address those problems would make future English language teachers more aware of and better prepared for these problems.

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