

IN THE NAME OF GOD

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دانشگاه شهید باهنر کرمان

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The Effect of FL Anxiety

on

Listening Comprehension

of

Iranian EFL Learners

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Hereby, we recommend that this thesis submitted by *Fatemeh Mahmoudi Zarandi* be accepted as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (M.Sc.).

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Dedication

To whom I love beyond all loving

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of foreign language anxiety on listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. The quantitative component of the study first examined the learners' level of FL listening anxiety as well as their performance on the listening comprehension test, and then compared the performance of high-anxious and low-anxious females and males on the listening comprehension test. The quantitative component of the study further looked at the females' and males' performance on the listening comprehension test regardless of their level of FL listening anxiety, and also the females' and males' differences in terms of their level of FL listening anxiety were examined.

A total of 100 intermediate EFL learners, all studied in English Language Institutes, participated in this survey. Participants' FL listening anxiety was measured by the Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS), a newly developed scale by Kim (2000). The other instrument used in this study, was a listening comprehension test to measure the listening proficiency of the participants.

This study suggested that foreign language learners do indeed experience anxiety in response to listening comprehension, and the results of the t-tests analyses revealed the possibility that FL listening anxiety actually does not interfere with foreign language listening comprehension skill. This study also suggested that FL listening anxiety attributable to gender does not interfere with the listening comprehension skill and there is no significant difference between females and males in the listening comprehension skill as well as in their level of FL listening anxiety.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Overview

Over the past several decades, second and foreign language educators have experienced gradual changes of attitude toward the role and importance of listening comprehension in language instruction. Though it has taken a considerable amount of time to overcome the common belief that listening is almost the same as reading and to admit that comprehending spoken language is an active skill, listening skills have finally become an important focus of language instruction.

The steadily growing appreciation for the role of listening comprehension has generated much new research related to foreign language listening. Kim (2000) stated that the two main approaches to such listening research have involved either an instructional orientation or a linguistic orientation. It was also mentioned that one area of focus in teaching-oriented lines has been "comprehension approaches," many of which have criticized previous simple listening instruction methodologies that simply exposed learners to the spoken language (Asher, Kusudo, & de la Torre, 1974; Belasco, 1981;

Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Postovsky, 1974; Stevick, 1976; Winitz, 1981). Assuming that comprehension makes material available for language learning, the proponents of these approaches have recommended that receptive skills such as listening should be a starting point for instruction in second and foreign languages. Consequently, many ESL or EFL researchers have paid more attention to the role of listening comprehension in the language acquisition process, resulting in an increasing interest in the nature of listening and the factors influencing comprehension.

The linguistic approach which has usually been concerned with psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic paradigms, in general, has provided useful insights into listener characteristics, L2 sound perception, and various components of listening comprehension (Oxford, 1993). A number of studies in psycholinguistics and second language acquisition (Anderson, 1985; Bacon, 1992a; Richards, 1983; Wipf, 1984) have investigated the listening process; and in recent studies, the information processing view of listeners has been prevalent, as both receivers of information packages and

reconstructors of the interlocutor's message (Nagle & Sanders, 1986; Rost, 1990).

However, research on listening comprehension to date has neglected an important dimension of the listening process – the listener's own viewpoint (Lynch, 1998). Brown (1995) also pointed out that listeners in real life conversation do not simply respond neutrally as recipients of message, and that the listener should be examined in more naturalistic contexts. It was also mentioned that without understanding of the listener's individual personality and point of view, it is difficult to explain logically how speakers and hearers interact with each other in real situations. Therefore, sociocultural and affective factors influencing listening should be carefully explored in order to get a more comprehensive view of listeners and their task.

Based on this consideration, Kim (2000) mentioned that a series of studies (Call, 1985; Dunkel, Mishra, & Berliner, 1989; Faerch & Kasper, 1986; Long, 1989) have suggested that success in L2 comprehension depends on internal variables as well as external variables. Therefore, they have proposed that foreign language teachers should not blame students for their low aptitude in listening

comprehension and lack of effort, but should be sensitive to affective aspects, such as attitude, motivation, confidence, and anxiety.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Listening in a second language is an integrative language skill, including lexico-grammatical, phonetic, and cognitive complexities, as well as performance features such as false starts, irregular pauses or hesitations, or unclear pronunciation and intonation (Snow & Perkins, 1979). Moreover, when L2 learners are involved in listening activities, typically, they are not allowed to control the topic, speed, or volume of the speech. Kim (2000) stated that unlike reading comprehension in which the language learner can manage the input, listeners have fewer chances for repetition and correction in listening because the delivery rate of information is typically controlled by the producer. It was also mentioned that when language learners do not have appropriate listening competence, which includes quick judgment and appropriate timing, the signal, as the original listening input, decays rapidly and the listeners may fail in the simple decoding of discrete information, losing the first significant items of information. Therefore, listeners

may experience helplessness and apprehension when they feel they are not able to control their intake of language.

In line with the above prediction, Kim (2000) stated that it is not difficult to find novice listeners who complain that they simply can not keep up with the pace of listening activities. It was also mentioned that since they still have few or no automatic processes, they are often unaware of even what aspects of the sound stream to pay attention to. As such listeners lag "farther and farther behind the speaker, they try even more desperately to decode, thus missing the redundancies of real discourse that could help" (Meyer, 1984, p. 343). Consequently, the listeners are forced into a frustrating "task overload" failure, perhaps with serious anxiety.

In anxiety studies, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) found strong anxiety in listening as well as speaking and listening situation. The results showed that highly anxious listeners were so apprehensive that they would not understand all the input. They experienced difficulties in both distinguishing the sounds and structures of a listening message, and comprehending the content of the extended utterances in L2. In Young's (1992) interview, Krashen also mentioned that

incomprehensible input in listening might provoke anxiety for foreign language learners. Some quantitative studies support the contention that listening anxiety is significantly related to listening comprehension (Aneiro, 1989; Gardner, Lalonde, Moorcroft, & Evers, 1987; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994b; MacIntyre, Noels & Clement, 1997).

However, because the focus of most of the above studies was not listening comprehension but overall second language skills, their findings can not be regarded as clearly representative of listening anxiety in foreign language learning. In the previous studies, just a small part of the descriptions or analyses has been devoted to anxiety about listening comprehension with students' listening anxiety typically measured by a micro scale with only a few items regarding general input anxiety. Thus, a more detailed study is needed to identify and potentially overcome these problems, and this study has been devoted to examining a single construct, listening anxiety, by a newly developed scale to measure it.

In order to determine the existence and characteristics of listening anxiety, the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale has been used with a