

**A Study of the Problems Bahraini EFL Learners Encounter in
Listening Comprehension**



by

TARIQ HUSSAIN AHMED

**A Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of**

**MASTER OF ARTS
IN APPLIED ENGLISH LANGUAGE STUDIES**

Department of English Language and Literature

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this work is the result of my independent investigation, and other sources are acknowledged by explicit references. Further, this study has not been submitted in substance for any other degree, nor is it being concurrently submitted for any degree.

Signed: Tariq Hussain Ahmed

Date: May 13, 2012

The thesis defense committee considers this thesis entitled:

**“A Study of the Problems Bahraini EFL Learners Encounter in
Listening Comprehension”**

submitted by Mr. Tariq Hussain Ahmed to the Department of English language and literature satisfactory and acceptable for the degree of Master in Applied English Language Studies.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents who have supported me all the way since I began my studies. It is also dedicated to my wife and children who have been a valuable source of encouragement and inspiration.

ABSTRACT

Listening is a vital skill in language learning as it facilitates communication in general and the acquisition of the other skills (reading, writing and speaking) in particular. However, EFL learners face some difficulty understanding spoken English. Therefore, it was the purpose of the study to explore some of the areas of difficulty that Bahraini EFL learners encounter in listening comprehension as well as the sources that exercise influence on learners' listening comprehension. The sample selected for this work was a group of 34 English majors studying advanced level English courses at the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Bahrain (UoB). Four data collection methods are used: a TOEFL listening test, a questionnaire, an interview with the subjects and an interview with the teachers of the language development courses. The findings obtained from the TOEFL listening test reveal that the students have varying degrees of difficulty in using the following listening comprehension skills: identifying speaker's purpose, identifying speaker's attitude, grasping main ideas, making inferences, understanding details, and making predictions. Further, the findings gained from the other instruments show six major categories of the sources of areas of difficulty in listening comprehension: task sources (insufficient time for processing, impossibility of note-taking, type of questions asked, lack of repetition and lack of clarification); training sources (insufficient listening practice); text factors (type of input, length of listening text); speaker sources (accent and rate of delivery); listener sources (insufficient non-linguistic knowledge, insufficient non-linguistic knowledge and psychological state) and situation sources (lack of eye contact and noise). The study ends up with pedagogical recommendations that are considered helpful in enhancing EFL learners' competency in listening comprehension.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides background information about the study. It includes a brief review of the difficulties EFL learners may encounter in understanding spoken English. It also presents the statement of the problem, the aims of the study, the research questions, the significance, limitations and organisation of the study.

1.1 Background of the study

English has become a global language, and this gives it great importance in most parts of the world. The people who come from different linguistic backgrounds can communicate and develop their relationships using English as a lingua franca. Further, since cross-cultural studies, science and technology, etc., are taught in English in most educational institutions, listening comprehension plays an important role in the students' learning process. However, listening is still one of the most challenging skills for ESL learners to develop as it is probably the least explicitly practiced of the four language skills (Vandergrift, 2004, p. 4). EFL learners still face problems in listening comprehension, and this may deter their educational achievement (Harmer 1993, Oxford, 1993; Scrivener 1994, Gower et al, 1995, Ur 1996; Brett, 1997; Rubin, 1994; Nunan, 1998).

EFL learners' difficulties in listening comprehension have been investigated by a number of EFL specialists and researchers. Buck (2001), for example, notes that some of the difficulties learners encounter may be due to the linguistic features of

informal style. Christine (1999) points out that all EFL students have difficulties in listening comprehension, but the difficulties vary according to the students' individual differences. Further, communication in a second language involves in its process the ability to understand the oral message which cannot be separated from its context. Thus, some of the difficulties EFL learners face can be attributed to the lack of knowledge of the English culture, or the context in which speech takes place. According to Anderson and Lynch (1988), the lack of sociocutlural, factual and contextual knowledge of the language learnt can affect the students' listening comprehension due to the fact that language represents its culture. They go on to say that language speaks its culture and reflects how people view the world. Cook (2003) supports this view, stating that understanding spoken or written language depends on elements of cultural background knowledge. Vandergrift (2004) raises a related issue, the relevance of background knowledge. He points out that listening comprehension is a process of matching whatever has been said with the listener's background about the topic. A different problem is discussed by Al Alili (2009) who also maintains that despite the importance of listening comprehension in learning a second language, students still find it difficult to understand spoken English for lack of exposure to the spontaneous natural speech, which in effect makes it difficult for them to control the overflow of the information received.

Other difficulties may arise from insufficient aural training. Research has shown EFL courses sometimes fail to pay sufficient attention to listening comprehension, and as a result, EFL students face problems in understanding the oral message (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Rost, 2002; Park, 2004; Kuo, 2009; Al Alili, 2009). This view is supported by Park (2004) who finds that listening comprehension is not given attention in EFL classes in Korea due to the difficulty of mixing with English native speakers in the

speech takes place etc.(Brown and Yule, 1983; Wipf, 1984; Samuel, 1984; Rubin, 1994). When English teachers get aware of what areas of difficulty their students face in listening comprehension, what the sources of those problems are, and what training skills and strategies the learners need to overcome such obstacles, they can help their students improve their listening comprehension, and eventually, their communicative competence and linguistic proficiency will be improved.

1.3 Research questions

The study attempts to address the following questions:

- 1) What areas of difficulty do Bahraini EFL learners find more problematic in understanding spoken English?
- 2) What are the sources of the areas of difficulty that could influence Bahraini EFL learners' listening comprehension?

1.4 Aims of the study

The aims of this study directly respond to the questions raised by the study. In other words, the study aims to:

1. Investigate the areas of difficulty Bahraini EFL learners find more problematic in understanding spoken English.
2. Look into the sources of the areas of difficulty that could influence Bahraini EFL learners' listening comprehension.
3. Include, on the basis of the findings, some pedagogical recommendations that are intended to help English teachers to improve the learners' listening comprehension skills and strategies.

1.5 Significance of the study

Since there is little research done in EFL learners' difficulties in listening comprehension in the Arab World (Hasan, 2000; Yousif, 2006; Al Alili, 2009), the researcher finds it of great value to investigate what areas of difficulty Bahraini EFL learners find more problematic in listening comprehension in understanding spoken English. Furthermore, being aware of the sources of these areas of difficulty, English teachers can better address at least some of the problems in their teaching efforts. Therefore, the researcher hopes that the findings of the study will be useful for English teachers. It is expected that the findings can help them be aware of the sources of the areas of difficulty that can influence their learners' listening comprehension and consequently adopt the appropriate methodology that can help improve their listening competencies. Promoting the learners' listening comprehension skills and strategies can help them overcome many of the listening problems they often come across when listening to the foreign language (Oxford, 1990 cited in Richard and Renandya, 2002, p. 122). In addition, improving such skills will undoubtedly upgrade their performance in other content areas where the medium of instruction is English, such as business administration, medicine, physics, math, etc.

1.6 Limitations of the study

The results of this study must be considered in the light of its limitations. First, the study is limited to investigating the areas of difficulty Bahraini EFL students find more problematic in listening comprehension, and the sources of such areas of difficulty.

Second, the study is also limited to a sample of students doing an advanced course in English at the University of Bahrain (UOB), so the results are of a limited generalisability as this requires the inclusion of students from all proficiency levels. Therefore, future research should include different proficiency levels so that the problems EFL learners encounter in listening comprehension could be more accurately investigated.

Third, the study focuses on passive listening i.e. listening to others' conversations and lectures without responding to them. Thus, active listening in which the listener takes part in the conversation is beyond the scope of this study.

Finally, while the researcher concedes that the results are of a limited generalisability, the findings are expected to identify these areas of difficulty and shed light on their sources.

1.7 Organisation of the study

This dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter One gives the background of this study, states the problems, introduces the research questions, the significance, limitations of the study and organization of the study.

Chapter Two offers a discussion of the concept of listening comprehension, the features of spoken and written language, various definitions of listening definitions, types of listening, the nature of listening comprehension, the importance of listening comprehension in language classrooms, the cognitive models of listening comprehension including schema theory, listening strategies and listening skills.

Chapter Three gives a theoretical background for the factors that can influence EFL listening comprehension, and then reviews a number of empirical studies conducted in this domain.

Chapter Four describes the methodology of the study: data collection methods, study sample, procedure, and data analysis techniques. It also presents the analysis and discussion of listening test scores and questionnaire results.

Chapter five summarizes the study, presents the conclusions and makes some pedagogical recommendations. The study ends with some suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The aim of this chapter is to build a theoretical background for this piece of research by reviewing a number of previous studies related to second language listening comprehension. The chapter consists of three sections: the first section sheds light on the differences between spoken and written varieties of language. The second section provides an overview of listening comprehension including definitions of listening, types of listening comprehension, the nature of listening comprehension, and the importance of listening comprehension in EFL classrooms. It also describes some cognitive models of listening comprehension, with emphasis on schema theory. The third section discusses listening skills and strategies.

2.1 Spoken language vs. written language

The features of spoken language are quite different from those of written language. Speech differs from writing in the fact that when people write, they produce language that is, in general, well-organised and shows progression of ideas and cohesion of text constituents. However, when people speak, they produce spontaneous language which has its own unique features. In speech, people hesitate, repeat themselves, pause and restart, with frequent use of redundancy and exophoric reference.

Buck (2001) holds that there are three characteristics of speech that are very particularly important in the listening comprehension construct:

1. Speech is encoded in the form of sound.

2. It is linear and takes place in real time, with no chance of review.
3. It is linguistically different from written language.

These characteristics are further explained below.

First, the input is an acoustic signal that is encoded in the form of sounds (phonemes). These phonemes are combined to form individual words, phrases, etc. The sounds are not all the time modified clearly by the speakers and thus they become ambiguously encoded in the message. In addition, the modification of the sounds depends on a set of phonological rules including assimilation, elision and intrusion. Some sounds are affected by the sound that follows them and others can be affected by the sounds that precede them. In English, functional words are usually pronounced in two different ways: weak form and strong form. Stress and intonation (prosodic features) create distinctions in meaning. People stress words they think are important for the expression of the intended meaning. Intonation patterns and the use of different tones also express a variety of meanings and attitudes. The patterns can also show clausal boundaries, mark questions and indicate when it is appropriate for the listener to respond.

Second, spoken language takes place in real time and therefore listening, as a process, exists in time rather than in space (Flowerden, 1994, p. 10). This means that the message is heard only once. We cannot go back to the message and hear it again unless we ask the speaker to repeat what they have said. It also means, as Anderson and Lynch (1988) state, that the listener has no time to stop and think about the language used in terms of vocabulary, grammar, etc. Even when the message is repeated, we usually receive it in a different way since the speaker realizes that there is a problem and tries to rephrase or give examples to make it easier. Besides,

the oral input is produced at a speed that is suitable for the speaker not the listener, and this makes the listener bound to process the message at a speed determined by the speaker.

Third, written language and spoken language are linguistically different. They are two variants of the same linguistic system. Every one of them has its own features and complexity. Furthermore, Brown and Yule (1983) maintain that while written language is made up of well-formed sentences that form structured sequences, spoken language consists of short incomplete utterances that are more related to each other by the way the speaker says them than the way they are syntactically related, as their syntax is rather simple compared to written language. This means that sometimes when people speak, especially in informal situations, they do not speak in sentences. Instead, they speak in phrases and clauses. These phrases and clauses are called 'speech units', which are often linked together in a loose way, mostly by coordinating conjunctions. The vocabulary and grammatical structure of spoken language are usually of colloquial type that is normally avoided in writing. The degree of colloquiality of speech affects its pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and syntax, while its spontaneity affects its syntactic and discoursal structures (Ur, 1994, p. 7).

Halliday (1989) also states:

"Written discourse...tends to be more lexically dense than spoken discourse. Lexical density refers to the ratio of content words to grammatical or functional words, within a clause. Content words include nouns and verbs while grammatical words include items such as prepositions, pronouns and articles. In spoken discourse content words tend to be spread out over a number of clauses rather than being tightly packed into individual clauses, which is more typically of written discourse" (Halliday, 1989, cited in Paltridge, 2006, p. 14).

A more detailed distinction between spoken and written language is given by Chafe (1985) who summarizes the major linguistic difference as follows:

1. In spoken language idea units tend to be shorter, with simpler syntax, whereas written idea units tend to be more dense, often using complex syntax, such as dependent and subordinate clauses, to convey more information.
2. In spoken language idea units tend to be strung together by coordinating conjunctions (*and, or, but* etc.), whereas written idea units tend to be joined in more complex ways.
3. Spoken language usually has hesitations: pauses, fillers and repetitions that give the speaker more thinking time, as well as repairs, such as false starts, corrections in grammar or vocabulary, and afterthoughts.
4. Spoken languages tend to have more non-standard features such as dialect, slang, and colloquialism, whereas written language tends to be far more formal, conservative and 'correct'.
5. Spoken language tends to be far more personal, with more emotional involvement and much less precision. Speakers tend to indicate their feelings more, with expressions such as '*I think*' or '*I mean*', or by making direct reference to the listener. They also tend to be content with gross approximations, or use overstatements and exaggerations (Chafe, 1985 cited in Buck, 2001, pp. 10, 11).

It can be inferred that spoken language has its own features that are rather different from those of written language. Spoken language is generally less formal and precise than written language. Furthermore, spoken language can be more communicative

than written language due to extra cues such as body language, rhythm, tone etc., which are not apparent in written language. Written language, on the other hand, is often more articulate and sophisticated with complex syntactic structure (Buck, 2001; Paltridge, 2006). With this in mind, as Harmer (2001) maintains, when students do listening classes, teachers train them on how to get rid of the redundancy, repetition and hesitation, and how to sustain grammaticality.

2.2 Listening comprehension

This section falls into four parts. The first part provides different views about the definitions of listening, while the second part shows the different types of listening comprehension. The nature of listening comprehension and the importance of listening in EFL classrooms are in the third and fourth parts respectively.

2.2.1 Definitions of Listening

Listening is defined as an ‘active process’ (Nunan, 1999; Celce-Murcia, 2001; Anderson and Lynch, 1988; Buck, 2001; Vandergrift, 2002). This process is different from that of hearing, which is passive, since in listening, the listener has to pay attention and comprehend the oral message delivered by the speaker. This view is supported by Barker, 1987; Ronald et al, 1985) who say that listening is an active process that requires skills of prediction, hypothesizing, checking and revising. Similarly, O’Malley and Chamot (1989) believe that “listening comprehension is an active and conscious process in which the listener constructs meaning by using cues from contextual information and existing knowledge, while relying upon multiple strategic resources to fulfill the task requirement” (p. 420).

According to Howatt and Dakin (1974), listening is the way we recognize and comprehend what the speaker says, and this involves understanding their accent, grammar, vocabulary and meaning. Burley-Allen (1982) also defines listening as "taking in information from speakers..., acknowledging the speakers in a way that invites the communication to continue, and providing limited, but encouraging input to the taker's response, carrying the person's idea one step forward" (pp. 2, 3). In a rather detailed way, Rost (2002) classifies the definitions of listening into four categories:

1. Receptive orientation: listening can be the reception of what other people are saying.
2. Constructive orientation: listening can be understanding and interpreting what the speaker says.
3. Collaborative orientation: listening can be the interacting and negotiating process with speakers.
4. Transformative orientation: listening can include empathy as well as understanding what the speaker says or the context in which speech takes place.

Finally, Hassan (2000) differentiates between listening and listening comprehension. He believes that both of them are processes. Listening is a process of taking in the information without interpreting and responding to it, while listening comprehension is a process that includes meaningful interactivity and understanding of the spoken language.

It can be noticed from the above-mentioned definitions that listening is an active process in which the listener interacts with the speaker. While people are listening, they focus on some aspects of the received information, build mental representations from what is heard, and then relate that to the existing knowledge that is based on their past experiences in order to make sense of the aural message.

2.2.2 Types of listening:

Authors have suggested different types of listening depending on the purpose behind it, the role of the listener and the type of text listened to. These variables can be mixed together and produce different configurations such as interpersonal and transactional language. The interpersonal dialogues occur in the course of social interaction, while the transactional language exists for the exchange of goods and services (Nunan, 1999, p. 204).

As far as the communication role of the listener is concerned, Anderson and Lynch (1988) distinguish between reciprocal listening and non-reciprocal listening. To them, reciprocal listening is the type of listening in which the listener can respond to the speaker and interact with him, while the non-reciprocal listening is rather passive or one-directional, that is, the listener only listens without interacting with the speaker. In other words, reciprocal listening involves “dialogues in which the role of an individual alternates between listener and speaker, while non-reciprocal listening involves listening to monologues” (Nunan, 1999, p. 215). Nunan goes on to say that in listening classes, the learners involve in both reciprocal and non-reciprocal listening situations. In the case of reciprocal listening, ‘they can be cast in the role of participant, in which they alternate between listener and speaker’, while in the second

type of task, ‘they listen to conversations between two or more speakers, but they do not take part in the conversations themselves.’

Ur (1984) differentiates between listening for comprehension and listening for perception. Listening for comprehension gives preparation for real –life listening. It involves listening to comprehend the content of the spoken text, and the listener in this type can interact passively or actively with the oral message. Listening for perception, on the other hand, is based on identifying correctly different sounds, sound-combinations and intonation. It is the only category where actual comprehension is a secondary consideration, the emphasis being on aural perception.

With regard to the type of the text listened to, Richards (1987a) makes a distinction between conversational listening (listening to casual speech), and academic listening (listening to lectures and other academic presentations) (Richards, 1987a, cited in Nunan 1989, p. 24).

Since this study is based on a TOEFL listening test, test-takers interact passively with the listening tasks as verbal response is unneeded on the part of the listeners, and therefore, this study adopts the “non-reciprocal” type of listening posited by Nunan (1999), the second type of listening “listening for comprehension” postulated by Ur (1984) and both “conversational listening and “academic listening” distinguished by Richard (1987a). It should be noted that the students’ responses to the task items by selecting the correct answer from a list of four does not constitute a genuine interaction as it normally takes place in natural conversation.

2.2.3 Nature of listening comprehension

There is considerable controversy in the literature concerning the nature of listening comprehension. Anderson and Lynch (1988) distinguish two influential views. The first view, a rather traditional one, regards the listener as a tape-recorder. According to this view, the listener takes in the spoken message and stores it in the same way a tape-recorder can do. However, to the best of my knowledge, no researcher agrees with this model. As mentioned earlier (see part 2.3.1 above), listening is an active process in which the listener interacts with received information through asking clarification questions, or repetition, etc, in order understand what he hears (Barker, 1987; Ronald and Roskelly, 1985; Goh, 1999; 1987; Suvorov, 2008). Anderson and Lynch regard this traditional view as inappropriate and invalid since the tape-recorder cannot get hold of all the features of comprehension. People can understand the spoken message and show their understanding without necessarily producing it verbatim. The most important thing in comprehension is the ability to interpret the received information and relate it, if necessary, to the nonlinguistic context in order to use it. While we listen, we select, interpret, and summarize input, and this cannot be incorporated within the tape-recorder analogy (Anderson and Lynch, 1988, p. 11).

The alternative view of listening is to regard the listener as an "active model builder", which Anderson and Lynch call "the mental model." According to this model, the listener combines the new information received with his previous knowledge and experiences in order to reach full comprehension of what has been heard. Anderson and Lynch agree with this view, and so do a number of other researchers. For example, Fang (2008) points out that a listener normally concentrates on meanings and uses both his linguistic and non-linguistic types of knowledge to comprehend what is being said. He adds that the listener does not need to understand every single

word in the message in order to comprehend it since there are other clues that can make us understand the message such as the context in which speech takes place.

2.2.4 Importance of listening in the EFL classrooms

In the past, listening was seen as a passive process, and thus, not given sufficient attention in language classrooms (Morley, 1990; Brett, 1997; Rubin, 1995; Christine, 1999; Nunan, 1999; Sara, 2009). However, recent studies on L2 listening have shown that listening is considered an active skill and highly needed in second/foreign language learning (Feyton, 1991; Morley, 1990; Brett, 1997; Rubin, 1995; Rost, 2002; Herron and Seay, 1991; Al Alili, 2008). Hence, the importance of listening in language classrooms lies in the following points:

2.2.4.1 The time spent on listening

Nunan (1998) says that "listening is the basic skill in language learning. Without the listening skill, learners may not learn to communicate effectively. In fact over 50% of the time that students spend functioning in a foreign language will be devoted to listening" (Nunan, 1998 cited in A.Majid, 2009, p. 144). Feyten (1991) also believes that some people are said to spend 45% of their daily time listening, 30% speaking, 16% reading, and 9% writing.

2.2.4.2 Listening facilitates language acquisition

Vandergrift (2004) states that listening plays a very important role in the learning a second language. If we consult any reference book on EFL teaching, we find that the authors stress the importance of listening comprehension as an aim and means of acquiring the foreign language (Harmer 1993, Scrivener 1994, Gower 1995, Ur 1996). Vandergrift (1997) also maintains that listening not only internalizes the rules of

language but also facilitates the emergence of other language skills. This view is supported by Yagang (1993) who believes that listening is the most basic skill to develop the other three skills (speaking, reading, and writing).

2.2.4.3 Fast development of listening

Among the four skills, listening is the language skill which usually develops faster than speaking and affects the development of reading and writing abilities in learning a second language (Scarcella et al, 1992; Vandergrift, 1997). This view is supported by Rost (2002), who points out that in learning a foreign language, learners start by listening to a spoken text and then try to imitate its speakers. This process occurs prior to learning how to read and write.

2.2.4.4 Listening provides input

Rost (1994) believes that listening is vital in the learning process since it provides input for the learner without which learning cannot take place. Since language teaching has moved towards comprehension-based approaches, listening has been an essential element in second language classroom as it provides comprehensible input (Lund, 1990; Nunan, 2002). Language can be acquired through exposure to authentic input, which can mostly be achieved through listening (Carter et al, 2001, p. 8).

Given the importance of listening comprehension, EFL specialists advise teachers to try their best to develop their students' listening skills to help them become effective listeners. Teachers are expected to prepare their students to use the foreign language outside the classroom, i.e. in real world situations. To achieve this goal, EFL specialists, for example Guo (2006), suggests that language teachers should dig deep into the nature of listening comprehension through studying the theory and

methodology to enhance their teaching of listening as well as to imbue their students with the significance of listening comprehension in the learning process. To support his claim, Guo refers to two linguistic views: the constructivist linguistics view, and the functional language theory. The view of constructivist linguistics emphasizes that foreign language teaching should concentrate on form and function and teaching listening should be handled in this way. The functional language theory puts emphasis on the function of language in society, that is, language as a communicative tool. The researcher considers these two views complementary to each other and both put the skill in its relevant place as a major language skill.

It can be inferred from this review that listening is of great value in language classrooms as it facilitates the process of foreign language acquisition. For this reason, listening classes should be given sufficient attention in the foreign language teaching process.

2.3 Cognitive models of Listening Comprehension

From a cognitive psychological perspective, information is processed through a number of cognitive systems (attention, perception and memory), and meaning is constructed by relating what is heard to prior knowledge stored in long-term memory (Rumelhart, 1997; Anderson, 1995). One way we can understand how information is processed is by the “three-phase model” postulated by Anderson (1995). According to this model, information processing undergoes three stages. Firstly, the "perceptual stage" in which the listener concentrates on the oral message and stores the sounds in his/her memory. After that, the listener builds up meaningful mental representations by words and messages through a process called "parsing". Both the perceptual and parsing stages take place in the listener's short-term memory,

a term that refers to that part of the memory where the received information is stored for short periods of time while it is being analyzed and interpreted (Richards et al, 2000). When the listener connects the received information to their existing knowledge in the long-term memory, which is the place where more permanent information is stored (Xu, 2008), listening comprehension occurs, and this process is called "utilization".

Another way of how information processing takes place in the mind is postulated by Coackley and Wolin (1986). They maintain that the listening comprehension process passes through five stages. In the first and second stages, the listeners are encouraged to listen to a certain input by discussing a pre-listening topic that is related to the listening task, and then they receive the spoken message together with non-linguistic clues such as facial expressions, gestures, pauses, etc. In the third stage, the received message is preserved in the short-term memory of the listener, and at the same time, related to the listeners' background knowledge. The fourth and fifth stages deal with interpreting the oral input in the long-term memory and giving feedback to the speaker.

One more model is based on the notion that any received information can be comprehended by making use of listening skills that are hierarchically arranged. These skills vary from basic literal understanding of verbal messages (recognizing sounds, words phrases, etc.) to contextual understanding (making references, drawing conclusions, etc.) (Brindley, 1989, cited in Suvorov, 2008, p. 8).

2.4 Schema theory

This section is organized into three parts. The first part provides a variety of definitions of schema, while the second part shows the different types of schemata.

The impact of schema theory on listening comprehension is summarised in the third part.

2.4.1 Definitions of schema

Schema (Schemata plural) theory has been defined in various influential cognitive ways, and all of them are derived from the first definition made by Frederic Bartlett (1932): “The knowledge we carry around in our heads is organized into interrelated patterns. They are like stereotypical mental scripts of scenarios of situations and events, built up from numerous experiences of similar events.” (Bartlett, 1932, cited in Nunan, 1999, p. 201). In other words, this theory views the organized knowledge in our minds as an elaborate network of abstract mental structures that represent our understanding of the world. This network of patterns or structures has been described, in other definitions, as ‘block of cognition’ (Rumelhart, 1997), and as a general representation of events and situations that have occurred in our past experience and how these patterns are related to new experiences (Smith, 1994). It is also described as a basic knowledge existing in memory in form of previously acquired knowledge structures (Yule, 1996).

The general purpose of schema, as stated by Widdowson (1983), is to describe how a person processes, arranges and stores information in the mind. A more specific purpose given by Brown and Yule (1983) is to lead people to ‘expect or predict aspects in our interpretation of discourse’ (p. 248). In general, the introduction of the term ‘schema’ is based on the notion that “past experiences lead to the creation of mental frameworks that help us make sense of new experiences” (Nunan, 1999, p. 201). From the above definitions, it can be concluded that schema is an abstract

structure of the past knowledge that was gained through experience and stored in one's mind.

2.4.2 Types of schemata

With regard to the classification of schema mentioned earlier, schema can be of two major types: formal schemata (linguistic and specific schemata) and content schemata (non-linguistic and more general schemata).

2.4.2.1 Formal schemata (Linguistic schemata)

This type of schemata is referred to as the person's knowledge of language. Buck (2001) calls this knowledge as "linguistic knowledge" which includes knowledge of sounds, individual words and grammatical structure. They also include knowledge of how texts are structured and what the key characteristics of a particular text are (Carrel et al, 1983; Carrell, 1987; Anderson, 1999). Other examples of this type of knowledge, according to Sharp (2002), include various text types and genre, language formation, vocabulary, and level of formality. These are part of the macrostructure of text that contain the logical organisation of the text. This type of knowledge is directly related to the listening comprehension process, and without it, it is very difficult for the listener to understand the oral message.

2.4.2.2 Content Schemata (non-linguistic knowledge)

Content schemata are referred to as the background knowledge of the world. They contain knowledge about the context in which language is used, knowledge about people, culture and the world. Buck (2001) calls this type of knowledge "non-linguistic knowledge" which constitutes the background knowledge about the topic and context (situation). Content knowledge can also be further subdivided into two

subcategories: background knowledge and subject matter knowledge. The former is that knowledge that can or cannot be relevant to the topic, while the latter is that knowledge that is directly related to the topic (Anderson, 1999).

Both the linguistic and non-linguistic types of knowledge are essential in language comprehension as they are interdependent in the fact that what is missed in the linguistic knowledge can be compensated for by the nonlinguistic knowledge. The more background knowledge one has about a certain topic, the more comprehensible the topic becomes. This is why it is always commendable that people expand their knowledge at different levels.

2.5 Schemata theory and listening comprehension

Since its introduction, schema theory has had a great impact on understanding the process of language acquisition (Buck, 2001). Rumelhart (1980) believes that comprehension is a process of inputting some information and then looking for the schema that can illustrate the information. Therefore, activating the listener's stored knowledge (schemata) can facilitate the listening comprehension process. In other words, the process of listening comprehension relies significantly on the listener's prior knowledge (Carrell and Floyd, 1989; Anderson and Lynch, 1988; Rumelhart, 1997; Nunan, 1999; Buck, 2001; Vandergrift, 2006).

Similarly, Carrel and Eisterhold (1983) argue that any stretch of language spoken or written is meaningless without the learner's pre-existing knowledge that makes the message comprehensible. For example, if there is a difference in people's schemas, they can easily misunderstand each other. If a person says "I like riding", referring to horse-riding, another may think he is saying he likes bike-riding! (Landry, 2002).

Accordingly, psycholinguists conducting research on listening comprehension encourage teachers to help their students construct more schemata in their memory to achieve better comprehension in listening. Rumelhart (1997), for example, confirms that when students accumulate more schemata, their comprehension becomes better and this can make them better equipped to cope with material that gets more difficult as students progress in their learning process. Hence, Carrell et al (1987) advise ESL instructors to teach their students the schema they lack, and how to link their existing knowledge with the new knowledge they receive. This kind of connection facilitates the comprehension process.

2.6 Listening comprehension processes

As outlined earlier (see part 2.3.1), listening comprehension is an active process in which a listener interacts with a speaker to construct meaning within the context of their experiences and knowledge. Listeners receive the input and associate that with their existing knowledge (Anderson and Lynch, 1988; Buck. 2001; Vandergrift, 2002; Celce-Murcia, 2001; Rost, 2002; Kuo, 2009; Al Alili, 2009; Harmer 1993; Scrivener 1994). A better way to explain how listening comprehension is processed is by illustrating the effect of schema theory on describing the process of listening comprehension. This theory discusses two interdependent processes known as top-down and bottom-up processes. These two processes are combined together in the comprehension process so that the listener can understand the oral message (Buck 2001).

The reason why these two processes are essential in understanding the nature of listening comprehension is that listeners first listen to a verbal input (triggering the bottom-up process), and then they integrate it into their background knowledge

(utilising the top-down process). Comprehension occurs when these processes are consistent with each other (Buck, 2001; Nunan, 1999, Swales, 1990). In order for the listener to understand the meaning of an oral message, the linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge should be optimized. In other words, the listener should understand the textual elements (sounds, words, phrases, clauses, etc.) of the oral message combined with his understanding of the context in which speech takes place. Thus, listening comprehension is a process of matching whatever has been said with the listener's background about the topic (Anderson, 1995; Anderson and Lynch, 1988; Vandergrift, 2004).

2.6.1 Bottom-up process

Buck (2001) holds that the bottom-up process is based on the fact that meaning is acquired by identifying first different sounds, which leads to recognizing individual words. The recognition of words leads to the recognition of sentences which itself leads to the comprehension of the text or topic. He adds that this process sees language comprehension as a process of passing through a number of consecutive stages, or levels, and the output of each stage becomes the input of the next higher stage. It's as it were, a one-way street (Buck, 2001, p. 2). This explanation is also given by Nunan (1999), who states that "the bottom-up processing model assures that listening is a process of decoding the sounds that one hears in a linear fashion, from the smallest meaningful units (phonemes) to complete texts" (p. 200).

Grabe and Stoller (2002), give a related explanation, stating that the listener goes through a mechanical process by building a piece-to-piece mental blocks of information received, while interaction between him and the text includes little or no

involvement of his background knowledge. From the bottom-up perspective, the meaning of the input message is expected to occur naturally when the received information is broken down into smaller linguistic units based on the listener linguistic background knowledge of sounds, vocabulary, grammar, etc. However, this process alone does not provide a full listening comprehension since the focus here is on understanding the linguistic features, while little attention is paid to the background knowledge (Buck, 2001).

2.6.2 Top-down process

The top-down process makes use of the pre-existing knowledge that is based on past experiences to predict and interpret the received input (Smith, 1994; Rumelhart, 1997; Nunan, 1991; Buck 2001). This process uses schemata to interpret the meaning of any received information. It is based on the knowledge of topic, culture, etc., (Xia-hui et al, 2007; Wu-ping, 2006). It is not necessary for the listeners to know every single word in the oral message in order to understand its meaning. They can only recognize the key words or phrases and match what they already know from previous experience with the meaning collected from the message. For example, if we take the following extract, which is borrowed from Brown and Yule (1984), and analyze it from the perspective of a listener who does not have sufficient background knowledge about the western culture, we can find that the true implication of the words is difficult to comprehend.

1. A: What time is it?

B: Well, the postman's been already.

2. A: Can you go to Edinburgh tomorrow?

B: B.E.A. pilots are on strike. (Brown & Yule 1984, p. 227)

We can notice that all the words in the dialogue are familiar words except the acronym B.E.A, and yet, it is still difficult for the listener to understand the conversation without the necessary background knowledge. For instance, B's answer in the first example can only be understood if the listener knows that the postman passes by at scheduled times, whereas B's answer in the second example shows that the person cannot go there because of the strike of the British European Airline pilots.

2.6.3 Interactive process

This model was the result of a review of both bottom-up and top-down processes. It was first introduced by Rumelhart (1975) and seen to compensate for the shortcomings of both the bottom-up and top-down processes since it combines element from both. The shortcomings were best illustrated by Harmer (2001). He compares the top-down process to the process of looking at a forest or looking down on something from above, while the bottom-up process is compared to the process of studying the individual trees in a forest or trying to determine where a person is. According to the interactive model, as Anderson (1999) points out, listeners not only pay much attention to the linguistic elements of the text such as sounds words, phrases, etc., but they also interact with the text using their prior knowledge and past experiences in order to effectively comprehend the oral message. This combination can lead to an efficient understanding of the listening text. Language is processed simultaneously at different levels in which phonological, syntactic, semantic and paradigmatic information interact, although it is not clear exactly how (Rumelhart, 1975, as cited in Flowerdew and Miller, 2005, p. 26).

2.7 Listening strategies

To understand what they listen to and monitor this process, learners adopt certain strategies. Since they help guide and evaluate comprehension, these strategies are considered central in training the skills of listening (Vandergrift, 1997).

According to Hollas (2002) strategies are defined as plans that can be used by learners to perform a certain skill. In other words, strategies are determined by learners according to their needs, unlike skills, which are teacher-directed, i.e., teachers decide what learners need. They are efforts to compensate for uncertainties in understanding and could include inferences, realizing where misunderstandings have occurred, and asking for clarification (White, 1998, p. 9). Another definition, which is slightly more general, sees listening strategies as “techniques or activities that contribute directly to the comprehension and recall of listening input (Guo, 2006, p. 24).

Different classifications of the types of strategies have been offered. Guo (2006) classify listening strategies according to the listener's listening processing into two categories: top-down strategies and bottom-up strategies. The top-down strategies include listening for the main idea, predicting, drawing inferences and summarizing, while the bottom-up strategies involve listening for specific information, recognizing cognates and organizing word-order patterns.

Another different classification of listening strategies is given by O'Malley and Chamot (1990), who divide them into three types: metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies. The metacognitive strategies regulate the listener's listening comprehension in terms of planning, checking, monitoring, evaluating, etc. The cognitive strategies

involve comprehending and storing the received information (the input) in long-term memory to be used later. The social strategies stimulate learning through building levels of empathy between the interlocutors (e.g. the instructor and student). These strategies are non-linguistic strategies used to verify mutual understanding.

Nunan (1999) examines listening strategies as techniques based on recognizing the segmental features (e.g. phonemes, phonemic distinctions, and how these signal semantic distinctions) and suprasegmental features (e.g. stress, rhythm, and intonation, etc.). The types are identified as follows:

1. Listening for gist:
 - b) Is the speaker describing a vacation or a day in the office?
 - c) Is the radio report about news or weather?
2. Listening for purpose:
 - a) Are the speakers making a reservation or ordering food?
 - b) Is the speaker agreeing or disagreeing with the suggestion?
3. Listening for main idea: For examples,
 - a) Why is the speaker asking the man questions?
 - (a) Did the speaker like or dislike the movie?
4. Listening for inference: What are the speakers implying by what they said?
5. Listening for specific information: For examples,
 - a) How much did they say the ticket cost?
 - b) Did the speaker's husband say he picked up the kids?
 - c) Why did the speaker say he was studying Chinese?
 - d) Where did she say the meeting was being held?

6. Listening for phonemic distinctions: For examples,
 - a) Did the speaker say 'first' or 'fourth'?
 - b) Did the speakers say they 'can' or 'can't come to the party'?
7. Listening for tone/pitch to identify speakers attitude: For examples,
 - a) Did the speaker enjoy the wedding or not?
 - b) Is the speaker surprised or not?
8. Listening for stress: What is more important, where he bought the watch, or when? (Nunan 1999, p. 219)

It can be generally noticed that the above strategies are directly linked to the two major listening processes; the top-down and bottom-up processes. For example, strategies used in listening for purpose, inference or prediction are strategies based on the top-down process where listeners use their knowledge of the world in order to interpret what is meant in the spoken text. On the other hand, strategies like listening for phonemic distinction, recognizing words, phrases, clauses etc., are used in the bottom-up process, which involves recognising the textual elements of the listening material.

2.8 Listening skills

Listening skills are abilities or competencies that can help listeners utilise the received information as well as facilitate communication (Oxford, 1992, O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). The value of identifying listening skills according to some researchers, for example White (1998), is that they can be utilised during listening practice to develop learners' comprehension.

McDonough and Shaw (1993) classify listening skills into two major categories based on the top-down and bottom-up listening processes:

1. Processing sound;

- to segment the stream of sounds and recognize word boundaries;
- To recognize sentence and clause boundaries in speech;
- To recognize significance of language related features, most obviously intonation;
- To recognize changes in pitch, tone and speed of delivery;

2. Processing meaning:

- To organize the incoming speech into meaningful sections;
- To identify redundant material;
- To use language data to anticipate what speakers are going to say;
- To store information in memory and know how to retrieve it later by organizing meaning as efficiently as possible and avoiding too much attention to immediate detail. (McDonough and Shaw 1993, cited in Fang, 2008, p. 25).

A more detailed categorization of listening skills is given by White (1998). He again subsumes listening skills into two categories: bottom-up skills and top-down skills. Bottom-up skills enable listeners to recognize particular sounds or words in the stream of speech, identify word and sentence, or recognize and understand the function of particular intonation patterns. The top-down skills enable listeners to use more global clues to meaning, such as their knowledge of the topic or the way in which a particular kind of spoken text is typically organised (White, 1998, p. 55). With this in

mind, this classification includes five broader categories, and each category involves a list of what he calls "sub-skills", as follows:

1. Perception skills:

This category includes skills like recognizing individual sounds, discriminating between sounds, identifying reduced forms in connected speech, identifying stresses and unstressed syllables in utterances and finally recognizing intonation patterns.

2. Language skills:

This type involves the identification of individual words and groups and building up possible meanings for them. It also includes the identification of discourse markers that organize what is being said such as references, conjunctions, etc.

3. Using knowledge of the world:

These skills include connecting the linguistic features of what is being said (e.g. recognizing sounds, words, phrases, etc.) to the non-linguistic features (e.g. context, topic familiarity, gestures, pauses, facial expressions, etc.), so as to draw meaning.

4. Dealing with information:

These skills include skills of understanding the main ideas and points of what are being said, understanding details and inferring information which is not clearly stated or has been missed.

5. Interacting with a speaker:

Interacting with the speaker and understanding what they are saying require skills like coping with their speech variation (e.g. speed, accent, etc.), recognizing the speaker's intention, identifying the speaker's mood/attitude, recognizing the speaker's cues about things such as when to take a turn or when there is a change of topic, and predicting what the speaker will say. (White 1998, pp. 8, 9)

As a background to these classification, it can be stated that using these skills depends on the listener's needs and the topic. Good listeners can use different skills in order to get hold of the received information. Buck (2001) points out that recognising linguistic elements (e.g. sounds, words, phrases, clauses, etc.) may help to understand the oral message, but it may not be enough. Listeners must also be capable of using non-linguistic skills (e.g. making inferences, prediction, topic familiarity, etc) in order to interpret the utterances being said.

Since this study is based on a TOEFL listening test, the researcher finds that most of the listening tasks in the TOEFL are based on both linguistic and non-linguistic skills. These skills can be categorised into six skills: understanding details, making inferences (suggested or implied, but not stated), making predictions, identifying purpose, identifying attitude, and understanding main ideas. Thus, McDonough and Shaw (1993) and White (1998) taxonomies can be used in this study.

In conclusion, listening strategies and skills are central in EFL classrooms. Learners use listening strategies to monitor and evaluate their comprehension progress, while they use listening skills to improve their comprehension of spoken language. The use of strategies and skills depends on what is required from the listening task. If the task tests the learners' linguistic knowledge, the bottom-up strategies and skills can be

utilised by the learners, and if the task examines the learners' background knowledge, the learners can use the top-down strategies and skills.

CHAPTER THREE

FACTORS INFLUENCING LISTENING COMPREHENSION:

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The primary aim of this chapter is to provide a specification of these factors that affect EFL listening comprehension, which can later be used in the field work analysis and discussion.

3.1 Theoretical Background

3.1.1 Real time processing and EFL classroom dilemma

Listening is a complex process whereby listeners decode and construct meaning on the basis of their linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge. It is a process that takes place in real time and is thus directly affected by all the ramifications that real time entails (see section 2.2). In EFL classrooms, learners should be exposed to real time listening, since speech takes place in real time. However, in EFL situations, according to Brown and Yule (1983), listening as a natural real time process does not seem to produce the desired pedagogical effects. To them, this obstacle is due to the fact that:

1. The student is taught to speak slowly and clearly and his teacher generally addresses the class in a public style;
2. Native speakers, much of the time, do not speak slowly or particularly clearly;
3. The student is often exposed to one accent of English, usually only spoken by his teacher and as spoken only by his teacher;

4. The normal habits of simplification which characterize the accent may be lost when the teacher speaks slowly and 'artificially' clearly;
5. Students consequently get used to a model of speech where every segment is clearly articulated.

This situation in EFL classrooms can cause some difficulties when the learners are exposed to real-life listening activities. In addition to these problems, authors and researchers in the field of L1 and L2 learning have found that EFL learners face difficulties in comprehending spoken language due to a set of factors classified as linguistic and non-linguistic. The factors that can cause problems to native listeners also prove problematic and difficult for L2 learners (Anderson and Lynch, 1988, p. 47). Some researchers have discussed these factors as groups and others have dealt with them individually. The next sections offer a review of both.

3.1.2 Groups of factors

According to Brown and Yule (1983), there are four groups of factors that can determine the difficulty of listening:

1. Speaker factors: how many speakers are there? How quickly do they speak?
What types of accents do they have?
2. Listener factors: what is the listener's role: eavesdropper or participant? What level of response is required? How interested is the listener in the subject?
3. The content: how complex are the grammar, vocabulary, and information structure? What background knowledge is assumed?
4. Support: how much support is provided in terms of pictures, diagrams, or other visual aids?

A similar classification to this is made by Boyle (1984), who lists three groups of factors:

1. Listener factors: these factors include biographical, sociological, intellectual, physical and psychological categories such as experience/practice in listening to the target language, general intelligence, general background knowledge of the world, home and educational background, memory, motivation, listeners' attitude to the speaker and the message, and listener's powers of attention and concentration, etc.
2. Speaker factors: these include language ability and production (pronunciation, accent, variation, voice etc.), speed of delivery, and prestige and personality of the speaker.
3. Material and medium factors: these include the diversity of language use, difficulty of content and concepts, acoustic environment, and amount of paralinguistic support provided.

Another classification of these groups of factors is made by Rubin (1994) who classifies them into five categories:

1. Text type: this includes acoustic features, discourse features, and clear influence.
2. Task: this includes the types of question, the amount of time available for processing information, and the repetition of information.
3. Speaker: this includes accent, fluency, standard or non-standard usage, and gender of speaker.

4. Listener: this includes language proficiency, gender, memory, interest, purpose, prior knowledge, attention, concentration, accuracy of pronunciation, physical and psychological states, knowledge, knowledge of context, topic familiarity and established learning habit.
5. Listening process: this includes top-down process, bottom-up process, a combination of both processes, and types of listening strategies.

3.1.3 Individual factors

Samuel (1984), for instance, believes that listening comprehension is achieved by the listener's knowledge and the skills they follow in interpreting the meaning of the oral message. According to this belief, Samuel classifies the factors that inhibit listening comprehension into five main internal factors:

1. Intelligence: intelligence can greatly affect listening comprehension. A person with a low level of intelligence will encounter some difficulties in understanding the oral message, while the person with a high level of intelligence will find it easier to comprehend the message intended by the speaker.
2. Language facility: listening comprehension depends on the listener's capability of segmenting and analyzing speech. To understand spoken language, people try to identify the words and phrases heard, otherwise the meaning of the message get lost.
3. Vocabulary: the person's knowledge of vocabulary can also affect their listening comprehension. Usually word meaning changes according to the context the word is used in. So, getting acquainted with a wide range of vocabulary, one becomes a more effective listener.

4. Background knowledge: background knowledge about a topic is an essential factor that influences listening comprehension. The lack of background knowledge can obstruct listening comprehension even if the person is good at understanding word meaning and analyzing speech accurately.
5. Speech registers: speech registers are the different styles that the speakers use in different situations (e.g. formal, informal, etc.). The use of a certain speech style depends on the participants' opinion and the situation in which language is used. Listeners usually find spoken language more comprehensible in informal situations than formal ones.

Similarly, but in a slightly different way, Anderson and Lynch (1988) classifies these factors into four factors:

1. Information organization: when the events of a given story are put in order, the learners' comprehension of the text increases.
2. Topic familiarity: when the topic is familiar to the learners, listening comprehension becomes better.
3. Explicitness of information: listening comprehension can be affected by the explicitness of information. Listeners find it easier to understand listening texts with clearly stated meaning than those whose meaning is implicit.
4. Types of input: the type of input affects listening comprehension. According to Brown and Yule (1983), spoken texts can be categorized into three types: static, dynamic, and abstract. Texts that describe objects or give instructions are static texts; those that tell a story or recount an incident are dynamic texts; and those that focus on someone's ideas and beliefs rather than on concrete objects are abstract texts.

Ur (1984) also categorizes the main problems in listening comprehension into eight problems: 1) hearing the sounds; 2) understanding intonation and stress; 3) coping with redundancy and noise; 4) predicting; 5) understanding colloquial vocabulary; 6) fatigue; 7) understanding different accents; and 8) using visual and aural environmental clues. The presence or the absence of these factors can influence listening comprehension.

Similarly, Mackay (1998) gives eight reasons for ineffective listening:

1. Selective listening: under normal circumstances, we are selective in our listening. That is, we only concentrate on what we think is important and ignore the sounds that we consider unimportant.
2. Talking speed vs. speed of thought: there is a considerable difference between the speed at which people speak and the speed they think at. The person can speak at 125 words per minute, but the speed at which they think is about 500 words. So, when we listen to someone, we jump ahead of what is being said, and this can make us miss what is being said.
3. Lack of interest: people usually get bored listening to something uninteresting and this affects their comprehension of the topic being talked about.
4. Beliefs and attitudes: if the speaker is saying something that is against our beliefs, attitudes and opinions, we react emotionally towards it. This creates a heated argument which cannot be called effective listening. Emotional involvement always makes it more difficult for people to assess what is being said.
5. Reaction to the speaker: our reaction to the speakers rather than the opinions they are expressing is another reason for why we do not listen effectively. The

speaker's class, accent, style, etc., can provoke a strong reaction to them and thus our listening gets affected.

6. Our preconceptions: this happens when we do not give other people a chance to talk. We prejudge what the speakers are going to say depending on how much important they are to us. When they are unimportant to us, we do not pay them any attention.
7. The words we hear: when we speak, sometimes we repeat the same words or phrases every time. Our repetition may present a powerful barrier to effective listening. Furthermore, using unfamiliar words (e.g. jargon words or technical words) and words that indicate racial discrimination or profanity can also distract the listener's comprehension and interest in paying attention.
8. Physical distractions: this can happen in a number of different guises. For example, the noise that associates what we are listening to distracts our attention. Besides, not being able to see the speaker affects both our interest and attention. Not seeing often means not hearing since the speaker's body language can tell us as much as the words they produce. (Mackay, 1998, pp. 5-16).

Finally, a more inclusive classification is made by Brown (1994) who identifies eight factors that can affect EFL listening comprehension:

1. Clustering: due to memory limitations and predisposition for chunking of clustering, listeners break down speech into smaller groups of words. EFL listeners have to pick out manageable clusters of words.
2. Redundancy: in real-life situations, speakers do often use sufficient redundancy which could help EFL listeners to process meaning more easily.

3. Reduced forms: spoken language has many reduced forms. These can be phonological, morphological, syntactic, or pragmatic.
4. Performance variable: the distracting performance variables such as hesitation, false starts, pauses and correction may cause difficulties. Listeners should train themselves to listen for meaning in the middle of all these distracting performance variables.
5. Colloquial language: listeners may find it difficult to deal with colloquial language such as idioms, slang, reduced forms, and shared cultural knowledge. The extent to which speakers use these language forms impacts comprehension (Brown and Yule, 1983).
6. Rate of delivery: most of EFL listeners perceive that native speakers speak too fast for them and this makes it difficult for listeners to follow (Brown and Yule, 1983).
7. Stress, rhythm, and intonation: the prosodic features of the second language may cause difficulties. If listeners feel familiar with these prosodic features, they may have less difficulty in L2 listening.
8. Interaction: interaction plays a major role in listening comprehension. If EFL listeners cannot communicate with speakers, they cannot elicit more information from them.

3.2 Empirical studies

The extent to which EFL learners' listening comprehension can be affected by the factors discussed above has been investigated by a number of researchers. In this section, a number of studies conducted during the last 20 years will be classified in a

chronological order in order see how understanding the influence of these factors has developed over time.

3.2.1 Chiang and Dunkel (1992)

This study investigated the effect of speech modification, prior knowledge and listening proficiency on EFL lecture learning. The subjects were 388 Chinese students of English as a foreign language. The learners were high-intermediate listening proficiency (HILP) and low-intermediate listening proficiency (LILP) students. The students listened to a lecture whose discourse was: a) familiar-unmodified; b) familiar-modified; c) unfamiliar-unmodified; and d) unfamiliar-modified. The modified discourse contained information redundancies and elaborations. After the lecture, a multiple-choice exam based on the information in the lecture and general knowledge of the familiar and unfamiliar topics was administered to the subjects.

The results revealed a significant interaction between speech modification (redundant vs. non-redundant speech) and listening proficiency (HILP vs. LILP), indicating that the HILP students benefited from speech modification, but LILP students did not. Another significant interaction was found between the prior knowledge (familiar vs. unfamiliar topic) and test type (passage-independent vs. passage-dependent items). Both the HILP and LILP's memory for information in the passage-independent test items on the post-lecture comprehension test was significantly influenced by their prior knowledge. Those who listened to the familiar-topic lecture scored higher in the passage-independent items. Further, there was no difference in the performance on the passage-independent and

passage-dependent items of those who listened to the unfamiliar-topic lecture. Finally, the performance of the subjects on the passage-dependent items did not differ significantly whether the familiar or unfamiliar topic was presented or not.

3.2.2 Goh (1999)

This study looked into the factors influencing Chinese ESL learners' listening comprehension. The informants were 40 tertiary level learners from Mainland China studying in Singapore. The data were collected through two instruments - interviews and learning diaries. According to the statistical analysis, the students in study appeared to have difficulties in understanding spoken English. The factors behind those difficulties were twenty, classified under five major categories: text, listener, speaker, task and environment. Most of the factors influencing the students' listening comprehension were related to text and listener characteristics. Goh also identified the five most commonly cited factors reported by at least two-thirds of the forty students involved in the study. These factors were vocabulary, prior knowledge, speech rate, type of input and speaker's accent.

3.2.3 Goh (2000)

This study investigated the real-time listening problems faced by 40 EFL learners who were learning English in preparation for undergraduate studies. The author used the three-phase model of language comprehension proposed by Anderson (1995). The three phases are: perception, parsing and utilisation. The data were collected from three sources. The main source was weekly diaries kept by 40 students as part of their listening course. In these diaries, the students wrote about actual listening events and described how they tried to understand what they heard

and the problems they experienced. In addition, 17 students from these 40 participated in small group interviews. These were semi-structured interviews aimed at finding out what the students knew about the task of learning to listen to English. Twenty-three students also participated in an immediate retrospective verbalisation procedure.

The data revealed 10 processing problems that occurred during their listening. Problems experienced at the perception stage had mainly to do with recognising sounds as distinct words or groups of words. Perception problems also included difficulties with attention. These problems were: 1) students did not recognize words they knew; 2) they neglected the next part of the listening text when thinking about meaning; 3) they could not chunk streams of speech; 4) they missed the beginning of texts; and 5) they concentrated too hard or were unable to concentrate.

Three problems were found in the parsing stage. These problems were related to developing a coherent mental representation of the words heard and were as follows: 1) students quickly forgot what was heard; 2) they were unable to form a mental representation from words heard; and 3) they did not understand subsequent parts of input. In the utilisation stage, some learners had difficulty with understanding the intended message of the speaker. Difficulties also arose at this stage when listeners were unable to process the text further due to either lack of prior knowledge or inappropriate application of prior knowledge. The problems were: 1) students understood words but not the intended message; and 2) they were confused about key ideas in the message.

A comparison of two groups of learners with different listening abilities showed some similarities in the difficulties experienced, but low-ability listeners had more problems with low-level processing.

3.2.4 Hasan (2000)

This study investigated the learners' perception of listening comprehension problems. The participants were 81 Arab EFL learners in the ESP Centre at Damascus University. The study looked into, in particular, the learner's strategies, features of the listening text, characteristics of the speaker, attitudes of the listener, task to be completed as a result of understanding the text, and the degree of visual and written support for the aural input. The hypotheses were: 1) learners' use of ineffective listening strategies may affect their listening comprehension; and 2) learners experience different sorts of listening comprehension problems which may be due to the inadequacy of the message caused by factors related to the speakers' speech, and the learners' proficiency in listening comprehension.

The listening comprehension problems the findings showed were associated with bottom-up processing such as missing parts of the text, not recognizing words, problems resulting from unclear pronunciation and rapid speech rate. Other problems were caused by factors such as lack of effective listening strategies and skills that can help students improve their comprehension of spoken English.

3.2.5 Guizhen and Lisheng (2004)

This study investigated the listening comprehension problems of non-English majors freshmen's in Zhanjiang Ocean University in China. The data were collected through making observation of the students' classroom performance, conducting interviews with some of the students, getting verbal reports from the students and holding discussions. The findings showed that the students' insufficient vocabulary, lack of cultural background, anxiety and shortage of listening skills negatively affected their efficient listening.

3.2.6 Hwang (2004)

This study explored the listening comprehension difficulties among Korean high school students. The data were collected from twenty high school students in Korea: 17 females and 3 males at year eleven. The subjects were divided into two groups of ten on the basis of their performance on a test of the Standardized Secondary School Level Proficiency (SLEP). The subjects listened to four texts with two levels of difficulty (more difficult texts and less difficult texts). The three-phase model of Anderson (1995) (perception, parsing and utilisation) was used in this study.

The results revealed that the students in study had encountered 11 listening comprehension types of difficulty. In the perception stage of listening, four types were found, related to the learners' failure to segment flowing speech sounds: 1) non-recognition of a single known word; 2) non-recognition of a single unknown word; 3) non-recognition of sequence of words; and 4) mishearing. In the parsing phase, there were four types of difficult: 5) non-grasp of a single known word; 6)

non-grasp of a single unknown word; 7) non-grasp of sequence of words; and 8) confusion of meaning between words with similar pronunciation. The last three types of difficulty were found at the utilisation stage and were related to the students' failure to relate what they had mentally represented to their prior knowledge and experience and were: 9) non-resolution of reference; 10) non-identification of the sentence meaning ; and 11) non-identification of the text topic.

The factors that caused these difficulties were also identified, and most of them were stage-specific, that is, they caused difficulties within the same stage of listening. The difficulties at the perception phase were caused by: 1) speed of input; 2) attention lapses; 3) failure to chunk input into a manageable size; and 4) failure to identify sentence boundaries. Three of these causes caused difficulties at the parsing stage: 5) ambiguous words and near homonyms; 6) memory lapses; and 7) arbitrary interpretation. The remaining five causes were stage-independent: 8) fixation; 9) speaker variation; and 10) strategy-related problems, which caused difficulties at the perception and parsing phases; 11) lack of world knowledge, which caused listening difficulty at the parsing and utilization stages; and 12) earlier problem-which occurred at all three stages of listening; in other words, a listening problem not solved in the earlier part of the text has a negative impact when dealing with later input, for example, non-recognition of a single known word or sequence of words led to difficulties at a later stage.

3.2.7 Chen (2005)

This study investigates the barriers to acquiring listening comprehension strategies for EFL learners. The subjects were 36 EFL learners who voluntarily participated in listening strategy training. The subjects were fourth level students in a five-year language program in a junior college in Taiwan. The instrument used for data collection was a Second Level English Proficiency (SLEP) test. The findings showed that the obstacles that the learners faced in listening comprehension were associated with the internal factors of the learners such as their affective statuses, listening habits, information process capacities, English proficiency and their belief about listening activities. Other barriers were related to the nature of listening strategies and listening material used.

3.2.8 Othman and Vanthas (2005)

These researchers conducted a study on the effect of topic familiarity on listening comprehension and how certain aspects of language are likely to be influenced by topic familiarity. The subjects were 34 intermediate level students from the School of Business and Information Technology. The author used two listening tests to investigate that problem: a pre-test and a post test. In the pre-test, the subjects had been asked to answer a total of sixteen questions. The post-test was given three weeks later, and in the test, the students listened to the same text that they had listened to and answered the same questions. The statistical analysis of their achievement showed that there is a marked improvement in their performance.

3.2.9 Miao (2006)

In order to make sure of what factors can affect EFL learners' listening comprehension, the Miao conducted a study on 80 English majors of the first and third years at China University of Mining and Technology, who had attended an English listening test. The research was conducted by means of a questionnaire and a listening test. The questionnaire was on correlated factors of listening comprehension. Concerning different factors, the test consisted of 10 short conversations, 3 passages and dictation. The findings suggested that the factors that affected listening comprehension were linguistic knowledge, listening material, skills, techniques and strategy of listening, psychological factors and cultural and background knowledge.

3.2.10 Guo (2006)

This study investigated the factors influencing listening comprehension among non-English majors. The subjects were 550 undergraduates of the Shanxi University of Finance and Economics in China. The findings showed that psychological obstacles, insufficient grammar and cultural background knowledge, and incorrect use of thinking processes inhibit students' listening comprehension.

3.2.11 Goh and Taib (2006)

In a small-scale study, these researchers examined metacognitive instruction for young language listeners and investigated the value of lessons that highlight the listening process. The data were collected from ten primary school students who participated in eight specially designed listening lessons that included traditional

listening exercises, individual post-listening reflections on their listening experience, and teacher-facilitated discussions that focused on specific aspects of metacognitive knowledge about listening. During the eight lessons, the learners demonstrated some knowledge about factors that influenced their listening and strategy use.

The authors categorized these factors into four major categories. The first factor was "text", which subsumed: explicitness of information, speech rate, content of listening text, and repetition. The second factor was "task", which comprised types of question, types of answer option, and test format. The third factor was "environment", which included physical conditions and presence of other listeners. The last factor was "listener and speaker", which comprised emotional and physical states, attention, and voice clarity.

After the eight lessons, all the students reported a deeper understanding of the nature and the demands of listening, increased confidence in completing listening tasks, and better strategic knowledge for coping with comprehension difficulties. On the whole, the weaker learners have benefited the most from such a process-based approach to listening instruction.

3.2.12 Kijpoonphol (2006)

This study investigated was conducted on the difficulties related to listening comprehension of university students. The researcher adopted the factors that influence listening comprehension from Brown and Yule(1983), Anderson and Lynch (1988), Brown (1994), Goh (1997), and Goh and Taib (2006). The factors

are information organization, visual, support, familiarity of topic, explicitness of information, types of input, clustering, redundancy, reduced forms, colloquial language, rate of delivery, stress, rhythm, interaction and unfamiliar vocabulary. In order to investigate whether these factors could influence students' listening comprehension, the researcher selected 130 undergraduate law students for the study. The instruments used in the research were a questionnaire and interviews. The interviews were carried out later on the same day at the same place, but different students were chosen. The results obtained from the questionnaire suggested that the rate of delivery and vocabulary are the most influential factors on both high-achievers and low-achievers. The results gained from the interviews revealed that background knowledge and lack of vocabulary are factors that could significantly obstruct the students' listening comprehension.

3.2.13 Yousif (2006)

This study investigated the listening comprehension difficulties that Arab EFL students face. The subjects were 50 first-year students majoring in English in their second semester of the academic year at Al-Majmah College of Education in Saudi Arabia. The participants were admitted to the English department on the merit of achieving a minimum of average score of 70% or more on the school certificate examinations. The data were collected by means of a short open-ended questionnaire and an interview. Both questionnaire and interview dealt with problems encountered in listening to lectures. The results showed that linguistic, conceptual, discoursal, acoustic, environmental and psychological variables were all factors that hinder the students' listening comprehension.

3.2.14 Osuka (2007)

This study was conducted to investigate the factors that affect Japanese EFL learners' listening comprehension. The researcher carried out several experiments on 64 college students majoring in Business Administration at a private university in Tokyo who were of intermediate proficiency level. The experiments took the following forms: a) providing questions related to the main idea in advance; b) slowing speech rates and introducing pauses into the input; c) supplying the meaning of important vocabulary words in advance. The results showed that fast speech rate and students' perception problems were the most significant factors that impaired their listening comprehension. The study also found that providing questions related to the main ideas and providing background information about the topic in advance were techniques that facilitated their listening comprehension.

3.2.15 Lind (2008)

This researcher conducted a study on the affective factors of listening performance of English majors in Xinjiang Agricultural University in China. The subjects were thirty freshmen majoring in agricultural English of Foreign Language Department. The instruments used for the study were two questionnaires. The first was based on the affective factors of listening performance, while the other was related to information about the subjective and the objective factors that influence the learners' listening comprehension. Lind found that subjective factors that could negatively affect the students' listening performance were anxiety, lack of motivation, fear, pressure, frustration, orientation of achievement and pressure. Further, teaching quality and syllabus

design were among the objective factors that influence the listening performance of the students.

3.2.16 Suvorov (2008)

This researcher studied the influence of context visuals, namely single photograph and video on test-takers' performance on a computer-based listening test developed for that study. The listening test consisted of six listening passages and thirty multiple-choice questions administered to 34 intermediate students from three English classes. The study examined whether test-takers performed differently on three types of listening passages: passages with a single photograph, video-mediated listening passages, and audio-only listening passages. The results indicated that the students' scores in both photo-mediated and audio-only listening passages were not statistically different, but the students' performance in video-mediated listening passages was significantly lower.

3.2.17 A.Majid (2009)

This study investigated the effect of cultural knowledge on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. The participants were 120 out of 300 students learning English (both male and female) at two private language institutions of Andimeshk, a city in the south of Iran. The selection of the participants was based on their scores in a listening comprehension pre-test and were randomly assigned to four groups. Each group was exposed to a certain condition as follows: TC (Target Culture), ITC (International Target Culture), SC (Source Culture), and CF (Culture Free). The participants in each group practised listening comprehension materials that reflected a particular culture. At the end of the experiment, to see

whether or not any changes happened regarding their listening proficiency, a post-test including sample authentic listening comprehension materials related to the four cultures was administered to the four groups.

The findings showed that the participants performed differently on the post-test. The participants who listened to the culturally-oriented materials related to the culture they had been exposed to scored higher than the other three groups. This indicates that familiarity with culturally-oriented language material promotes the Iranian EFL learners' listening proficiency.

3.2.18 Hayati (2009)

This researcher studied the impact of cultural knowledge on listening comprehension of EFL learners. The participants were 120 intermediate language learners from both sexes who were learning English at two private language institutions of Andimeshk, a city in the south of Iran. The data collection instruments used for the study were a listening comprehension test containing 25 multiple-choice items extracted from TOEFL and materials selected from reliable internet sites (e.g. bbc.com and cnn.com). The students were selected on the basis of their scores in a listening comprehension test as a pre-test, and after that, they were randomly divided into four groups: English and American culture, international target culture, Persian culture and culture-free. At the end of the experiment and training, in order to see whether or not any changes happened regarding their listening proficiency, a post test was given to the four groups. The results suggested that the participants performed differently on the post-test. Their

scores indicated that familiarity with cultural-oriented language material promotes the Iranian EFL learners proficiency.

3.2.19 Butt, et al (2010)

This study investigated the problems of listening comprehension among Pakistani EFL learners. The data were collected from three government boys' secondary schools in the District of Kohat in Pakistan. The sample of the study was 300 respondents, 100 from each school, selected on the basis of simple random a sampling technique. The study used a questionnaire for the collection of quick, valid, and up-to-date data from the respondents. The findings revealed that pronunciation, accent and colloquial expressions were the problems which always existed during the process of listening exercises.

3.3 Conclusion

Though the methods of data collections used in the previous studies reviewed in this section differ from one researcher to another, the findings showed that there were factors that caused listening comprehension difficulties to EFL learners. These difficulties were caused by factors that varied from one study to another. Some studies investigated individual factors and others a group of factors. However, most of these factors were related to six major categories: listening training factors, speaker factors, listener factors, text factors, task factors and situation factors.

It has also been noticed that, through the chronological development of the studies, the listening comprehension problems and their causes have not remarkably changed over time and place despite the development the world has witnessed in education.

Therefore, it is the purpose of this study to investigate what difficulties Bahraini EFL learners encounter in listening comprehension, and what factors from the ones found in literature can cause such problems to Bahraini EFL learners.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY, DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter is organised in two parts. The first part presents the methodology used in this study. It provides information about the subjects, methods of data collection, the procedural steps followed, and the data analysis techniques employed in this study. The second part presents the analysis and discussion of the data collected for this study.

4.1 Methodology

4.1.1 Subjects

The subjects of the study are 34 third- year and fourth-year students majoring in English in their second semester at the Department of English Language and Literature at the College of Arts, University of Bahrain (UOB). The students' ages range between 20 to 23 years, and their proficiency level at which they were studying is advanced as judged by the Department. The first group consists of 19 third-year students who have completed an English Development course coded English 305. The second group consists of 15 fourth-year students who have finished an English course coded English 405. The students' proficiency level corresponds to English course level (C1) in the Common European Framework (CEF) classification. The two groups also happen to study courses in language, literature and linguistics. The language courses in which listening training is provided are English 111, English 112, English 205, English 305, and English 405. When the data collection procedures were

conducted, these two groups were the only groups registered in the two courses mentioned above.

It should be noted that students at the Department of English are admitted on the merit of achieving a minimum average score of 70% or more on the secondary school certificate examinations. Before joining UOB, they are expected to have studied English as a school subject at the primary, intermediate and secondary levels.

4.1.1.1 Setting

The University of Bahrain (UOB) was chosen by the researcher for the following reasons:

- It was the only national (i.e. state-run) university in the Kingdom of Bahrain when the data collection procedures were conducted.
- UOB followed the principles proposed by the Quality Assurance Authority in terms of teaching methods, syllabus design, credit hours and assessment methods.
- The Department of English at UoB trains students in listening comprehension, and it forms one of the requirements of graduation; adequate performance in this skill is measured by the TOEFL test.

4.1.2 Data collection methods

It has been argued that total reliance on one single method may lead to inaccurate results, so in order to build up more justifiable and valid results, different data collection methods should be used (Mathison, 1988; Creswell, 2003). Therefore, in an

attempt to answer the questions posed by this study, the researcher made use of four methods:

4.1.2.1 TOEFL test

A TOEFL paper-based listening test was used. The test was constructed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS, 2001). According to ETS, the test is a key step in EFL learners' journey to continue their education in an English-speaking country. According to Istratkova and Boyadzhieva (1999), the TOEFL is used as a standard measure of the 'English proficiency' of the candidates taking it, and its score is a compulsory requirement on the basis of which foreign candidates are considered for admission at different educational institutions and organisations. The scores of the test are accepted in more than 8,000 universities and colleges in over 130 countries. There are also agencies and institutions in the Middle East and Europe, for example, that rely on TOEFL scores as proof of language proficiency. For example,

- Immigration departments use them to issue residential and work visas.
- Medical and licensing agencies use them for professional certification purposes.
- Individuals use them to measure their progress in learning English (ETS, 2011).

The listening comprehension section tests EFL learners' ability to understand both short and long conversations in English. The section contains recorded material that is similar to what might be heard in an English-speaking environment. Most importantly, the skills tested in the listening section of the TOEFL coincide with the list of skills needed to be tested by this study.

The test consists of 50 multiple-choice items in three parts. The first part contains 30 items, each consisting of a short conversation between two people. The second part consists of 8 items, each of which is a longer conversation than the those of the first one. The last part is composed of 12 items, each a short lecture or a long talk. The test reflects a variety of a) text lengths, b) situations (social, academic, etc.), c) genres (e.g. conversations, lectures, etc.). This variety can help identify the listening comprehension problems, if any.

4.1.2.2 Questionnaire

A questionnaire (see Appendix1) was conducted with the testees right after they finished their TOEFL test. The questionnaire contained 22 questions based on 1-5 Likert scale (i.e. strongly agree, agree, neither, disagree, and strongly disagree) to elicit further information about the students' listening comprehension areas of difficulty through their responses towards the listening comprehension difficulties they faced while they were listening to the test recordings.

In order to secure the face validity of the questionnaire, it was sent to *a panel of experts at UOB. The questionnaire was based on presupposed factors that have proved in previous research to be the sources of areas of difficulty in listening comprehension. Suggestions on the early version of the questionnaire were incorporated, and the second version was sent to the panel again for review. More suggestions were made, and on that basis, the final version was constructed.

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4.1.2.3 Students' interview

The researcher also conducted an interview with the test-takers in the form of an open discussion (see appendix 2). The interview contained 15 items and was based on the questionnaire mentioned above as it shed light on the sources the areas of difficulty that EFL learners encounter. It focused on sources related to listening training, text, task, listener, speaker and situation.

4.1.2.4 Teachers' interview

The researcher conducted an interview with 4 faculty members who are responsible for teaching the language development courses at the Department of English (from intermediate to advanced levels) (see Appendix 3). The interview was about the listening training and listening material provided to the students at UOB. The reason behind this interview was to gain some information about:

- How listening classes are taught.
- How much time is devoted to training listening comprehension.
- Whether the listening material given to students in listening classes is sufficient.
- What type of skills the listening comprehension exercises attempt to practise (as indicated by the course material authors).
- What attitudes teachers and students have towards listening practice.
- Whether or not supplementary material is needed/used.
- What type of problems students face in listening comprehension.
- What type of problems teacher have when preparing or giving listening practice.

4.1.3 Procedure

According to the practice followed in the Department of English Language and Literature at UoB, students have to complete a TOEFL test as part of the syllabuses they study in their current English Language Development courses. The test is administered to the students of English 205, 305 and 405 so that their proficiency in the courses can be assessed and later compared with the previous TOEFL scores in previous courses. Since this study aims at investigating advanced learners' areas of difficulty in listening comprehension as mentioned earlier, the test was given to the students of English 305 and English 405.

The rationale behind using the results of this test was that the students were sufficiently motivated since the test was part of their course evaluation. The period of the total TOEFL test was two hours. The test started with the listening part, which lasted for approximately 35 minutes. The researcher, during the test, supervised the process of the test and gave help in invigilation.

After the listening test, the researcher immediately gathered the testees in a hall within the Department building and distributed a questionnaire to the testees to elicit information about the areas of difficulty they had encountered in the listening test. Some of the items of the questionnaire were slightly rephrased for those who found them rather ambiguous or confusing.

The purpose behind distributing the questionnaire immediately after the listening test was to capture information while still in the short-term memory in a process similar to introspection. Another way which, if used, could have elicited more reliable

information was concurrent verbalisation, but that was not possible as the TOEFL listening was timed.

After the questionnaire, the researcher together with the participants took part in an open discussion that took the form of an interview. The discussion was to obtain further information about the students' listening areas of difficulty. The total time taken to complete the questionnaire and the open discussion was about one hour and a half.

Finally, the researcher conducted an interview with the course teachers to elicit more information about listening practice in the language development classroom and their students' involvement.

4.1.4 Data analysis techniques

4.1.4.1 Analysis of the TOEFL listening results

The students' TOEFL listening scores were analyzed using the statistical package SPSS. To determine the length of the cells 1, 0 (lower and upper limits), the range ($0 - 1 = 1$) has been used and then divided by the number of cells of the range to get the correct cell length (i.e. $1 / 2 = 0.50$). After that, the value was added to the smallest value of the range to determine the upper limit of this cell, and thus the length of the cells became as follows:

- From 0.0 to 0.50 represents (failed).
- From 0.51 to 1.0 represents (passed).

This calculation was done through the scale mean (based on average score) of all the items in each category, i.e., the value does not mean that the student failed or passed

every item in the category. If the student's scale mean falls within 0.00 – 0.5, the student's answers in the same category fall in the failure range. Similarly, if the mean falls within 0.51 – 1.0, this means that the answers are within the passing range. For example, if a category contains 10 items, and the student has answered only 2 out of the 10 items correctly, the scale mean of this category will be 2 /10, that is, 0.2. This result falls within the failing range as it is less than 0.5.

4.1.4.2 Analysis of the questionnaire results

First the data was coded as follows: strongly agree = 5, agree = 4, neither = 3, disagree = 2, and strongly disagree = 1. Then, the coding and data entry were entered to the computer using SPSS. In order to determine the length of the cells of the five-point Likert Scale used in the questionnaire, the range ($5-1 = 4$) was calculated, and then divided by the number of cells of the range to get the correct cell length (i.e. $4 / 5 = 0.8$). This value then was added to the smallest value of the range to determine the upper limit of this cell, and thus the length of the cells became as follows:

- From 0.84 to 1.67 represents (strongly disagree).
- From 1.68 to 2.51 represents (disagree).
- From 2.52 to 3.35 represents (neither).
- From 3.36 to 4.19 represents (agree).
- From 4.20 to 5.00 represents (strongly agree).

4.2 Analysis and discussion of the results

This part provides the data analysis and discussion of both the TOEFL listening test and the questionnaire. The part is organised in five sections. The first section focuses on the analysis of the TOEFL listening results, while the second section sheds light on

the areas of difficulty the participants of this study encountered in listening comprehension. The analysis of the questionnaire results is reported in the third section, and the fourth section highlights the sources of the areas of difficulty that influenced the listening comprehension of the subjects of the study. Finally, a summary of all the results is given in the fifth section.

4.2.1 Analysis of the TOEFL listening results

RQ1. What areas of difficulty do Bahraini EFL learners find more problematic in understanding spoken English?

The areas of difficulty the students in this study encountered in the TOEFL listening test were classified into three major categories in terms of meaning on the basis of the skills mentioned in chapter two: ‘stated meaning’, ‘non-stated meaning’, and areas of difficulty based on the ‘speaker’s attitude and purpose’. The ‘stated meaning’ areas of difficulty are related to the listening comprehension skills of identifying main ideas and details, while the non-stated meaning areas of difficulty include difficulties related to the skills of making inferences and predictions. The third category is based on areas of difficulty related to the skills of identifying the speaker’s attitude and purpose of his oral message. The frequency and percentages of these problems are given in tables 1-6.

4.2.1.1 Skills of recognising main ideas

Table (1). Results of testing main idea-related skills

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Failed	12	35.3	35.3	35.3
Passed	22	64.7	64.7	100.0
Total	34	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table (1) shows the frequency and percentage of the participants' answers to the questions of the category that requires the skills of identifying main ideas. It is clear almost two thirds of the students did not face any difficulties in using such skills as 22 (64.7%) of the students in this study managed to pass, while only 12 students (35.3%) failed this category.

4.2.1.2 Skills of understanding details

Table (2). Results of testing detail-related skills

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Failed	9	26.5	26.5	26.5
Passed	25	73.5	73.5	73.5
Total	34	100.0	100.0	100.0

It is also clear from Table (2) that approximately three quarters, 25 students (73.5%), of the total number managed to pass the category that requires the skills of understanding details in the listening tasks, while only 9 students (26.5%) failed.

4.2.1.3 Skills of making inferences

Table (3). Results of testing inference-related skills

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Failed	11	32.4	32.4	32.4
Passed	23	67.6	67.6	67.6
Total	34	100.0	100.0	100.0

According to Table (3), 23 out of 34 students (67.6%) passed the category of test items based on the skills of making inferences, while only 11 students (32.4%) did not manage to pass.

4.3.1.4 Skills of making predictions

Table (4). Results of testing prediction-related skills

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Failed	6	17.6	17.6	17.6
Passed	28	82.4	82.4	82.4
Total	34	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table (4) shows that the majority of the students of the study had no difficulties in answering the questions of the category that requires the skills of making predictions as 28 (82.4 %) out of 34 students passed this category, while 6 students (17.6%), failed.

4.2.1.5 Skills of identifying attitude

Table (5). Results of testing attitude-related skills

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Failed	14	41.2	41.2	41.2
Passed	20	58.8	58.8	58.8
Total	34	100.0	100.0	100.0

According to Table (5), 20 students (58.8%) out 34 passed the category of items that requires the skills of identifying the speaker's attitude in the listening tasks, while 14 students (41.2%) did not manage to pass.

4.2.1.6 Skills of identifying purpose

Table (6). Results of testing purpose-related skills

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Failed	25	73.5	73.5	73.5
Passed	9	26.5	26.5	26.5
Total	34	100.0	100.0	100.0

Finally, it is clear from Table (6) that the category that requires the skills of identifying the speaker's purpose of his oral message appears to be the most problematic category as 25 students (73.5%) of the total number of the participants failed this category. The students who passed were only 9 students (26.5%) of the informants of the study.

4.2.2 Discussion of the TOFL listening results

According to the results obtained from the TOEFL listening test, six areas of difficulty in listening comprehension were identified. These areas are related to six listening comprehension skills and listed in Table (7) on the basis of the testees' low performance in them, i.e. the higher the percentage, the lower the student's performance in that skill is.

Table (7). Results of all listening comprehension skills failures

Number of students	Listening skill	Frequency of students failed	Percentage
34	Identifying speaker's purpose	25	73.5
	Identifying speaker's Attitude	14	41.2
	Understanding Main ideas	12	35.3
	Making inferences	11	32.4
	Understanding Details	9	26.5
	Making predictions	6	17.6

These problems are further discussed below and supported with examples from the TOEFL listening test.

4.2.2.1 Identifying speaker's purpose

The speaker's purpose of his message was the most prominent area of difficulty as (73.5%) of the participants of the study failed in this category. The following example is taken from the test to illustrate this difficulty (see appendix 4).

Question: Why does the speaker mention that more than 70% percent of people read food labels.

- a) To demonstrate that current consumer trends are stable.*
- b) To compare current consumer trends to those of the past.*
- c) To indicate that most consumers actively research the product they buy.*
- d) To show that there has been a decrease in consumer awareness.*

The best answer to the question is (c) “*To indicate that most consumers actively research the product they buy.*” However, (52.9%) of the subjects in this study could not answer this task. Based on previous studies (Goh, 1999; Guizhen and Lisheng, 2004; Miao, 2006), this inability indicates that the subjects faced some difficulties in meaning processing in terms relating bottom-up skills (e.g. making use of language clues) to top-down skills (e.g. topic familiarity, the context, etc.) to construe meaning. Some students can segment the stream of sounds and recognise linguistic features, but this is insufficient if it is not combined with their contextual knowledge or their knowledge of the world. Goh (1999) through conducting diaries and interviews found that “the influence of prior knowledge was perceived by 80% of the students as a major factor in their listening comprehension (p. 25). Miao (2006), through conducting a questionnaire and a listening test, also related this area of difficulty to the fact that when students are exposed to a certain listening topic about which they do not have any background, this can inhibit their comprehension.

4.2.2.2 Identifying speaker’s attitude

The second area of difficulty faced by the subjects is related to the skill of identifying the speaker’s attitude towards the topic of the conversation as (41.2%) of the subjects did manage to pass this category. This difficulty was also recognised by Hwang

(2004) as his study, which was based on a listening test, suggests that the students' failure to relate what they had mentally represented to their prior knowledge and context affected their comprehension of the oral message. Here is one example of this type:

Man: You know I'm on your side, Alice, and even I think you're overreacting.

Woman: Well! That's your opinion, isn't it?

Question: What does the woman mean?

- a) She doesn't agree with the man.*
- b) She wants the man's opinion.*
- c) The man is overqualified.*
- d) The man shouldn't react so strongly.*

The best answer to this question is (a) "*She doesn't agree with the man.*" The woman does not agree with the man; she expresses her attitude through a tone of disagreement. However, (41.2%) of the testees did not succeed in answering this question. This inability gives a clear indication that subjects of the study could not connect the linguistic components of the spoken passage (vocabulary, phrases, clauses, etc.) to the extra-linguistic features such as the speaker's attitudinal signals (tones, pauses, gestures, etc.) that can help a great deal in drawing meanings. Knowing the speaker's attitude towards a situation can be recognized by a change in pitch and tone, and this skill requires the listener to interact the spoken text, a skill that apparently some students did not make use of.

4.2.2.3 Understanding main ideas

The third area of difficulty is related to the skills of grasping main ideas as more than one third of the subjects (35.3%) failed in this category. The main idea of a paragraph or a passage is what the other sentences are about. It contains the most important information the writer wants to deliver. The tasks based on main ideas are in the last part of the test (part C), which includes rather long talks. Here is an example with referring to the passage on food labels:

Question: What was the controversy about?

- a) Whether it is necessary to put labels on prepared food.*
- b) What the daily requirements for certain nutrients should be.*
- c) How to get consumers to read labels more carefully.*
- d) What information food manufactures should provide for consumers.*

The best answer is (d) “*What information food manufactures should provide for consumers.*” During listening to long talks, some subjects in this study found it difficult to deal with long listening texts or long stretches of speech, and consequently, they could not understand the topics of the spoken texts. As shown in previous research (Goh, 1999, Goh. 2000; Osuka, 2007), this difficulty was due to the fact that some students could not store the information of the listening text in the short-term memory and know how to retrieve it later by efficiently organising meaning and avoiding paying too much attention to details (Goh, 2000). The students’ lack of meaning processing skills such as organizing the incoming information into meaningful blocks and distinguishing between important information and minor details affected their formulation of main ideas.

4.2.2.4 Making inferences

The fourth listening area of difficulty concerns the skills of making inferences as almost one third of the participants (32.4%) did not pass this category. A similar area of difficulty was identified by Goh (2000), who found more than half of the subjects of his study unable to get the full meaning of the message even though they had understood the literal meaning of the words. He related this difficulty to a “utilisation” problem because it is related to the listeners' inability to make useful elaborating inferences or act on the intended meaning of the message. Sometimes, meaning is not given on a silver platter, and as a result, listeners need to go beyond the words in order to understand what is meant by the oral message. Therefore, making accurate inferences involves not only the ability to understand the meaning of the words in the listening passage, but it also involves an ability to go beyond just what is said. An example of this skill is as follows:

Woman: I think you've been working too hard. You should take a vacation.

Man: Tell that to the stack of papers on my desk.

Question: What can be inferred about the man?

- a) He'll take work with him on his vacation.*
- b) Work stacked up while he was on vacation.*
- c) He has too much work to do.*
- d) He's already made his vacation plans.*

The best answer to this question is (c) “*He has too much work to do.*” The reason why the man was not going to take a vacation was because of too much work he had in hand. The man did not state explicitly that he had a lot of work in hand and, therefore,

he couldn't take a vacation. Instead, he made his statement implied by saying "*Tell that to the stack of papers on my desk*", assuming that the addressee was linguistically competent enough to perceive his message. The subjects could not guess what the answer of this task was, simply due to their inability to make use of the linguistic clues of the listening task and their contextual knowledge in order to know the underlying meaning of the oral message.

4.2.2.5 Understanding details

The fifth listening comprehension area of difficulty that some of the subjects in this study encountered is related to the skills of understanding details or specific information as more than one fourth of subjects of this study (26.5%) failed this category of items. These detailed-based listening tasks are found in the longer talks and conversations in part B and part C of the TOEFL listening test. This can be shown through this example from the same listening text on food label:

Question: What did the survey of food shoppers reveal?

- a) They were unable to comprehend a label without percentage.*
- b) They preferred more basic labeling.*
- c) They were unwilling to do simple arithmetic.*
- d) They thought the language on labels was too technical.*

The best answer is (a) "*They were unable to comprehend a label without percentage.*" However, (52.9%) of the subjects failed this task as they could not deal with the information of the listening texts. Some previous studies (Goh, 2000; Goh and Taib, 2006, Kijpooonphol, 2006) related this obstacle to the lack of mastery of linguistic skills such as recognizing words, phrases and clauses and, subsequently,

listeners failed to make mental representation from what was listened to. Another reason for this setback was the impossibility of note-taking in a TOEFL test. The subjects probably could understand what was delivered by the speaker when they listened, but when they were not able to take notes of what they had listened to, they apparently forgot it, especially when they moved to another part of the listening text. This problem indicates the listeners' inability to store details in their short-term memory due to constraints of time or its limited capacity. This confirms what Goh (2000) states that "short-term memory is constantly cleared for new input and unless some form of association or fixation in long-term memory occurs immediately, the information will be forever wiped out from an individual's memory" (p. 60).

4.2.2.6 Making predictions

Finally, the sixth area of difficulty is related to the skill of making predictions as (17.6%) of the subjects did not pass this category. This area of difficulty is similar to the one related to the skill of drawing inferences mentioned above. Both skills require the learners' ability to use their background knowledge about the topic as well as their linguistic knowledge to process the meaning of the received input and draw conclusions. Here is an example from the test:

Woman: you're the manager! Look! The strap on this suitcase broke the first time I used it. I'd like to get my money back, or at least restore some credit.

Man: I've sold hundreds of these suitcases, and this's the first time anything's happened. Why don't you try another one?

Question: What is the man going to do for the woman?

- a) Give her a new suitcase.*
- b) Give her store credit.*

c) *Fix her suitcase.*

d) *Give her a refund.*

The best answer to the question is (a). The man did not say “Don’t worry! I’ll give you a new suitcase.” Based on the information given “*Why don’t you try another one?*”, it can be concluded that a new suitcase will be given to the woman. However, some of the subjects taking the test could not guess or predict what the speaker might do next. This provides an indication that the subjects were insufficiently trained, and so they failed to base their prediction on linguistic clues from the listening texts and their own experiences to guess what will happen or be said next.

In conclusion, this discussion has shed light on the areas of difficulty that the participants of this study encountered in listening comprehension. These areas were related to six listening comprehension skills: identifying speaker’s purpose, identifying speaker’s attitude, understanding main ideas, drawing inferences, understanding details, and making predictions. The most influencing area of difficulty that affected approximately three quarters of the subjects of the study was related to the skill of identifying speaker’s purpose, while the least affecting area of difficulty was related to the skill of making predictions. The percentages of the other areas of difficulty were close to each other. Further, these areas of difficulty were generally consistent with the those found and discussed in previous research (Guo, 2006, Chiang and Dunkel, 1992; Goh, 1999; Goh, 2000; Guizhen and Lisheng, 2004; Hwang, 2004; Miao, 2006; Goh and Taib, 2006; Kijpoonphol, 2006; Yousif, 2006; Osuka, 2007).

4.2.3 Analysis of the questionnaire results

RQ2. What are the sources of the areas of difficulty that could influence Bahraini EFL learners' listening comprehension?

The sources of the areas of difficulty that influenced Bahraini EFL learners' listening comprehension were divided into six major categories according to the questionnaire given to the subjects of the study. These major categories were:

- Training sources (insufficient listening practice)
- Speaker sources (e.g. rate of delivery and accent)
- Listener sources (insufficient background knowledge, insufficient linguistic knowledge, inability of making inferences, inability of prediction, and nervousness)
- Task sources (lack of clarification, lack of repetition, impossibility of note-taking, and insufficient time for processing)
- Text sources (phonological modification, organization of information, type of input, and length of text)
- Situation sources (noise and impossibility of eye contact)

In order to elicit information from the participants regarding the influence of the areas of difficulty sources on their comprehension of spoken English, a five-point Likert scale was used (strongly disagree, disagree, neither, agree, and strongly agree). The results were analysed by using SPSS in terms of frequency and percentages, and the category that carries a zero percentage was deleted from the tables. In the analysis, the frequencies and percentages of the categories 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' are added together, and so are these of agree and strongly agree, since they all provide agreement or disagreement despite the degree of their intensity.

4.2.3.1 Students' attitude

Table (8). Students' attitudes towards listening comprehension

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Agree	15	44.1	44.1	44.1
Strongly agree	19	55.9	55.9	55.9
Total	34	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table (8) demonstrates the participants' responses to listening comprehension. According to the table, all the participants of the study 34 (100%) agreed that listening comprehension is essential in learning a second/foreign language, no responses were made against or were neutral to the importance of this language skills.

4.2.3.2 Training sources

Table (9). Students' responses to training-related sources

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	13	38.2	38.2	38.2
Neither	4	11.8	11.8	50.0
Agree	15	44.1	44.1	94.1
Strongly agree	2	05.9	05.9	05.9
Total	34	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table (9) shows the students' responses towards receiving sufficient in-class listening training. We notice that half of the students, 17 students (50%), agreed that they had received enough listening practice, while 13 students (38.2%) revealed that they had

not had sufficient listening practice. Finally, only 4 students (11.8%) gave neutral responses to this issue.

4.2.3.3 Speaker sources

Table (10). Students' responses to speaker-related sources

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly disagree	1	02.9	02.9	02.9
Disagree	11	32.4	32.4	35.3
Neither	6	17.6	17.6	52.9
Agree	11	32.4	32.4	85.3
Strongly agree	5	14.7	14.7	100.0
Total	34	100.0	100.0	100.0

By looking at Table (10), which shows the speaker-related sources that could influence the students' comprehension of spoken English, it is evident that 16 (47.1%) of the total number of the subjects admitted that some of their listening difficulties were due to the way the person speaks. However, 12 students (35.3%) believed that the speaker-related sources did not affect their listening comprehension. Further, 6 students (17.6%) showed a neutral stance towards those sources.

4.2.3.4 Listener factors

Table (11). Students' responses to listener-related sources

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	5	14.7	14.7	14.7
Neither	17	50.0	50.0	64.7
Agree	9	26.5	26.5	91.2
Strongly agree	3	08.8	08.8	08.8
Total	34	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table (11) demonstrates the students' responses to the listener-related sources. According to the data, half of the students (50.5%) neither admitted nor denied that some of the difficulties they encountered in listening comprehension could be related to themselves as listeners. However, 12 students (35.3%) admitted that some of the problems were caused by the listener himself. It is also noticed that only 5 students (14.7%) believed that the listener-related sources did not affect their comprehension of listening tasks.

4.2.3.5 Task sources

Table (12). Students' responses to task-related sources

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	4	11.8	11.8	11.8
Neither	9	26.5	26.5	38.2
Agree	18	52.9	52.9	91.2
Strongly agree	3	08.8	08.8	08.8
Total	34	100.0	100.0	100.0

We notice from Table (12) that the majority of the students in the study (61.7%) reported that the task-related sources could influence their listening comprehension, while only 4 students (11.8%) found that the nature of the listening task did not affect their comprehension. The students who stood neutral to the influence of those sources were 9 students with a percentage of (26.5%).

4.2.3.6 Text sources

Table (13). Students' responses to text-related sources

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly disagree	3	8.8	8.8	8.8
Disagree	3	8.8	8.8	17.6
Neither	11	32.4	32.4	50.0
Agree	10	29.4	29.4	79.4
strongly agree	7	20.6	20.6	20.6
Total	34	100.0	100.0	100.0

According to table (13), it is clear that half of the subjects of the study (17 students with a percentage of 50.0%) stated that the type of the listening text had influenced their listening comprehension, while only 6 students (17.6%) revealed it had not. The students who showed a neutral response to the influence of those sources on their comprehension were 11 students with a percentage of (32.4%), which approximately constitutes one third of the total number.

4.2.3.7 Task sources

Table (14). Students' responses to situation-related sources

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly disagree	9	26.5	26.5	26.5
Disagree	12	35.3	35.3	61.8
Neither	10	29.4	29.4	91.2
Agree	3	8.8	8.8	8.8
Total	34	100.0	100.0	100.0

From Table (14), we can see that more than half of the students (61.8%) said that the situation in which speech takes place did not influence their comprehension of the oral message, while only three students (8.8%) said it did. It is also evident that 10 students (29.4%) did not show a negative or positive response, i.e., stood neutral.

4.2.4 Discussion of the questionnaire results

Generally, the students are aware of the areas of the difficulty they faced in listening comprehension, and they could generally rate the difficulties on a scale which shows the varying degrees of influence. This is indicated by the low percentage of the

students who stood neutral to the influence of some areas of difficulty sources. But neutrality may not necessarily mean that the students could not rate the influence of a source. It could be interpreted that students might think that the source in question is not relevant. However, the data gathered does not allow for a categorical answer to this. According to the results of the questionnaire and the open discussion, the areas of difficulty sources that influenced the participants' listening comprehension correlate with the factors previously discussed by some linguists and researchers (Brown and Yule, 1983; Anderson and Lynch, 1988; Brown, 1994; Mackay, 1998; Kuo, 2009; Chiang and Dunkel, 1992; Goh, 1999; Guizhen and Lisheng, 2004; Hwang, 2004; Chen, 2005; Othman and Vanthas, 2005; Miao, 2006; Goh and Taib, 2006; Kijpooonphol, 2006; Yousif, 2006; Osuka, 2007; Lind, 2008; Ayesha, 2010). To be clearly discussed, these sources are listed in table (15) below to show their influence on the listening comprehension of the students in the study, i.e. the higher the percentage, the more influence the source has. These sources are further discussed below.

Table (15). Students' responses to all listening influencing sources

Number of students	Listening influencing source	Frequency	Percentage
34	Task sources	21	73.5
	Training sources	17	50.0
	Text source	17	50.0
	Speaker source	16	47.1
	Listener source	12	35.3
	Situation source	3	08.8

4.2.4.1 Task sources

The highest influencing category of sources is related to the nature of the listening tasks as (73.5%) of the subjects of the study reported that their listening comprehension was affected by factors related to the listening task. These sources are:

- Insufficient time for processing
- Impossibility of note-taking
- The type of questions asked
- Lack of repetition
- Lack of clarification

First, the time for processing is not sufficient. Some of the subjects of the study complained about the fact that the time given between questions was not enough, and this made them unable to answer some of the questions as they had to go on to the next listening task. Some subjects in this study found it difficult to process the information received within a specified time. For example, the time given between the one task and another in the TOEFL listening test is approximately 30 seconds. This, according to some students, was not enough for them to understand the oral message, read the four options on the test booklet and respond to the question. Listening is not like reading in terms of the required time for processing information since in reading texts learners can refer to the text if they forget some of the information. However, listening texts are conveyed through the air and the information sometimes vanishes immediately after receiving it. Thus, insufficient listening training on how to deal with listening tasks could have been behind the students' slow processing of information.

Second, the impossibility of note-taking is another factor that has influenced the performance of the students in the test. It was reported by some subjects that if they could take notes while listening, their performance in listening tests would have been better. Taking notes can facilitate listening comprehension as learners can easily refer to whatever they have written down to help them make use of some of the information they need for answering listening tasks. This, specifically, applies to long listening texts as some of the information heard earlier cannot be retained in the short-term memory, especially if they listen for quite a long time. In the interview conducted with the language development teachers, it was mentioned that some of the listening tasks in the textbooks they taught were based on note-taking. However, according to the instructions of the TOEFL paper-based test, note-taking is not allowed, and this negatively affected the subjects' performance.

Third, the type of the questions asked in the listening tasks also affects the EFL learner's performance in the listening comprehension test. Some students said that some of the questions asked in the listening tasks were not asked in the same order as the information in the listening text, and that affected their performance in the test. The students, and this was confirmed in the interview after the test, apparently understood part of the spoken text but found it difficult to recall all the necessary information in their working memory since the questions were not in the same sequence as that of the information in the listening text. Besides, the lack of repetition of the questions could contribute to the students' inability to give correct answers to the test items.

Fourth, some subjects reported that they could better understand what was said if it was repeated despite the speakers' speed of delivery. In every-day life, people usually ask for repetition if they miss some of the information. This can be supported by

Berne (1998), who believes that repetition should be encouraged as it can further EFL learners' listening comprehension. However, repetition is not allowed according to the instructions of the TOEFL test.

Finally, the impossibility of asking clarifying questions also affected the subjects' performance in the test. Some subjects revealed that being unable to ask for clarification had negatively affected their comprehension of listening tasks. In listening tasks, students interact passively with the speakers as they listen to something recorded, and, as a result, their comprehension can be affected, unlike what they experience in their daily life where they can interact positively with the speakers, ask clarifying questions as well as make use of body language.

4.2.4.2 Insufficient listening practice

The second influencing category of sources that could cause some areas of difficulty to EFL learners was related to insufficient listening practice. (50.0%) of the subjects of the study reported that the listening practice they received was not sufficient as in-class listening training was not given sufficient attention as were other linguistic skills (e.g. reading, writing and speaking). Based on previous studies, listening practice is essential in teaching English, and insufficient practice could cause communication difficulties for EFL learners (Kuo, 2009; CELCE-Murcia, 2001; Rost, 2002; Park, 2004; Kuo, 2009; Sara, 2009). According to the course teachers who were interviewed, the listening exercises provided in the course books are not sufficient and those available are not often motivating. Further, the textbook exercises are mainly focused on bottom-up skills such as listening for specific information or details and not on top-down skills that can stimulate the learner's background knowledge. It was also inferred from the students' interview that the materials the textbooks contained

are not interesting and some texts are unnecessary long and very boring. In addition, they pointed out that some of the tasks are not clear and therefore they fail to see what is required or expected in the exercise.

4.2.4.3 Text sources

The category of the sources related to the nature of the listening text caused a negative effect on the subjects' performance in the TOEFL test as reported by (50%) of the subjects of the study. These sources are:

- The type of input (medical, scientific, literary, etc.)
- The length of the listening text

First, the type of input. In this study, the subjects revealed that the type of the language used in the listening tasks affected their comprehension. This confirms a finding in a study by Goh and Taib (2006), who concluded that the type of input could affect listening comprehension. When EFL learners listen to a text whose language can be used in daily conversation, they find it much easier to comprehend than scientific texts that display more complex and may contain technical vocabulary. The reason behind this obstacle could be related to the students' insufficient mastery of vocabulary and structure, or insufficient exposure to text varieties.

Another source is the length of the listening text. Some subjects said that the length of listening texts has influenced their comprehension as there was a large amount of information for processing. Yousif (2006) also found that the students of her study had encountered some difficulty in listening to long lectures as "they cannot control the flow of information and hence the processing of it" (p. 40). Some subjects in the study could not keep track of the flow of information of the listening passage and, as a

result, they forgot some crucial information in the spoken text. This can be indicative of the limited capacity of the students' short memory, which sometimes fails to preserve information for later use, especially when students do not have sufficient training in listening.

4.2.4.4 Speaker sources

This category of sources that caused some listening comprehension problems to the students of the study is related to the speaker or the addressor. (47.1%) of the subjects said that their performance in the TOEFL test was affected by sources related to the speaker. These sources are:

- Rate of delivery
- Accent

To begin with, the rate of delivery has affected the subjects' performance in the test. Some students in this study admitted that they could not understand the oral message due to the speed at which an oral message was delivered. People speak at different rates, and what is a normal speaking rate for a native speaker of a language could be fast, particularly for non-native speakers of that language. This confirms a study by Kijpooonphol (2006) who, through a questionnaire and interviews, concludes that the rate at which speech is delivered affects L2 listeners as speed sometimes does not give the listeners the opportunity to follow the fast flow of information in the listening text. Another possible reason for this setback could be that the students of the study did not have sufficient exposure to listening comprehension materials delivered at such speed, which is connected to insufficient listening practice, a point confirmed by the interviewed course teachers.

Another speaker source that has also influenced some students' test performance is accent. When interviewed, almost one third of the students of this study, particularly those who were not taking American studies as a minor, complained that the speaker's accent, which is the accent of the TOEFL listening test, had caused them some comprehension problems. They said that they were familiar with the British accent as during their study period they had been receiving their listening training by using material delivered in this accent, and this did not help them to perform well in the TOEFL test. Those who were taking American studies, which are mainly taught by American teachers, did not raise any complaints as they were already exposed to both varieties of accents. This indicates that the insufficient exposure to more than one variety of accent (e.g. British, American, etc.) influenced the subjects' comprehension of the delivered message, a point confirmed by a study conducted by Butt et al (2010), who, through using a questionnaire, found out that accent was a factor that could greatly disrupt the listening comprehension of their subjects.

4.2.4.5 Listener sources

The fifth category includes sources related to the listener and his overall language competence. (35.3%) of the subjects reported that their performance in the test was affected by sources related to themselves. These sources are:

- The listener's non-linguistic knowledge (topic familiarity, knowledge of the world, etc.)
- His linguistic knowledge (vocabulary, structure, etc.)
- His psychological state

First, the listener's non-linguistic background. Some subjects in this study stated that they could not understand what they heard because of their unfamiliarity with the

topic of the listening text. Based on previous research (Anderson and Lynch 1998; Samuel, 1984; A.Majid, 2009), topic familiarity plays a significant role in facilitating the process of understanding spoken texts as it enables EFL learners to connect the new information received with that stored in their long-term memory, hence their comprehension increases.

What is more, some subjects asserted that they could understand word meaning but not the intended message, while others said that they could not understand the oral message because the meaning was not directly stated. This area of difficulty is related to the subjects' insufficient mastery of top-down skills (making inferences and predictions) that facilitate understanding what is meant by the stretch of language delivered. The students only depended on their language background to literally understand the oral message, but their insufficient knowledge of the world could not help them understand what was meant by the message or predict what might be said or done (see sections 4.2.2). The interviewed teachers also stated that there was no coherent plan followed systematically for teaching bottom-up and top-down skills.

Second, the listener's language background is also essential in the listening process. Some subjects stated that as they listened, they thought about word meaning and missed listening to the next 'chunk', and others revealed that if they had a good stock of English vocabulary, they would perform well in listening tasks. Kijpoonphol (2006), through a questionnaire also found that vocabulary was one of the most influential factors that affected both high-achievers and low-achievers' listening comprehension. This area of difficulty could be related to the learners' insufficient mastery of vocabulary as well as their inability to use background knowledge and contextual clues to understand unfamiliar words. This can be illustrated by the following example, which (32.4 %) of the subjects in this study could not answer:

Woman: The gym looks pretty crowded. Are always many people here?

Man: It changes according to time of day.

Question: What does the man mean?

- a) The gym is always very crowded.*
- b) The gym offers many different activities.*
- c) He doesn't know how late the gym stays open.*
- d) The number of people in the gym varies. (Underlining added)*

The best answer to the question is (d) “*The number of people in the gym varies.*” It can be inferred from the question above that if those students who chose the wrong option had known that the verb *varies* means *changes* in this context, they could have answered the question correctly.

Other linguistic difficulties can also be related to structure as some subjects admitted that their listening comprehension was affected by the complexity of the grammatical structure of the listening text. This finding conforms to what Brown and Yule (1983) believes that the content of the spoken message in terms of the complexity of grammar, vocabulary and information structure can influence listening comprehension. The listening texts of the TOEFL are of two types in terms of structure; relatively simple and relatively complex. The texts with the relatively simple structure are based on daily conversations, while the text with the relatively complex structure are based on academic lecturettes. The latter are delivered in a rather formal style with more complex structure and vocabulary. The subjects with insufficient language background found these texts rather difficult to comprehend. Listening comprehension is assumed to start with recognizing and analysing the

segments and structure of spoken language, and if these segments are not recognized, comprehension lapses.

Third, the psychological state of the listener can also affect their listening performance. Some students reported that they could not understand the listening task due to their nervousness. This was also highlighted by Rubin (1994), who pointed out that among the factors that could interfere with listening comprehension of EFL learners is the listeners' psychological state as it can affect their concentration and attention. Listening is not like reading, where students can refer to the information of the text more than once. Listening is momentary, and the oral message is supposed to be delivered once as we experience in real-life listening. This affected the subjects' concentration as they felt nervous or confused while listening either by trying hard to concentrate or by failing to concentrate and, as a result, they lost track of the listening passage. Another likely reason, as stated by the course teachers, is the lack of motivation on the part of the students as they felt bored while listening to academic texts, especially when not supported by visual aids such as videos, pictures, cards, etc.

4.2.4.6 Situation sources

The last category of sources that influenced students' performance are related to the situation in which speech takes place as reported by (8.8%) of the subjects of the study. According to the students' responses, two sources were identified:

- Eye contact
- Noise

First, maintaining eye contact with the speakers in a conversation can contribute to listening comprehension. Some subjects of this study said that they could not

understand spoken texts because they could not see the speaker. Seeing the speaker can improve listening comprehension as the speaker's body language such as facial expressions, movements, etc., conveys as much information as words do. Students listen to a tape recorder, a machine; they don't see the speaker. So, physical contact with the speaker was missing.

Second, noise that may take place during listening tasks could interfere with the learners' listening comprehension. Some subjects of the study reported that when there was some distracting noise inside or outside the classroom, their concentration got interrupted. The subjects took the TOEFL listening test by means of a tape-recorder. The sound caused some echo in the classroom as its walls are not sound-proof. This caused the subjects some difficulty to concentrate.

These two sources of areas of difficulty confirm what Mackay (1998) believes that being unable to see the speaker and the noise we hear while listening to an oral message can affect our attention. These two sources caused some students to miss some crucial information of the spoken text and, as a result, their performance was adversely affected.

In conclusion, from analysing the areas of difficulty sources that can influence EFL learners' listening comprehension, it has been noticed that the students of the study were aware of the sources that influenced their listening comprehension. These sources were related to task, training, text, speaker, listener and situation. It has also been found that these sources were consistent with the factors found and discussed by researchers and linguists in previous research.

4.2.5 Summary of the results

From the statistical analysis of the TOEFL listening test results, responses to the questionnaire and interviews conducted by both the students and teachers, we conclude that the students who participated in this study encountered a number of listening comprehension problems that were caused by a number of areas of difficulty sources.

First, the TOEFL listening results showed five areas of difficulty in listening comprehension. These areas were related to the learner's inability to understand the speaker's purpose of the oral message and his attitude towards a certain situation. Other areas of difficulty were related to understanding main ideas, making inferences, understanding details, and making predictions.

Second, according to the responses of the participants regarding the areas of difficulty sources that could influence their listening comprehension, the students identified six categories of sources: task sources, training sources, text sources, speaker sources, listener sources, and situation sources.

Finally, all the listening comprehension areas of difficulty the subjects of the study encountered and the sources of such areas were consistent with those found in previous research reviewed in chapter three.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter falls into three sections. The first section provides conclusions of the whole study, while the second puts forward a set of recommendations that the researcher believes can help promote EFL listening comprehension for Bahraini students. Recommendations for further study are presented in the third section of this chapter.

5.1 Conclusions

Previous research has shown that listening is crucial in the students' learning process as it provides input without which learning cannot take place. However, EFL learners face difficulty understanding spoken English (see section 1.2). In order to investigate the areas of difficulty that Bahraini EFL learners encounter in listening comprehension, four instruments were used: a TOEFL listening test, a questionnaire and two interviews; one with the subjects of the study and the second with the language development teachers.

The results obtained from the listening test showed that the participants did encounter some areas of difficulty in listening comprehension. These areas were related to identifying speaker's purpose, identifying speaker's attitude, grasping main ideas, making inferences, understanding details and making prediction. The areas of difficulty related to the categories of identifying speaker's purpose and speaker's attitude were the most difficult ones as (73.%) of the subjects of the study did not manage to identify the speakers' purpose of their oral messages, while (41.2%) could

not pass the category of identifying the speakers' attitudes towards the topics of the listening texts. In addition to these two categories, areas of difficulty related to understanding main ideas, making inferences, understanding details, and making predictions were also found. Obviously, all the difficulties the student encountered belong to two listening categories of skills: bottom-up skills and top-down skills. The first includes skills of how to use linguistic features, such as recognizing words, phrases, grammar, etc., in understanding listening tasks that require these skills, while the latter includes skills of how to make use of background knowledge, topic familiarity, subject matter, etc., in a way to comprehend listening tasks that require more than linguistic knowledge.

The results obtained from the learners' responses revealed six major categories of sources: 'task' sources (e.g. lack of clarification, lack of repetition, impossibility of note-taking, type of questions and insufficient time for processing); 'training' sources (e.g. insufficient listening practice); 'text' sources (e.g. type of input, and length of text); 'speaker' sources (e.g. rate of delivery and accent); 'listener' sources (e.g. insufficient background knowledge, insufficient linguistic knowledge, inability of making inferences, inability of prediction, and nervousness); and 'situation' sources (noise and impossibility of eye contact and face-to-face encounter). In order to elicit some information about how much time spent on listening training, what listening material textbooks provided to students and what skills this material tests, the researcher conducted an interview with a number of course teachers, who revealed that the time dedicated to listening was insufficient, the material was often uninteresting to the students and there was not a coherent plan for systematically teaching listening skills.

Listening comprehension competence can be significantly promoted if students improve their linguistic knowledge by increasing their vocabulary repertoire and grammar (syntax, phonology, etc.), and their background knowledge by expanding their knowledge of the world, topic familiarity, etc., and then activating such types of knowledge (Buck, 2001). Therefore, developing Bahraini EFL students' language competence should be taken as an on-going process that all courses should contribute to, a view that syllabus designers at the undergraduate level have to consider, investigate and implement. Given the limitations of the study, the researcher concedes that besides the problems that this study has identified, there may be still other problems and factors influencing listening comprehension that need to be further explored.

5.2 Recommendations of the study

With the results of this study in mind, the researcher offers some recommendations for EFL instruction, particularly that concerning the development of undergraduate students' language skills at the University of Bahrain.

1. Students should be imbued with the importance of listening skills as this can also develop their other language skills.
2. A coherent plan for systematically teaching listening skills should be adopted. The material should be carefully selected to suit the type of skill to be trained. Further, the material should also be graded and sequenced, and plans need to be designed for effective classroom presentation.

3. Students need to be exposed as far as possible to authentic listening materials.

Exposure to authentic material can improve the learners' listening competence through immersing learners in real world situations. Thus, authentic material is pedagogically more effective than idealized or contrived material. However, the linguistic levels of the learners need to be taken into account. Authentic material that is beyond the language level of the students, while challenging to some, is often demotivating..

4. Listening comprehension classes should include materials that stimulate the learners' background knowledge (top-down skills) not only focus on understanding specific details. Top-down skills can improve the learners' communicative competence in the target language.

5. Students need to be trained in how to be selective in their listening. This can make them able to comprehend listening tasks without being frustrated by the long flow of the information received. This can be done through providing them with tasks on specific information.

6. Some students feel nervous or even anxious before they start the listening task. This problem can be gradually resolved by a) observing the difficulty level of the text, b) choosing interesting topics, c) giving the students an idea about the listening task through asking them questions about the topic of the listening task as a step to get them ready for practice.

7. In listening classes, EFL learners should be exposed to materials with a variety of accents and dialects. Being familiar with more than one accent or dialect can help students improve their listening comprehension skills.

5.3 · **Suggestions for further study**

Based on the results of this study and the limitations of time, budget and energy, the researcher could not carry a comprehensive study in this domain. Therefore, the researcher makes the following suggestions for further research.

1. Due to the small sample size used in the study, it is difficult to generalise the findings to all Bahraini students. Future studies may include a large sample size from all proficiency levels in order for the results to be more useful and accurate. Further, the subjects of the current study were English majors at the University of Bahrain, so further research may include informants from different educational institutions in the Kingdom of Bahrain.
2. Since the findings of this study are based on a TOEFL listening test, it would be more beneficial to investigate students' performance using two types of listening tests (TOEFL and IELTS) since these tests represent two different varieties of the English language (American and British). This can better determine the influence of accent on listening comprehension.
3. Since the results of the study are based on passive listening (listening to conversations and talks without the listeners taking part in them), future research may investigate EFL learners' performance in active listening such as listening to

academic lectures in which listeners take part. This can, more accurately, pinpoint the listening comprehension problems EFL learners encounter.

4. Since this study is an exploratory study, a number of experimental studies can be conducted to investigate the effectiveness of the use of certain comprehension strategies and skills. For example, students can be trained to use a certain skill, and then their performance can be tested. This requires a simple experimental design involving one experimental group which should be tested before and after the training. It also involves simple statistical treatment in which a t-test can be conveniently used to assess the difference in the performance of students in the pre-test and post- test.
5. Another possible experimental study can be used to assess the effectiveness of two or more listening comprehension skills. This requires an experimental design of two experimental and optionally control group. Statistically, this process is more complex and requires the use of ANOVA, which can be used to compare and contrast the performance of the three groups.
6. Further studies may use Factor analysis to summarise the areas of difficulty rather than the automistic analysis which is based on test items. The power of factor analysis is that it classifies test items on the basis of actual performance of the students instead of the prior classification, which was followed in the present study.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Questionnaire on test/task listening comprehension areas of difficulty

Answer the following questionnaire as truly as possible to the best of your ability.

1. Listening comprehension is essential in learning a second/foreign language.

a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree

2. I receive sufficient in-class listening practice.

a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree

3. The type of language of listening tasks (e.g. medical, scientific, literary, etc.) negatively affects my understanding.

a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree

4. I find it difficult to answer some listening questions because there is more information than required.

a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree

5. I cannot understand what I hear because I am not familiar with the topic.

a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree

6. I do not understand what I hear because I do not see the speakers.

a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree

7. I cannot answer some listening questions because the time given between the questions is not enough.

a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree

8. While listening, I find it difficult to recognize some of the words that I already know.

a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree

9. As I listen, I think about word meaning and miss the next listening part.

a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree

10. If I know more vocabulary, my comprehension of what I hear will be better.

a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree

11. As I listen to a task, I understand individual words but not the intended message.
- a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree
12. I do not understand what I hear because of my insufficient knowledge of the grammatical structure of the listening task.
- a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree
13. I cannot answer some listening comprehension questions if I do not take notes.
- a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree
14. I find it difficult to understand details in a listening task.
- a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree
15. I cannot understand what I hear because the meaning is implied (not straight forward).
- a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree
16. I find it difficult to answer some of the listening comprehension questions when they are not asked in the same order as the information in the listening task.
- a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree
17. I cannot understand what I hear if speakers talk very fast even if I listen more than once.
- a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree
18. I can understand what I hear if repeated even if the speakers speak very fast.
- a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree
19. I sometimes do not understand what I hear because I cannot ask clarifying questions.
- a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree
20. I cannot understand what I hear in listening tasks because I get nervous.
- a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree
21. I cannot I understand what I hear in listening tasks if there is noise in the background.
- a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree
22. I cannot understand what I hear because the speakers' accent is different from the the one I am used to .

a) Strongly agree b) agree c) neither d) disagree e) strongly disagree

Appendix 2

Students' interview on the sources of listening influencing areas of difficulty

Answer the following questions to the best of your knowledge.

1. Do you get sufficient in-class listening practice?
2. How many listening classes do you have per week?
3. In listening classes, how often does your lecturer repeat the listening exercise?
4. Do unfamiliar words affect your listening comprehension? If yes, how?
5. What problems do you encounter in understanding the main points of a listening task?
6. What are the problems you encounter in understanding details in a listening task?
7. What are the problems you encounter in understanding the topic of a listening task?
8. In your listening class, how does the language the listening task contains (e.g. medical, scientific, literary, etc.) affect your understanding of the listening text?
9. How often do you understand the words but not the intended message?
10. In your listening class, do you understand everything in the listening text? If no, why not?
11. Do you ask clarifying questions during listening classes? If no, why not?
12. How often do you ask for repetition?
13. How does the speed at which the speakers speak affect your listening comprehension in your listening classes?

14. How does the speaker's accent affect your listening comprehension in your listening classes?
15. In your opinion, what are the factors that affect your listening comprehension in class? Mention as many factors as you can.

Appendix 3

Teachers interview on listening training and listening material.

1. How much time is devoted to training listening comprehension?
2. What type of skills do the listening comprehension exercises attempt to practise (as indicated by the course material authors)?
3. In your opinion, does the course book that you teach provide the students with sufficient listening materials? If no, why?
4. What attitudes do teachers and students have towards listening practice?
5. Do you use supplementary material when necessary? When do you use it?
6. What kind of listening materials does the course book provide?
7. Do the listening materials or tasks provided by the course book qualify the students for the TOEFL listening test?
8. What listening skills does the course book test?
9. Do you give your students extra listening materials in compensation for what the course book does not provide? What kind of material, if any?
10. Do the students feel motivated when they do the listening tasks provided by the course book? Why?

Appendix 4

Food Labels

Parents studies show that food labels are a major consideration for many manufacturers since more than 70% of shoppers read food labels when considering to buy a product. A recent controversy as whether labels on prepared food should educate or merely inform the consumer is over. And a consumer got its way. The group had maintained that product labels should do more than simply list how many grams of nutrients food contains. Their contention was that labels should also list the percentages of the total nutrients that the product supplies to the consumer because this information is essential in planning a healthy diet.

A government agency disagrees strongly with favoring a label that merely informs the consumer. In other words, a label that only lists the contents of the product. The agency maintained that consumers should decide for themselves if the food is nutritious and is meeting their daily needs. The consumer group, in supporting its case, had sided a survey in which shoppers were shown a food label. And when they were asked on if they would need more or less of a certain nutrient after eating a serving of this product, the shoppers weren't able to answer the question easily when they weren't given a specific percentage. This study and others helped get the new regulation passed, and now food products must have the more details labels.