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COMPREHENDING ENGLISH LECTURES IN THE PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES OF BANGLADESH: PROBLEMS AND WAYS OUT

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Abstract

The predominance of English language all over the world dignifies English language as the medium of higher education in the non-native countries like Bangladesh to an enormous phase. Academic listening, thereupon, has been one of the most important skills in order to comprehend the content information from the classroom lectures. But most of the learners, especially, of private universities in Bangladesh are debilitated in this exigent field. This paper ventures for identifying the reasons in the root through a surveying questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) with 121 participant learners of three different private universities, and for pursuing the possible way out according to the capacities and resources in Bangladeshi EFL (English as foreign language) context. Implemented the proposed facets properly, listening skill will reach a level where learners prove them as world standard students.

Keywords: *English language, higher education, academic listening, comprehending lectures.*

1. Introduction

Teaching language for communication has been an accepted aim of the foreign-language teacher throughout the world. To most of the teachers, it has come to mean that we must teach our students to speak the language with proper fluency and authentic idioms. What emphasized, however, is that communication is a process involving at least two people. Speaking does not itself constitute communication unless what is said is comprehended by another person (Rivers, 1968). So listening skill has a great value for communication purpose, and it becomes more valuable when the learners are involved in academic lectures since "English for academic purposes (EAP) in instructional settings require a higher level of listening skill" (Ferris & Tagg, 1996). But it is a matter of regret that listening skill of a language is "a long – neglected area" (Rivers, 1968). This scenario of English language, as English is learnt and taught as our foreign language, is very common and regular at every level of education in Bangladesh. This picture is crystal clear if we have an inquisitive look on every academic syllabus, examination modules, university admission tests and other public examinations.

There is the prior emphasis on only reading and writing skills for academic purposes; speaking skill is, more or less, given importance for both, a little bit, academic, (class/project presentations, viva-voce etc.) and, to a great extent, career motives. This feature is very common from primary stage to the tertiary level of education. The learners face a predicament while they get admitted to the universities, especially private universities.

Teachers in private universities are subject to delivering lectures through English language, and most of the learners are incapable of understanding the lectures as the survey shows

below. The author as a teacher is bitterly experienced in this aspect. This weakness and failing does not have the one sided reason rather multi-dimensional causes like lack of teachers' intention to use English in classroom teaching, absence of listening practice and tests especially in secondary, higher secondary and other public examinations, lack of necessary language lab and essential equipment, and so forth. This listening problem, therefore, demands possible way out as soon as possible as "it has been revealed that good listening comprehension contributes significantly to academic success" (Jeon, 2007). At the same time, the possible solutions, after they are proposed and recommended, should experience a practicality among the teachers, learners and related every concern.

2. Objectives

This study has been accomplished in order to find out the present condition of learners' capability of understanding English lectures, know how much the listening skill was emphasized at their primary, secondary and higher secondary levels of English education, identify the problematic area(s) for which learners lag behind in listening skill, and to seek way out in order to strengthen learners in listening skill and comprehending English lectures perfectly and successfully.

3. Methodology

Because of the nature of this paper both qualitative and quantitative approaches have been adopted. Data have been collected through a surveying questionnaire from 121 students of Honors first year first semester. Out of the 121 students 39 are the students of English department at Dhaka International University, 45 English students from Northern University of Bangladesh and 37 English students from Presidency University. Interviews and group discussion have also been conducted with the learners.

4. Literature Review

Listening skill is significantly considered in second language acquisition (SLA) process. Several dozen of researches have been carried out focusing on listening, teaching listening modules, strategies of teaching listening, meta-cognition of listening, accents and pronunciations, challenges of academic lectures etc. by many researchers. For example, a study carried out by Goh (1998) finds out some significant factors affecting learners' listening comprehension. They include vocabulary, prior knowledge, speech rate, type of input, and speaker's accent.

Goh's (1998) study shows that about 68% of interviewed learners are lagged behind in listening comprehension due to speaker's accent. Zarin (2013) suggests teachers "to select listening texts that are spoken by non-native speakers as teaching materials so that students can develop their listening skills and do not get demotivated". Rahimirad and Moini (2015) emphasize that "various core academic activities like listening to teachers explaining courses and assignments or listening to classmates' questions, reports, and summaries, which are dependent on active listening comprehension skills". Since Bangladeshi learners have not huge opportunity to be exposed to English listening experience, "some general listening materials and listening tasks,"

Alam and Sinha (2009) consider, "must be included to provide exposure to the sound system of English. As recommended by most researchers, a variety of texts and tasks with lots of opportunity for practice is the best option". But in the Bangladeshi EFL context, there is a research deficiency in the problem of comprehending English lectures at the private universities. The current study is an endeavor to fill this gap and eradicate this problem, and is seeking the possible best way out for the learners in the private universities of Bangladesh.

5. Findings and Discussion

To have a subtle look and vivid concept on the present scenario of listening comprehension and the emphasis on listening in various levels of education, every finding of the single question is shown in the table rather than the pie chart or column bar.

Table 1: Questionnaire and findings

SL	Descriptions of the Items	Responses of the Participants		
		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
1	Your classes are conducted using English language.	90. 24%	7.32%	2.44%
2	You understand English lectures thoroughly.	31.71%	65.85%	2.44%
3	You faced listening test after you got admitted in the university.	56.1%	39.02%	4.88%
4	Your listening proficiency was tested and you are grouped accordingly.	4.88%	92.68%	2.44%
5	Your university has language laboratory from where you can receive listening assistance.	7.32%	90.24%	2.44%
6	You heard English lectures in English classes at your primary, secondary and higher secondary levels.	53.66%	46.34%	0%
7	You have listening activities at your primary, secondary and higher secondary levels.	26.83%	73.17%	0%
8	Marks were allotted for listening skill in your primary, secondary and higher secondary curriculums.	2.44%	97.56%	0%
9	You were well motivated to improve English listening skill.	75.61%	24.39%	0%
10	You were provided with technological equipment for correct pronunciation and native like accent.	2.44%	97.56%	0%

The table shows more than half of the university learners (65.85%) are incapable of comprehending teachers' lectures delivered in English language, and the learners (31.71%) understanding the lectures range in between 50–80 percent of the lecture. This very ratio comes out from the focus group discussion. Again the learners face a nominal listening test in the fundamental English language classes after they get admitted to university, but there is no next step to make them skilled by segmenting them according to their proficiency level as 92.65% learners consider so. Another common scenario the table mentions is that the concerned bodies of private universities are, somehow, unresponsive to providing listening-oriented language laboratory (only 7.32%). This picture is more miserable at the primary, secondary and higher secondary levels (only 2.44%).

The problem of comprehending English lectures lies not only in the systematic problem of the universities, but the educational policies of primary, secondary and higher secondary levels, to a great extent, are responsible for this. Though the finding shows the out of the 53.66% learners heard English lectures, to some extent, when they were at the secondary level/ college, but delivering lectures in English were totally depended upon the teachers' intention. And what is about the other two left levels is easily measurable. This very problem arises from the mechanism of syllabus design since there is no mark allotted for listening skill in the primary, secondary and higher curriculums as 97.56% learners has reported. The same percentage of learners has reported that they were not provided with technological equipment for correct pronunciation and native like accent.

6. Recommendations

If there is any problem or crisis in present time, it does not mean that the reason lies at the same time, rather reasons are prolonged phenomena that started long before. Prudential steps, this is why, should be carried out. The reasons behind the problems of uncomprehending English lectures at the university level spring out from the primary level to university level as well. The following recommendations may be appropriate way out for the current listening situation at the tertiary level in Bangladesh.

English syllabus designers should be concerned about the examination system and marks distribution in order to have a positive output. Equal emphasis on the four skills of English

language (listening, speaking, reading and writing) must be given in teaching and learning, and equal marks must be allotted for every skill of English language from primary level to higher secondary level, for example:

Exam Area	Marks
Listening	25
Speaking	25
Reading	25
Writing	25
Total	100

English teachers of primary, secondary and higher secondary levels must be subject to teaching English through using English language, and for this, Primary Training Institution (PTI), National Academy for Educational Management (NAEM), Dhaka and University Grants Commission (UGC), Bangladesh respectively should provide competent English teachers with quality trainings on this issue so that learners become used to listening English lectures.

Phonetics and Phonology course should be introduced to the English syllabi of primary, secondary, higher secondary and Honors first year so that learners have enough command of English sounds, accents, stresses, intonations etc. According to Vandergrift, "Listening comprehension is anything but a passive activity. It is a complex, active process in which the learner must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and structures, interpret stress and intonation, retain what was gathered in all of the above, and interpret it within the immediate as well as the larger socio-cultural context of the utterance"(Vandergrift, 1999).

Listening test should be included in the university admission tests and students may be grouped according to their proficiency range. It will help the language instructor commence the listening courses and practices as to the students' competency level. According to Brown (2006), "One very important idea for teaching listening is that listening courses must make use of students' prior knowledge in order to improve listening comprehension".

Every department should record every individual teacher's lectures in the audio-visual format and newcomers would watch and listen to the lectures, gestures and style of expressions so that the freshers can have the primal idea of the teachers' lectures and comprehend them easily.

In the classroom, teachers should inform the students about the topic of the next class. It would help students gather some prior knowledge on the certain topic and understand the lectures comfortably successfully. Teachers may give classes through bilingual method; she/he, firstly, should use English language (L2) and the same thing, then, should be translated into Bengali language (L1). The ratio of using English and Bengali language the teachers, at first, may maintain at about 50:50 (L2:L1), and it is wise to decrease the ratio gradually like 60:40, 70:30, 80:20, 90:10 and 100:00 (Ahmed, 2016). This very strategy is empirically successful in the author's classroom teaching experience at the university level.

Teachers should monitor how much of the lecture learners have comprehended through asking questions, making them repeat some information, setting them in a competition to derive points from the lecture and so on. It will help learners fully concentrate on the lecture, and concentration leads one to the comprehension.

In this techno-modern era, the advent and application of technologies have immensely facilitated language teaching and learning. Classes should be held with the technological equipment like audio, video, Power Point presentation, and so on. The use of technology make students more motivated and attentive, and students can easily understand or infer the meaning from the visualization lectures. As Jeremy Harmer (1998) said, "Exposure to language is a fundamental requirement for anyone wanting to learn it. Listening to appropriate tapes provides such exposure and students get vital information … about pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, pitch and stress". Harmer (1998) again said, "Video is richer than audio tape. Speakers can be seen. Their body movements give clues as to meaning".

7. Conclusion

A classroom lecture at the university level is a cumulative asset of a teacher's experience, study, research, observation and so on. It is, generally, quite impossible on the part of the learners to gather this kind of quality information in their apprenticing period. Every lecture, therefore, is very much important for the learners. No single word or information, if possible, should be skipped, because these lectures mould learners' foundations on certain issues make their mind improve with sophisticated ideas and knowledge, and pave the ways for learners' bright future with sufficient expertise. Comprehending English lectures, therefore, as an academic language skill is a must. But due to some logical reasons found in the given survey, most of the learners of the tertiary level do not understand the lectures. For this, the recommendations proposed in this paper might be applied in the universities and other levels of education in order to have expected outcomes and successes in Bangladeshi EFL context. Teachers, nevertheless, should be dynamic and concerned about the application of appropriate theory, the development of careful instructional designs and strategies, and the study of what actually happens in the classroom teaching.

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