

Listening: Why is it so Difficult?

Traditionally, listening has been segregated to a somewhat secondary role in English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. Nevertheless, research suggests that listening is the skill in which more time is invested during communication and that it needs instruction in order to be fostered (Devine, 1967, p.152). Although many ESL programs have accepted the importance of including listening comprehension (LC) in instruction, this task can be very challenging both for teachers and learners.

This study seeks to explore the relationship between the performance of level seven students from Programa Institucional para la Persona Adulta y Adulta Mayor (PIAM) in a cloze listening exercise and their level of anxiety. In order to do so, the researchers set the following question: what is the relationship between the performance of level seven students from PIAM in a cloze listening exercise and their perceived level of anxiety?

This inquiry arises from the need to understand the reasons why many students don't seem confident when doing a listening task. Listening comprehension is, therefore, the first concept to address, although defining it seems difficult because of factors such as paralinguistic cues (Rivers, 1996; Mendelsohn, 1994); the reluctance to accept a sole definition of the term (Hengelsen & Brown, 2007); and the different models that address it (Mendelsohn & Rubin, 1995; Rivers, 1966). For this reason, listening tests and the anxiety while taking them add to the complexity of LC, especially because anxiety is directly connected to the students' self-perception of their language performance (Scarella & Oxford as cited in Sharif & Ferdous, 2012). This means that to study the

relationship between such factors could enlighten on how to decrease anxiety in listening tests.

Framed in a mixed methods approach, 21 level-seven students were asked to take a listening cloze test as part of one class session. Before taking the test, participants filled out a semantic differential scale to establish their perceived level of anxiety while completing a listening test. After the test, collaborators were given a checklist where they could identify the elements that had caused them anxiety. Finally, each participant completed one questionnaire to share their recommendations to lower anxiety in LC testing.

Results showed that students seemed to feel anxious about listening in general terms. Furthermore, ten or more students reported that elements such as speed of speech, unknown vocabulary, among others, caused them to be anxious. Additionally, nine or fewer students reported lack of clarity, lack of visual support, among others, as factors causing anxiousness.

Finally, results suggest that the sources of anxiety the students have are diverse and that the nature of anxiety is quite complex and can vary greatly within a group. Although, each student has different perspectives on how their anxiety level might decrease, the fact is that anxious students will always need help from the instructor to overcome their problems, and such a task has to be a goal of the English classroom and of those professionals involved in the English teaching field.

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