



IDENTIFYING DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY SRI LANKAN ESL STUDENTS AT THE FIRST CERTIFICATE IN ENGLISH (FCE) LISTENING TESTS

Chamali Gamage , Dilini Jayarathna
Department of Marketing, University of Ruhuna*

INTRODUCTION

Background

Language learning programmes around the world have become complicated and challenging in recent years, because of their accountability requirements which are to provide a more explicit focus on educational outcomes. One of the implications of this phenomenon was the widespread adoption of performance descriptors known as ‘standards’, ‘benchmarks’, ‘skills’ or ‘attainment goals’ as a basis for measuring learner success and communicating learning outcomes to external stakeholders (Brindley, 1998 & Mckay, 2000). According to the literature, numerous studies have indicated that efficient listening skills are equally important to the other skills as a factor contributing to academic success (Coakley & Wolvin, 1997). Due to the fact that ESL teachers and content developers pay more attention to English grammar, comprehension and vocabulary, ESL learners have serious problems with listening skills. Thus, listening activities have not become important components of many course books or curricula while designing the lessons. Therefore, this study appears as a requirement for curriculum designers and educators to assist them in developing appropriate language programmes with equal weight for all the language skills. Moreover, according to Jin, Ying, Liu, and Zhang (2014), following the identification of language demands, crucial decisions about the learning outcomes, content selection, choice of lesson material, teaching methodologies, and assessments relevant to the language programmes can be made.

The FCE test which is subjected to this study belongs to the B2 level in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The test includes all language components; where the students are evaluated for reading, writing, speaking and listening within three hours. In the listening section of the test, the students listen to the audio tracks where British English is spoken within different contexts. Hence, the listening test of FCE is selected for this study since it is recorded that the students score low marks ranging from 5-15 out of 30 for listening.

Research objective

This study brings attention to a critical skill in language learning; listening skill with a focus on the difficulties encountered by FCE students. Thus, the study aims to investigate the difficulties encountered by FCE candidates, and to identify their extent of exposure to listening in English.

Research questions

The research questions are the following.

1. To what extent are FCE candidates exposed to listening in English?
2. What type of listening difficulties are encountered by FCE?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

To fulfil the objectives of the research, a mixed methodology was adopted using both qualitative and quantitative methods. As defined by Smith (2012), quantitative methods are those that deal with measurable data. Hence, the quantitative data of the study was obtained



from the google form questionnaires. A qualitative method is an unstructured method which consists of words, participants' opinions, theory generation and process-based analysis (smith, 2012). Thus, the qualitative data of the present study was obtained from semi-structured interviews.

Sample

The study was conducted with the participation of 30 ESL (17 female and 13 male) students who were selected from random sampling. They are the candidates for the FCE test conducted by ESOL College International whose ages range from 12 to 17 years. Two classes were selected for the study and 15 students from each class were selected. In order to conduct the interviews, 6 students (3 students from each class) were taken from the sample of 30 students to collect qualitative data for the study. The first language of all the participants is Sinhala and they learn English as a second language. Additionally, the participants were provided with a consent form that contained the purpose of the study.

Data collection and data analysis

The questionnaire that consisted of 10 questions was created to obtain data about the linguistic features of the listening resources for the FCE test while the answers are recorded on a 4-point Likert scale. Moreover, the purpose of the interviews was to triangulate the information which was obtained through the questionnaire and to obtain information about the reasons behind the learners' difficulties in listening comprehension. The participants were given 15 minutes to fill out the Google form. Subsequently, six semi-structured interviews were conducted over the telephone for 15-20 minutes after their FCE test. The collected quantitative data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Prior experience in acquiring listening skills before attempting the FCE test

According to the findings, the participants have not had good practice in listening before attempting the FCE test. One interviewee (1) revealed the reason for not practising listening previously as his English teacher has often missed the listening lessons in the classroom; "My English teacher used to miss the listening lessons whenever she came to the class". Another interviewee (2) stated the reason for her bad listening performance as the lack of access to listening materials; "I am not that much exposed to different listening resources which can help me to improve my listening skill". Thus, these are the factors that make the students incompetent in comprehending complex listening texts which are commonly used in the FCE listening test.

The listening difficulties encountered by FCE candidates

Results of the questionnaire

According to the findings of the questionnaire, the listening difficulties are caused by both the lack of English fluency and the lack of exposure to the spoken language among the participants.

Table 3. 1 Listening Difficulties

Statement	Never %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
I'm familiar with the pronunciation but cannot recognize the words.	20	40	23.3	16.7
I do not often pay attention to the intonation	20	30	30	20



of the speaker.				
I find it difficult to recognize the signals which indicate that the speaker is moving from one point to another.	-	40	30	30
I feel it difficult to understand natural speech, which is full of hesitation and pauses.	26.7	40	33.3	-
I feel it difficult to understand well when speakers speak with a variety of accents.	-	26.7	36.7	36.7
I feel it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast.	20	23.3	33.3	23.3

According to the above table, the pronunciation of some speakers is considered a source of listening problems for many participants. More than three-quarters of the students (30% - “often” and 30% - “sometimes”) attribute their incomprehension to patterns of intonation. This result is in line with the findings of Brown (1992), who mentions that the English language’s prosodic characteristics — stress, rhythm, and intonation are significant for listening comprehension. Moreover, signal words help listeners to understand the material’s thread of thought. Unfortunately, in the study, most of the students (40% - sometimes, 30% - often and 30% - always) fail to recognize the signals indicating that the speaker moves from one point to another. Further, authentic dialogues include hesitations, breaks, and poor intonation making it difficult to comprehend complex listening texts. Hence, Table 3.1 shows that the majority of the students find it difficult to understand natural speech which is full of hesitations and pauses. The variation of accents used by the speakers in listening materials causes students trouble in listening comprehension because they have little exposure to different accents. According to the participants, another serious issue in listening comprehension they encountered, was the speed of speech used in listening texts. Therefore, according to the data obtained through the questionnaire, unfamiliar pronunciation, intonation, inability to identify signal words due to the speed and varied accents are the causes of listening difficulties encountered by FCE candidates.

Results of the interviews

The participants who were interviewed mentioned the following listening difficulties realized by them during the FCE test.

A- Unclear pronunciation of the speakers in listening texts: All the interviewees said that they were not successful in listening comprehension tasks of the test because of the unclear pronunciation of the speakers. For example, one interviewee (4) stated; “*When I listen to native speakers, I feel that sounds change or blend with each other*”. Thus, there is a considerable impact of the speakers’ pronunciation on the listeners’ comprehension ability.

B- Limited English vocabulary of the listener: Poor vocabulary is another major issue that impeded the understanding of spoken utterances in the target language. This is evident from a participant’s interviewed comment; “*My vocabulary is weak; I find it very hard to understand what the topic is, mainly when a keyword is a word that I don't know*” (Interviewee 1). Hence, an FCE candidate should possess the adequate vocabulary to score well, for the listening section of the FCE test.

C- Listener’s poor knowledge of grammar: The interviewees emphasized the importance of grammar when it comes to understanding a listening text. For instance, interviewee (6) stated; “*I don't think knowing a lot of words is just a useful skill for me... My ability to listen to complicated phrases is too bad, and I also know that my English grammar is miserable*”.



Even though the participant did not directly explain the connection between grammar and listening comprehension, there was an indirect connection between them. Therefore, it is necessary for an FCE candidate to improve grammar knowledge gradually in order to comprehend a complex listening text during the test.

CONCLUSIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the findings of the study, it is suggested that listening comprehension is a problem for many ESL students who face the FCE test. Furthermore, according to the semi-structured interviews conducted in the study, the prior experience of the candidates in acquiring listening skills was not sufficient before attempting the FCE test. Besides, the listening difficulties encountered by FCE candidates such as unfamiliar pronunciation, intonation, inability to identify signal words due to the speed, varied accents of speakers and the listener's poor knowledge of grammar as well as vocabulary were revealed by both the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, it is expected that the results of this study will contribute to overcoming the listening difficulties encountered by Sri Lankan ESL students in FCE listening tests.

Recommendations

Based on the major findings of this study, ESL students are recommended to enrich and improve their English vocabulary knowledge by expanding the usage of English and practising frequently. They should practise communicating in English with peers inside their classrooms and at the same time, improve their listening skills. Moreover, in order to improve the students' listening comprehension, the teachers should encourage the students to constantly improve their vocabulary and grammar. Besides, it is recommended for the teachers to encourage the students to develop their interest in the culture of English because students need to learn the vocabulary items related to the culture and their usage to foster their listening comprehension.

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