Relationship Between Foreign Language Listening Anxiety and Listening Comprehension

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Abstract

This study was carried out to investigate the relationship between foreign language listening anxiety and listening comprehension. The study employed correlational study design. Participants of the study were 40 grade 11 students who attended the listening class in 2015/2016. Foreign language listening anxiety questionnaire and listening comprehension tests were used as data gathering instruments. These data were analyzed using Pearson's Product moment correlation and one way ANOVA. In order to identify the significance of differences between the pairs of FL listening anxiety, multiple comparisons or a post hoc test was also conducted. The results revealed that there was a significant, negative correlation between listening comprehension and foreign language listening anxiety. The findings also showed that the mean differences were statistically significant between the low anxiety and average anxiety, low anxiety and high anxiety and average anxiety and high anxiety.

Key words: Anxiety, listening comprehension, foreign language listening, foreign language listening anxiety

Introduction

For many years, listening has been neglected in language research and teaching. The main reason is that this skill is viewed as an implicit and passive language skill. However, over the past fifty years, Vandergrift (2007) mentioned that many educators have not considered listening as a passive skill; and they have moved from repetition exercise to real life communication. Besides, Vandergrift (1999:168) noticed "listening comprehension is anything but a passive activity." He stated that listening is an active and complex process that a listener is engaged.

From the above quotations one can understand that the traditional view of considering listening as a passive skill is changed to the active one in which learners actively select and interpret information which comes from auditory and visual clues in order to define what is going on and what the speakers are trying to express (Rubin & Meldelsohn, 1995).

Of the four language skills, listening is one of the most crucial for language learning especially at the beginning level. As Vandergrift (1997) maintained, listening helps the learners to internalize the rules of language and then facilitate the emergence of other skills. This emphasizes the important role of listening in language learning.

Listening is used for more than any other single language skill in normal daily life. On average, we can expect to listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read, and five times more than we write (River, 1981; Weaver, 1972). Listening as the most frequently used skill plays an important role in foreign language learning (Vogely,1998) since through this channel learner is able to comprehend the information.

For this reason, it has been emphasized by both instructors and students for achieving success in language learning (Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Ferris, 1998). Listening comprehension has emerged as an important and distinct second/foreign language skill (Byrnes, 1984; Dunkel, 1991;

Krashen, 1981) leading teachers to look for ways to facilitate improvement of learner performance in this skill.

In spite of its main role in SLA, listening is regarded by some researchers (e.g Graham, 2006; Kurita, 2012) to be a difficult skill. In line with this, Kurit (2012) considered listening as the most difficult language skill to learn. Similarly, L2 learners often regard listening as the most difficult language skill to learn (Hasan, 2000; Graham, 2003). One of the reasons might be that learners are not taught how to learn listening effectively (Vandergrift, 2007). Another reason might be that the listener cannot refer back to the text in contrast to a reader who usually has the opportunity to refer back to clarify understanding (Stahr, 2009). Consequently, listening becomes a cause of anxiety for L2 learners (Elkhafaifi, 2005; Noro, 2006). Graham (2006) considered the listening comprehension more difficult than reading comprehension since in listening there is less opportunity or it is not as easy to go back over previous input. Some factors have been reported to make listening comprehension more controversial which include aspects of the input such as accent, complex syntactic structures, fast speech rate, in addition to learners' shortcomings such as limited vocabulary, insufficient memory, a lack of confidence in listening, a lack of necessary cultural and background knowledge to understand the topic and so on and so forth (Chang & Read, 2006; Goh, 1999, 2000). Additionally, according to the research literature, for many L2 students, listening is stressful and hard work (Chang & Read, 2006).

During listening process, different factors may cause uneasiness and tension for language learners and result in poor listening. Young (1992) stated that poor listening ability results from many factors, such as insufficient emphasis on listening, immature teaching methodologies, ineffective listening strategies, and students' lack of vocabulary, but the increasingly important one is anxiety. It plays a very important role because the anticipation of foreign language use in receiving information can provoke anxiety.

Furthermore, researchers who have investigated listening skills have also reached the consensus that FL listening creates anxiety (Young, 1992; Bacon, 1989). They agree that FL listening may provoke anxiety, for it may sometimes be incomprehensible for the learner. In Krashen's terms, listening anxiety may act as an affective filter, which makes comprehension harder (1988). When listening comprehension becomes harder, listening anxiety present in the learner becomes more prevalent. This creates a cycle which needs to be broken to allow for the proper comprehension of what is being listened to.

Moreover, as Scarcella and Oxford, (1992) and Vogely, (1999) stated anxiety can be highly provoked in listening comprehension context. By the same token, MacIntyre (1995) explained the reason for such an anxiety is that learners often worry about misunderstanding what they listen to and the fear of being embarrassed by interpreting the message wrongly.

The researcher has many years of experience in teaching English in high schools and observed that the students' performance in listening skills is below the standard. Besides what the researcher faced when teaching the skill, he had information from many English language teachers and they complain that learners are not willing to participate or to do listening exercises; and they become anxious, feel uneasiness, shyness, and worry when learning or doing listening activities; and because of this their listening performance is negatively affected or poor.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine if there is a relationship between FL listening comprehension and listening anxiety. Having this in mind, the researcher formulated the following basic questions to be answered through the study:
1. Is there a significant correlation between students' FL listening comprehension and listening anxiety?

2. Is there any statistically significant difference in level of anxiety among low, average and high achievers?

Methodology

Research Design

The main objective of the study was to investigate the relationship between FL listening comprehension and listening anxiety. All the participants (40 students) from the two sections of grade eleven, one section from natural sciences and the second section from social sciences were randomly selected. Correlational research design was employed in this study. Data gathered through Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) and listening comprehension test were analyzed quantitatively by using percentage or mean and other statistical tools.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

As mentioned in the first part of the study, the sample size of the study was 40 students of Grade11 who were enrolled in 2016 in Dembi Dollo preparatory school. From the first section (72 Natural Science students), 24 students and from the second section (48 Social Science students), 16 students were randomly selected. This means that 40 students were involved in the study from the total population of 120 students.

Instruments of Data Collection

In order to collect the necessary information for the study, the researcher utilized two types of data collection instruments. These are FLLAS and a listening comprehension test. To investigate the students' FL listening comprehension skills, first they were given the listening test. Then, to see the degree of their listening anxiety, FLLAS was employed.

In this study one of the data collection instruments used was the questionnaire or Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) which was developed by Kim (2000). The questionnaire consists of 33 items accompanied by 5 response categories in which the subjects were asked to indicate the degree of agreement or disagreement about their FL listening anxiety by circling option numbers ranging from 1 to 5, and indicate whether they 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with the items of the questionnaire on a 5-point Likert type scale when it describes their listening comprehension anxiety. The purpose of the questionnaire was to check the students' level of FL listening comprehension anxiety when doing or practising listening activities or tasks.

In order to help the students complete the items in the questionnaire easily or to avoid lack of information due to language difficulty, it was translated into the students' mother tongue or native language (Afan Oromo (students' mother tongue) before administering it to the subjects. In fact, it is customary to allow second language learners to respond in their native language in describing their learning strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). It also works for foreign language learners.

Even though the translated version of the questionnaire was administered to the subjects, efforts were still made to make everything clear to them while they were completing the questionnaire. Firstly, the purpose of the questionnaire was explained to them orally, and the procedures for completing it were made clear to them. Secondly, each item was read out and its concept was briefly explained as the respondents were filling in the questionnaire. As a result, they did not have much difficulty of understanding the items and worked as quickly as they could to complete the questionnaire.

The other data collection method utilized in this study was the Listening Comprehension Test. It was used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of students FL listening comprehension skills. The test consists of 33 items; and it has 5parts.These include identifying positive and negative ideas or statements mentioned in the listening text, multiple choice items, expressing author's ideas, explaining the meaning of words as they are used in the text, and answering comprehension questions.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection instruments: FLLAS and listening test were adopted based on the existing ELT literature. Before administering the data gathering tools to the subjects of the study, they were commented by a teacher who has MA degree in TEFL. The teacher was working together with the researcher in the same preparatory school. The teacher provided relevant comments on the above mentioned two data collection instruments. However, the final comments were given by the researcher's advisor.

After receiving the necessary comments, the researcher made some changes and corrected unclear items before administering the tools for the final study so as to avoid ambiguity on the part of the students. Next, the translated version of FLLAS was piloted on ten Grade 11 students who were not the subjects of the study. These enabled the researcher to see whether the tools were practical or not.

Listening comprehension test was given first to the sample students before gathering data using the other data collection methods. Before the administration of the test, the subjects were given orientation that the test was part of their assessment of English subject; and they were given codes like S_1, S_2, S_3, ---S_{40} depending on the initial alphabet letter of their names. Then after listening comprehension test was administered to the students. This was done before the other data collection tools to see how much they feel anxiety while taking the test. This was very important for the students to complete or to fill the second tool-FLLAS questionnaire to decide their agreement or disagreement about the items regarding listening test. FLLAS questionnaire was used to identify the degree of the students' agreement or disagreement with the statements in the questionnaire towards their listening comprehension skills.

Data analysis

The data gathered through the above two instruments were organized and analyzed to answer the research questions of the study. The data obtained from the listening comprehension test and FLLAS questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively by using the latest SPSS version windows 20 (Special Software called Statistical Package for Social Sciences).

In order to analyze the data gathered through listening comprehension test and FLLAS questionnaire and to investigate the relationship between FL listening comprehension and listening anxiety, Pearson's Product Moment of Correlation was used. Correlation analysis is used to describe the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables. According to Hatch and Farhady (1981), there are some underlying assumptions that have to be met for Pearson correlation analysis. The assumptions are:

1. the two variables are continuous,
2. scores on X and Y are independent of each other, and
3. the relationship between X and Y is linear.

Since the collected data met these assumptions, Pearson product moment correlation was the appropriate method to be used. Furthermore, to analyze the data collected through listening comprehension test and FLLAS questionnaire, one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was

employed to determine the possible differences among the listening abilities of students with low, average, and high level of anxiety.

Results

The major objective of the present study was to determine the relationship between listening comprehension and Foreign Language Listening Anxiety. To this effect, the Listening Comprehension Test was administered and the papers were corrected. Then after, values for the students' achievement were given according to the marking system set by Education Ministry of Ethiopia for high school students' promotion. According to the Ministry, the marking system is presented as follows:

» 90-100 Excellent
» 80-89 Very Good
» 60-79 Good
» 50-59 Fair
Below50% Poor

Table 1. *Frequency of the participants' Listening Test Achievement*

Grading System		Frequency	Percent
90-100	Excellent	0	0
80-89	Very good	3	8
60-79	Good	10	25
50-59	Fair	11	27
Below50	Poor	16	40
Total		40	100

The above table shows that only 3(8%) of the students scored very good results (80-89). The other 10(25%) of the students got good mark (60-79). Another 11(27%) of the students earned fair result (50-59), and the last group 16(40%) of the students scored poor mark (below 50%).

The above students' test achievements revealed that almost half of the students were poor (scored below 50%). This means that most of the students had difficulty of listening and understanding listening text, and failed doing or completing listening comprehension activities. This result showed that the students were poor in their listening comprehension skills because of different reasons.

On the other hand, since the marking system set by the Ministry of Education contains 5(five) scales, the researcher tried to change it into 3(three) scales for grouping the students into low, average, and high achievers on the basis of their listening test achievement. To do so, the students who got the mark 80-89 (very good) in the grading system were considered as high achievers. The other group that scored 60-79(good) in the grading system was taken as average achievers. The remaining group who earned the mark below 59 (50-59 fair, and below 50 poor in the grading system) was considered as low achievers.

Table 2. *participants' classification based on achievement*

Levels		Frequency	Percent
80-89	High	3	8
60-79	Average	10	25
below 59	Low	27	67
		40	100
Total			

From this table, one can understand that very few students 3(8%) were high achievers (scored 80-89). The other group of students 10(25%) was average achievers (scored 60-79). The remaining majority of the students 27(67%) who earned the mark below 59 were low achievers. The number of these students was greater than the number of both low and average achiever students; even greater than twice of them. This means the majority of the subjects have difficulty of listening and understanding listening text because of various reasons.

Next to the listening test, the FLLAS questionnaire was administered to all sample subjects. They all completed appropriately and returned the papers. After the papers were returned, the sum of every student's FL listening anxiety result was calculated. Next, depending on their anxiety result, they were classified in to three groups namely: low anxious students, average anxious students, and high anxious students. To do so, first, the minimum and the maximum anxiety result were identified. Since the FLLAS consisted of 33 items in the questionnaire and the score of each item ranged from 1 to 5 points, the potential score of each student's anxiety should range from 33 to 165 points; and lower scores indicate lower levels of listening anxiety whereas higher scores mean higher levels of listening anxiety. Then, the range of the minimum and the maximum anxiety result was calculated (165-33=132). After that, the obtained result was divided in to three equal groups. As a result, the first group who scored between the ranges 33-77 was taken as low anxious students. The second group who got between the ranges 78-121 was taken as average anxious students and the last group who scored above 122 was considered as high anxious students.

Table3. *Distribution of the participants' FL Listening Anxiety Levels*

Anxiety levels	Anxiety Score	No. of students	Percent
Low anxiety	33-77	8	20
Average anxiety	78-121	14	35
High anxiety	122-165	18	45
Total		40	100

As can be seen from the table above, the number of the students experiencing high levels of anxiety 18(45%) is more than the number of students with average anxiety 14(35%) and more than twice the number of students with low levels of FL listening anxiety. Of the 40 students, only 8(20%) experienced low levels of FL listening anxiety.

In order to investigate the degree of the subjects' FL listening anxiety, descriptive statistics of FLLAS questionnaire was conducted.

Table 4. *Descriptive Statistics of FLLAS Questionnaire*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Anxiety valid N (listwise)	40 40	64	147	106.55	24.214

The above table shows that the mean M=106.55 and Std. Deviation *SD*=24.214. The result indicated that the subjects have experienced high listening anxiety, which reflects that during the process of listening comprehension, the subjects easily become anxious. This phenomenon is probably related to the emotional states of the listeners. Compared with speaking and writing, listeners are in a relatively passive position. In addition, speech signals are fast, continuous and fleeting, so learners always take a heavy psychological burden and need to concentrate the mind completely.

In the investigation of FLLA, 16(48.48%) students chose "agree" when answering the item "I get nervous if a listening passage is read only once during English listening tests"; 15(45.45%) students chose "agree" in the item "when a person speaks English very fast, I worry that I might not understand all of it"; meanwhile, 15(45.45%) students chose " strongly agree" in the item "I get worried when I have little time to think about what I hear in English." Therefore, anxiety is pervasive in foreign language listening comprehension.

In order to investigate the relationship between listening comprehension and listening anxiety, Pearson's product of moment correlation was utilized. However, before calculating the correlations, a scatterplot was used to indicate whether the variables (listening test score and listening anxiety score) positively or negatively related.

The scatterplot indicates whether variables are positively or negatively related. For positive correlations, the points form a line pointing upwards to the right (that is, they start low on the left-hand side and move higher on the right). For negative correlations, the line starts high on the left and moves down on the right.

The scatterplot also provides a general indication of the strength of the relationship between two variables. If the relationship is weak, the points will be all over the place, in a blob-type arrangement. For a strong relationship the points will form a vague cigar shape, with a definite clumping of scores around an imaginary straight line.
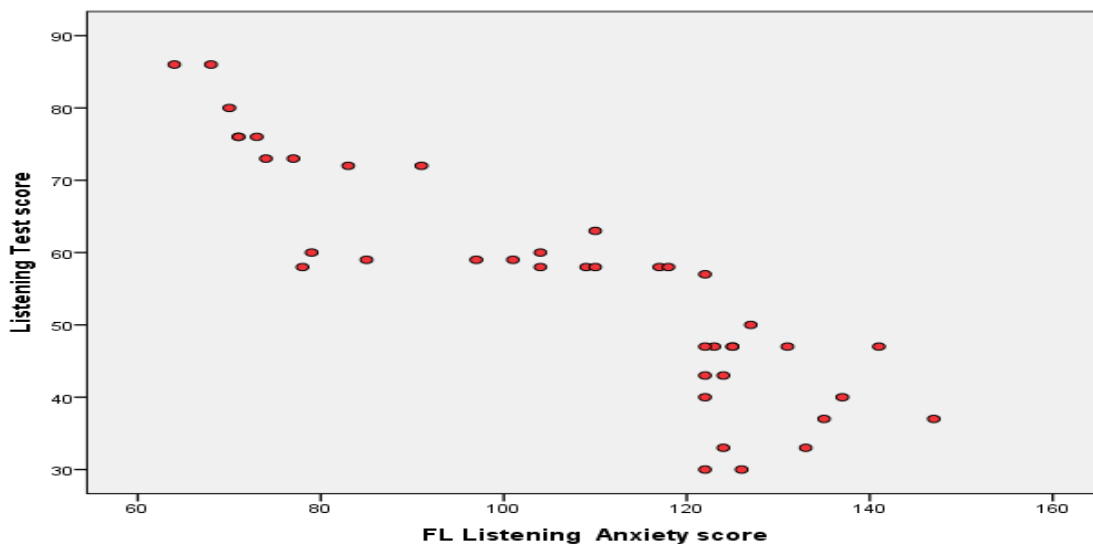
Figure 1. *The relationship between listening comprehension score and listening anxiety*

From the above scatterplot, there appears to be a strong, negative correlation between the two variables (listening comprehension test score and listening anxiety score) for the sample as a whole. Respondents who scored good mark (shown on the y or vertical axis) experience lower level of listening anxiety (shown on the x, or horizontal axis). On the other hand, respondents who scored less mark (shown on the y, or vertical axis) experience high level of listening anxiety (shown on the x, or horizontal axis).

The scatterplot indicated that when one of the variables (listening test score) increased, the other variable (listening anxiety score) decreased, in other words, when the listening test score decreased, the listening anxiety score increased. This means there is a negative correlation between the two variables; so would be appropriate to calculate a Pearson product-moment correlation for these two variables.

Table 5. *The relationship between Listening Test Achievement and FLLAS*

Variables		Test score	Listening anxiety
Test score	Person Correlation	1.000	-.918**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	40	40
Listening anxiety	Person Correlation	-.918**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	40	40

Note ** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As Table 5 shows, there is a strong, negative correlation between FL listening comprehension and listening anxiety with r = -.918 and p=.000 < .05. The negative correlation between the two variables (test score and listening anxiety) indicates that as the students' foreign

language listening anxiety decreases, their listening comprehension performance increases. In other words, when the students' foreign language listening anxiety increases, their listening comprehension performance decreases.

When students come with across unfamiliar words and difficult sentences, they become stressed and anxious, this in turn influences the following content. Although it seems that they are listening, in fact, they have given up. After a series of vicious circles, they lose all interest in listening. In addition, thinking process can be broken up by higher anxiety. The students with lower anxiety not only can make a positive response immediately according to the obtained information and corresponding clues, but also adjust thinking promptly when meet with interference; while students with higher anxiety whose thinking process is restrained, cannot make a correct judgment.

Analysis of the differences among low, average and high level anxiety achiever students was also made. In order to see the differences in their listening test achievement, first an F value was computed and checked for significance.

Table 6. *Significance of Listening Test Achievement and FLLA Level*

Source of variations	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	7845.616	2	3922.808	99.676	.000
Within Groups	1456.159	37	39.356		
Total	9301.775	39			

The above table shows that the calculated value of F is 99.676 which is greater than the value table 5.25 at 5% level with degree of freedom being variation Between Groups ($V_1 = 2$, and variation Within Groups($V_2 = 37$). This means that the test score was significantly different for the three (low, average, and high) FLLA levels (sig. = .000).

However, in order to identify the significant differences among the pairs of FL listening anxiety, multiple comparisons or a post hoc test was conducted in the following table.

Table 7. *Differences among Listening Test achievement and FLLA levels*

(I) Anxiety level	(J) Anxiety level	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Low anxiety	Average anxiety	17.393*	2.780	.000	10.60	24.18
	High anxiety	36.306*	2.666	.000	29.80	42.81
Average anxiety	Low anxiety	-17.393*	2.780	.000	-24.18	-10.60
	High anxiety	18.913*	2.236	.000	13.45	24.37
High anxiety	Low anxiety	-36.306*	2.666	.000	-42.81	-29.80
	Average anxiety	-18.913*	2.236	.000	-24.37	-13.45

Note* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The multiple comparisons or ANOVA table shows that the mean differences are significant between the low anxiety and average anxiety (17.393, Sig. = .000), low anxiety and high anxiety (36.306, Sig. = .000), and average anxiety and high anxiety (18.913, Sig. =.000). These results indicated that there was a moderate mean difference between low and average anxious students as well as average and high anxious students, but the difference was a little bit bigger for average and high anxious students than the low and average anxious students. However, there was a great mean difference between low anxious and high anxious students in their listening achievement.

From these, it was concluded that as the students' foreign language listening anxiety increases, their listening comprehension performance decreases. On the other hand, as the students' foreign language listening anxiety increases, their listening comprehension performance decreases. This means that low anxious students are good achievers in their listening comprehension than average and high anxious students. However, average anxious students are a little bit better than high anxious achievers.

Discussion

The major objective of the present study is to determine whether there was relationship between foreign language listening and foreign language listening anxiety. The study revealed that there was a negative correlation between the two variables (test score and listening anxiety), which indicates that as the students' foreign language listening anxiety decreases, their listening comprehension performance increases. In other words, when the students' foreign language listening anxiety increases, their listening comprehension performance decreases. The findings are in line with the findings of the studies conducted by Gonen (2009). This finding is also congruent with the findings of previous studies conducted by Horwitz et al. (1986), MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), Kim (2000), Elkhafaifi (2005), Kimura (2011) and Golchi (2012).

The result also indicated that high anxiety interferes with the processing of listening comprehension, and the stronger anxiety the students experience, the worse listening achievements they make. According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985), "a mental block" caused by affective factors such as motivation, anxiety, attitude, which prevents acquisition from fully utilizing the comprehensible input they receive. Therefore, acquirers with a high affective filter (filter is "up") fail to take in the available target language. Anxiety is a kind of affective filter, so listeners with higher anxiety level prevent themselves from receiving comprehensible input, which leads to worse listening achievements. Meanwhile, higher anxiety is easy to distract attention, and interferes with the normal process of listening comprehension.

Analysis of the differences among low, average and high level anxiety students was also made. The result indicated that the mean differences were statistically significant between the low anxiety and average anxiety, low anxiety and high anxiety and average anxiety and high anxiety. This finding is in line with the findings of Aneiro (1989), Elkhafaifi (2005), Mills, Pajares and Herron (2006), Wang (2010) and Kimura (2011). These studies also revealed that learners' anxiety varies according to their level of ability in foreign language listening.

Conclusions

Depending on the analysis and interpretation of the collected data, the following conclusions were made. Regarding the relationship between FL listening comprehension and listening anxiety, Pearson's Moment of Correlation Coefficient indicated that there was strong,

negative relationship between FL listening comprehension and listening anxiety with (r = -.918, p =.000<.05).

With respect to the differences in the level of anxiety among low, average, and high achiever students, the study showed that the majority of the students experience high level of anxiety. Because of this, they were poor in their listening comprehension test performance. However, average anxious students were better than high anxious students but low anxious students were better than both average and high anxious students in their listening test achievement.

Concerning the causes or sources of the subjects' FLLA, the information gathered through interview revealed that the subjects do not feel confident during listening comprehension activities. They face difficulties with listening comprehension activities because their teacher reads the text quickly; they do not understand the text because of the way it is pronounced, and thus they have problems of identifying vocabularies from each other. Moreover, the study indicated that the subjects were not taught how to listen and what to focus on when doing listening comprehension exercises. In addition to, the students were not given adequate or sufficient time for processing and doing listening comprehension activities. Besides, the exercises given to them to be done in a single period were too many. Furthermore, many of the listening texts presented to them when doing listening comprehension activities were new or unfamiliar; they were not taught the meaning of new or unfamiliar words in the text before the listening text was read. As a result, they stop listening to the text when they meet these words.

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