

**Aušra STEPANOVIENĖ**

## BARRIERS TO ACADEMIC LISTENING: RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

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**Summary.** The study explores perceived difficulties related to the legal English listening comprehension of the respondents. It investigates the differences related to listening comprehension between high-ability and low-ability listeners. The subjects in this study were 118 undergraduate law and police activity students learning in the Faculty of Public Security. The findings of the study indicated that the most difficult obstacle to listening comprehension was the lack of knowledge of legal English vocabulary. The least difficult factor was sequencing of information in a legal text. Some solutions are proposed to the problems. The significance of the study lies in its contribution to curriculum building. The paper formulates some implications for further research.

**Keywords:** language proficiency, listening comprehension, skills, abilities, listener.

**Santrauka.** Vienas iš pagrindinių užsienio kalbos mokymo reikalavimų nekalbinėje aukštojoje mokykloje yra gebėjimų suprasti originaliąją specialybės literatūrą klausant ugdymas. Klausymas ir supratimas iš klausos yra vienas svarbiausių kalbos mokymo(si) tikslų. Be šių įgūdžių ir gebėjimų lavinimo neįmanoma sėkmingai bendrauti. Straipsnyje analizuojami sunkumai, susiję su specialybės anglų kalbos teksto suvokimu klausant. Tyrime dalyvavo 118 Mykolo Romerio universiteto Viešojo saugumo fakulteto teisės ir policijos veiklos studijų programos trečiojo kurso studentų. Straipsnyje lyginami aukštesnius ir žemesnius klausymo gebėjimus turinčių studentų teksto suvokimo ypatumai. Remiantis tyrimo rezultatais galima padaryti išvadą, kad klausantis teisinio teksto, aukštesnius klausymo gebėjimus turintiems studentams buvo sunkiausia sekti profesinio teksto mintį. Žemesnius klausymo gebėjimus turintiems studentams buvo sunku suprasti teisės terminų reikšmę. Tyrimo rezultatų analizė leido padaryti išvadą, kad pratybų metu reikia daugiau dėmesio skirti teisės terminijos analizei ir būtina tobulinti sakytinio specialybės teksto suvokimo gebėjimus, dažniau klausantis teisės tekstų pratybų metu ir savarankiškai namuose.

**Pagrindinės sąvokos:** kalbos mokėjimas, klausymas ir supratimas, įgūdžiai, gebėjimai, klausytojas.

### Introduction

Listening is one of the most basic areas of communication skills and language development. In the classroom, students have to listen carefully and attentively to lectures and class discussions in order to understand and retain the information for later recall. Listening is not only the first of the language arts skills developed, it is also the skill most frequently used in both the classroom and daily life. Clearly, much of the educational process is based on skills in listening.

Students have to spend most of the time listening to what the teacher says, for instance, giving lectures. In a language classroom, listening ability plays a significant role in the development of other language arts skills. Listening can also help students build vocabulary, develop language proficiency, and improve language usage (Barker, 1971, p. 35). Students' ability to comprehend written material through reading as well as to express themselves through speaking and written communication are directly related to students' maturity in the listening phase of language development (Cayer et al, 1971, p. 115). Dunkel (1986, p. 47) asserts that developing proficiency in listening comprehension is the key to achieving proficiency in speaking. Not only are listening skills the basis for the development of all other skills, they are one of the main channels through which students make initial contact with the target language and its culture (Curtain et al. 1988, p. 89).

Skills of listening have been neglected in terms of research and shifted to a secondary position (Kavaliauskienė, 2008, p. 1). The researchers and teachers tended to do more research into reading, writing and speaking rather than listening. They often considered that listening was something which could be picked up easily and saw little need for developing a specific research agenda or approaches to teaching listening. As a result, listening remains very under-researched. It is a surprising fact considering that it is the skill most often used in everyday life. According to Miller (2003, p. 61), more than forty percent of our daily communication is spent on listening, thirty-five percent on speaking, about sixteen percent on reading, and only nine percent on writing. Yet listening remains one of the least understood processes in language learning despite the recognition of the critical role it plays both in communication and in language acquisition (Morley, 1991).

A review of previous research regarding four language learning skills used by EFL students indicates that a skill that is considered weak is listening. This claim is in agreement with some research studies (Kavaliauskiene (2008, p. 6), Alam (2009, p. 19), Abedin (2010, p. 69), Velička (2007, p. 18)) which show that most students have a problem in EFL listening comprehension.

One way to help students develop their listening comprehension is to help them realise their listening problems or difficulties. The purposes of the study are to investigate the perceived difficulties related to listening comprehension of the subjects and to explore differences related to listening comprehension between high-ability and low-ability listeners. The research methods include 1) the analysis of scientific literature, 2) a listening comprehension test, 3) a questionnaire, and 4) a semi-structured interview.

Research object: the problems that university students encounter in listening comprehension.

## Literature Review

Listening comprehension is a complex, covert process. Lynch (2010, p. 76) mentions that there are four main factors that affect the ESP listening process:

- 1) The listener. The listener may tune out topics that are not of interest. A listener who is an active participant in a conversation has more background knowledge to facilitate understanding of the topic than a listener who is eavesdropping on a conversation.
- 2) The speaker. The extent to which the speaker uses colloquial language and reduced forms impacts comprehension. A speaker's rate of delivery and many hesitations may make it difficult for a listener to follow.
- 3) The content of the message. Content that is familiar is easier to understand than content with unfamiliar vocabulary or for which the listener has insufficient background knowledge.
- 4) Visual support. Visual supports such as video, pictures, diagrams, gestures, facial expression, and body language can increase comprehension of the listener.

In his study Itkonen (2010, p. 5) defines eight characteristics of a listening text which make the listening process difficult:

- 1) Clustering. Due to memory limitations and predisposition for chunking or clustering, listeners break down speech into smaller groups of words. Students have to pick out manageable clusters of words.
- 2) Redundancy. In real life situations, speakers often use sufficient redundancy which could help listeners to process meaning easier.
- 3) Reduced forms. Spoken language also has many reduced forms. These can be phonological, morphological, syntactic, or pragmatic.
- 4) Performance variables. The distracting performance variables such as hesitations, false starts, pauses, and corrections of L2 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, reduced forms, and shared cultural knowledge. The extent to which speakers use these language forms impacts comprehension.
- 6) Rate of delivery. Most listeners perceive that native speakers speak too fast for them and this makes it difficult for L2 listeners to follow (Butt, 2010, p. 312).
- 7) Stress, rhythm and intonation. The prosodic features of L2 may cause difficulties. If listeners feel familiar with these prosodic features, they may have less difficulty in L2 listening.
- 8) Interaction. It plays a major role in listening comprehension. If listeners cannot communicate with speakers, they cannot elicit more information from them.

From the study of Lynch (2009, p. 48), obstacles to listening comprehension can be separated into person knowledge and task knowledge. The obstacles of person knowledge are: (1) limited academic terms; (2) phonological modifications; (3) particular types of accent; (4) types of input with an unfamiliar structure; (5) inefficient memory; and (6) fast speech. The factors of task knowledge are: (1) phonological modifications; (2) unfamiliar vocabulary; (3) different varieties and local accents; (4) speech rate; (5) types of input; (6) interest in topic and purpose of listening; (7) existing knowledge and experience; (8) physical factors; (9) emotional states; and (10) length and structure of sentences.

Most factors that cause difficulties are similar. The main problems are from: (1) the listener, which are related to interest in topic and prior knowledge, and (2) the text type, which are related to speech rate and content of the listening text.

In developing the research tools for this study, the researcher adopted from the above mentioned studies of authors the following obstacles influencing English listening comprehension: visual support, information organization, familiarity of topic, explicitness of information, types of input, clustering, redundancy, reduced forms, rate of delivery, stress, rhythm, interaction, and unfamiliar vocabulary.

### **Methodology and Data Collection**

The subjects in this study were 118 undergraduate law and police activity students enrolled in the faculty of Public Security at Mykolas Romeris University. The respondents were selected based on their scores on a listening comprehension test and were randomly assigned to two groups: (1) high ability listeners who obtained 80 percent or more in the listening comprehension test and (2) low ability students who obtained less than 60 percent in the listening comprehension test. The purpose of the division was to compare the different difficulties in listening comprehension related to high and low ability listeners.

Two research instruments, a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were used. The researcher distributed questionnaires to more than 120 students and 118 completed questionnaires were returned. Each student spent around ten minutes to complete the questionnaire. In addition eight students were randomly selected for an interview. Interviews were carried out on the same day. Research data were statistically analysed, identifying standard deviation and mean scores of the answers to the research questions.

### **Findings**

Research Question 1: What difficulties related to listening comprehension do university students perceive?

Judging from the student answers, students perceive they have a moderate level of difficulty in understanding legal English texts. The participants agreed

with the following statements: (1) legal English collocations is a major obstruction to understanding; (2) they can understand what they listen to if they are familiar with that topic; (3) they can understand what they hear if information is made explicit; (4) the topic being spoken about is one factor that affects listening comprehension; (5) redundancy in texts helps them to comprehend; (6) rate of delivery affects listening comprehension; (7) anxiety and stress are the factors that the respondents face with when they listen to legal English texts; (8) rhythm affects listening comprehension; (9) interaction with the speaker makes comprehension easier; (10) anxiety is one factor that respondents feel when they listen to English texts.

Difficulties related to listening comprehension were categorised into 10 items which were elicited from the students’ responses to open-ended questions beforehand. Each student was asked to rank 10 most important items.

**Table 1**

**Factors influencing listening comprehension**

Rank	Category	Mean (SD)
1	Rate of delivery	4.42 (0.69)
2	Phonological reduction	4.21 (0.91)
3	Vocabulary	4.15 (0.97)
4	Syntactic reduction	4.06 (1.08)
5	Cross-cultural elements	4.05 (0.86)
6	Sequencing of information	4.04 (0.64)
7	Breaking down speech into words or groups of words	3.43 (0.50)
8	Lack of knowledge of English idioms	3.36 (0.49)
9	Lack of redundancy	3.33 (0.47)
10	Rhythm	3.16 (0.37)

Table 1 shows that the highest mean score, 4.42, was for rate of delivery. After rate, in order of perceived difficulty, came phonological reduction (4.21), vocabulary (4.15), syntactic reduction (4.06), cross cultural elements (4.05), and the sequencing of information in forms other than a simple narrative text (4.04).

The lowest mean score was 3.16 for the parameter “rhythm affects listening comprehension”. This indicates that rhythm is the least difficult component of listening comprehension for the respondents. After rhythm, in order of increasing perceived difficulty, came lack of redundancy in texts (3.33), lack of knowledge of English idioms (3.36), and breaking down speech into words or groups of words (3.43).

Research Question 2: In relation to difficulties related to listening comprehension, what are the differences between high and low ability university listeners?

**Table 2**

**Difficulties in listening comprehension encountered by high and low ability students**

Rank	Category	Mean	SD	Rank	Category	Mean	SD
1	Rate of delivery	7.61	3.34	1	Vocabulary	6.42	3.73
2	Vocabulary	5.65	3.34	2	Rate of delivery	5.91	3.49
3	Phonological reduction	5.12	3.49	3	Phonological reduction	4.50	3.38
4	Syntactic reduction	4.10	3.31	4	Breaking down speech into words	4.10	3.42
5	Sequencing of information	3.77	3.60	5	Cross-cultural elements	3.95	3.79
6	Breaking down speech into words	3.65	3.33	6	Sequencing of information	3.67	3.27
7	Lack of redundancy	3.19	3.37	7	Lack of knowledge of English idioms	3.58	3.43
8	Lack of knowledge of English idioms	3.11	3.00	8	Syntactic reduction	3.14	3.17
9	Cross-cultural elements	2.86	3.24	9	Rhythm	2.61	3.45
10	Rhythm	2.54	2.92	10	Lack of redundancy	2.72	2.01

□ High ability students N=61

■ Low ability students N=57

Spearman rank correlation  $r=0.946$  ( $p<0.001$ )

Pearson rank correlation  $r=0.955$  ( $p<0.001$ )

To examine the difficulties that are encountered in listening comprehension by high and low ability students, the data drawn from the two groups were contrasted, interpreted and discussed. On the questionnaire, the statistical analysis of the second part was enhanced by pairs of relevant items according to the parallel forms reliability technique. That is to say, a perceived difficulty was examined at two different points on a questionnaire.

High ability listeners revealed that the main obstacle in legal English listening was the rate of delivery. They said that they were unable to understand what foreigners said if the foreigners spoke at a normal speed. Moreover, vocabulary was mentioned as important to listening comprehension. They stated that if they knew more vocabulary, they would understand what they listen to more easily. The students also reported that phonological reduction was a factor affecting understanding.

Low ability listeners revealed that the main obstacle to legal English listening comprehension was vocabulary. Students mentioned that they were not able to understand what foreigners said to them because of their lack of legal vocabulary.

The rate of delivery was another obstruction in listening comprehension. However, they did not worry about this factor because they mentioned that foreigners always speak at a slower rate when talking to them than they do when they talk with their friends. The phonological reduction is one more difficulty in listening comprehension.

Table 2 shows that only the top three items between these two groups formed the same subset. Both high and low ability listeners reported problems with vocabulary, rate of delivery, and phonological reduction.

## **Discussion**

For research question 1, the results from the questionnaire can be grouped into "moderate" and "agree". From the opinions expressed, it is obvious that the students realised that they had difficulties in listening to English texts. The most difficult factor for them was the rate of delivery. The least difficult factor was the rhythm.

For research question 2, the high ability listeners indicated that the rate of delivery was the factor that caused most difficulty while the low ability listeners reported that the lack of vocabulary was most difficult to them. This finding is congruent with the findings of Lynch (2009, p. 48) that one obstacle for listening comprehension is limited vocabulary or knowledge of academic terms. It is also congruent with the findings of Velička (2007, p. 19) that listeners' background knowledge can facilitate understanding.

## **Conclusion and implications**

This study aimed to investigate the difficulties university students experience in regard to listening comprehension and to compare differences between high and low ability listeners in relation to the perceived difficulties with listening comprehension. The results show that students face many difficulties including rate of delivery, vocabulary, phonological and syntactic reduction, degree of redundancy.

Although this study was conducted with the students studying law and police activity, the results can be applied to students in other programmes such as law and state border guard. Low ability listeners emphasised the rate of delivery and recognition of vocabulary, because the results of this study indicate that these difficulties are the major factors affecting their understanding of spoken English.

In the future the research methods could be triangulated, i.e. classroom observation and English listening tests could be included.

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<p><b>Aušra STEPANOVIENĖ</b>  <b>Faculty of Public Safety, lecturer in</b>  <b>Department of Humanities</b></p> <p><i>Fields of scientific interests: ESP, learner training, legal English translation</i></p> <p>Faculty of Public Security,            Mykolas Romeris University            V.Putvinskio St.70, LT-44211 Kaunas,            Lithuania            ausramru@gmail.com</p>	<p><b>Aušra STEPANOVIENĖ</b>  <b>Viešojo saugumo fakulteto</b>  <b>Humanitarinių mokslų katedros lektorė</b></p> <p><i>Mokslinių interesų sritys: anglų kalba specifiniais tikslais, besimokančiųjų mokymas, teisinės anglų kalbos vertimas</i></p> <p>Mykolo Romerio universitetas,            Viešojo saugumo fakultetas            V.Putvinskio g. 70, LT-44211 Kaunas,            Lietuva            ausramru@gmail.com</p>
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