

Listening Comprehension Skill: The Forgotten Skill in the Saudi Classrooms

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Abstract:

Background: Listening plays a very significant role in language acquisition and language learning. The more input kids and students get, the faster and easier it will be for them to acquire and learn any new language. Unfortunately, over a long period listening didn't receive enough attention by curricula designers, teachers, and students which affected the output and labelled listening as a difficult skill to teach and understand.

Materials and Methods: This study intends to draw the attention to listening through answering three important questions related to the importance of listening, the challenges that face teaching it and suggestions for enhancing this important skill. To this end, the researchers chose all secondary and intermediate students in Jeddah as a population and fifty male and female students as a sample. A survey of twenty-two items was used as a data collection tool.

Results: The findings of the study showed clear enthusiasm for listening comprehension and an urgent need to overcome the challenges and reconsider suggestions to improve this skill including training teachers, facilitating it, and increasing the weight in the schedules.

Conclusion: The study recommends giving more attention to listening and including it in any English language test.

Key words: KSA, KAU, intermediate students, secondary students, listening comprehension, oral skills

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I. Introduction

While ample attention has been directed towards the development of reading, writing, and speaking skills in Saudi EFL classrooms, the skill of listening has often been relegated to the periphery. This oversight is concerning, as listening plays a pivotal role in effective communication and language proficiency. It is also considered an integral component of language learning, serving as the foundation upon which all other language competencies are built. It is through listening that learners are exposed to authentic language input, enabling them to comprehend and interpret spoken English accurately. Furthermore, listening skills are indispensable for effective communication in various academic, professional, and social contexts. In today's interconnected world, where English serves as a global lingua franca, the ability to understand and respond to spoken English is crucial for successful communication. In Saudi Arabia, a country known for its dedication to education and an increasing demand for English proficiency, it is imperative to recognize the significance of developing listening skills among EFL learners. However, the traditional approach to English language instruction in Saudi EFL classrooms has focused primarily on grammar and vocabulary acquisition, leaving listening instruction neglected. This imbalance in instructional priorities has resulted in a deficiency in the listening abilities of Saudi EFL learners. Listening plays a vital role in language acquisition as it serves as the foundation for all other language skills ([1]). According to ([2]), listening comprehension is crucial for overall language proficiency, as it facilitates vocabulary development, grammar acquisition, and pronunciation improvement. Moreover, listening skills are essential for effective communication in various academic, professional, and social contexts ([3]). As English continues to be a global lingua franca, the ability to understand and respond to spoken English is crucial for successful communication ([4]). Traditionally, Saudi EFL classrooms have focused primarily on grammar and vocabulary instruction, with limited attention given to listening skills ([5]). This imbalance in instructional priorities has resulted in a deficiency in the listening abilities of Saudi EFL learners.

Several factors contribute to the neglect of listening skills in Saudi EFL classrooms. First and foremost, teachers often face challenges in incorporating listening activities into their lessons due to a lack of appropriate resources and training. The scarcity of listening materials specifically designed for EFL learners in Saudi Arabia poses a significant hurdle. Additionally, the lack of professional development opportunities for

teachers to enhance their knowledge and pedagogical skills in teaching listening further exacerbates the problem. Moreover, the traditional teacher-centered instructional approach prevalent in Saudi EFL classrooms tends to prioritize teacher talk, leaving little room for students to actively engage in listening activities. The focus on grammar and vocabulary drills often sidelines the development of listening abilities, resulting in a passive learning environment. This lack of emphasis on listening not only hampers the overall language development of EFL learners but also diminishes their confidence and proficiency in understanding spoken English.

To address this pressing issue, it is crucial to revisit and revitalize the role of listening in Saudi EFL classrooms. By employing effective listening strategies and techniques, educators can create a more learner-centered classroom environment that promotes active engagement and interaction. Incorporating authentic listening materials, such as podcasts, videos, and audio recordings, can expose learners to real-life language use, enhancing their listening comprehension skills. Furthermore, it is essential for Saudi EFL teachers to receive professional development opportunities that focus specifically on teaching listening skills. Training programs and workshops can equip teachers with the necessary knowledge and pedagogical techniques to effectively integrate listening activities into their lessons. Additionally, collaboration among teachers, both within and across institutions, can foster the exchange of best practices and innovative ideas for teaching listening.

It goes without saying that the neglect of listening skills in Saudi EFL classrooms hampers the comprehensive language development of learners. Henceforth, it is crucial to recognize the importance of listening as a fundamental skill in language learning. By revitalizing listening instruction, Saudi Arabia can equip its EFL learners with the necessary skills to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and English-dominated world. This article aims to shed light on the current state of listening instruction in Saudi EFL classrooms, identify the challenges hindering its implementation, and propose practical strategies to revive this forgotten skill. To this end, the researchers investigated this crucial concern through answering the following research questions:

1. Why is the listening comprehension skill important for EFL and ESL learners?
2. What are the obstacles and challenges teachers and learners face while teaching and learning this skill?
3. How can the people in charge of the teaching/learning process overcome these challenges?

II. Review Of Literature

Listening is a crucial aspect of second language acquisition, as research has demonstrated its significance in exposing learners to new vocabulary, grammatical structures, and pronunciation patterns ([6]). However, despite its importance, listening is often overlooked in language learning contexts, where speaking and writing skills take precedence ([7]). Thus, listening is often relegated to a secondary position in language courses, with limited time and resources allocated to its development ([8]). The literature below aims to highlight the importance of listening in second language acquisition, the challenges and barriers that hinder its development, and provide suggestions for improvement.

Importance of Listening:

Listening plays a pivotal role in language development, enabling learners to internalize the rhythm, intonation, and stress patterns of the target language, leading to more natural and accurate pronunciation ([6]). It also enhances comprehension skills, which are essential for effective communication ([9]). Additionally, listening proficiency is closely connected to reading comprehension, as the strategies developed through listening contribute to the understanding and interpretation of written texts. Moreover, listening facilitates intercultural communication, exposing learners to different cultural perspectives and discourse patterns, fostering cultural awareness and sensitivity. Research has consistently shown that learners who actively engage in listening activities demonstrate higher levels of language proficiency compared to those who solely focus on speaking and writing skills. By actively listening to authentic language input, learners can internalize the rhythm, intonation, and stress patterns of the target language. This exposure enables them to develop a more natural and accurate pronunciation, enhancing their overall oral communication abilities. Furthermore, listening comprehension is closely linked to reading comprehension. Proficient listeners are often skilled readers, as the ability to decode and understand written texts heavily relies on the comprehension strategies developed through listening. Thus, neglecting the development of listening skills can have a detrimental impact on learners' overall language proficiency and limit their ability to effectively engage with written materials. In addition to facilitating language acquisition and comprehension, listening also plays a vital role in intercultural communication. By actively listening to authentic audio materials or engaging in conversations with native speakers, learners gain exposure to different cultural perspectives, idiomatic expressions, and discourse patterns. This exposure fosters cultural awareness and sensitivity, allowing learners to navigate intercultural interactions with greater ease and effectiveness.

Overall, recognizing the importance of listening in second language acquisition is crucial for educators and learners alike. By prioritizing listening instruction and providing ample opportunities for practice, learners can significantly improve their language skills, enhance their comprehension abilities, and develop greater intercultural competence.

Challenges & Barriers:

Traditional teaching methods that prioritize knowledge transmission over the development of listening skills limit learners' exposure to authentic language use ([9]). Cultural and linguistic differences can also pose challenges, with distinct listening styles and disparities in phonology, syntax, and vocabulary impacting non-native speakers' comprehension abilities ([6]). Furthermore, the lack of appropriate listening materials designed for second language learners and the absence of a standardized listening curriculum further hinder the development of listening skills ([10]). Traditional teaching methods employed in many language classrooms often prioritize knowledge transmission over the enhancement of listening skills. Methods such as grammar-translation and vocabulary-building tend to focus on explicit instruction, leaving limited room for learners to interact with authentic listening materials and engage in meaningful listening activities. ([11]) Obeidat reports that the results obtained from the General Secondary School test in Jordan (Tawjihi) show that “the English language test affects the way of teaching in Jordan, as the test does not focus on listening and speaking but focuses instead on grammar, reading, writing, and vocabulary only”. However, the results of the Oxford Placement Test show that “the correlation between the two results suggest a concerning discrepancy”. The results of this international test also demonstrate a lack of students' proficiency in all language skills ([11]).

As a result, learners may not develop the necessary strategies and confidence to comprehend, and process spoken language in real-life situations. Cultural and linguistic differences can also pose challenges to developing listening skills. Learners from different cultural backgrounds may exhibit distinct listening styles, influenced by their native language and cultural norms. These differences can impact their comprehension and response to spoken language, making it necessary for educators to be aware of these variations and tailor instruction accordingly. For instance, research indicates that learners from various cultures may exhibit distinct listening styles, which can influence their comprehension and response to spoken language ([12]). Additionally, non-native speakers may face challenges in deciphering phonological nuances, understanding complex syntax, and acquiring a wide range of vocabulary, which can hinder their listening comprehension.

Another significant barrier is the lack of appropriate resources and support for listening instruction. In many language learning contexts, there is a scarcity of authentic listening materials specifically designed for second language learners. This dearth of resources limits educators' ability to provide engaging and authentic listening experiences that reflect real-life language use. Additionally, the absence of a standardized listening curriculum further compounds this challenge, as teachers may lack clear guidelines and benchmarks for assessing and developing listening skills. Furthermore, the teacher-centered approach prevalent in some language classrooms can hinder the development of listening skills. A focus on teacher talk, grammar drills, and rote memorization can create a passive learning environment that does not prioritize active engagement and interaction. This approach limits opportunities for learners to practice their listening skills and develop their ability to comprehend and respond to spoken language in real-time.

Suggestions for Improvement:

To address the neglect of listening skills, it is recommended to integrate authentic listening materials, such as podcasts, videos, and audio recordings, into classroom instruction ([2]). Comprehension tasks and follow-up discussions can be incorporated to enhance understanding and encourage critical thinking. Adopting a learner-centered approach that promotes active participation through information exchange and group discussions based on listening stimuli fosters collaborative learning, language production, and listening skill enhancement ([13]). Professional development opportunities for teachers focused on teaching listening skills, including instructional strategies, authentic material selection, technology integration, and assessment methods, are crucial to ensure effective implementation ([10]). Collaboration among teachers, through communities of practice, facilitates the sharing of best practices and innovative ideas for teaching listening, elevating the quality of instruction in language classrooms ([13]). Creating communities of practice where teachers can exchange experiences, resources, and lesson plans can enhance the quality of listening instruction in Saudi EFL classrooms. By implementing these strategies, the teaching and learning of listening in Saudi Arabia can be revitalized, enabling EFL learners to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and English-dominated world.

Listening is a vital component of second language acquisition, aiding learners in enhancing their language proficiency, comprehension skills, and intercultural competence. However, challenges such as inadequate instructional methods, cultural and linguistic differences, limited resources, and a teacher-centered

approach hinder the development of listening skills. Strategies for improvement include integrating authentic materials, adopting learner-centered approaches, providing professional development for teachers, and fostering collaboration among educators. By implementing these suggestions, the teaching and learning of listening can be revitalized, empowering learners to thrive in an interconnected, English-dominated world.

III. Methodology

Population and sample of the study

The population of the study is all intermediate and secondary schools' males and females' students in Jeddah KSA, aged between thirteen and eighteen years old. They are from public schools as teachers in public schools are mainly fresh graduates and didn't receive enough training and follow up. The researchers chose this age as they are aware of the importance of the listening comprehension skill and can answer the survey questions. The sample of the study is fifty male and female students chosen randomly from the population.

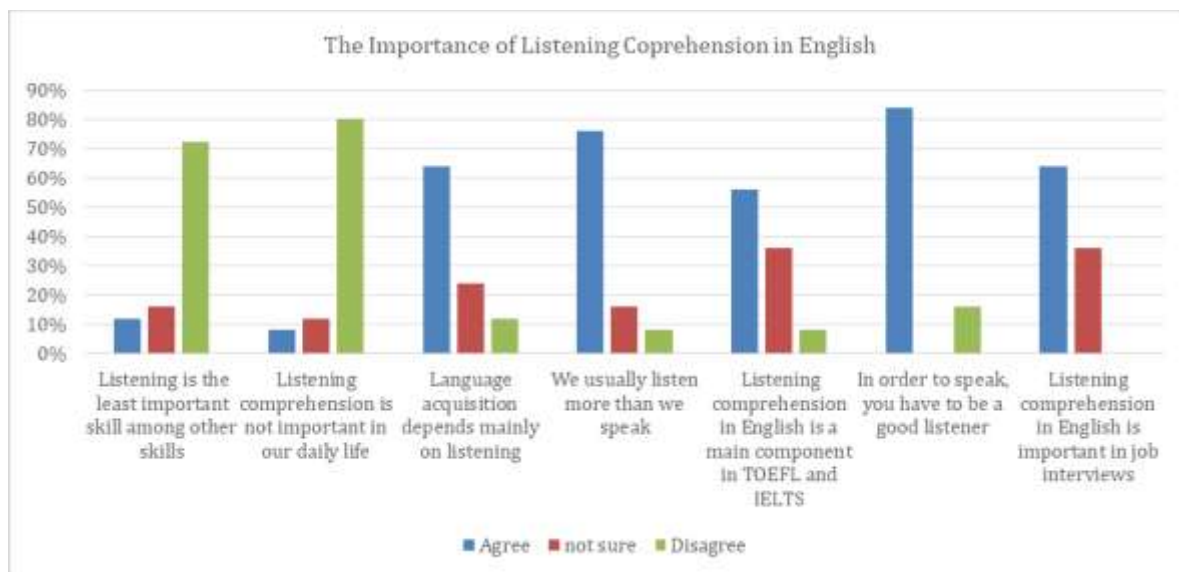
Design of the study

The data collection tool of the study is a survey consisting of twenty-two items that fall under three categories. The first category is about the importance of listening as an academic and life demand. The second category is about the barriers and challenges against facilitating the listening comprehension skill in the Saudi classroom. Items related to possible solutions and suggestions that may bring listening comprehension back to the scene are shown in the third category. The survey is validated and piloted on a group of students outside the sample and sent to google forms. The pie charts resulted after answering the survey were grouped into bar-charts for later analysis in the results chapter.

IV. Results

This chapter contains three bar charts reflecting the respondents' answers with regard to the three main questions of the study related to the importance of listening comprehension, the barriers that face incorporating listening comprehension in the classroom, and suggestions for improving this skill. Each bar chart is labelled above and explained thoroughly in a paragraph below.

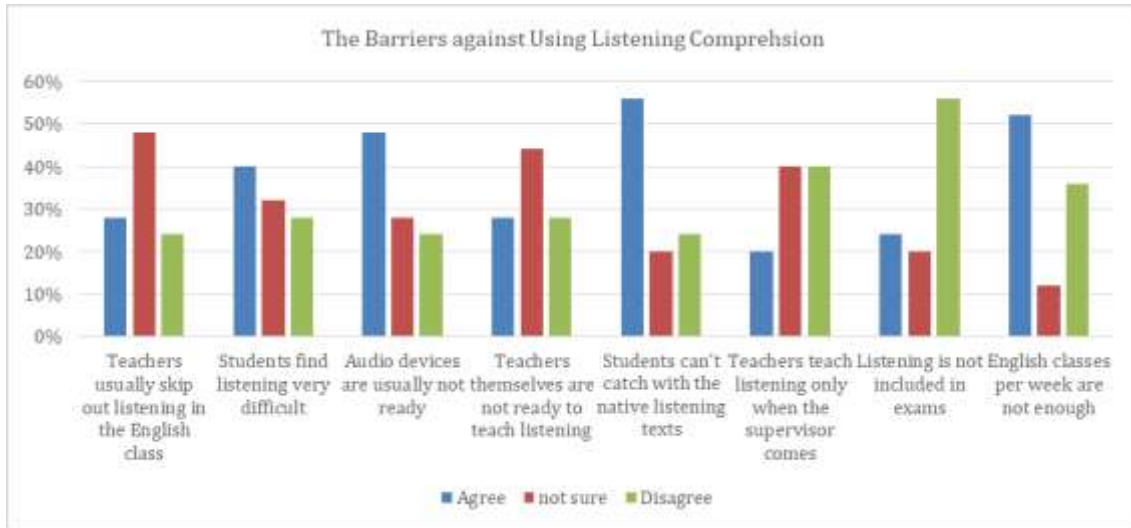
Bar chart (1) the respondents' answers with regard to the first question "What is the importance of listening comprehension?"



Bar chart (1) above illustrates the results related to the importance of listening comprehension. It is clear in the table that the majority of respondents disagreed that it is not important (70%, 80%). It is also apparent in the chart that there is unanimous agreement that listening comprehension is important among other skills and in daily life. The other items also show students enthusiasm that listening is an unavoidable step for language acquisition (62%) and before speaking (73% and 82%). It is also an important component in the main

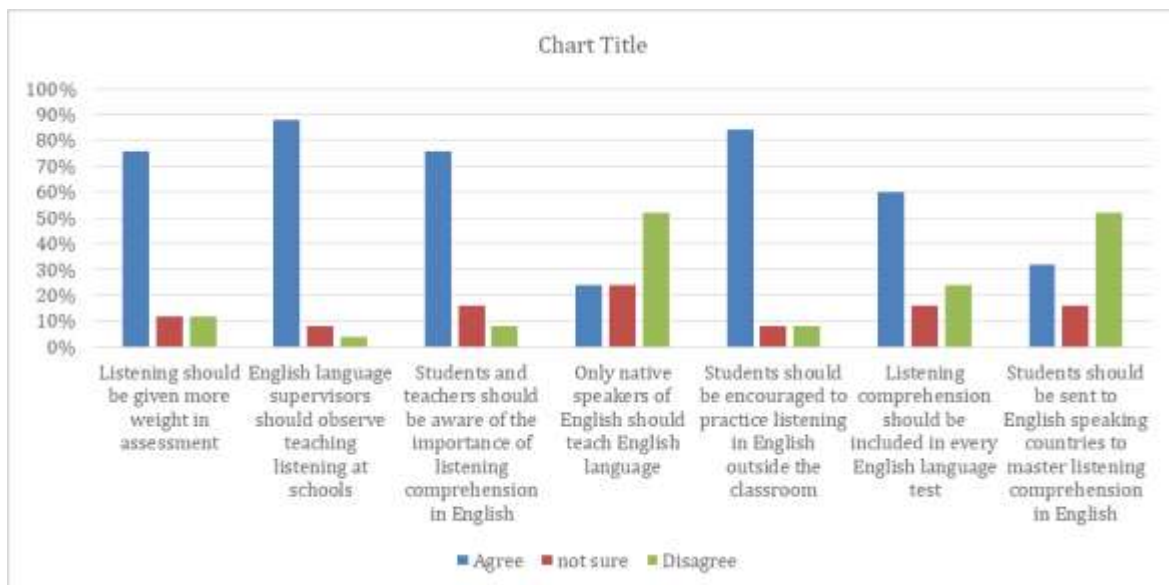
international exams IELTS and TOFEL (58%). Those who disagree completely disappear in the last item about the importance of listening comprehension in job interviews.

Bar Chart (2) The respondents' answers with regard to the second question "What are the barriers against incorporating listening comprehension in the English language classroom?"



Bar chart (2) above shows the results of the survey in terms of the barriers that face teaching listening comprehension in the English language classroom. It is very clear in most of the items that uncertainty about the answers dominates the majority of the items (49%, 32%, 28%, 44% and 40%) respectively. Items three and five shows unanimous agreement among respondents with regard to the absence of audio devices and the difficulty of native English (48% and 58%). A goof percentage of respondents disagree that listening is not included in exams or teachers are not willing to teach listening.

Bar-chart (3) The respondents answers with regard to suggestions for improving listening comprehension in the Saudi classrooms.



Bar chart (3) illustrates the respondents answers to the survey with regard to suggestions for improving English listening comprehension in the Sudi classrooms. Except for items four and seven, the respondents agreed unanimously that listening comprehension should be given more attention in terms of weight, supervision, awareness, and practice outside the classroom. Respondents showed good percentage of disagreement with regard to only native speakers should teach English language listening at schools and students should go to English speaking countries.

V. Discussion And Analysis

This study used a survey as a data collection tool. The survey was answered by a sample of fifty male and female intermediate and secondary students chosen randomly from a population of all intermediate and secondary students in public schools in Jeddah/KSA. The items of the survey were classified under three subtitles: The importance of reading comprehension, the barriers that face incorporating listening comprehension in the English language classroom and suggestions for improving listening comprehension.

The respondents' answers to the three categories of the questionnaire reflect awareness and maturity towards the importance of listening comprehension. Few years ago, listening comprehension was thought to be a luxury and decoration in the English language syllabus. Teachers used to skip listening thinking that reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar are more important ([7], [3]). Currently with the emergence of the communicative approach and language acquisition theories and learner centered approach, listening starts to gain more importance in the teaching learning process. Respondents to the first category of the survey showed unanimous disagreement for the first two items that listening comprehension is the least important among other skills or in daily life. Items three to seven about the importance of listening in language acquisition, in IELTS and TOEFL; in addition to job interview and the importance of listening for speaking witnessed good percentages of agreement among respondents. This is justified by the students' awareness of the need to communicate with other nationalities as Jeddah is a cosmopolitan city as well the new challenges in finding a job and work requirements.

The findings related to the second question with regard to the barriers against including listening in the English language classroom showed that respondents were confused in nearly all items. This shows that students don't know that these barriers are justified or not or who is responsible of these obstacles. They also agreed that lack of experience, training, and logistics; in addition to not taking listening comprehension seriously are possible reasons behind ignoring listening. Teachers go to the field directly after graduation and don't take training seriously although the Ministry of Education dedicates a big budget for training and improvement.

Suggestions for a better listening comprehension at schools received contradicting results from respondents. Giving more weight to English language, more attention by supervisors, increasing awareness about the importance of the listening comprehension skill, practice outside the classroom and incorporating listening in English language tests gain unanimous agreement by respondents ranging from 60% to 88%. This means that students feel the responsibility toward listening comprehension and welcome any suggestion to improve this skill which is encouraging as students are a very important component in the teaching/ learning process. What shows students' maturity and credibility is their little enthusiasm to allowing only native speakers to teach English listening comprehension at public schools and sending students to English speaking countries to improve their listening comprehension.

Surprisingly, everybody feels the importance of Listening comprehension and how urgent it is to be competent as it is now one of the preconditions for any job, nevertheless, the key performance indicators for the school stage are still below expectations. This calls for transforming this enthusiasm into action through motivating students and teachers to stop ignoring listening comprehension and to consider it as important as other skills. Supervisors play an important role in this context through their follow up and intensive care. Their visits to schools should be welcomed and looked at as instant help and a seat belt to save listening from extinction.

VI. Conclusion

This study investigated three major questions related to listening comprehension with regard to the importance of listening, the barriers against incorporation listening comprehension in the English language classroom and suggestions for better listening comprehension. The respondents' answers to the survey showed clear understanding of the three questions and enough enthusiasm that listening should be given more attention from all the people concerned (students, teachers, parents, and the Ministry of Education). It is worth mentioning that the Ministry of Education is doing its best with regard to logistics and audio devices, but the output is still below expectations. Accordingly, someone or some area should sound the alarm to highlight listening comprehension and motivate teachers, students, and supervisors to facilitate teaching listening at

public schools. The study is limited by the small sample size and the data collection tools; observation might be the right tool for this study to know exactly what is going on in the classrooms and how teachers and students deal with the listening tasks.

More research should be conducted about teaching oral skills (listening and speaking) as they are the most ignored in public schools. Supervisors should reconsider their school visits agenda to include monitoring oral skills. Knowing that students are test oriented, teachers should include listening comprehension in any English language test. Furthermore, curricula designers should provide listening comprehension context that is appealing and motivating for students and teachers as well.

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APPENDICES

Appendix (1)

The survey

Dear students,

It gives us great pleasure to share this survey with you about the importance of teaching English language listening comprehension, the barriers and obstacles that stand against teaching this important skill and the solutions and suggestions for this problem. Your response to this survey will definitely contribute to shedding the light on this skill and probably facilitate it.

أعزائنا الطلاب، يسعدنا أن نشارك معكم هذه الاستبانة حول أهمية تدريس مهارة الاستيعاب السمعي باللغة الإنجليزية، المعوقات التي تعترض تدريس هذه المهارة المهمة ثم الحلول والاقتراحات لحل هذه المشكلة وإلقاء الضوء عليها.
أ.د. سلامة سليم محمود
د. خالد خضر عرابي

#	Item	agree	Not sure	disagree
	The Importance of Listening			
1	Listening is the least important skill among other skills			
2	Listening comprehension is not important in our daily life			
3	Language acquisition depends mainly on listening			
4	We usually listen more than we speak			
5	Listening comprehension in English is a main component in TOEFL and IELTS			
6	In order to speak, you have to be a good listener			
7	Listening comprehension in English is important in job			

	interviews			
	Obstacles of Teaching Listening comprehension			
8	Teachers usually skip out listening in the English class			
9	Students find listening very difficult			
10	Audio devices are usually not ready			
11	Teachers themselves are not ready to teach listening			
12	Students can't catch with the native listening texts			
13	Teachers teach listening only when the supervisor comes			
14	Listening is not included in exams			
15	English classes per week are not enough			
	Suggestions for better listening comprehension at KSA classrooms			
16	Listening should be given more weight in assessment			
17	English language supervisors should observe teaching listening at schools			
18	Students and teachers should be aware of the importance of listening comprehension in English			
19	Only native speakers of English should teach English language			
20	Students should be encouraged to practice listening in English outside the classroom			
21	Listening comprehension should be included in every English language test			
22	Students should be sent to English speaking countries to master listening comprehension in English			