CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In order to improve my EFL students' listening comprehension skills, a review of literature on key concepts and processes relevant to listening comprehension will be discussed. This will include the definition of listening comprehension, factors which contribute to problems in listening comprehension, the development of listening skills and note-taking.

Defining Listening Comprehension

In reviewing the area of listening comprehension in the teaching of EFL, it is necessary to define what listening comprehension entails. There are numerous definitions for listening comprehension. Howatt and Dakin (1989) define listening comprehension as the ability to identify and understand what others are saying and this involves understanding a speaker's accent, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and meaning. Wolvin and Coakley (1985) approach listening comprehension from the perspective of cognitive processes and they define listening process as the process of receiving, attending to and assigning meaning to aural stimuli. For the purpose of my study, listening is examined in the context of teaching of English as a Foreign Language. The study hinges on a definition of listening comprehension as the student's ability to comprehend the speaker's language, identify key points of content and put them down in the written form.

Processes Involved in Listening Comprehension

Lynch and Anderson (1988) suggest that we challenge the view that listening is merely a passive or receptive skill as it had been regarded traditionally. I feel that
this skill may be regarded as a receptive skill while acknowledging that it is an active skill. As Saricoban (1999) has said there should be an awareness that the listening skill is a skill which involves a very active process and it gives way to productive skills. He feels that listening is as active as the speaking skill and in some ways even more difficult as it requires attention, thought, interpretation and imagination. Understanding or comprehending the input that listeners hear cannot be seen as an effortless task because the listeners have a crucial part to play in the process, by activating various types of knowledge and by applying what they know to what they hear and trying to understand what the speaker means (Lynch & Anderson, 1988).

As listening is an active process, I feel that it would be essential to understand the processes listeners employ in order to comprehend the input that they hear. Rubin (1994) defines the process of listening comprehension as how listeners interpret input in terms of what they know through the use of different kinds of signals and how they identify what they don’t know. In describing the process of listening comprehension, Van Duzer (1998) writes,

Two processes which would affect a listener’s listening comprehension are top-down and bottom-up processing. Top-down processing refers to utilizing schemata (background knowledge and global understanding) to derive meaning from and interpret the message heard. Top-down processing would be activated when the listener engages in an activity that reviews what the listener already knows about the topic. Bottom-up processing refers to deriving the meaning of the message based on the incoming language data, from sounds, to words, to grammatical relationships and to meanings. Bottom-up processing would be activated as the listener is signaled to verify comprehension by the teacher
asking a question using the declarative form with rising intonation. Practice in recognizing statements and questions that differ in intonation will help a listener to develop bottom-up processing (pp. 2-3).

In comparing the use of these two processes, Vogely (1995) found that top-down processing was the immediate strategy needed for comprehension by students whereas the bottom-up processing was used in the areas of difficulty and repair. She claims that when the task became more difficult or when students comprehension began to break down, they found themselves less capable of using their schema and had to rely on more discrete skills like word recognition. I am able to infer from this that students’ schema which comprises relevant individual knowledge, memory, experience and linguistic elements such as syntax and semantics are aspects that need to be given consideration in the teaching-learning of listening comprehension.

Factors Affecting Listening Comprehension

In reviewing the literature on factors which affect the teaching and learning of listening comprehension, my focus will be on two main aspects. They are factors which affect students’ comprehension of audio-texts and their ability in note-taking based on listening comprehension. Various ways to develop listening skills will also be discussed. As it is my objective to overcome students’ problems in listening comprehension and note-taking, I hope to draw useful insights from the literature in order to devise appropriate strategies.
A review of literature revealed the following aspects as some of the factors that affect students' comprehension of audio-texts. They are students' auditory memory, familiarity of the topic, unfamiliar vocabulary, speaker's speech rate, fatigue and frustration.

**Auditory Memory** Call (1985) notes that recognising linguistic elements although essential to the listening process is not sufficient for comprehending what is heard. She stresses that it is important for the listeners to be able to retain these elements in short-term memory long enough to interpret the utterance which they are attending to.

From my experience, I have noticed that students are able to recognise or grasp some of the words that they hear. However, they are not able to remember them long enough to write them down. Fodor, Bever and Garette (1974) have an explanation to this problem. They believe that foreign language input or words are held in short-term memory only long enough for listeners to organise them into clauses and to extract the meaning that they convey. As a result of this, as soon as listeners have interpreted the clauses, the elements that made it up are purged from memory to make room for incoming sounds. This shows that although students are able to recognise the words, they are not able to hold them long enough in their memory to interpret them and subsequently write them down.

From the above literature, I understand that there are limitations in each listener's ability to retain input in their memories. As such, in my expectations towards my students in producing the relevant input that they hear, I will have to consider these limitations.

**Familiarity of the Topic** In most foreign language courses, the materials used for reading and listening are set in very diverse contexts which maybe unfamiliar to the
students. EFL students have difficulty understanding and recalling information contained in spoken or written discourse when they lack familiarity with the topic or the cultural elements contained in the discourse (Carell, 1983; Connor, 1984). This maybe because the cultural backgrounds of the author/speaker and the reader/listener differ as a result of which the reader or listener may utilize inappropriate schemata and if this occurs, communication or comprehension of the message contained in the text fails (Rumelhart, 1980). Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) also found that if there is a mismatch between prior knowledge possessed by listeners, a breakdown in comprehension can occur. As a result of this, there is a necessity of providing listeners with the background information needed to understand the message before asking students to listen to a segment of discourse so that they can develop 'script competence' which is knowledge that listeners and speakers possess in advance about the subject—matter and the context of the discourse (Dunkel, 1986).

I am able to infer from this that it is necessary to develop script competence on the subject-matter of each audio-text by providing students with some background knowledge on it prior to the listening activity. This is necessary to ensure that the topics of listening passages are grounded in experience common to all students to ensure fairness (Mead & Rubin, 1985).

**Unfamiliar Vocabulary** Van Duzer (1997) states that content that is familiar is easier to comprehend than content that has lots of unfamiliar vocabulary in it or for which listeners have insufficient background knowledge. Vogely's (1995) study showed that a factor which made listening comprehension tasks most difficult were new vocabularies and phrases made up of these words. Dunkel (1986) who acknowledges this problem emphasizes the building of the listeners' lexicon to help them comprehend
listening materials better. Bransford (1977) agrees with this point because he feels that knowledge of words enables listeners to make plausible assumptions about sentences which helps to determine the meanings of messages. Ur (1996) suggests that a ‘warm up’ is held to pre-teach words that are essential for the basic understanding of the text before presenting it. She feels that introducing new words and some information on the topic is needed to ensure understanding. However, she warns teachers not to explore in depth into the text as it will dilute the impact of the text.

This helps me to conclude that there should be a few stages in a listening lesson. As pre-teaching is essential, a pre-listening stage is necessary. Saricoban (1999) too believes that the pre-listening stage is necessary in the listening process. He divides the listening process into three stages which are the pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening phases.

**Speaker’s Speech Rate** Speech rate is said to have a prominent effect on listening comprehension (Griffiths 1992). Conrad (1989) and Griffith (1990a) found that after a certain level, comprehension declines as speech rate increases. Griffith’s previous study showed that rates of speech faster than 200 words per minute (wpm)/3.8 syllables per second, impair comprehension for lower-intermediate students. King and Behnke (1989) found that as speech rate increased, understanding a message and remembering it for future use became more difficult.

I believe that fast speech rate of a speaker makes comprehension of a text more arduous. However, as students move on to higher levels in the course of learning English, they should be exposed to faster speech rates as this would make the listening activities more challenging. Thus, as a teacher of the listening component for
the intermediate level, I feel that the speech rate of speakers in the materials used in this level should be faster than in the previous levels.

**Frustration** Ur (1996) reports that frustration on the listener’s part can hamper listening comprehension. Anderson and Lynch (1988) agree with her because they feel that frustration encourages passive and unsuccessful habits where listeners equate listening with sitting back and letting a largely meaningless sequence of sounds wash over them. Ur (1996) cites the following two aspects as factors which attribute to frustration in the listening class. Single exposure listening is a factor which can cause feelings of failure in listeners because it does not give them enough exposure, practice and a chance to succeed in doing the task assigned. She also blames an overload of information which comes in too fast as this requires students to keep up with the fast pace of the speaker which can be frustrating if they are unable to do so.

I share Ur’s (1996) opinion that single exposure listening can lead to frustration especially if the content-matter is new or difficult to listeners and also if the audio-text is a lengthy one. In my intermediate level EFL class, I would ensure that the tape is played more than twice not only to avoid frustration but also to motivate students to take an interest in listening.

Vogely (1995) found that the psychomotor process of writing can interfere with the mental processes of listening if students write as they listen for information. This gives more reason to play the audio-text more than once because if students were to write and at the same time focus on the audio-text, they may not get an understanding of the content-matter if they listen to the audio-text only once. I believe that this too can lead to frustration because students are torn between writing and comprehending the text and they are unable to perform well in both tasks. By
playing the tape more than once, students maybe able to comprehend the content-matter in the first round of playing and then concentrate on writing in the subsequent rounds of playing.

**Fatigue** Listeners can experience fatigue if they are expected to listen for a long period of time and this might result in listening without understanding (Byrne, 1986). Ur (1984) who has the same belief reports,

> The effects of the fatigue vary a great deal, depending on how hard the learner needs to concentrate and on his ability to do so for long periods. It is certainly a fact that in long listening comprehension exercises a learner’s grasp of the content is much better at the beginning and gets progressively worse as he goes on. This is due to a psychological phenomenon whereby we tend to perceive and remember the first of a series of visual stimuli better than we do later ones. This is very largely because of fatigue: the listener runs out of the energy necessary to absorb and interpret the strange sounds (p. 19).

Byrne (1986) is of the opinion that when students are brought together for a short period in the classroom for a lesson, they should not be expected to listen for long because it will not be good for language learning in the long term. It is true that long periods of listening might lead to frustration which can be damaging to students. However, in a bid to develop students’ level of listening, I feel that the degree of difficulty of the audio-text as well as the length of it should be increased as students move on to higher levels. For example, I would want my intermediate level students to listen to audio-texts which are longer than those that they listened to in lower levels.
Developing Listening Skills for Listening Comprehension

Rost (1991) recommends four different kinds of teaching-listening strategies to develop EFL and ESL (English as a second language) students' listening skills. Attentive listening is designed to give students practice with listening and with supplying short responses to the speaker either verbally or non-verbally. Intensive listening is meant to focus students' attention on language forms by raising students' awareness of differences in sound, structure and lexical choice which can affect meaning. Selective listening helps to direct students' attention on key words, discourse sequence cues or information structures. Interactive listening is designed to help students assume active roles in shaping and controlling an interaction. In my EFL class, students were exposed mainly to selective listening whereby they had to listen to words, cues and facts selectively with the support of tasks given. As Morley (1990) suggested, I will not place too much of emphasis on testing listening comprehension because my intention is to teach listening comprehension skills to help them develop their listening skills gradually.

Note-taking Based on Audio-texts

Students' note-taking skills appears to be one notable factor which affects students' ability in producing the relevant information that they hear. Poser (1999) feels that college students are often expected to take good sets of notes and this demands good listening and note-taking skills. As this study aims to prepare my EFL students for tertiary education, it is crucial to equip them with some skills in note-taking as it would be required in their course of study which involves lectures and seminars. This necessitates a review of literature on note-taking and developing note-taking skills.
Note-taking

Notes are a storehouse of information for later use and note-taking is an important means of recording listeners' understanding of the ideas and concepts discussed in class for later use (Note-taking Skills Module, 2000). Note-taking enables listeners to capture and hold onto valuable information and it gives the brain the task of listening, digesting the speakers' thoughts and putting them into the listeners' own words instead of taking a passive role while listening (Taking Classroom Notes Module, 1997).

Studies show that people may forget fifty percent of a lecture within twenty four hours, eighty percent in two weeks and ninety five percent within one month if they do not take notes (Note-taking Skills Module, 2000). I feel that it is crucial for students to take down notes during listening lessons because they are often confronted with a barrage of important information and it is impossible to retain them in their memory. By taking down notes while listening to audio-texts, students can store at least some information which they can fall back on later and at the same time it makes the listeners active and involved in the process of listening.

Developing Note-taking Skills

Marchi and Najul (1994) found that it is important to teach note-taking guidelines in a second or foreign language for the sake of having an organised written summary as the end product. Fajardo (1996) highlights two complexities of note-taking: its involvement with the combination of different skills like listening or reading, selecting, summarizing and writing and its requirement of selecting the relevant information from the non-essential. This shows that if students are not adept at note-taking it can affect their performance in listening comprehension especially
because this skill will determine their ability to identify key points from the non-
essential in listening comprehension.

As mentioned by Fajardo (1996), note-taking comes in combination with a
different skill which means that a student will have to perform two tasks
simultaneously. Lindsay and Norman (1977) who acknowledge this see note-taking as a
decision between defocusing the text and focusing on the act of writing. To get a
good understanding of the lecture content, they suggest that listeners be attentive to
the lecture and take few notes. A question which arises here is will students be able
to remember what they had heard if they don’t write them down. In this situation, I
would instruct students to be attentive towards the text and not to take any notes at
all the first time they hear it. In the subsequent rounds of playing, they should be
allowed to take down notes.

Lindsay and Norman (1977) point out that a compromise can be achieved
between the need to attend to the lecture and the need to record selected information
if listeners can abbreviate or learn a type of shorthand because this minimizes the
time they focus on writing. By abbreviating, the notes become a simplified register
which listeners must later translate to formal register (Janda, 1985).

Note-taking will not be so taxing a task if there is prior expectation about
subsequent tasks because listeners will have an idea of what facts to listen for
(Dunkel, 1985; Chaudron, 1988). Saricoban (1999) believes that listeners can be taught to
focus on significant content items when note-taking and they need not write down
every word that they hear. He recommends teachers to teach listeners to isolate
significant content and informational items by providing controlled listening exercises.
He suggests that students are given general informational questions that require the
isolation of facts clearly revealed in the texts or sequentially organised and significant
questions which suggest the content and provide the student with an organisational frame for selective listening.

Such controlled listening exercises may not be practical for students such as mine who aspire to pursue their education in colleges and universities where they have to be able to take down notes without the guidance of any questions. In helping students to be selective, I rather give my students headings or sub-headings which can direct students' attention to the relevant points.

Field (1997) wrote that an ability to write down what is heard is crucial in practising listening. In order to equip students with this ability, he claims that a knowledge of the spelling system is essential. English is a language in which the pronunciation of many words cannot be logically predicted from their spellings and vice versa (Ur, 1996). This explains why listeners are unable to produce the correct spellings of words based on the sounds that they hear. Field (1997) adds that a knowledge of the regularities of the spelling system will enable the listener to extrapolate the written form of the word from the spoken form and this also helps gaining access to the meaning of the word.

According to Ur (1996)

Once learners have mastered the basic sound-symbol correspondence they may in some languages be immediately able to decode and pronounce correctly any written text or conversely, write down a spoken one. In others such as in English, it may not be so simple. They may need a whole set of extra sound-symbol rules: for example, ‘tion’ at the end of a word in English is usually pronounced /ʃən/ . Hence, words or sets of words with unusual pronunciation or spelling should be taught first for successful listening and writing (p. 57).
The Note-taking Skills Module (2000) presented by the Eastern Illinois University gives some important tips on developing note-taking skills. It recommends that students are taught to take notes in a 'telegraphic style' whereby they should take only key words and phrases and not every word they hear because this saves time and energy and helps to keep up with the speaker. In order to use the telegraphic style, it is suggested in this manual that students listen and then think before they write because this would enable them to phrase most ideas in their own words. It also states the importance of organising notes in some sort of a logical form and writing legibly to avoid confusion later. Another tip it gives is the use of symbols and abbreviation whenever possible and the elimination of connecting words such as 'is', 'are', 'was', 'were', 'a', 'an' and others.

**Conclusion**

I hope to use this review of literature as a guide to explore into the problem areas that affect students' listening comprehension skills. It is also my intention to use the information gained from here as a basis for the planning of strategies to overcome these problems. Last but not least, I also hope to draw useful tips from this literature to help my students develop their listening skills.