CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

This study sets out to explore the problems EFL students encounter in notetaking during listening comprehension lessons and the appropriate teaching–learning strategies to overcome them using action research. As such, the discussion of findings in this chapter will be two-tiered: the first section focusing on the processes of action research that were carried out and the second on the outcomes of these processes. In the first part of the findings, the action research processes comprising the researching and the teaching that were carried out will be presented. The action research processes will be described in terms of cycles.

The second part of the findings discusses two key aspects of the research questions on which this study is based. They are the problems faced by EFL students in note-taking during listening comprehension lessons as well as the relevant teaching-learning strategies undertaken to help students improve in this task during their listening comprehension.

The Action Research Process

As discussed in Chapter 3, action research is an attempt by the teacher to improve practice by systematically diagnosing problems in teaching-learning situations, planning and implementing teaching-learning strategies to improve the situation. This section presents the seven cycles of the action research I carried out in listening classes with my EFL students. The description of each cycle will involve four different stages: identifying the problem, planning and implementing the intervention, assessing the strategy and reflection of the cycle. For the purpose of this section,
discussion of these four stages will be organised under the following sub-headings: the problem, the intervention strategy and assessment of the strategy and reflection.

**Cycle One**

In this cycle, I identified students’ inability to take down notes as a critical problem which I subsequently attempted to rectify. The focus of this cycle was on improving the note-taking skills of my students in the listening class.

**The Problem** The exasperation of most of the students was obvious during these two listening lessons. In the first listening lesson, an audio-text entitled “Mrs Gibbs Travels” was played. Most students complained that they were not able to write down notes and focus on the audio-text at the same time in the first round of playing. The problem recurred in the second round. I decided to discuss the answers for the task assigned orally but hardly any of them volunteered. An examination of their work showed that most of them were unable to take down enough notes to produce the relevant points of content.

In the second lesson, students listened to a lecture entitled ‘College Courses’. (see Appendix 4 for an example of student’s work showing the amount of notes taken). Students were required to take down notes under seven different headings. In note-taking, it is important for listeners to be able to identify the key points of the content that the text contains. In this study, I considered each piece of information that the students were able to draw accurately from the audio-text as a point that they were able to take down. Three students were able to take down a reasonable amount of notes under all seven headings and more than half of their points of content were correct. Six others seemed attentive and tried to take down some notes.
However, more than half of their points were incorrect. Three others stopped writing half way and as such had very little notes. There was a slight improvement in the amount of notes taken by the students compared to the previous lesson. However, their performance was far from satisfactory. An interview was carried out to discover the reasons for students' inability to take down notes while listening to the tape.

I was able to confirm from students' responses in this interview that they had difficulty in performing two tasks simultaneously. They found it difficult to listen to the audio-text for information and write down notes at the same time. While writing, students got distracted from what was being said as their attention was temporarily focused on the information they were writing down. This helped me to confirm that writing while listening impedes listening comprehension and thus, I had to consider this while planning the teaching procedures for listening comprehension lessons.

The Intervention Strategy In planning my intervention, I ensured that students understood the content-matter of the audio-text before students took down notes. To this end, I decided that the tape would be played three times instead of twice. The Interactions books which contained the audio-text and the lecture outline for the note-taking task were distributed and I discussed the headings in the outline. A recorded lecture entitled "Entrepreneurs" was played. The first time the tape was played, the students were instructed not to write. They were told to listen carefully to get an understanding of the gist of the content-matter. Upon playing the tape, students were asked to write down whatever information they could remember under the headings given. Students had a choice between writing their answers in the book or on a separate piece of paper.
Before playing the tape for the second time, students were told to be ready to take down notes under the respective headings as they listened. After a five-minute interval the tape was played for the final time. They were given another ten minutes to complete their answers. The same strategy was employed in the following lesson as well in which a lecture entitled "The Changing U.S Job Market" was played.

**Assessment of the Strategy and Reflection** The groans and moans of frustration from students had decreased tremendously on the very first day the strategy was implemented. All the students were seen taking down notes especially during the third round of playing. An examination of students' work for two consecutive days showed that all of them had attempted to write down some notes under each heading although three of them had not written much. However, I considered this an improvement because nobody gave up.

Upon reflection, I felt that students' performance was unsatisfactory as almost half the class had a considerable number of irrelevant and incorrect points under each heading. It was necessary to probe further to find out why students were unable to grasp the relevant points as required by the headings given.

**Cycle Two**

Further investigation revealed two new problems. Unfamiliarity with the topic of the audio-text was a problem which hampered listening comprehension. A second problem was students had difficulty in writing down notes in the class text books in an organised way.
The Problem Some students had difficulty in understanding the content-matter of both the audio-texts played in the third and the fourth lessons despite playing the tape three times. There were complaints that topics such as ‘Entrepreneurs’ and certain concepts under ‘The Changing U.S Job Market’ were totally new to them and they hardly understood the content. More than half the class blamed new words in the audio-text for impeding their understanding of the content-matter.

Further observations indicated that students who wrote down notes in the class text-book or on a separate piece of paper were not able to organise their notes well. They had to fit their notes in one page in the book and very often they wrote them all over the page and this could have caused confusion (see Appendix 5 for an example of student’s work showing the notes written in a text-book). Those who wrote their notes or answers on a separate piece of paper did not have a lecture outline as a guideline to organise their notes. As a result, they wrote down their notes in an unsystematic confusing way.

The Intervention Strategy Two strategies were planned to deal with the problems mentioned earlier. A pre-listening discussion of the content-matter of the audio-text seemed a solution to the first problem. It was crucial to equip students with some prior knowledge on the content-matter. Hence, in the fifth lesson, we had a short discussion about China prior to listening to a lecture entitled “Phone in on China”. The tape was then played three times and the same procedures in the previous two lessons were repeated.

To overcome the second problem with note-taking, I gave them separate worksheets which had the outline of the lectures. There was ample space for students to write down the relevant notes.
Assessment of the Strategy and Reflection  Apart from the two students from China, the others showed no enthusiasm to contribute to the pre-listening discussion. They explained that they did not have much knowledge on this topic and expected the two 'experts' from China to do all the talking.

There was an improvement in the performance of both students from China in the task assigned. Out of the sixteen points of content from the text, one of them had twelve points and the other Chinese student had ten points. Five other students also showed a slight improvement. They managed to identify in between eight to eleven points, the remaining five students took down less than eight points of content.

It was a good idea to give them the worksheets as students felt that they were able to organise and write their notes in a more systematic way on the worksheets than in the space provided in the class text-books or on a separate piece of paper.

From my reflections, I realised that most of the students did not contribute to the discussion because they were not familiar with the topic. Besides, they were not able to prepare for this discussion in advance.

**Cycle Three**

Students' participation in the pre-listening discussion was not satisfactory in cycle two. This cycle focussed on facilitating more active student contributions.

**The Problem**  It was essential for students to participate and contribute to the pre-listening discussion as it would familiarise students with the content-matter of the audio-text. Their reluctance to contribute to the discussion was a cause of worry.
The Intervention Strategy In planning my intervention, my aim was to get each student to participate in the pre-listening discussion. In order for this to take place, I gave the topic to be discussed a day in advance to enable students to research and read up on it. Students were told to be prepared to discuss the topic of “Neighborhood Watch and Burglary Prevention”. In the sixth lesson, the same procedures as in the previous lesson were administered.

Assessment of the Strategy and Reflection There was an improvement in the pre-listening discussion as more students were able to actively contribute. Besides, it was an interesting discussion because some of them discussed personal accounts of burglaries that they had experienced. I intervened occasionally to throw in questions regarding aspects related to the audio-text to ensure that the discussion did not go off-track.

There was a slight improvement in this lesson as eight students had at least half of their notes correct as compared to seven students in the previous lesson. However, I had no reason to be overjoyed because it was not a very significant improvement.

On reflection, the pre-listening discussion was helpful in familiarising students with the content-matter of the audio-text and to a certain extent, it helped them understand what they heard. Nonetheless, students’ performance was still not satisfactory.

Cycle Four

In this cycle, I diagnosed lack of knowledge of the meanings and spellings of words from the audio-texts as a problem that affected students’ performance in
listening comprehension. I sought the appropriate measures to overcome this problem in this cycle.

The Problem An analysis of students' work showed mispelt words and unintelligible phrases. The grousers I heard helped to confirm that students encountered many unfamiliar words. These words not only hampered their comprehension of certain parts of the audio-texts but caused problems with spelling during note-taking. Although some of the difficult words had been introduced during the pre-listening discussion, many students were not aware of their meanings.

The Intervention Strategy In planning a strategy to familiarise students with frequently occurring words and phrases, I felt that instructing students to find the meanings and spelling of these words and phrases would be a remedy. Prior to the pre-listening activity, students were asked to write out a list of words which I dictated (see Appendix 6 for list of words and Appendix 7 for tape-script). Students were given ten minutes to find the meanings and spellings of these words. Subsequently, we had a discussion on the topic "Changes in the American Family" which was given the previous day.

Assessment of the Strategy and Reflection Obviously, ten minutes was insufficient to look up the meanings and spellings of nineteen words. As the pre-listening discussion took up another ten minutes, there was insufficient time to play the tape three times and subsequently check the answers. As a result of this, the activity had to be continued in the next lesson. This task required students to take down seventeen key points. When students' worksheets were examined, I noticed that five students had
between twelve to fifteen points of content. Two others managed to get nine and eleven points respectively. The rest of the students had less than nine points. There was some improvement in some students’ spelling of words as the number of spelling errors was definitely less. Many students said that knowing the meanings of new words that appeared in the audio-texts gave them a better understanding of the content-matter. However, students’ work indicated the need for more improvement.

**Cycle Five**

My main concern in this cycle was to fit all the steps mentioned in the previous cycle in a fifty-minute lesson.

**The Problem** Despite spending a substantial amount of time in looking up the meanings and spellings of words, students did not overcome all their vocabulary and spelling problems. Moreover, this strategy was too time consuming and as result of this, the tape could not be played three times and students’ note-taking could not be checked. A new strategy had to be devised whereby students would still be required to look up the meanings and spellings of the words followed by all the other procedures. My main concern now was to accomplish all the steps within the period of fifty minutes.

**The Intervention Strategy** As my main concern here was to save time, I felt that group work would speed up the process of looking up meanings and spelling of words. In groups of three, students had to share the responsibility of finding the meanings of a list of twenty words. This was followed by a pre-listening discussion on “Global Village and Cultural Differences”. All the other procedures were repeated.
Assessment of the Strategy and Reflection  Grouping students for the purpose of this activity was a good idea because all groups were able to accomplish the given task in ten minutes. This task required students to produce twenty points of content. One student produced seventeen points and two others had fourteen points. Five students had in between thirteen to ten points. The rest had below ten points.

I was disturbed as to why four students were not able to get at least half of the points of content correct. I probed by interviewing two of these students who were the key informants.

Cycle Six

This cycle dealt with students’ inability to take down notes fast while listening to the tape.

The Problem  I discovered from both students who performed badly that they were unable to write fast. They cited the influx of information and the speakers’ speech which was too fast as reasons for their inability to write down notes quickly enough. Other students also complained that they were unable to take down notes fast enough and as a result they missed out many important points.

Intervention Strategy  I had assumed that students were able to use symbols and abbreviations in note-taking. They had been introduced to methods of abbreviation in the very first class. However, students abbreviated only common words such as auxiliaries and conjunctions. Besides, students did not dare to abbreviate new words
because they were afraid that they would not be able to spell the words correctly when they wrote out the complete notes later.

I taught students to abbreviate words with more than five letters, words which recurred and jargon. Under this new strategy, students were asked to devise symbols, preferably simple pictures or individual units of numbers or letters of the alphabet beside the words given in the list prior to the pre-listening activity. While taking down notes, students were advised not to write these words but use relevant symbols as this would take less time. After the tape had been played for the third time, students were given an extra five minutes to translate the symbols into words.

Assessment of the Strategy and Reflection Some students complained that it was not easy to keep referring to the list to check for the symbols and draw them while listening to the tape. However, this strategy did help a few students who were able to remember the symbols. Therefore, this strategy proved to be beneficial to some students. As such, I was hopeful that a variation of this strategy would help other students.

Cycle Seven

In this final cycle, I further endeavored to help students to use symbols to abbreviate.

The Problem Some students had found it difficult to refer to another piece of paper for the symbols while trying to listen for main points. As such, this problem had to be dealt with.
The Intervention Strategy This intervention involved asking students to write the words and draw their symbols in a specially prepared column on their worksheets (see Appendix 8 for an example of a worksheet). This meant that they did not have to refer to another piece of paper while listening. A lecture entitled ‘North America: The Land and the People’ was played.

Assessment of the Strategy and Reflection This strategy produced better results. As another piece of paper was not involved, there was less distraction while taking down notes. Nevertheless, some students still complained that it was a chore to check for the symbols. They were hopeful that I could give the list of words a day in advance so that they could prepare symbols for them and memorise these symbols before the listening activity. However, I decided against giving them the list in advance because there was a possibility that students would expect the list before the quiz as well, and this was against the regulations of the institution. Besides, in class, I could monitor students’ efforts and their performance which enabled me to evaluate their class participation. Due to time constraints, I could not improve on this strategy.

Conclusion

The seven cycles of action research described in this chapter constitute the processes involved to help my EFL students improve in note-taking skills during listening comprehension lessons.

Outcomes of the Study

As stated in Chapter 1, this action research study is an exploration into the problems faced by EFL students while taking notes during listening comprehension as well as
into the teaching-learning strategies which could facilitate this task. Therefore, this section culls these two elements from the action research process and discusses them.

**Problems Faced by EFL Students in Listening Comprehension**

The focus of this study was on the ability of EFL students to take notes while listening to audio-texts. Note-taking during listening activities demands that the students be able to perform various skills in the foreign language. They need to be able to understand the content of the audio-text, identify key points of information and write down this information rapidly while listening to the text. My observations revealed that there were a number of factors which contributed to my intermediate level EFL students’ poor performance in listening comprehension. This section discusses these problems.

**Problems in Listening Comprehension Using Audio-Texts**

Many of the problems that students’ faced in listening comprehension stemmed from one main problem which is their inability to comprehend certain parts or the gist of the audio-text. The factors which hampered their comprehension of the audio-text were unfamiliar content matter of text, difficulty with the language of text, unfamiliar text structure and inability to listen and take down notes simultaneously.

**Unfamiliar Content-matter of Text**

Two problems which stemmed from unfamiliar content-matter of text were unfamiliarity with the topic and inability to contribute to pre-listening discussions.
Unfamiliarity with the Topic  One of the objectives of the listening component of
the 105 Level class was to introduce students to lecture-based audio- texts. Most of
the audio-texts taken from the *Interactions* text-book were based on American settings.
The only two audio-texts which were not were ‘Phone-in on China’ and ‘Global
Village and Cultural Differences’. Most of the students in this class, admitted that
they had had very little exposure to such American settings. Besides, most of the
issues discussed were totally new to them. For example, none of the students in this
class had the faintest idea what ‘Entrepreneurs’ meant and most of them had never
heard of ‘Neighbourhood Watch’.

Comprehending audio-texts in a foreign language can be arduous to students.
Listening to content-matter which is totally alien makes it worse. Van Duzer (1997)
states that content that is familiar is easier to comprehend than content that has lots
of unfamiliar vocabulary or content for which the listener has insufficient background
knowledge. This explains students’ inability to listen and select the relevant points
under the respective headings despite playing the tape three times.

Rivers’ and Temperley’s (1978) explanation gives us further clues as to why
students have difficulty in comprehending content – matter which is unfamiliar despite
listening to it more than once. They found that short-term memory for target language
words are often overloaded which causes words to be purged before they can be
organized and interpreted. They added that even though language learners are able to
recognise each word of an utterance as it is spoken, they may not be able to hold
lengthy utterances in mind long enough to interpret them. Having to deal with an
influx of information, my students might have faced the problem of an overload of
information which had to be purged in order to give way for incoming information. I
would not deny the fact that among the information heard there would have been
some familiar information. However, as it came in combination with unfamiliar information, it must have been difficult to retain the familiar and unfamiliar information in their memory long enough to make sense of them.

**Inability to Contribute to Pre-listening Discussion** Due to the lack of familiarity with the topics of the audio-texts, students had difficulty in contributing to the pre-listening discussions held. When a discussion was held on the topic 'Phone in on China', the two Chinese students who had some background knowledge on the content-matter were able to contribute to the pre-listening discussion and their performance was better than in the previous lessons. The other students' contribution to the discussion was very minimal. They could not contribute because their knowledge on this content-matter was very limited. Moreover, they were not given time to read up for information on this topic. Unlike them, the two Chinese students could contribute to the discussion without any preparation because they had prior knowledge on this topic.

The critical role of prior knowledge has been articulated in schema theory and documented in the work of many researchers namely Anderson (1984), Bartlett (1932), Carell (1983, 1984), Connor (1984), Jenkins (1987) and Long (1989). They found that the basic tenets of schema theory posits that written texts or spoken discourse does not carry meaning in or of itself, rather, meaning occurs as a result of the interaction between the reader's or listener's prior knowledge about the world and the text of the speech. Many students in this class were not able to identify with and comprehend the subject-matter of most of the audio-texts because they hardly had any prior knowledge which could interact with it. Dunkel (1986) pointed out that EFL listeners often came from ethno-cultural backgrounds that differed from that of the
speaker on the tape and thus, it was necessary to establish a context of the discourse and also to ensure that the listener and speaker share the same semantic field.

Although it has been established here that unfamiliarity of the content-matter hampers comprehension, I feel that EFL students should be exposed to a reasonable number of unfamiliar topics in order to diversify their knowledge. Apart from this, knowledge on various issues in western settings would be beneficial to students who aspire to pursue their studies in western countries as they would gain some familiarity with the western cultures. However, teachers must not forget to prepare students for what is to come in these topics. This reveals again how crucial the pre-listening phase of the listening lesson is.

**Difficulty with Language of Text**

Problems with vocabulary, inability to discriminate sounds, speaker's accent and fast speech rate were problems which resulted from difficulty with language of text.

**Problems with Vocabulary** As Rivers and Temperley (1978) found, holding information or words in their short-term memory is a difficult task, what more if these words or phrases are unfamiliar to students. This gave me an insight on why words which were new or difficult hampered students' understanding of audio-texts. However, there were instances when students were able to retain certain words in their memory despite not knowing their meanings. Dunkel (1986) notes that not all the words that students hear will be purged from their memories. Nevertheless, she claims that lack of knowledge of the words will deter students from making plausible assumptions about sentences that clarify meanings of messages. As a result of this, I felt that it was necessary to familiarise students with the difficult words in
audio-texts which in a way helped them to get a better understanding of the content-
matter

Inability to Discriminate Sounds  Students’ inability to discriminate between the sounds that they heard could also be accounted for their poor performance in listening comprehension. Many students were unable to perceive the sounds that they heard accurately so much so that they interpreted some of the words they heard inaccurately. For example, almost all my Libyan students perceived the ‘p’ sound as the ‘b’ sound probably because the Arabic language did not have the ‘p’ sound and as a result they assimilated the nearest sound which was ‘b’. One of my Libyan students once told me that the sentence ‘The stranger lurked in the bark’ sounded rather odd because he knew that ‘bark’ was a sound made by dogs and it did not fit in the context of the sentence. Although the tape was played again and I tried to draw his attention to the word ‘park’, he still heard it as ‘bark’. It was axiomatic that his inability to discriminate the two sounds affected his comprehension of the sentence. From her experience as a teacher, Ur (1984) claims,

EFL learners have difficulty in perceiving certain English sounds with accuracy because most of these sounds don’t exist in their language. The number of homophones and homonyms in English is small, while the number of words which can be confused or misunderstood by inaccurate perception is relatively large. Furthermore spoken discourse goes by so fast that EFL listeners simply cannot afford a moment’s delay. They may even sometimes understand according to what it sounds like to them despite the fact that their interpretations do not fit the context simply because they do not have the time to stop and work it out. It is therefore essential for listeners to achieve
familiarity with the common phonemes of the target language as soon as possible (p. 12).

**Speaker’s Accent and Speech Rate** One complaint that I heard in almost all the listening lessons was student’s difficulty in grasping the speaker’s accented speech. Almost all the speakers spoke with an American accent which was almost unintelligible to some students. Some claimed that they would have been able to follow the speakers’ speech despite being accented, if they had been able to keep up with the speakers’ pace. Van Duzer(1997) stated that listeners’ ability to follow a conversation or recorded text would depend upon the speaker’s rate of delivery. The speakers’ fast rate of delivery made accented speech more difficult to comprehend, as a result of which students were not able to identify the relevant points presented. The following complaint from a student illustrates this.

 ..........By the time I write one word, the speaker has already said ten words. She speaks very fast and I cannot understand what she is saying at times. Please, play the tape again......

(Personal journal entries 16/12/99)

**Unfamiliar Text Structure**

Due to unfamiliarity with the text structure, students’ had the tendency to take down notes word for word while listening to the audio-text and were unable to distinguish between the essential and the non-essential information. Barrett’s (1972) taxonomy states that an essential element of comprehension is the interaction between the intentions of the reader and the ‘meanings’ available in the text. This taxonomy
reveals that comprehension is reflected in the listeners' or readers' ability to extract 'meanings' appropriate for their intentions and reject others which are unimportant.

From this I discovered that it was important to familiarise students with the headings and sub-headings because this helped to draw students' attention to the relevant points they had to identify. I was also able to infer that if they had understood the sentences first, it would have been easier to abbreviate and also to write it out in their own words. Nwokoreze (1990) shares my opinion on this as he too is against verbatim transcription or copying lecture notes word for word because he feels that this method does not reflect comprehension. He believes that note-taking should comprise listening and understanding before writing.

**Inability to Listen and Take Down Notes Simultaneously**

This problem involves a combination of two aspects which can affect listening comprehension. They are student's inability to understand the content-matter and a problem which will be discussed in the next section which is the taking down of notes at the same time. This study revealed that students should not be expected to listen and take down the relevant information the first time they listened to the audio-text. Students tried to write every single word in a sentence and did not make an attempt to understand them prior to writing. When they focused on writing, their train of concentration was diverted from the audio-text to the action of writing. As a result, they were not able to grasp the words or phrases that followed. Vogely's (1995) findings help to shed light on why students should not be encouraged to write and listen at the same time. She found that the psychomotor process of writing would interfere with the mental processes of listening if listeners tried to write as they listened. O'Malley, Chamot & Kupper (1989) too are of the opinion that other
competing stimuli such as writing should be excluded when students listen to an audio-text so that students can focus attention selectively on certain keywords or phrases that are important in the context.

Problems in Note-taking

As mentioned earlier, taking down of relevant notes or points of content was a very crucial aspect in listening comprehension. The factors which affected students' note-taking were their inability to spell words that they heard, their inability to organise their notes and their inability to write fast as a result of their inability to abbreviate.

Spelling. An examination of students' work revealed their inability to spell words that they heard as a prominent problem. As mentioned earlier, some students were not able to perceive certain sounds accurately and as such they assimilated the nearest sound in their language and produced it in oral as well as in written forms. This resulted in incorrect spellings of words. Field (1997) reports that in order for students to produce the difference between two sounds in the written form, they should be able to hear and discriminate the sounds in the spoken form first. Besides this, students' lack of knowledge of words could also have contributed to the spelling mistakes. For example, most students who did not know the meaning of the word 'entrepreneur' could not spell it correctly. Field (1997) acknowledges the relationship between the spelling system and the knowledge of words. He however, looks at the spelling system and knowledge of words in the reverse situations. He found that the lack of knowledge of the spelling of a word can deter the listener from accessing its meaning. From this, I was able to conclude that knowledge of words and their
spelling system were interrelated. As such, I felt that providing students with the meaning of words and their spellings would definitely help them comprehend audio-texts better.

**Inability to Organise Notes** The class text-books which contained the outline of the lectures were distributed during each listening lesson. In my experience as a teacher of the listening component, I had always asked my students to either write their notes in the book provided or on another piece of paper. This study drew my attention to the detriments of asking students to write down their notes on their books or a separate piece of paper instead of on proper worksheets.

As most students had the problem of not being able to select the key points, they wrote down every other word that they heard on the page that contained the lecture outline in the book. As there were so many headings and sub-headings in most of these outlines, the space for students to write their notes was limited. This being the case, students often wrote down their notes on whatever space they could find. This resulted in students not being able to organise their notes as most of them wrote down words or phrases all over the page(s) in the book. Many students complained that they found the notes that they had written down confusing when they looked at them later to select the relevant points for the headings because they were not organised systematically.

Writing down their notes on a separate piece of paper was not very effective either. This is because students did not write down the outline of the lectures found in the book on this separate piece of paper. As a result of this, there were no headings or sub-headings under which students could organise their notes. I noticed
that students wrote down their notes all over the paper which led to confusion when they referred to them later.

**Inability to Write Fast** One of the factors which accounted for students’ poor performance in listening comprehension was their inability to write fast. Some students said that they could understand what the speakers were saying but they were not able to take down notes fast enough as a result of which they performed poorly in listening comprehension. Two factors which contributed to students’ inability to write fast were fatigue and fast speech rate of speakers.

Most of the audio-texts played in Level 105 were comparatively longer than the audio-texts in the previous levels. The length of most these audio-texts were between five to twelve minutes compared to audio-texts which lasted for a maximum of five minutes in the previous levels. Many students appeared attentive at the beginning and tried to write as fast as they could but their ability to do so deteriorated as the length of the audio-text increased. Concentrating and at the same time writing as fast as they could to keep up with the speaker’s speech rate can be a tiring and taxing task.

According to Ur(1984)

*Listening to and interpreting unfamiliar sounds, lexis and syntax for long stretches of time can be very tiring to a foreign language learner. In long listening comprehension exercises, a learners’ grasp of the content is much better at the beginning and gets progressively worse as he goes on. This is because the listener runs out of the energy necessary to absorb and interpret the strange sounds (p. 52)*
When students are expected to write and listen for information, they have to perform two tasks simultaneously which can be laborious. Thus, it is not surprising that students’ ability to write deteriorates when listening to long audio-texts.

**Inability to Abbreviate While Taking Down Notes** In listening the pace is set by someone else and breaks may or may not occur where the listener needs them (Ur, 1984). Thus, the listener must keep up with the pace of the speaker. If the speaker’s speech rate is fast, the listener has to write very quickly to ensure that they don’t miss out any relevant points or notes. Writing down every word that they hear in full is impossible. As such, students should know how to abbreviate whenever possible as it saves time and students can write a lot more.

Students were given some guidance on abbreviation in the very first lesson. They were given examples of ways of abbreviating. For example, words such as ‘important’, ‘computer’ and ‘economy’ could be abbreviated as ‘imp’, ‘cpr’ or ‘comp’ and ‘ecmy’or ‘econ’. However, many of them did not use the short forms while taking down notes.

Students cited three reasons for seldom using short forms or abbreviations. They claimed that abbreviating required them to think and formulate a short form for a word while listening and taking down notes. As they were already performing two tasks simultaneously, doing a third one was rather taxing. Some of them used abbreviations but they were not able to remember what the abbreviations represented when they referred to them later. For example a student who abbreviated the word ‘maternity’ as ‘mny’ did not know what it meant when she came across it later. Many students chose not to use abbreviation for words which were new to them because they tried to determine the spelling of the word based on its sound. For
example, a student who abbreviated the word ‘vacation’ as ‘vksn’ could not remember how the word sounded when she saw the abbreviated form later, whereas a student who wrote down ‘wakasion’ got the correct answer despite the spelling error.

**Conclusion**

My main aim in this study was to improve students’ listening comprehension skills. Having identified the problems, my objective was to devise appropriate strategies to overcome the problems students faced in listening comprehension.

**Teaching-learning Strategies to Overcome Problems in Listening Comprehension**

In line with the aim of the study which was to improve students’ performance in listening comprehension especially in the area of note-taking, strategies were implemented to overcome two main categories of problems. They were strategies to overcome problems in comprehending audio-text and strategies to overcome problems in note-taking. This section discusses the teaching-learning strategies that I employed in a bid to overcome the problems faced by students in listening comprehension.

**Strategies to Overcome Problems with Audio-texts**

Four different strategies were implemented to help students comprehend the content-matter of audio-texts better. The aims of the strategies were to familiarise students with the topics, encourage student participation in pre-listening discussions, familiarise students with language of text and help students identify key points in the texts.
Familiarising Students with Topic  After the implementation of the first strategy, many students admitted that they were able to listen to the whole audio-text with hardly any distractions. However, many found the subject-matter of the audio-texts totally new to them besides coming across many words or phrases which they couldn’t comprehend. This was due to their unfamiliarity with the topic of the content-matter.

A pre-listening discussion was held to familiarise students with the topic of the content-matter. Under this strategy, students were required to engage in a discussion on the topic of the text before they listened to the audio-text. I started off by asking them questions to lead them into a discussion. However, students who had limited knowledge on the topic “Phone in on China” were not able to contribute to the discussion. Only two students from China who were familiar with the topic contributed to the discussion.

A comparison of the participation of the two Chinese students and the other students in this class showed very clearly that familiarity with the topic helped students to perform better in discussions and tasks related to the topics. As Ur(1996) stated, providing a context for making sense of the content-matter of the audio-text makes the task involved relatively simple. Providing this context of the content-matter was vital because these foreign language listeners came from diverse cultural backgrounds which differed from that of the speakers who delivered the audio-texts. Apart from this, the content-matter of most of the audio-texts were set in contexts which these students couldn’t identify with. Dunkel (1986) recommends that teachers ensure that the foreign language listeners and the first language speakers on the tape share the same knowledge and they must be certain to activate the students’ world knowledge before presenting any listening selections.
Encouraging Student Participation  By announcing the topic of the audio-texts and expecting students to discuss the topics without prior notice was a futile attempt. Thus, it was imperative to give students time to prepare or read up for information on a particular topic at least a day in advance. By doing this, students couldn’t give the excuse that they were not prepared for the discussion and remain quiet. Each student had to be called to contribute to the discussion because many students did not volunteer to contribute to the discussions. Besides, some of the passive students did not concentrate on the ongoing discussion and thus, they were not be able to identify with the content-matter of the audio-text when they listened to it.

One problem that I encountered in conducting the pre-listening discussion was ensuring that it did not exceed the allocated time. Some students were very enthusiastic and had a lot to contribute to the discussion. I had to ensure that all twelve students were given the opportunity to speak in ten minutes.

Familiarising Students with Language of Text  As mentioned earlier, difficulty with language of text resulted in a number of problems namely unfamiliar vocabulary, inability to discriminate sounds, speaker’s accent and fast speech rate. Inability to spell words correctly was a problem which stemmed from unfamiliar vocabulary. Speakers’ speech rate and accent were two aspects which were beyond me as a teacher and thus, I did not attempt to overcome these problems. In an effort to overcome the other three problems, students were introduced to unfamiliar words before they listened to the audio-text.

I dictated certain words from the audio-text which I deemed difficult for the students. Students were asked to write them down. They were subsequently asked to
find the correct spellings and meanings of the words. I decided against giving them the meanings and the spellings because I felt that by assigning this task to them, they wouldn’t be passive recipients and they would probably remember the spellings and meanings better. However, this task was too time consuming and students could not complete it in the stipulated time. Many students complained that it was not easy to look up meanings and spellings of nineteen words in ten minutes and try to remember them within that short period of time.

I realised that allocating ten minutes for this activity was simply insufficient, however, I wanted to carry out this task in class as I did not want to give it as homework. This is because I had to consider the rules set for the listening quiz in this institution. It was against the rules of this institution to give students a list of words that would appear in the listening quiz in advance. By giving it a day in advance for the purpose of the activity in class, I was afraid that students would grow dependent on it and expect the same for their quiz.

It was a better idea to place students in groups as they were able to share the responsibility of looking up the meanings of the words. Besides, their burden was lighter now as a copy of the list of the words were given to each student which meant that they did not have to look up for the spellings of the words. Under this strategy, students had to find the pronunciation of the words as I did not read out the words. Hence, they were asked to discuss the pronunciation of the words as well. If they had any doubts, they were asked to clarify them with me or refer to the phonetic symbols in their dictionaries for the correct pronunciations.

Students preferred group activity because they were not so tensed up and they were able to discuss the words and clarify doubts. This method helped them to remember the meanings of words better. By exposing the pronunciation of words, students also got
some help on discriminating the sounds involved. However, I wouldn’t consider this
the best strategy to overcome this problem because I found some students to be
passive and expected some others in the group to do the work. Due to time constraint,
I couldn’t experiment further to find a better strategy to overcome this problem as
there were other problems which I had to attend to.

Helping Students Identify Key Points This strategy was undertaken as a measure to
overcome two problems which are students’ inability to identify key points due to
lack of understanding of the content-matter and their inability to take down notes
simultaneously. Students often tried to take down every other word they heard
because they were unable to identify the key points and often ended up taking down
irrelevant points. This was as a result of their inability to divide their attention
between listening for information and writing. Due to this, students were unable to
understand certain parts of the audio-text and simply wrote down whatever words or
phrases they heard. This is probably because they faced a loss of comprehension when
writing and they just stopped listening or found themselves listening passively at certain
times (O’Malley et al, 1989).

In the new strategy employed to overcome this problem, the tape was played three
times instead of twice. Before the tape was played for the first time, the headings
under which they had to take down notes were discussed. The first time the tape was
played, students were told to listen for the gist of the content-matter and if possible
try to identify the key points and take a mental note of when the points for the
different headings were mentioned. It was a good idea not to allow students to write
during the first round of playing because they could focus their attention solely on
the audio-text. Students were asked to write down whatever points they could
remember under the headings during the interval. Before the tape was played again, students were told to refer to the headings again to be reminded of the aspects that they had to listen for. In the second and the third rounds of playing, most students did not write down every word that they heard as they were able to identify the key points to a reasonable extent and write them down.

Although they might not have got a thorough understanding of the content-matter in the first round of playing, they would have at least got an idea of what it was about. Furthermore, the information was repeated in the second and the third rounds of playing and this would have helped to reinforce what they had heard. Hatch (1983) suggests that repetition of information would give students more time to process the information so that, among other things, the relationship of syntactic forms and the meanings of lexical items in the lecture become clearer.

Under this strategy, most students got the gist of the content-matter because they were forced to listen to the content-matter of the audio-text the first time the tape was played. It cannot be denied that there would have been instances when students did not understand what they were hearing because of certain difficult words but at least they could differentiate between what they could understand and what they could not. Before this strategy was implemented, many students complained that they just heard sounds which made no sense to them while taking down notes, due to which they could not get the gist of the content-matter even after the second round of playing.

**Strategies to Overcome Problems in Note-Taking**

Note-taking was an important feature in this listening class. Hence, problems concerning note-taking had to be rectified without further delay in order to facilitate
listening comprehension. Two strategies were undertaken to overcome problems in note-taking. One strategy was aimed at helping students to organise the notes that they took down and the other strategy was aimed at helping students to abbreviate while taking down notes to enable them to write fast.

**Helping Students to Organise Their Notes** In note-taking, organising the notes systematically is one crucial aspect. Although students wrote down notes while listening, most of them did not refer to the notes that they wrote down immediately. The notes were usually referred to after each round of playing or after the final round of playing when students wanted to select the relevant points or answers for the different headings. Most students claimed that when they referred to the notes after a few minutes, they found the notes confusing because the notes were not organised. This happened because students did not write down all the notes or answers under the respective headings due to lack of space but utilised whatever other space they could find on the page in the book. Those who used a separate piece of paper did not do any better because the absence of a lecture outline caused students to write down their notes in a disorganised way.

Worksheets which contained the outline of the lecture were prepared and distributed. I made sure that there was sufficient space under each heading and sub-heading for students to write down their notes or answers. The efficacy of this strategy was evident on the very first day it was implemented. All the students were in favour of the worksheets because they had enough space to write down the relevant notes under the specific headings which meant that their notes were more organised and there was less confusion when they referred to them again.
Helping Students to Write Down Notes One factor which determined the amount of notes students could take was their speed in note-taking. The use of abbreviated or short forms was necessary for students to keep up with the pace of speakers because writing down every word that they heard was time consuming and slowed down the process of writing. As such students needed to be introduced to a method of abbreviation which did not require them to write out many words. Using symbols instead of words seemed a solution to this problem. Most of the words given in the list in the pre-listening activity were words which needed to be abbreviated as they were either long or difficult words. Instead of writing long or difficult words, students were advised to draw symbols to represent them.

Students were asked to draw any symbols that they liked, preferably symbols which were easy to draw or write such as individual units of letters or numbers. The drawback of this strategy was many students were not able to remember the symbols and as such, they had to refer to another sheet of paper which contained the words and their symbols. Hence, in the following lesson, students were asked to write out the words and their symbols on their worksheet. While taking down notes, they could refer to the symbols on the worksheet itself.

Students admitted that there were less distractions under this strategy, however, some of them still felt that it was not easy to check for the symbols in the midst of taking down notes and listening for information. This strategy benefited students who were able to remember the symbols as they did not have to refer to any papers.

This strategy would have been effective if I had given the list of words a day in advance because that would have allowed students to memorise the symbols before the listening lesson. However, I decided against it because it was my responsibility to prepare my students for the quizzes. As I couldn’t give the list of words that
appeared in the audio-text a day before the quiz, I felt that I should not do it for the purpose of lessons in class as well.

Due to time constraint, I could not employ any other strategies to rectify this problem.

**Conclusion**

All the teaching-learning strategies undertaken were helpful to a reasonable extent to overcome my EFL students problems in listening comprehension. However, I feel that I could have improved on the strategies in order to produce better results given more time.