Listening Difficulties among Non-Native Speakers of Arabic

Fatma Yousuf Al-Busaidi*
Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman

This qualitative study analyzed the listening difficulties of 19 students learning Arabic as a foreign language in the Sultanate of Oman from a social-constructivist perspective. Analysis of the data obtained from interviews and students' diaries has indicated that learners experienced five listening difficulties that occurred either in the classroom setting, in their real-life conversation with Omanis or while listening to TV and radio programs. It was found that their listening difficulties were related to speed of speech, quickly forgetting what was heard, missing the next part when thinking about meaning, the inability to understand what they had heard and inability to match the sound of the word with what they already know.This paper also investigates and analyzes the causes of listening problems. The most frequent difficulties seemed to result from the lack of opportunities to practice Arabic. It has been also found that cultural differences have a strong relationship to listening comprehension problems.

Keywords: Arabic as a foreign language, Listening difficulties, learning difficulty, English students, Sultanate of Oman.

صعوبات الإستماع لدى متعلمي العربية لغير الناطقين بها

فاطمة بنت يوسف البوسعيدي*

جامعة السلطان قابوس ، سلطنة عمان

هدفت هذه الدراسة النوعية لتحليل صعوبات الإستماع التي يواجهها متعلمو العربية كلغة أجنبية في سلطنة عمان وفقا لمنظور النظرية الاجتماعية البنيوية. وقد أسفر تحليل البيانات التي تم التوصل إليها من خلال المقابلات واليوميات المسجلة من الطلبة ، أن ١٩ من المتعلمين للعربية يعانون من خمس صعوبات تواجههم في فهم ما يستمعون إليه باللغة العربية ، أثناء دراستهم في الصفوف الدراسية أو أثناء محادثاتهم اليومية مع العمانيين أو أثناء استماعهم للبرامج الإذاعية أو مشاهداتهم للتلفاز . وقد أشار أفراد العينة أن صعوبات الإستماع لديهم ترجع إلى عدة عوامل منها السرعة في حديث من يحاورونهم من العرب، سرعة نسيان ما استمعوا إليه ، فقد جزء من كلام المتحدث أثناء استغراقهم في التفكير فيما يقول، عدم قدرتهم على فهم ما يستمعون إليه ، عدم قدرتهم لمطابقة صوت الكلمة مع المعنى المعروف لديهم سابقا. قامت هذه الدراسة أيضا ببحث وتحليل أسباب صعوبات الفهم السماعي لدى أفراد العينة. وقد أشار أفراد العينة أن أكثر الصعوبات شيوعا تعزى إلى عدم وجود فرص كافية لممارسة اللغة العربية في المجتمع العماني، وقد وجد أيضا أن الإختلافات بين ثقافة هؤلاء المتعلمين والثقافة العمانية لها علاقة قوية بصعوبات الإستماع لديهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة العربية كلغة أجنبية ، الصعوبات السمعية، صعوبات التعلم، طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية، سلطنة عمان

* fbusaidi@squ.edu.om

INTRODUCTION

Learning and teaching Arabic as a foreign language has become a universal phenomenon. For instance, Arabic is currently taught in many universities and institutions all over the world (Al-Batal, 1995). Elkhafaifi (2005) reported that enrollment in Arabic courses in universities has increased significantly in recent years. He stated that while only 5,505 students were studying Arabic at U.S. colleges and universities in 1995, there was a 23.9% increase in the number of students of Arabic from 1995 to 1998. According to a recent survey conducted by the Modern Language Association, Arabic witnessed a 92.3% increase in enrollment from 1998 to 2002 (Welles, 2004). As a consequence, a number of universities and colleges in America and Europe have expanded their programs and courses of teaching Arabic. Moreover, in order to provide English learners of Arabic with the opportunity to study the language in its real cultural setting, several universities in America and United Kingdom offer intensive summer language programs to study Arabic in the Arab world (Al-Batal, 1995).

The growth of awareness in teaching and learning Arabic was not limited to the western countries. To cover the need of many foreigners living in the Arab world, a number of institutions in various Arab countries have established Arabic schools. Thus, currently there are a number of programs of Arabic for non-native speakers in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Yemen and Oman.

Despite all these efforts, the field of Teaching Arabic as a foreign language (TAFL) still faces some challenges. Researchers such as Elkhafaifi (2005) and Al-Juhany (1990) have found that learning Arabic seems to be extremely difficult for native speakers of English. Additionally, The United States Foreign Service Institution (FSI) has classified languages according to levels of difficulty into four categories based on the amount of time required to reach a certain level of proficiency. According to the FSI rankings, Arabic was grouped with those relatively difficult languages such as Chinese, Korean and Japanese (Omaggio Hadley, 2001). It has been argued that Arabic cannot be fully mastered as a second or foreign language to a level where a learner would be able to use it as a native speaker. As a result, there has been a serious argument over whether or not non-native learners can ever achieve the 5 levels in Arabic (in terms of FSI proficiency ratings) (Ryding, 1994). Likewise, it has been found that some Arabic teachers consider that achieving this level of proficiency is simply not possible (Ryding, 1995). Supporting this argument, Ryding (1991) found that many learners, frustrated at their lack of communicative competence even after "great effort", give up learning Arabic after a year or two of study (p. 212). Accordingly, attrition among students of Arabic tends to be higher than among other foreign language students (Belnap, 1995).

The findings of some studies conducted in the TAFL field, (Al-Juhany,1990; and Al-Mutawa,1995) suggest that learners of Arabic tend to face difficulties caused by the characteristics of Arabic language. They also argue that the difficulties students face in learning Arabic could be due to the different cultural and learning environment (Al-Juhany, 1990; Al-Mutawa, 1995). Al-Juhany (1990) argues that the difference between Arabic and that of Indo-European languages such as English, Spanish, French, and German is one major reason for this issue. Arabic has some features that European languages do not have along with a very complex morphological system (Holes, 1995). Additionally, Al-Mutawa (1995) found that many students confirmed that adjustment to Arab world and survival to the new society are prevailing problems. Furthermore, they stated that their difficulties mainly result from diglossia which leads to two forms to be used: Modern Standard Arabic 'MSA' and Non Standard Arabic 'NSA', which are genetically related but quite different.

Although the previous research (Ryding, 1995; Al-Mutawa, 1995; Al- Juhany, 1990) has provided some ideas about the difficulties faced by learners of Arabic, a critical review of these studies shows that there is an urgent need for many studies to be done in the field. For example, these researches have studied the overall difficulties, but have not studied the difficulties related to the communicative competence in listening and speaking. In teaching Arabic as a foreign language (TAFL) field there is a lack of research and literature on teaching listening. Listening skills are considerably neglected in Arabic teaching classes

(Al-Mutawa, 1995).   Although the development of the four language skills is outlined as one of the goals of Arabic instruction, a closer analysis reveals that there is no systematic approach to the teaching of listening at any level of instruction. There are no activities or materials that specifically focus on the development of this skill. (Taha, 2006; Al-Juhany, 1990).

The significance of listening as a key factor in facilitating language learning has been widely emphasized by many researchers (Feyten, 1991; McErlain, 1999; and Howatt & Dakin, 1974). Listening is regarded as a critical component of foreign language proficiency, and as such plays an important role in foreign language acquisition. This is because language acquisition depends on listening as it provides the aural input that serves as the basis for language learning and helps learners to interact in spoken communication. Nunan (1998) believes that "listening is the basic skill in language learning. Without listening skill, learners will never learn to communicate effectively. In fact over 50% of the time that students spend functioning in a foreign language will be devoted to listening" (p. 1). Wilt (1950) found that people listen 45% of the time they spend communicating. Accordingly, listening provides the foundation for all aspects of language and cognitive development, and it plays a life-long role in the processes of communication.

Keeping in mind the importance of listening skills in foreign language programs and the negligence of teaching and researching listening skill in TAFL field was the starting point for an exploratory study of listening difficulties among learners of Arabic in Oman.

To the best of the resources knowledge, no attempt has been made in the Omani context to explore the students' listening difficulties of non native learners. Likewise, no attention has been given to the non-native Arabic learners' voices in Oman. In addition, neither Arabic as a foreign language programs nor the basic teaching and learning of Arabic as a foreign language in the Omani context have been examined. Most of the research emphasizes investigating the teaching of Arabic as a mother language without paying any attention to Arabic as a foreign language. In this respect, educational scholars in TAFL field maintain that in reality we know little about the difficulties students face in different learning environments (Alosh, 1997; Taaima & Al-Naqa, 2006). This has led researchers such as Ryding (2006) to call for urgent research in the TAFL field to understand the processes and difficulties involved in learning Arabic.

Therefore, this study was conducted during the summer semester of the 2009/2010 at a private institution that offers Arabic program. The purposes of the paper are to provide an overview about listening difficulties of learners of Arabic, describe the factors that might affect listening comprehension, discuss their implications for the teaching of Arabic at tertiary level and gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and the difficulties which hinder the acquisition of Arabic language. This may help in the planning and the implementation of Arabic programs in Oman.

Understanding learners' listening difficulties

This paper discusses five listening difficulties reported by a group of learners who are learning Arabic as a foreign language in Oman. Two qualitative data collection methods have been used. Learners had described the listening difficulties in their own words in different situations when they listened to Arabic. In many cases, they offered reasons for these problems. I believe that using such approach in TAFL field can be useful to both researchers and teachers because it allows us to understand the difficulties from the learner's point of view. Moreover, by providing opportunities for learners to report their experiences in their own words, we might gain some insights into their understanding of and attitude towards some of these difficulties. The learner's voice can be very valuable to our understanding of their listening comprehension problems while learning Arabic as a foreign language.

Adopting a social constructivism framework

In order to locate the current study in one of the theoretical frameworks, the social constructivist theory seems to be the most convenient one. This approach has been adopted because it pays attention to the different personal and contextual factors which have an influence on shaping students' difficulties, given the cultural diversity of the participants of the current study (Fosnot, 1996; Palincsar, 1998).

Social constructivism emerged, mainly, from Vygotsky's ideas about the role of the

socio-cultural context in the learning process (Lantolf, 2000). It argues for the significance of culture and context in shaping and constructing meaning. The idea is that to understand learning, we need to look beyond the individual's mind and explore the social and cultural processes which surround learning activities (Fosnot, 1996; Palincsar, 1998). The core belief of the social constructivist approach is that what individuals learn about the world surrounding them emerges from their own personal understanding and interpretation of their own experiences. Likewise, what they learn and how they make sense of knowledge depends on where and when they are learning it. Learning is viewed by the social constructivists as a social process (McInerney & McInerney, 2002). It does not take place only within an individual, nor is it a passive development of behaviors that are shaped by external forces. Meaningful learning takes place when learners are engaged in socially and culturally constructed activities, which are constantly changing (Palincsar, 1998).

This theory provides a fundamental explanation of the listening difficulty and the factors influencing Arabic listening comprehension in learning Arabic as a foreign language in the Sultanate of Oman. From Vygotsky's point of view, an individual's learning is the result of social interaction (Cobb, 1996; Fosnot, 1996). Such interaction is critical for the development of language acquisition, both in the formal learning environments and in natural situations. Likewise, Cobb (1994) argues that individual and social aspects of learning can interact over time to strengthen one another in a reciprocal spiral relationship.

From a social constructivist perspective, each participant in this study is from a different background, leading to different interpretations of the world where they live. In this context, participants have their own different understanding about their learning difficulties that could have an effect on their learning. These meaning constructions differ due to the difference in many factors including their cultural background, first language and the learning environment where they live, work and learn Arabic.

METHOD

Although there are three institutions that offer Arabic classes in Oman, only one of them has agreed to participate in this study. This institution has three different levels. Students selected were in their third level of Arabic language proficiency. The reason for selecting this sample was that they would likely have the knowledge and experience required for the research. Also, they could feel more comfortable to discuss and share their experiences than beginners. It was expected that learners with at least some background of learning Arabic are more likely to be able to explain their own experience in a better way compared to other learners with little or no experience in Arabic language at all.

It was hoped to find big number of learners studying Arabic at the time of collecting the data but there was only 19 students (8 female and 11 male) who were studying in the third level at this institution. Therefore, all the 19 learners were purposively selected as subjects for this study. However, considering the main purpose of the study, this sample was enough to understand the issue under investigation. The aim of the study was not to derive a universal set of students listening difficulties. Rather, it aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the students' experiences in the difficulties they encounter in learning Arabic in a particular context.

The participants came from seven different cultural backgrounds namely India, England, Sweden, France, the Netherlands, Italy, and Turkey. Sixteen of them were full time employees. They were considered highly qualified employees and experienced experts, as the majority of them had high educational degrees such as a Bachelor or Masters and they worked either as lecturers in Sultan Qaboos University, in embassies, or as managers in big companies in Oman. They were adult learners aged between 32-52 years. The most common reason of the subjects in choosing to migrate to the country is to work in Oman.

Data collection methods

This study is based on two data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and diaries. More explanation about these methods and how they have been used in the current study is presented in the following points.

The semi-structured interview

The semi-structured interview was used to allow for in-depth data collection. It has the

characteristic of providing the participants with the opportunity to talk about their views and allows them to express themselves, whilst providing sufficient structure to prevent rambling (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989). Each learner was interviewed twice for the following reasons: first, to check the credibility of the data collected from the informants in the first interviews; second, to supplement the first interviews and to ask the questions that had emerged in their diaries. It was found that the second interview provided more in-depth information based on the possibility that students might think more about the processes after the first interview. The interviews were conducted from the 4th of July to the 26th of August 2009 in a comfortable room arranged by the school either before or after the classes depending on the participant's time.

Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes, depending on the availability and willingness of the informants. The interviews started with background questions that dealt with the participants' names, cultural backgrounds, first language, their experience in learning any other languages, the number of years being in Oman, occupation, and the motivation for learning Arabic. Although an interview protocol was prepared, the order and the wording of the questions, during the interview, were modified and some questions were added or varied as the interview unfolded to ensure that the participants grasped the meaning. Additionally, some questions were added for second interviews as a result of earlier interviewees' comments. Keeping in mind the learners' level in Arabic, all interviews were conducted in English – the language that all of them speak either as a first or second language and were recorded on audio-tape with each informant's consent followed by a verbatim transcription.

Learner diaries

To gain a further understanding of the informants' listening difficulties, learners' diaries were used to cross-reference the data collected by interviews, and accordingly increasing their trustworthiness. Delamont (1992) suggests that diaries are an important data collection method in qualitative research, as they are a helpful research method for obtaining an insight into participants' daily life. Similarly, McDonough and McDonough (1997) regard diary writing as an important historical

source for the very reason that many of the diaries kept by the individuals have offered significant insights into their activities and how they think about the world around them. They consider such a tool as a form of certification, employed by qualitative researchers to understand more about the facts being investigated.

Bearing in mind that the participants in this study were non-native speakers of Arabic and not proficient writers or speakers of the language, I followed Brumfit's (1984) advice that "the writing of the beginner non-native user of the language will often be unfathomable and heavily marked" (p.85). Consequently, I thought that they had better use the English language when writing their diaries as for all of them English is either his/her first language or second language.

Participants were given instructions for diary writing. They were asked to keep writing their diaries during a 10 week course, explain the listening events, their listening activities in the Arabic lessons and their everyday listening difficulties and challenges in learning Arabic within and outside their school. The purpose of diary writing was not only to illuminate certain aspects of the listening difficulties, but also to provide insights into their feelings regarding their listening difficulties in the Omani context and why they thought it was a challenge for them to understand the listening tasks. Meetings with participants were held regularly in their school in the break time to see if they had any challenges in writing the diaries. Written diaries were submitted every week. It was hoped that this procedure could reflect some issues that needed to be clarified in the interviews.

Data analysis

The collected data was analyzed manually following the coding procedures suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994). The starting point was reading the data reported in the interviews and the diaries several times, looking for any reports or description of listening problems. At that level, listening difficulties were highlighted with a pen, then summarized in a short statement and recorded on a sheet of paper. The lists of difficulties were created from each interview and diary, and compared with the list of categories created from other individuals in the same sample. For example, the list of learner's difficulties re-

ported by the first learners was compared with the list from other participants. The next step was to see the similarities and the differences of the difficulties experienced by each participant. It would be useful to know how different learners might construct different understanding of their listening difficulties. The data was tallied and analyzed, and a list of listening difficulties was developed. A preliminary classification was checked by a colleague who agreed with all the categories except one. After discussing and re-examining the data, the final categorization was designed (see figure 1). A sample of the data was also checked by another colleague who acted as an independent coder for this study.

FINDINGS

Analysis of the data obtained from interviews and students' diaries has shown that the 19 adult learners experienced five listening difficulties that occurred either in the classroom setting, in their real-life conversation with Omanis or while listening to TV and radio programs. These difficulties do not mean that they are isolated from each other. Rather, they are very often interrelated and thus bound to be affected by each other. It has been found that their listening difficulties mainly resulted from: speed of speech, quickly forgetting what is heard, missing the next part when thinking about meaning, inability to understand what they have listened to and inability to match the sound of the word with what they already know. Also, the data displayed that the listening difficulties seem to be affected by different factors. For example, the data has shown that the Omani social context; the characteristic of Arabic language, the status of English in the country, the lack of educational resources and materials have a strong influence on these students' comprehension. The following section discuses the listening difficulties and they are summarized in Figure 1:
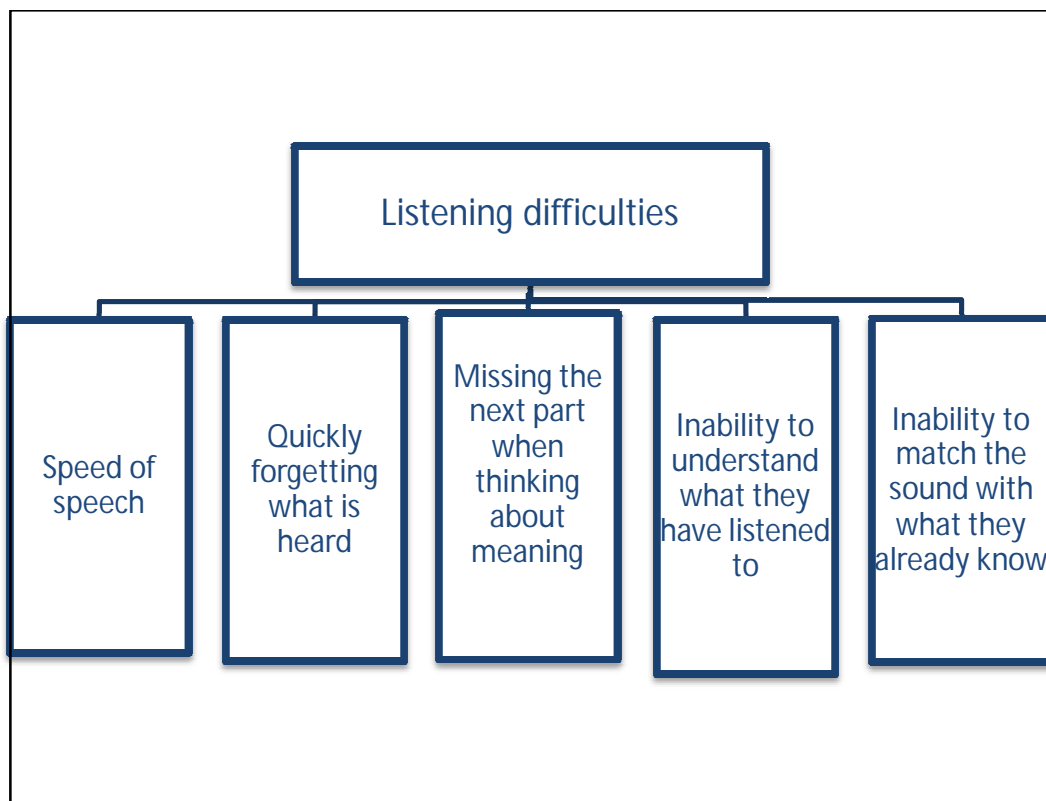

Figure 1
Listening difficulties

Speed of speech

The majority of the participants reported that speech rate influenced their listening comprehension significantly. They stated that Omanis speak very quickly and that they found difficulty in following them. For example one of them said:

"When people speak very fast, I actually have a hard time understanding, it just goes over my head, you know" (Ana, Interview).

Another participant wrote in her diary:

"I met my neighbours this afternoon… I have been like a foolish lady; I couldn't understand at all... they speak very quickly so I found it very difficult to catch up...I think if they were speaking slower I won't have much difficulty to understand them" (Linda, Diary).

These participants have tried to interact with Omanis to improve their listening capabilities in the Omani dialect. However, they found the way Omanis use the language is difficult to follow. This could be understood if one considers that the listening process does not just involve hearing Arabic sounds, but is a complex set of activities which require the listener to have sufficient intellectual function to be able to make sense of what the speaker is saying (Mendelsohn, 1994; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). Therefore, these participants might have not yet built the full capability for listening comprehension.

Additionally, this difficulty might have resulted from the differences between Arabic language and these participants' mother languages on the one hand and the differences between Standard Arabic and the Arabic dialects on the other hand. Al-Juhany (1990), for example, found that learners of Arabic very often related their difficulties to the differences between their mother languages and Arabic sounds which seem to be unfamiliar to them. Also, Cutler (2000) reported that the processing system was found to be more complicated when the new language is not rhythmically similar to the student's mother language. Therefore, given that the participants of the current study come from different language backgrounds, some of them might not be used to hearing Arabic sounds in which some syllables are given more stress than in their mother languages.

Quickly forgetting what is heard

Some of the participants reported that they experienced difficulties in remembering words and phrases they had just heard. Although sometimes they could understand what was said when they heard it, they would forget it as soon as they began listening to another part of the message. For example, one of them said:

My problem is that although I might understand the phrases, I easily forget what was said when I heard the new words…. (Neil, Interview).

When I watch T.V, I can understand some of it, but what is difficult for me is that I quickly forget the proceeding sentences. (Steven, Diary).

It seems that these participants recognized words in the text and had understood what they heard, but they soon forgot the contents. Such difficulty is more likely to be caused by low competence in their working memory span, which reduces their ability to remember the words they have just heard. This slows their ability to recall the meaning of words and phrases during the listening process. The reduction in their short term memory and their reduced power to process the information they hear, leads them to quickly forget what is heard. Call (1985) and Hasan (2000) found that beginner learners reported difficulty in dealing with the large amount of input they have to listen to. They related this problem to the memory span input of a learner which is found to be shorter than that found in those using their native language. Another possible reason for this difficulty is lack of their vocabulary, limited knowledge of the grammar and their lack of background knowledge of the text.

Missing the next part when thinking about the meaning

The most frequent problem mentioned by the participant was that they very often miss the next part of a text because they need to stop and think about unfamiliar words. For example, this student described this problem by saying:

Actually my problem is that I spend a lot of my time thinking about the first sentence so I miss the following one. (Lillian, Interview)

Robert explained why it was sometimes hard not to stop and think about words by saying,

While listing, I find that there are a lot of words that sound very familiar, but I can't understand their meanings immediately, I need to think for a moment but in this case the following sentences are not waiting for me (Robert, interview).

This common listening problem seems to result from incapability of these students to process the information fast enough. While listening they experienced difficulty of dealing with the input from the stream of speech. They could not understand some words and so tried to search for the meanings in their memory at the same time they had to keep up with new input. This finding was supported by Anderson (1995). He found that learners of English were unable to process the information fast enough as they were soon displaced by new.

It is also possible that while listening, these participants strive to search for words they might know to be able to fill the gaps in their comprehension. Also, they might struggle to structure the meaning from the available information. As a result, they might be suffering from information overload in the process which hinders their ability to monitor the message and get an overall comprehension of the text. This might lead to undermining the efficiency of the listening processing.

Inability to understand what they have listened to

Another listening difficulty the participants faced during conversation either in the classroom or in real life communication was the inability to understand what people are saying. More than half of them stated that although sometimes they can understand some expressions, they are unable to understand the whole meaning and obtain the right message. One reason for this difficulty might be that their ability still needs to be built up to be able to make useful meaning deductions or manage to acquire the intended meaning of the language. Joseph, for example, said:

"Listening is rather frustrating, because you might catch one word or another but not the whole context" (Joseph, Interview).

Sally explained this in her diary, "The hardest part is to understand what people are trying to say" (Sally, Diary).

This problem might result from the differences between Standard Arabic that they are studying in the classroom and the local language used by the public. Bearing in mind that the two varieties of Arabic have different vocabulary items and phrases, this might delay students' comprehension in both forms of Arabic. Additionally, teaching practices in the classroom might contribute to such difficulty. It seemed that the teaching approach mainly focuses on grammar and vocabulary learning instead of focusing on improving listening skills. For example, Susan stated:

"We do not do any listening in the class, just spending the whole time on vocabulary and grammar learning." (Susan, Interview).

Another possible explanation for this difficulty is the nature of the Omani social context where there are different accents used by different people. These learners are living in Muscat, whereas many Omanis come originally from different regions and speak varied dialects. In fact, some of them might not even speak Arabic very well because they are not originally Arabs. This multi-linguistic or multi–dialectical context might cause confusion, which makes understanding very complex. This could indicate that the nature of Omani society, together with the Arabic language with different dialects, the type of Arabic courses in Oman that focus only on one variety, and the teachers' approach which focuses on words and grammar role instead of meaning comprehension, might all contribute to comprehension difficulty. This finding is in line with Najy (2008) and Ibrahim (2001), who found that both the features of the Arabic language and the nature of Arab society might be reasonable factors for learner's comprehension problems.

Another factor might be the lack of background knowledge these participants have about the listening topic which contributes to this difficulty. Social discourse or TV programs reflect not only the context of the message, but also the culture of the speaker, his/her values and his/her beliefs that reflect the whole of society's values and beliefs. Limited knowledge of all these aspects by the listener might lead to difficulties in grasping the right meaning. For example, King (1984) argues that listening not only requires hearing, but it widely depends on the amount of information and meaning which both speaker and listener must share. Likewise, Harris (2003) states that to make inferences and de-

termine the speaker's implied meaning, listeners use pragmatic knowledge, which is often culturally bound. Accordingly, as the majority of these learners come from different cultural backgrounds, which are widely different from the Omani culture, it is more likely that their limited knowledge of the cultural aspects has contributed to this difficulty.

Another possible interpretation for this difficulty is the lack of listening materials that prepare the beginner learners for real life interaction. This has led them to be dependent on Arabic TV, Films, and Radio. For example, one of them said:

"I like to watch TV but then this is very often harder for me to understand because some TV tends to be very colloquial. For example like Syria TV, Egyptian and so on…" *(Linda, Interview).*

Thus, although these participants appear to be conscious of the importance of practicing listening, they seem to get confused with the different words and phrases used by different dialects in TV programs. This could be understood given the fact that each Arabic dialect has its own expressions which are not usually used by the others. This is because there are four main dialects in spoken Arabic, each used in different geographical regions. The main dialects are North African (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya); Egyptian (Egypt, Sudan); Levantine (Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria); and Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Yemen, Iraq). Also, within each major region there are different local dialects. These dialects differ from one country to another and from one region to another based on speed, intonation, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Therefore, as has been argued by Madkoor (2007) and Wilmsen (2006), this phenomenon has not only led to understanding difficulties for non-native speakers, but in many cases, for Arab native speakers themselves.

Additionally, while listening to the media, these learners usually do not have the opportunity to get messages repeated or clarified by the speakers, whereas in the classroom the possibility to repeat and benefit from the teacher and other students exists. This might indicate that the starting point for practicing listening should be in the classroom setting. For example, Al-Hamad (1983) suggests that Arabic teachers who teaching non-native speakers should be aware that learners need to have access to the different forms of Arabic language in the classroom setting before starting to interact with people who mainly do not understand their level and have no experience to help them with their learning. He also clarifies that some students choose TV programs beyond their listening proficiency; therefore, this could negatively affect students' motivation and reduce their confidence and interest in Arabic learning.

Inability to match the sound with what they already know

Some of the participants reported that they have understanding difficulties because they failed to match the sound they heard with the words they had learnt or what they already know. For example, Mary said:

"Sometimes I can't even recognize the words my teacher uses even though I know the words" (Mary, Interview).

Robert also reported in his diary:

I listened to the radio in Arabic hoping to just catch a few words-but struggled- why is it so difficult??? I really have some difficulty in hearing the different words- I am sure that if I saw them in writing I would understand (Robert, Diary).

This difficulty seems to be more related to their inability to remember the meaning of the words during listening activities. This might be due to the lack of use of reviewing as a strategy that could help the new words to transfer from their short-term memory to the long-term memory. Another possible explanation might be related to the fact that Arabic language have many words that sound similar, but with different meanings. Additionally, people in Oman might pronounce the words differently depending on their different accents. Therefore, during the listening process, if the sounds are slightly different from what they previously knew, recognition of the word might be difficult. It is also the negative belief held by some of these participants regarding the listening process that might contribute to this difficulty. For example, some learners might focus more on the words that they do not know, instead of seeking the meaning from the context by applying some effective strategies such as approximating the meaning and using clues. This might demonstrate that some listening difficulties are the result of stu-

dents' inability to apply helpful strategies, either because they are not aware of them or they do not know how to apply them.

Factors influencing Arabic listening comprehension

After presenting student listening difficulties, this section will discuss the factors that influence these students comprehension from their own point of view. In general, participants reported that three main factors are related their listening difficulties. These factors are discussed in the following sections.

The lack of opportunity to practice Arabic language in Oman

Although only seven participants were found to be interested in practicing Colloquial Arabic, five other learners, all of whom work in oil companies, reported that they are willing to interact with Omanis and learn from daily conversation, but they found very little opportunity to practice the language in its natural situation. They explained that this was due to the dominance of English in the work environment:

"Yes I am living in Oman, but I spend more than 8 hours in my work just using English. It is the technical language; therefore, all our meeting papers are in English" (Lillian, Diary).

Also, English is used as a medium for communication among all the employees who came from different backgrounds.

"We are an international group and because English is the language that is spoken by all of us; therefore, it is easy to just maintain speaking it" (Neil, Interview).

They also raised an important issue regarding the opportunity to practice Colloquial Arabic with their Omani colleagues. One of them, who work in Petroleum Company, explained this point by saying:

"Looking for an opportunity to speak is the hardest part because most of the Omanis where I work speak English, even if I start to speak in Arabic, they will respond in English" (Robert, Diary).

This could be understood if one realizes that English is the work language of all petroleum companies in Oman. Therefore, in terms of the daily interaction, it is easy for Omanis to use English in a mixed nationality group. The second explanation for this might be that since these participants are beginner learners of Arabic, interacting with them using the Omani dialect is not an easy issue. Hence, to make themselves understood, especially if the conversation is associated with work issues, the Omanis might find it sensible to speak English, the language which everyone knows. Another justification for this problem might be that, as these participants are living and working in Muscat, the capital of Oman, it is normal to find Omanis who do not speak Arabic, simply because they are not originally from Oman, but come from different backgrounds such as Zanzibar, Pakistan, India, and Tanzania. These groups continue using their first language at home and English with the public. Therefore, it could be argued here that the common use of English in Oman, especially in work environments, has led some of the learners not to practice the language. Some of the participants in this study supported this explanation and stated that if they were learning Arabic in another Arab country, they would practice Arabic more. This view is exemplified by the following response:

"I went to Syria last summer. In Syria people don't speak English, so I have to go to the depth of my brain to speak Arabic which for learning is much better...." (Linda, Diary).

This participant believes that learning Arabic in a context or a country where the target language is the only language used by the people is more helpful. She believes that in this case she would be forced to speak and learn Arabic. This shows that learning Arabic in some Arab countries such as Egypt, Syria, and Jordan might be easier than in the Gulf countries such as UAE and Oman, where, due to the population's composition and the economic reasons, the use of English language is widespread (Al-Busaidi, 1995). Thus, although Oman is an Arab country, where the majority of people are Arab, the use of English in the country negatively affects the learning of Arabic among this group of students. Similarly it has affected the use of 'practicing Colloquial Arabic' strategy.

Lack of resources

Additionally, some participants faced some challenges in learning Arabic due to the lack of educational resources and materials. While discussing these challenges, some of

them used to reiterate their previous experience and compare them with the current one. This view is exemplified by the following responses:

"The tutor is the only choice available for us... we do not have other alternatives we can choose from... when I was learning English, for example, a variety of materials was provided" (Ana, Interview).

Joseph went a step further and explained what kind of resources will be helpful in learning Arabic:

"It will help to have audio cassettes which have some gaps in between, so you can repeat after the words on the tape or to even be able to take it in your car, and be able to listen to certain pronunciation that is difficult to learn without listening to it again and again" (Joseph, Interview).

It appears that the lack of educational resources was a major challenge for the participants in this study. This issue might result from the lack of support and funding given to Arabic teaching programs as well as the shortage of specialists who are capable of producing the listening materials that suit each level (Madkore, 2007). Consequently, this study is consistent with Hammoud's (1996) study which found that only half of the Arabic teachers use learning materials and the majority of them hardly ever include any of the core materials in teaching.

Cultural differences

Some participants reported that one major challenge that deterred them from practicing Arabic in its natural situation is that they found it hard to adjust to the Omanis' life style. They stated that Omanis' customs and values are widely different from what they are used to. Accordingly, they feel it is more comfortable for them to interact with colleagues and people with similar cultural beliefs. For example, Kevin said:

"People here have a different mentality.... to be honest I felt like it is much more comfortable to just be as I used to be and just maintain my relationships with my English friends" (Kevin, Interview).

Another participant confirmed this by saying:

"I found it difficult to keep up such relationships... I have a different life style... In the

weekend I like to drink, dance, and so on, and they tend to do other different things...they also seem to be very formal and serious but we tend to be freer..." (Neil, Interview).

Although these participants reported that their frustration over building any relationship results from differences between Omani culture and their own culture, it is more likely that this sort of feeling results from their anxiety about responding in a way that might show disrespect to Omani values. For example, Susan stated:

"I feel as if I am not really certain how I should behave and how I should respond, I don't want to behave in a way that is unacceptable by the people..." (Susan, Diary).

Similarly, Lillian explained that although she has learnt many phrases that she could use while interacting with Omani people, she still feels frustrated when the interaction involves traditional behaviors which she doesn't know how to respond to.

"....Nahla, my neighbor invited me for a day to her small village … it was the first time in my life that I have to sit on the floor and eat with no spoon using my five fingers... all the family were sitting in a circle eating together from one big plate ...the difficult thing was that all of them kept asking me to eat a lot of food that I was not used to. I didn't know what to say and I did not want to behave like a rude person..." (Lillian, Interview).

This learner seems to lack the knowledge about the customs of Omani invitations and what it might involve. She also seems to lack understanding about how she should respond when she is in this situation. Lack of understanding of all these aspects among these participants seems to cause this anxiety, more than the differences between their culture and the Omani culture.

It seems that this group of learners faces challenges regarding adjustments and adapting to Omani customs and values. This can be understood if one considers the huge differences between Omani culture, as an Arabic Islamic society, and the cultural backgrounds of the majority of the participants. This finding seems to be in line with the study of Olaniran (1996), who found that foreign learners of English encounter some degree of culture shock

that brings on stress and anxiety while settling into the new culture and building interpersonal relationships with the people. This, in turn, may have influenced their participation in activities that might contribute to their language learning and personal development outcomes. Similarity, Selvadurai (1992) found that diversity of cultural habits such as the nature of family relationships, food habits, religion and beliefs seem to cause shock to the students when they move from their own cultures to a liberal independent culture in America.

Summary of findings

The participants of this study reflected on some specific listening difficulties they have experienced while learning Arabic in Oman. Such difficulties mainly appear in classroom setting and while interacting with Omanis in natural setting. They have qualitatively described these difficulties and discussed what they were unable to do. This was helpful in providing rich data on these students experience in learning Arabic language in Oman. The data analysis revealed five listening comprehension problems. The majority of these students reported that their problems arise from failure in word recognition, inability of recognizing the words and quickly forgetting what they have heard. The explanation of such difficulties is that they might result from the misunderstanding of cultural aspects related to the Omani society.

To conclude, language learners at various points in their learning experience face difficulties related to some or all phases of language processing. Therefore, by identifying their listening difficulties at each stage, learners could be made aware of these potential setbacks and learn to take steps to cope with them when these difficulties arise. Therefore, it is recommended that TAFL programs need to take listening strategies into account in an explicit and comprehensive way in order to provide stable and coherent guidance for both teachers and students. Also, the Arabic teachers should be aware of the range of possible individual strategies that learners can use to improve their comprehension. Consequently, a new role for Arabic teachers is raising learners' awareness of the learning strategies and assisting them to achieve a good quality use of them, which would mean advising them to choose and apply strategies appropriately according to the learners' own needs, purpose of

learning Arabic and their particular social context (Takeuchi, Griffiths, & Coyle, 2007). Additionally, it is suggested that the incorporation of technology in Arabic teaching will have a positive impact on helping learners become a good listeners (Samy, 2006).

Also, learners should be taught the sound systems of Arabic, its stress, its rhythm, and intonation, and the differences between Standard Arabic and the Omani dialect must be clarified. Lack of knowledge of these features not only causes confusion but also difficulty in transferring what they have learnt from one form to another. Further research is needed among other groups of language learners to explore the causes of students' listening difficulties while learning Arabic language in Oman. It is also significant to find out to what extent student learning level can affect their listening comprehension. Additionally, further examination is needed to understand learner's attitudes to their listening problems and how they deal with these difficulties. Finally, in the TAFL field we need to understand which types of listening strategies work best with the learners of Arabic.

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