

## **A Comparative Study of EFL Listening Difficulties in Public and Private Ecuadorian High Schools**

**Ana Quinonez-Beltran\*, Paola Cabrera-Solano, Paul Gonzalez-Torres, Luz Castillo-Cuesta and Cesar Ochoa-Cueva**

*Department of Education, Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja, 1101608 Loja, Ecuador*

### **ABSTRACT**

The teaching of English in public and private institutions in the Ecuadorian context has been the subject of research since there are substantial differences in both educational systems. Thus, the purpose of this study was to compare the main difficulties that listeners from public and private high schools face when doing listening comprehension activities due to the importance of this skill for communication. It is important to remark that the conditions in terms of teachers' methodology are different in both types of institutions. The participants were 1536 Ecuadorian senior-high school students enrolled in 12 high schools, and 10 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. We used a descriptive mixed-method approach, which included the application of students' questionnaires and teachers' interviews to know their perceptions about listening difficulties in the classroom. The data analysis method was used to evaluate the answers to the students' questionnaires and the teachers' interviews. Findings indicate that students in public high schools

face more difficulties regarding listening comprehension activities, especially while trying to understand main ideas, predicting content, comprehending general ideas when listening for the first time, feeling anxious when they do not understand a passage, and using background knowledge of a topic to understand listening activities.

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#### *E-mail addresses:*

[alquinones@utpl.edu.ec](mailto:alquinones@utpl.edu.ec) (Ana Quinonez-Beltran)

[pacabrera@utpl.edu.ec](mailto:pacabrera@utpl.edu.ec) (Paola Cabrera-Solano)

[pfgonzalez@utpl.edu.ec](mailto:pfgonzalez@utpl.edu.ec) (Paul Gonzalez-Torres)

[lmcastillox@utpl.edu.ec](mailto:lmcastillox@utpl.edu.ec) (Luz Castillo-Cuesta)

[caochoa@utpl.edu.ec](mailto:caochoa@utpl.edu.ec) (Cesar Ochoa-Cueva)

\*Corresponding author

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## INTRODUCTION

In language acquisition, listening, speaking, reading, and writing are necessary skills to be developed. However, listening skill is an essential component that mainly contributes to master the language (Renukadevi, 2014). In addition, listening has been considered an important skill in language learning because it plays a significant role in daily communication and educational process (Pourhosein & Ahmadi, 2011). Furthermore, Worthington (2012) asserted that the development of listening comprehension influenced directly on the improvement of other language skills (speaking, writing, and reading). Likewise, Hamouda (2013) emphasized the role of listening comprehension as a fundamental skill in language learning and daily communication.

Nonetheless, learners face several challenges regarding listening comprehension, which have a significant impact on students' academic performance, especially in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Thus, investigating listening difficulties and learners' perceptions would be a suitable way to be aware of their needs so that teachers can plan appropriate listening activities for successful language learning.

Over the last decades, there have been many studies on the listening comprehension difficulties that students face when learning English (e.g. Bano, 2017; Bingol et al., 2014; Chen, 2013; Mahmoud, 2013; Nowrouzi et al., 2015). They have acknowledged several factors that influence listening comprehension

including vocabulary, pronunciation accent, lack of concentration, bad quality of recording, among others. However, a contrast between private and public high school students' perceptions regarding listening comprehension difficulties is an issue that has not been widely researched, especially in the Ecuadorian context.

In this respect, there is a socio-economic inequality in Ecuadorian private and public education since the public system is free and works with a limited state budget; while the private system is financed by people who can afford it. This inequality affects the access of most Ecuadorian students to better education (Ecuadorian Ministry of Education, 2016). As a result, English language learning in public institutions is also influenced by the lack of teachers' training, facilities, resources, among others. Therefore, the conditions of these institutions limit the appropriate development of the students' English language skills.

Based on the aforementioned context, the purpose of this study was to compare the main difficulties that students from public and private high schools face when performing listening comprehension activities since the conditions in terms of teachers' methodology are different in both types of institutions. This situation happens because the resources used by teachers are limited in public institutions, which does not allow educators to apply novel strategies to teach the target language. The findings of the present research will help teachers understand the difficulties students have so that appropriate activities can be planned

considering EFL students' needs. Thus, the following research questions guided this study:

- What are the main difficulties that listeners from private and public high schools face when doing listening comprehension activities?
- Which listeners have more difficulties in comprehension, private or public high school students?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Listening Comprehension

Listening, as a receptive skill, is a complex process due to the level of comprehension and interpretation that is required to understand a passage (Hasan, 2000). Thus, unlike a mere listening process, which does not require analysis, listening comprehension involves aspects such as reaction or interpretation to understand the message. In this respect, Hamouda (2013) stated that this process required elements such as perception, attention, cognition, and memory to comprehend oral input.

The development of listening comprehension influences directly on the improvement of speaking, writing, and reading skills (Pourhosein & Ahmadi, 2011; Worthington, 2012). In addition, Hamouda (2013) asserted that listening comprehension played a paramount role to achieve proficiency in speaking, which made it a fundamental skill in language learning as well as in daily communication. Listening comprehension is the main channel to acquire input; thus, it is an essential factor

that allows people to learn a language or communicate their ideas (Barclay, 2012).

### The Listener, The Speaker, and The Listening Passage

The listener's role, according to Stadler (2013) is more passive than the speaker's because what the listener has to do is just to receive information. Contrary to Stadler's idea, Hartley (2016) asserted that the listener played an active role because it involved participation in conversations through responses that showed the level of understanding; thus, those responses or comments became an important factor since they allowed the speaker to know how the message was understood by the listener (Verderber et al., 2012).

With respect to the speaker, Krizan et al. (2008) posited that the role of the information sender was to provide a comprehensible message by using words or gestures in order to persuade the listener. In addition, the speaker must take into account some aspects to transmit a clear message such as the correct volume, pitch, quality, rate and pause (Gutierrez, 2009).

Regarding the listening passage, it can be defined as the message that contains the speaker's thoughts, which can be transmitted directly or indirectly (Krizan et al., 2008). Additionally, Wilson (2008) claimed that the listening passage must contain some elements that made it understandable for listeners such as interest factor, entertainment, cultural accessibility, speech acts, discourse structures, density, language level, delivery, length, quality of

recordings, speed and number of speakers, and accent.

Research on listening elements (the listener, the speaker, and the listening passage) has indicated that students have a variety of problems in regards with these factors due to the ineffective use of listening strategies (Hasan, 2000). In addition, Hamouda (2013) also found that the aforementioned listening elements were some of the factors that affected students' listening comprehension.

### **EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension Difficulties**

Listening comprehension difficulties have been widely discussed during the last decades because of the implications they have for language learning. According to Underwood (1989), there are seven obstacles to efficient listening comprehension. These obstacles are the students' lack of control of the speakers' speed to deliver a message, learning situations in which word repetition is not always provided to students, listeners' limited vocabulary, failure to recognize the signals that indicate speakers' transitions from one topic to another, absence of mutual knowledge and common content in the speech, interruptions on listeners' attention, and students' anxiety when trying to understand every word.

Another difficulty in listening is related to the accent. In this regard, Munro and Derwing (1999) stated that too much accented speech could lead to an important reduction in comprehension. In addition, Goh (1999) asserted that the speaker's accent

was one of the most significant factors that affected learners' comprehension. Moreover, Buck (2001) indicated that when listeners heard an unfamiliar accent such as Indian English for the first time after studying only American English, they would encounter serious difficulties in listening.

Bingol et al. (2014) mentioned three additional difficulties. When listening to unknown words, it would be very difficult and confusing for students to understand them since many words had more than one meaning depending on the context. In addition, they explained that, in some classes, teachers tended to use recorded materials that had poor quality, which could impact comprehension on behalf of the learners. Furthermore, they believed that students' proficiency could have a significant impact when they listened to long passages and had to keep all information in their mind.

Other factors that make listening comprehension difficult are restricted vocabulary, poor grammar, misinterpretations about listening tasks (Graham, 2006), and pronunciation of words that is different from the way they appear written (Bloomfield et al., 2010; Walker, 2014). Hasan (2000) also stated that unfamiliar words, difficult grammatical structures, and the length of the spoken passages were some of the factors that hindered learners' listening comprehension. He went further and explained that clarity, lack of interest, and the demand for complete answers to listening activities were other crucial issues of students' listening comprehension.

Based on Hasan (2000), the present study focuses on the students' listening comprehension difficulties related to listeners' cognition such as experience and background knowledge, prediction, listening for main ideas and details, holding dialogues after listening to a passage, and anxiety produced by lack of understanding. These types of difficulties are similar to the ones observed in the Ecuadorian context (Gonzalez et al., 2015).

### **Strategies and Activities to Develop Listening Comprehension Skills**

With respect to strategies, Nation and Newton (2009) mentioned two types of useful strategies for training in listening. The first type (communication strategies) is related to assist comprehension, for example making predictions before listening, listening selectively, knowing how to interrupt politely, amongst others. While the second one (learning strategies) deals with noticing language forms in the listening input; for example, negotiating (seeking clarification), listening for patterns, and focused listening.

Richards (2008) identified two types of strategies on how to listen: cognitive strategies (mental activities for understanding and storing input in working memory or long-term memory), and metacognitive strategies (conscious or unconscious mental activities for the management of cognitive strategies). He also mentioned two strategies for listening as acquisition. The first one includes noticing activities, which involve returning to the listening texts that serve as

the basis for comprehension activities and language awareness. The second one refers to restructuring activities including oral or written tasks that involve productive use of selected items from the listening text.

According to Field (2009), activities for teaching listening can be divided into three stages: pre-listening, during listening and post-listening. In the pre-listening stage, we can pre-teach vocabulary, establish context, and enhance motivation. In this step, Harmer (2007) mentioned activities such as reading aloud, story-telling, interviews, and conversations. Finally, the post-listening activities include functional language in the listening passage, inferring vocabulary, and a final play in which learners look at the transcript.

Nation and Newton (2009) mentioned experiences with meaning-focused listening as a basis for L2 development. A typical activity for meaning-focused input is listening to stories, in which the teacher chooses a graded reader, sits next to the board and slowly reads the story to the learners. The main objective of this activity is to follow and enjoy the story. They also mention other activities such as oral cloze exercises, the picture ordering, the "What is it?" technique (the teacher talks about something and the learners have to explain what is being described), same or different exercises in pairs, and listen and choose activities. They also state that it is important to assist learners by giving them support when they do a listening activity. This support can be provided by sharing the previous experience with

aspects of the text, by guiding the learners during listening, by setting up cooperative learning arrangements, and by providing means through which learners can achieve comprehension by themselves.

### **Previous Studies about Listening Comprehension Difficulties**

There has been some previous research conducted on the field of listening comprehension difficulties which constitute the basis to identify the different students' perceptions on their own problems while acquiring EFL listening skills.

Chen (2013) conducted a study to identify students' listening problems over time as they developed their listening strategies. The participants were 31 Taiwanese EFL college students who received listening strategy instruction (two hours per week for 14 weeks). The general listening strategies taught were metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective. The methodology involved quantitative and qualitative methods that were used to examine listening problems faced by students and how they dealt with them over a period of time. Results showed that there were important differences in students' listening problems after the strategy instruction they received. The main problems encountered dealt with unfamiliar vocabulary, rapid speech rate and linking sound between words.

Mahmoud (2013) examined the listening comprehension strategies used by learners to cope with aural problems in EFL classes. The participants were fourth-year students of the English Department in Menoufia

University. Students were classified in two groups (20 advanced and 20 intermediate) who were administered a test based on two listening passages before the study. In order to obtain information from the participants' listening processes and strategies, the "Think Aloud" technique was used during forty sessions (one session per participant). Results showed that participants faced six problems: hearing an unknown word, known words with no connection to the topic, words with multiple meanings, inability to recognize proper names and places, hearing words incorrectly, and inability to understand numbers.

Hamouda (2013) conducted a study to investigate the listening problems encountered by a group of first year English major students of Qassim University. Sixty students who took the listening course in 2012/13 were selected for the study. Data was gathered by means of questionnaires and interviews. The results of the study showed that accent, pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, different accents of speakers, lack of concentration, anxiety, and bad quality of recording were the major listening comprehension problems encountered. Understanding students' learning difficulties may enable EFL teachers to help students develop effective learning strategies and ultimately improve their English listening abilities.

Wang and Fan (2015) studied and compared teachers' and learners' perceptions regarding the sources of listening difficulties experienced by low-proficiency Chinese learners of English. A 38-item questionnaire

and semi-structured interviews were employed to elicit the participants' beliefs. Findings show that in general the teachers and learners share the view that listening specific text-and processing-related variables have potentially the greatest impact on L2 listeners' comprehension, indicating the importance of giving priority to developing weak listeners' bottom-up perception abilities before higher-level processing skills should be attempted.

Nowrouzi et al. (2015) explored the listening comprehension problems of a group of EFL learners. The survey method was followed to collect data from a group of Iranian tertiary level EFL learners ( $n = 100$ ) by using a questionnaire. The results indicated that the learners experienced from moderate to high levels of difficulty in three categories of listening comprehension problems: perception, parsing, and utilization. The findings provide useful implications for syllabus designers and teachers who intend to address the listening comprehension problems of EFL learners.

Bano (2017) carried out a pedagogical exploration into listening comprehension skills and examined the problems faced by students when practicing this skill in the EFL classroom. The participants were 24 female students and eight teachers from a University in Saudi Arabia. The methodology used included tests, observations, recordings, interviews and dictation tasks. In addition, two processes namely top-down (driven by the listener's expectations and understandings of the context, the topic, and the nature of the

world) and bottom-up (triggered by the sounds, words and phrases which the listener hears as he or she attempts to decode speech and assign meaning) were applied to teach English lessons. The results demonstrate that the top-down process was productive because students used their background knowledge to make sense of what was said in the class. On the other hand, the bottom-up process was not really effective because students were well-versed in English skills and in English structure, so they were already able to understand the meaning of texts in context.

After discussing the approaches and results of the previous studies related to our research theme, it can be observed that they have been conducted in contexts in which the educational situation is different from Ecuador. Thus, the current study attempts to fill a gap in research in the Ecuadorian context where this topic has not been thoroughly explored.

## METHOD

### Setting and Participants

This research was conducted in 12 high schools (8 private and 4 public) from four cities in Ecuador, including the Highlands and Coast regions. The sample included 10 EFL teachers (7 female and 3 male) and 1536 senior-high school students (740 private and 796 public). Teachers' age ranged from 30-50 years old. Their teaching experience went from 6 to 25 years; they all held a Bachelor's Degree in EFL teaching; 2 of them held a Master's Degree in TEFL.

With respect to students, their age range was 16-17 years old. Students' proficiency levels varied between A2 (public high schools) and B1 (private high schools) according to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). It is important to remark that the expected proficiency level, according to the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education (2016), is B1 for senior high school; however, students from public education usually have a lower level (A2). They received an average of 10 hours of EFL instruction per week. In addition, 12 secondary researchers, who were pre-service teachers from a distance EFL program at a private university, contributed by collecting data.

### **Instruments**

Students' questionnaires were adapted by the researchers taking some of the listening difficulties identified by Hasan (2000) since they are similar to the ones observed in the Ecuadorian context. Thus, a Likert scale instrument that consisted of 9 items were applied. These items were selected to measure students' listening difficulties in terms of understanding main ideas, content prediction, anxiety, and background knowledge. Additionally, a teachers' structured interview (see Appendix 1), which aimed at finding out their own perceptions about listening difficulties in the classroom, was used.

### **Procedure**

The data for this study were gathered for a period of 5 months in the academic year 2016. A descriptive mixed-method approach was used in order to carry out this research. According to Creswell (2015), a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods allows the researcher to have a better comprehension of the research problem than using only one approach.

The students for this study were selected through purposeful sampling from five important cities of the country since those cities were more representative and provided further information about the problem. In this respect, purposeful sampling is useful to intentionally select participants and sites in order to learn or understand the research problem (Creswell, 2015). Secondary researchers approached the chosen high schools, located at their place of residence, to apply the students' questionnaire and the teachers' interviews. Before administering the questionnaires, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to test the reliability of the students' questionnaire, showing a result of 0.8, which means that this instrument is reliable. In terms of validity, the questionnaire was piloted with 26 students from a public and 26 from a private high school. The results of the piloting process allowed us to modify certain questions that were not clear enough in terms of vocabulary and interpretation. After the data were gathered from the questionnaires, the results were statistically analyzed using SPSS software;



thus, descriptive statistics were used, and the results were compared and contrasted. As for the teachers' interviews, they were also piloted with a group of professors in order to correct errors in questions and ensure its validity. The information gathered from these interviews was coded and classified in accordance with the most common opinions from the teachers (see Table 3).

## RESULTS

In the section below we present Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3, which contain information in regards to students' questionnaires in public and private high schools, and the teachers' interview.

Table 1 and Table 2 present the responses given by the students regarding the factors that affect their listening comprehension. In Table 1, the first item shows that 40.32% of participants sometimes used their experience and background knowledge to understand the listening passage. Additionally, 29.64% said that they seldom used their experience to comprehend the text. On the other hand, Table 2 shows that many more students (67.86%) sometimes used their previous knowledge and experience to understand listening activities. Regarding the teachers' interview in both private and public high schools, the use of strategies for activating prior knowledge was frequent.

Table 1  
*Students' questionnaire (public high schools)*

Item no.	Statements	Never %	Seldom %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
1	I use my experience and background knowledge of the topic to understand the listening passage	11.96	29.64	40.32	12.78	5.25
2	I listen to every detail to get the main idea of the listening passage	3.57	10.71	42.86	32.14	10.71
3	I find it difficult to do listening activities because of my lack of knowledge of English language	3.57	25	32.14	39.28	0
4	After my teacher stops the recording, I find it difficult to predict what will come next	3.57	21.43	42.86	25	7.14
5	I find it difficult to hold a short dialogue after listening to a passage	3.57	28.57	46.42	21.42	0

Table 1 (Continued)

Item no.	Statements	Never %	Seldom %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
6.	I find it difficult to get a general understanding of the message from listening for the first time	3.58	28.57	28.57	32.14	7.14
7.	I feel nervous and worried when I do not understand the listening passage	7.14	21.43	21.43	32.14	17.86
8	I find it difficult to understand listening passages related to topics that are not interesting to me	30.08	36.44	19.64	8.6	4.84
9	I find it more difficult to listen to a recorded text than to my teacher reading aloud	20.72	26.08	28.6	16.92	7.28

Table 2

*Students' questionnaire (private high schools)*

Item no.	Statements	Never %	Seldom %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
1	I use my experience and background knowledge of the topic to understand the listening passage.	0	14.29	67.86	17.85	0
2	I listen to every detail to get the main idea of the listening passage.	13.4	30.74	27.48	20.3	8.08
3	I find it difficult to do listening activities because of my lack of knowledge of English language.	21.36	30.68	31	12.56	4
4	After my teacher stops the recording, I find it difficult to predict what will come next.	14.76	32.36	30.56	14.36	7.56
5	I find it difficult to hold a short dialogue after listening to a passage.	22.4	31.16	28.24	13.76	4.24

Table 2 (Continued)

Item no.	Statements	Never %	Seldom %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %
6.	I find it difficult to get a general understanding of the message from listening for the first time	17.36	33.86	28.62	15.4	4.56
7.	I feel nervous and worried when I do not understand the listening passage.	23.16	25.8	23.8	16.48	10.16
8	I find it difficult to understand listening passages related to topics that are not interesting to me.	25	42.86	14.29	17.86	0
9	I find it more difficult to listen to a recorded text than to my teacher reading aloud.	7.14	42.86	28.57	10.71	10.71

Table 3

*Summary of the teachers' interviews*

Listening difficulties	Public teachers' interview	Private teachers' interview
Experience and background knowledge	Application of strategies to encourage the use of students' background knowledge in listening activities so that they can improve their understanding.	Activation of prior knowledge before doing listening tasks because students can assimilate the target language in a better way.
Listening to every detail to get the main idea	Repetition of the listening passage many times because students want to listen to every word to understand the complete message.	Students do not have many difficulties to understand messages in context.
Lack of knowledge of English language	Students find it hard to understand listening passages because they do not have a good English proficiency level.	Students do not have a good English proficiency level, thus they have some difficulties to understand the activities.

Table 3 (Continued)

Listening difficulties	Public teachers' interview	Private teachers' interview
Prediction	Students have many problems to predict the ideas that they are going to listen in class. Not all the students practice the use of prediction when they study.	Encouraging students to use prediction as a listening strategy.
Holding dialogues after listening to a passage	Students often find it difficult to have conversations in the target language after listening to a passage.	Students are able to hold dialogues after listening to a passage.
Getting the general understating of the message from listening for the first time	When students listen to a passage for the first time, they usually have problems to understand its general message because of their low proficiency level.	Most students do not have difficulties to understand the message when listening to a passage for the first time. They have a lot of learning opportunities to practice.
Anxiety produced by lack of understanding	Students often feel nervous when they do not understand a listening passage.	Some students feel worried when they are not able to comprehend a listening passage.
Difficulty to understand listening passages that are not of students' interest	The majority of students do not have problems when they listen to topics that are not interesting for them.	The majority of students have difficulties to understand listening passages when the topic is not appealing to them.
Difficulty to listening to a recorded text	Students may not fully understand a recorded text; they prefer teachers reading the text aloud.	When students listen to a recorded text, they sometimes have difficulties to understand it.

In the second item (Table 1), 42.86% of students sometimes need to listen to every detail to get the main idea of the listening passage, and a significant percentage (34.14%) often have this difficulty during listening tasks. Conversely, in Table 2, the trend changes to seldom (30.74%) and sometimes (27.48%). As for the teachers'

interview, the results show that students in public high schools had a low proficiency level, which led them to try to listen to every single word instead of listening to the whole message in context.

With respect to the third statement, 32.14% of students in public institutions sometimes found it difficult to do listening

activities because of their lack of knowledge of English language, while 25% seldom considered that these activities are hard. The percentages of these two options in Table 2 are almost similar, except for the option “often” in which 39.28% of students in public high schools found difficulties to do listening tasks. In a similar way, most of the teachers in both public and private institutions agree that their students have difficulties to do listening activities because of their low proficiency level.

In the case of the use of recordings to practice listening skills in public high schools (item 4), 42.86% of students sometimes found it difficult to predict what would come next after the teachers stopped the recording, and 25% of learners often found it difficult. The results in Table 2 indicate lower percentages in the same options; however, there is an important percentage (32.36%) in the option “seldom”. According to the teachers’ interview, students in public institutions have more difficulties for predicting ideas after listening to the passage than students in private institutions.

In item 5 (Table 1), it is evident that students could hold a short dialogue after listening to a passage (46.42% “sometimes” and 28.57% “seldom”). Similarly, the percentages in table 2 do not differ too much, except for the percentage in the option “sometimes”, which is higher in public high schools. Regarding private high school teachers’ beliefs, students do not find it difficult to hold short dialogues in the target language, while teachers from public

institutions perceive that their students often have this kind of problems.

In public institutions, most of the students had selected the options “often” (32.14%), “sometimes” (28.57%) and “seldom” (28.57%) regarding difficulties to get a general understanding of the message from listening for the first time (sixth item). On the other hand, students in private high schools selected the alternative “seldom” (33.86%) as the most significant one. As for the teachers’ interview, students in private institutions did not have too many problems to get a general understanding of the message when listening for the first time.

In item 7 “I feel nervous and worried when I do not understand the listening passage”, the percentage observed in the option “often” (32.14%) is the most significant one in public high schools. As for students in private institutions, the most important percentage was in the option “seldom” (25.8%). With respect to the teachers’ interview, in public institutions, students often felt nervous when they did not understand a listening passage. Likewise, learners in private high schools felt worried when they were not able to comprehend a listening passage.

Regarding item 8, which is about the difficulty to understand listening passages related to topics that are not interesting for students, the results show that a significant portion of learners in public institutions (30.08 % - “never” and 36.44% - “seldom”) did not have problems in this aspect. In the same way, students in private high schools expressed that they never (25%) and seldom

(42.86%) had difficulties regarding the aforementioned issue. Regarding teachers' beliefs, students in public institutions did not have major problems when they listen to topics that were not appealing for them. Surprisingly, this same aspect was mentioned as difficult for students in private institutions.

In the last item concerning difficulties to listen to a recorded text in both types of institutions, we can see similarities in the percentages of the option "sometimes" (28.6% - public and 28.57% - private) and differences in the rest of alternatives. The option "seldom" (42.86%) was higher in private high schools, and "often" and "never" were higher in the public ones. With respect to teachers' perceptions, students in public high schools preferred that their teachers read a text instead of listening to its recorded version. On the other hand, students in private institutions sometimes had difficulties when listening to the recorded versions of a passage.

## DISCUSSION

Students in private institutions usually have a good command of the target language in terms of using their experience and background knowledge of the topic to understand the listening passage (item 1). In this sense, prior knowledge may facilitate students' attempt to understand incoming information by relating what they already know with new knowledge (Pourhosein & Ahmadi, 2011). This is justified by the fact that teachers in private high schools have better professional preparation, which

allows them to foster students' previous knowledge through well-designed didactic resources that help them comprehend listening passages. Conversely, teachers in public institutions do not use them as frequently as in private high schools.

Public high school students pay more attention to every detail in the listening passage than the students in private high schools. This situation might occur because students in private institutions have been trained to develop their reading comprehension skill in previous levels of instruction, so they are able to easily identify the main idea of the listening passage. With respect to this aspect, Brown (2006), emphasized the importance of helping students listened for specific purposes; also, this author explained that focusing on main ideas was more important for comprehension than listening for details.

Considering the main difficulties that listeners from private and public high schools have in listening comprehension activities, we will start by saying that learners from private high schools seldom have problems when it comes to do listening activities due to the lack of knowledge (item 3). On the other hand, more students in public high schools experience difficulties in the aforementioned activity. This difference might be explained because students in private high schools are exposed to a better learning environment than in public institutions. In addition, private high school students have more opportunities to practice the target language due to some factors such as the exposure time, the number of

students per class, and the availability of didactic resources, which contribute to better instruction.

In item 4, students from private institutions are better prepared to predict what will happen next in a listening passage without necessarily listening to all the information. These students apparently have had experience in the practice of pre-listening activities that activate their schemata. These schemata allow the students to make predictions about the situation and the discourse, thus helping them integrate new information (Jensen & Hansen, 1995).

Students of private institutions perceive that they are able to hold short dialogues after listening to a passage because they have a better understanding of what they listen to in the target language than students from public high schools do; this fact is also corroborated by the teachers' opinions since they claim that the students' speaking performance fits their language proficiency level. In fact, practicing listening as a receptive skill plays a significant role when acquiring speaking skills (Hamouda, 2013).

Regarding learners' difficulties to get a general understanding of the message from listening for the first time, students in public high schools often experience them. On the other hand, students in private institutions seldom have problems related to this aspect. Likewise, teachers in public institutions report students' difficulties to get a general understanding of the message from listening for the first time. This might be due to the number of hours (4 hours a week) devoted to teach this language, and the number of

students per class. In fact, most public high schools in Ecuador have larger classes than private ones.

With respect to item 7 related to feeling nervous and worried when students do not understand the listening passage, learners in public institutions experience these feelings with a higher frequency than students in private ones. It is evident that students in both types of institutions typically feel nervous or worried when they do not understand the listening passage even though this skill can be stressful for language learners (Goh & Taib, 2006). According to the teachers' interview, there are many factors such as psychological problems, lack of knowledge and confidence, and others that cause anxiety at the moment of performing listening tasks.

In item 8, which is related to the difficulty to understand listening passages about topics that are not interesting for students, it seems that learners in both types of institutions do not have any problems when facing this issue. According to teachers' opinion, these results might be caused by the exposition of students to a variety of topics that allow them to improve the listening skill.

In the last item, regarding students' difficulty to listen to a recorded text, learners in private institutions considered that they seldom find it more difficult to understand recordings than listening to the teacher reading aloud. These results show that students' listening comprehension skill is acceptable because they are more exposed to authentic audio materials which include different English accents. In this regard, Goh

(1999) asserted that the speaker's accent was one of the most significant factors that affected students' comprehension. On the other hand, in public institutions, students are less exposed to authentic audio materials, which does not allow them to have a good command of the listening skill (Bingol et al., 2014).

Based on the aforementioned discussion, we can notice that the students in public institutions are the ones who experience more difficulties in listening comprehension.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The main difficulties that listeners from public high schools face when doing listening comprehension activities include not using their experience and background knowledge of the topic to understand the listening passage, trying to listen to every detail to get the main idea of the passage, lacking knowledge of English language, predicting content, understanding general ideas when listening for the first time, and feeling anxiety when they do not understand the passage. The most significant problem among the aforementioned issues is that students are unable to get the main idea of a listening passage because they try to listen to every detail.

Students in private high schools usually have access to high-quality didactic resources, technologies, and teachers with appropriate training, which results in better command of the target language. As a result, learners involve their experience

and background knowledge to comprehend listening activities. However, a significant amount of them feel anxious when they do not understand a listening passage.

Students in public high schools seem to have more problems regarding listening comprehension than their peers in private institutions. This can be observed in the data analyzed in which the percentages show higher incidence of difficulties in public high schools. This fact might be explained in terms of the learning environment, opportunities to practice the target language, class size, exposure time, and didactic resources.

A limitation to remark in this study is that we worked with a partial sample of the country which included the Highlands and Coast regions, further studies should consider participants in other Ecuadorian regions to have a more complete perspective of this issue.

Although this study has provided insights on the difficulties students have in listening comprehension, and has contributed to the development of education in Ecuador, further research on the reasons that cause those problems regarding the aforementioned issues should be conducted. In addition, teachers must seek self-improvement in terms of professional development by looking for opportunities to receive training in the field of EFL teaching. Finally, teachers should design classroom activities so that learners are trained to use strategies aimed at overcoming the listening difficulties discussed in this study.



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## APPENDIX 1

### Teacher's interview

1. Do you activate students' experience and background knowledge when they have to do listening activities? Why?

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2. Do your students have any difficulty when listening in context? Why?

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3. Does your students' English proficiency level influence their understanding of listening passages?

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4. Do your students use the prediction strategy to understand listening passages? Why?

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5. Do your students find it difficult to maintain short dialogues after listening to a passage? Why?

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6. Do your students find it difficult to get the general idea of a passage when listening to it for the first time? Why?

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7. How do you students feel when they do not understand a listening passage?

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8. Do your students find it difficult to understand listening passages that are not of their interest? Why?

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9. Do your students find it more difficult to understand a recorded text or a read-aloud text? Why?

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