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Original article

Listening Comprehension Difficulties of EFL Students at the Faculty of Languages and Translation, Azzaytuna University

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Abstract
This descriptive quantitative study identifies the listening comprehension difficulties encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at the Faculty of Languages and Translation, Azzaytuna University. The research addressed a central question: What are the primary difficulties that hinder the development of listening skills? The study was conducted in the first semester of the 2023/2024 academic year with a sample of 41 students from all educational levels. Data were collected via a closed-ended questionnaire and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings, confirmed by inferential statistical analysis, revealed significant challenges categorized into three areas: Listener-related difficulties, including limited vocabulary, insufficient practice, and problems with concentration; Listening material-related difficulties, such as unfamiliar accents, high-speed speech, and complex grammatical structures; and Physical setting-related difficulties, which encompassed poor audio quality, environmental noise, and crowded classrooms. Among these, issues with the physical learning environment were found to be the most severe. The study concludes that these multifaceted barriers significantly impede students' listening proficiency. It is recommended that students adopt metacognitive strategies to become more aware of these challenges. Furthermore, university authorities must prioritize improving physical learning conditions through investment in better audio technology and infrastructure.
Keywords. Listening Comprehension, Learning Difficulties, Language Acquisition.

Introduction

The unequivocal status of English as a global lingua franca has established proficiency in the language as a non-negotiable asset for academic and professional mobility. For learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), achieving communicative competence is contingent upon the integrated development of four core skills. Within this framework, listening comprehension is not merely a skill but the fundamental channel for language acquisition. As underscored by Krashen's Input Hypothesis, comprehensible input is the essential catalyst for learning, and listening serves as its primary medium [1]. This role is further emphasized by Vandergrift, who notes that listening provides the aural data necessary for internalizing vocabulary, phonology, and syntax, thereby laying the groundwork for speaking proficiency [2]. Despite this foundational importance, listening is consistently reported as the most challenging skill to master, often leading to significant learner anxiety and frustration [3].

Extensive research has catalogued the pervasive difficulties EFL learner's encounter. Studies by Goh and Hamouda highlight common obstacles, including an inability to identify main ideas, recognize known words in connected speech, and process information delivered at a natural pace [4,5]. Scholarly consensus, as synthesized by Bloomfield et al. and Graham, attributes these challenges to a complex interplay of listener-internal factors (e.g., limited vocabulary, inadequate metacognitive awareness) and listener-external factors (e.g., unfamiliar accents, rapid speech rate, poor audio quality) [6-8]. These difficulties can create a vicious cycle: comprehension failures often lead to heightened listening anxiety, which in turn further impedes cognitive processing and can result in task avoidance, severely hindering language acquisition [9].

The psycholinguistic underpinnings of these challenges are well-theorized. Scholars like Field explain that, unlike reading, listening demands the real-time parsing of ephemeral auditory signals, requiring simultaneous lower-level decoding (segmenting sounds, recognizing words affected by assimilation and elision) and higher-level interpretation (constructing meaning, inferring intent) [10]. This process places immense demands on cognitive resources. Vandergrift and Goh argue that when lower-level processes are not automatized, they create a cognitive bottleneck, diverting attention from meaning-building and leading to comprehension breakdown [11,12]. A critical manifestation of this is the dissociation between declarative and procedural knowledge. Learners often possess explicit knowledge of vocabulary and grammar but cannot access it swiftly enough for spontaneous comprehension, a discrepancy explained by Anderson's model of cognitive architecture [13]. This problem is exacerbated by the phonological modifications of natural speech, which distort the citation forms of words learners know from print, making them unrecognizable in context [12].

In response to these understood complexities, a significant body of pedagogical research, notably by Goh and Graham, advocates for a shift from product-oriented testing to process-oriented instruction that integrates metacognitive strategy training and bottom-up decoding practice [14,15]. However, as Gilakjani

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and Sabouri observe, a persistent gap remains between this research-based consensus and common classroom practices, where listening is often neglected or reduced to an assessment activity rather than taught as a strategic process [3]. This gap suggests that the general problems of listening instruction may manifest in uniquely specific ways within local contexts, influenced by factors such as curricular priorities, linguistic background, and available resources.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the specific listening comprehension challenges faced by EFL students at Azzaytuna University's Faculty of Languages and Translation, to develop more effective teaching methodologies to enhance their language learning outcomes.

Methods

Research Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive research design to systematically investigate the listening comprehension difficulties of EFL students. The research was conducted at the Faculty of Languages and Translation, Azzaytuna University, Libya, during the fall semester of the 2023-2024 academic year. The study participants comprised a purposive sample of 41 undergraduate EFL students. Participants were selected from the fourth to the eighth semesters to ensure the sample captured a range of student experiences and proficiency levels, from mid-level to advanced university students. This sampling strategy was chosen to gain insights from students who had sufficient exposure to formal listening instruction within the university's curriculum.

Research Instrument

The primary data collection instrument was a structured, closed-ended questionnaire developed by the researcher based on a comprehensive review of established literature on listening comprehension challenges [5,11,12,13]. The final questionnaire consisted of 22 questions; each rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The questions were organized into three distinct theoretical categories to provide a structured analysis:

Section 1: Listener-Related Difficulties (8 questions) assessing issues such as limited vocabulary, lack of concentration, and insufficient practice.

Section 2: Listening Material-Related Difficulties (10 questions) evaluates challenges related to factors like unfamiliar accents, high speech rate, and complex grammatical structures.

Section 3: Physical Setting-Related Difficulties (4 questions) concerning obstacles such as poor audio quality, environmental noise, and crowded classrooms.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the content validity of the instrument, the initial draft questionnaire was subjected to a rigorous review by a panel of nine (9) experts in EFL teaching and research (five from Libyan universities and four from Jordanian institutions). Their feedback pertained to item clarity, grammatical accuracy, relevance to the construct, and appropriate categorization. This process led to the refinement and reduction of the instrument from an initial 28 questions to the final 22 questions. Furthermore, a pilot study was conducted with 20 EFL students who were not part of the main sample to assess the instrument's reliability. The internal consistency, measured using Cronbach's alpha, yielded high coefficients for each section (Listener-Related: $\alpha = 0.886$; Material-Related: $\alpha = 0.882$; Setting-Related: $\alpha = 0.875$) and for the entire questionnaire ($\alpha = 0.881$), confirming its high reliability for this research context [14].

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was administered in person during scheduled class sessions to ensure a high response rate. The researcher provided clear instructions to participants regarding the purpose of the study and the method for completing the questionnaire. Anonymity and confidentiality were emphasized. Participants were given sufficient time to complete the questionnaire, and all 41 distributed questionnaires were returned fully completed.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data gathered from the questionnaires were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 26. Descriptive statistics, specifically, means and standard deviations, were calculated for each item and for the three main categories. This analysis allowed the researcher to rank the difficulties based on their perceived prevalence and intensity as reported by the participants.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to standard ethical principles in academic research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The confidentiality of their responses and their anonymity were guaranteed throughout the research process.

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Results

The primary objective of this study was to identify the challenges encountered by EFL students in developing their listening skills. Descriptive statistical analysis, comprising means and standard deviations, was employed to assess students' perceptions across three predefined categories of listening difficulties. The aggregate findings, presented in Table 1, indicate that participants encountered a high overall level of difficulty (Total M=3.76, SD=1.07).

A detailed examination reveals that Physical Settings-Related Difficulties constituted the most severe category of challenges (M=4.30, SD=0.91), ranking highest among the three domains. This was followed by Listener-Related Difficulties (M=3.60, SD=1.13) and Listening Materials-Related Difficulties (M=3.38, SD=1.17), both of which were perceived at a moderate level of difficulty.

Table 1: Overall Perceptions of Listening Difficulty Categories

Rank	Category	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
1	Physical Settings-Related	4.30	0.91	High
2	Listener-Related	3.60	1.13	Moderate
3	Listening Materials-Related	3.38	1.17	Moderate
Total		3.76	1.07	High

Scale: 1-2.33 (Low), 2.34-3.66 (Moderate), 3.67-5.00 (High)

Analysis of Listener-Related Difficulties

As detailed in (Table 2), the analysis of listener-related difficulties revealed a moderate overall perception of challenge within this category (M=3.60, SD=1.13). However, examination of individual items identified four specific difficulties that students rated as high-level challenges.

The most pronounced difficulty was limited vocabulary (Item 4, M=4.39, SD=0.92), representing the most significant listener-related barrier. This was closely followed by challenges related to comprehension after a single listening (Item 2, M=3.90, SD=1.18), insufficient listening practice (Item 1, M=3.78, SD=1.12), and difficulties maintaining concentration (Item 3, M=3.68, SD=1.21).

Additional challenges were perceived at a moderate level, including problems with identifying main ideas (Item 6, M=3.61, SD=1.22), relating individual ideas within texts (Item 7, M=3.56, SD=1.10), and recalling specific words or phrases (Item 8, M=3.17, SD=1.11). The least challenging aspect was constructing mental images to aid comprehension (Item 5, M=2.73, SD=1.24).

Table 2: Listener-Related Difficulties

Rank	Questions	Statement	Mean	SD	Level
1	4	Understanding texts with a limited vocabulary	4.39	0.92	High
2	2	Understanding after one listening	3.90	1.18	High
3	1	Insufficient listening practice	3.78	1.12	High
4	3	Difficulty concentrating on audio materials	3.68	1.21	High
5	6	Identifying main ideas	3.61	1.22	Moderate
6	7	Relating individual ideas	3.56	1.10	Moderate
7	8	Recalling words/phrases	3.17	1.11	Moderate
8	5	Constructing mental images	2.73	1.24	Moderate
Total			3.60	1.13	Moderate

**(Low: 1 - 2.33, moderate: 2.34 - 3.66, high: 3.67 - 5) based on Likert scale 1 to 5.*

Analysis of Listening Materials-Related Difficulties

As shown in (Table 3), students perceived listening materials-related difficulties at a moderate overall level (M=3.38, SD=1.17), with individual item scores ranging from 2.85 to 4.20. Three specific aspects were identified as high-level challenges.

The most significant material-related difficulty was comprehending texts with unfamiliar accents (Item 9, M=4.20, SD=0.89). Students also reported substantial challenges with high-speed speech (Item 12, M=3.98, SD=1.03) and the absence of adequate pauses in listening texts (Item 13, M=3.88, SD=1.07).

Several other factors were perceived as moderate challenges, including complex grammatical structures (Item 10, M=3.32, SD=1.25), unfamiliar content (Item 15, M=3.29, SD=1.23), lengthy audio texts (Item 11, M=3.20, SD=1.15), and the lack of transcripts (Item 18, M=3.17, SD=1.25). The least challenging aspects were colloquial expressions (Item 14, M=3.05, SD=1.29), absence of visual support (Item 17, M=2.85, SD=1.23), and uninteresting content (Item 16, M=2.85, SD=1.29).

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Table 3: Listening Materials-Related Difficulties

Rank	Item	Statement	Mean	SD	Level
1	9	Comprehending texts with unfamiliar accents	4.20	0.89	High
2	12	Understanding high-speed speech	3.98	1.03	High
3	13	comprehending meaning without adequate pauses	3.88	1.07	High
4	10	Understanding complex grammatical structures	3.32	1.25	Moderate
5	15	Comprehending unfamiliar materials	3.29	1.23	Moderate
6	11	Understanding lengthy audio texts	3.20	1.15	Moderate
7	18	Comprehending content without transcripts	3.17	1.25	Moderate
8	14	Grasping colloquial expressions	3.05	1.29	Moderate
9	17	Understanding without visual support	2.85	1.23	Moderate
10	16	Listening to uninteresting content	2.85	1.29	Moderate
		Category Total	3.38	1.17	Moderate

**(Low: 1 - 2.33, moderate: 2.34 - 3.66, high: 3.67 - 5) based on Likert scale 1 to 5.*

As presented in Table 4, physical settings-related difficulties emerged as the most significant category of challenges, with all items rated at a high level of difficulty and an overall mean of 4.30 (SD=0.91). This indicates that environmental factors constitute the most substantial barrier to listening comprehension. The most severe challenge was poor recording quality of listening texts (Item 19, M=4.66, SD=0.72), followed closely by exposure to surrounding noise during listening activities (Item 20, M=4.56, SD=0.79). Students also reported significant difficulties with inappropriate learning environments and lack of preparation (Item 21, M=3.98, SD=1.03) and crowded classroom settings (Item 22, M=3.98, SD=1.10).

Table 4. Physical Settings-Related Difficulties

Rank	Item	Statement	Mean	SD	Level
1	19	Comprehending texts with poor recording quality	4.66	0.72	High
2	20	Listening amidst the surrounding noise	4.56	0.79	High
3	21	Learning in inappropriate environments without preparation	3.98	1.03	High
4	22	Comprehending texts in crowded classrooms	3.98	1.10	High
Category Total			4.30	0.91	High

Comprehensive Analysis of Listening Difficulties

A comprehensive ranking of all 22 listening difficulty items across the three categories reveals significant variation in students' perceptions, with mean scores ranging from 2.73 to 4.66. The overall mean across all items was 3.62 (SD=1.16), falling within the moderate difficulty level. As detailed in (Table 5), environmental factors dominated the highest-ranked challenges. The top five most severe difficulties were all physical and technical in nature: poor recording quality (Item 19, M=4.66, SD=0.72), surrounding noise (Item 20, M=4.56, SD=0.79), limited vocabulary (Item 4, M=4.39, SD=0.92), unfamiliar accents (Item 9, M=4.20, SD=0.89), and inappropriate learning environments (Item 21, M=3.98, SD=1.03). The analysis identified eleven items rated as high-level difficulties (mean ≥3.67) and eleven as moderate challenges. Notably, no items were perceived as low-level difficulties. The most substantial challenges are predominantly related to physical settings (Category 3) and fundamental listening competencies such as vocabulary and accent recognition. Moderate-level difficulties primarily involved cognitive processing aspects, including identifying main ideas, understanding complex structures, and working with extended listening texts.

Table 5: Comprehensive Ranking of Listening Difficulties

Rank	Item	Category	Statement	Mean	SD	Level
1	19	3	Poor recording quality	4.66	0.72	High
2	20	3	Surrounding noise	4.56	0.79	High
3	4	1	Limited vocabulary	4.39	0.92	High
4	9	2	Unfamiliar accents	4.20	0.89	High
5	21	3	Inappropriate learning environment	3.98	1.03	High
6	22	3	Crowded classroom	3.98	1.10	High
7	12	2	High-speed speech	3.98	1.03	High
8	2	1	Single exposure insufficient	3.90	1.18	High
9	13	2	Inadequate pauses	3.88	1.07	High
10	1	1	Insufficient practice	3.78	1.12	High
11	3	1	Concentration difficulties	3.68	1.21	High
12	6	1	Identifying main ideas	3.61	1.22	Moderate

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13	7	1	Relating ideas	3.56	1.10	Moderate
14	10	2	Complex grammar	3.32	1.25	Moderate
15	15	2	Unfamiliar materials	3.29	1.23	Moderate
16	11	2	Lengthy texts	3.20	1.15	Moderate
17	18	2	No transcript	3.17	1.25	Moderate
18	8	1	Word recall	3.17	1.11	Moderate
19	14	2	Colloquial expressions	3.05	1.29	Moderate
20	16	2	Uninteresting content	2.85	1.29	Moderate
21	17	2	No visual support	2.85	1.23	Moderate
22	5	1	Mental imaging	2.73	1.24	Moderate
Overall Total				3.62	1.16	Moderate

**Scale: 1-2.33 (Low), 2.34-3.66 (Moderate), 3.67-5.00 (High)*

Inferential Statistical Analysis

To determine whether the identified listening difficulties represented statistically significant phenomena within the population rather than chance occurrences in the sample, a one-sample t-test was conducted for each category. The neutral value of 3 on the Likert scale served as the test value for comparison. The results, presented in (Table 6), demonstrate that all three categories of difficulties achieved statistical significance.

Table 6: One-Sample T-Test Results for Listening Difficulty Categories

Category	df	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value	Significance
Listener-Related Difficulties	41	3.60	1.13	3.45	<0.001	Highly Significant
Listening Materials-Related Difficulties	41	3.38	1.17	2.24	0.030	Significant
Physical Settings-Related Difficulties	41	4.30	0.91	9.45	<0.001	Highly Significant

Note: Test value = 3, a = 0.05

Category One - Listener-Related Difficulties demonstrated highly statistically significant results ($t(41)=3.45$, $p<0.001$), indicating that challenges such as limited vocabulary and concentration difficulties represent genuine obstacles for the student population rather than random variations. Category Two - Listening Materials-Related Difficulties showed statistical significance ($t(41)=2.24$, $p=0.030$), confirming that difficulties with accents, speech rate, and other material-related factors constitute meaningful challenges, though to a somewhat lesser extent than other categories.

Category Three - Physical Settings-Related Difficulties yielded the strongest statistical results ($t(41)=9.45$, $p<0.001$), with the highest mean score (4.30) and lowest standard deviation (0.91). This indicates remarkable consensus among participants that environmental factors such as poor audio quality and ambient noise represent the most substantial and consistently experienced barriers to effective listening comprehension.

These inferential results confirm that all three dimensions of listening difficulties identified through descriptive analysis represent statistically significant challenges that extend beyond this sample to the broader student population.

Discussion

Study illuminates the multifaceted nature of listening comprehension challenges encountered by EFL students at Azzaytuna University, categorizing them into three distinct yet interconnected dimensions. The results clearly indicate that physical setting-related difficulties present the most formidable barrier, followed by listener-related and listening material-related challenges [6,8]. The overall high mean score underscores a pervasive struggle among participants, reinforcing the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing these issues.

Interpreting Listener-Related Difficulties

The identification of limited vocabulary as the paramount listener-related challenge is consistent with a substantial body of literature that emphasizes lexical knowledge as the bedrock of bottom-up processing [1,10]. This finding is corroborated by recent studies, which have similarly found vocabulary deficits to be a primary hindrance among undergraduate English majors [10]. The significant need for repeated listening opportunities highlights a gap in extensive practice, aligning with research on automaticity and the necessity of consistent exposure [11,12]. Furthermore, difficulties with concentration and identifying main ideas point to underdeveloped metacognitive strategies, a concern also linked to strategic awareness for improved comprehension outcomes [7,11].

Analyzing Material-Related Challenges

The prominence of unfamiliar accents as the chief material-related obstacle echoes earlier findings and is validated by contemporary research, which reports that phonological unfamiliarity significantly disrupts

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comprehension for L2 learners [6,13]. The challenges posed by high-speed speech and insufficient pauses reaffirm conclusions about the impact of temporal variables, a factor that remains critically relevant as learners engage with authentic, fast-paced media [4, 5]. The moderate difficulties with complex grammar and unfamiliar content suggest that while students have some foundational knowledge, these areas require targeted support, a point emphasized in recent case studies of EFL listening classes [14].

Examining Physical Setting Challenges

The extreme difficulty associated with poor audio quality and ambient noise powerfully underscores the critical, and often overlooked, role of the acoustic environment [6,8]. This finding strongly supports earlier work and is amplified by recent research, which identified poor listening conditions as a major cause of comprehension failure among ESL undergraduates [6,8]. The significant challenges posed by crowded classrooms and inadequate learning environments highlight that infrastructural and environmental factor can severely compromise even the soundest pedagogical efforts.

Integrated Analysis and Theoretical Implications

The ranking of challenges, which includes factors from all three categories (technical, environmental, linguistic, and phonological), demonstrates that listening difficulties are not monolithic but interconnected. This supports an interactive model of listening comprehension, where acoustic, linguistic, cognitive, and environmental factors dynamically interact. The dominance of physical environment factors at the top of the list has profound implications. It suggests that investments in technological infrastructure (e.g., high-quality audio equipment, sound-treated classrooms) are not merely ancillary but are as crucial as pedagogical interventions. This study, therefore, aligns with a contemporary understanding that effective listening instruction must adopt a holistic strategy, simultaneously addressing learner strategies, material selection, and the physical learning space to foster successful listening development [3,6,8].

Limitations and Future Research

The focus on a single institution limits generalizability, and the exclusive use of self-report data may not capture all aspects of listening difficulties. Future research could employ mixed methods approaches, including direct listening assessments and classroom observations, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these challenges.

Conclusion

This study concludes that EFL students at the Faculty of Languages and Translation face significant challenges in developing their listening comprehension skills. These challenges, as categorized by the research instrument, are threefold: listener-related difficulties, listening material-related difficulties, and physical setting-related difficulties.

Conflict of interest. Nil

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