

EXPLORING EFL STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN LISTENING COMPREHENSION: A STUDY ON COMMON CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

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First Received: August 2025

Final Proof Received: September 2025

ABSTRACT

Listening comprehension is a fundamental skill in learning a foreign language, as it facilitates meaningful interaction and language acquisition. Despite its importance, many learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) struggle with understanding spoken English due to various linguistic, technical, and motivational challenges. While previous studies have highlighted some of these difficulties, few have explored how students themselves identify and address them within formal listening instruction contexts. To fill this gap, this study aims to investigate the types of listening difficulties encountered by university-level English education students and the strategies they employ to overcome them. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected from reflection questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, with 15 final-year students who had completed listening courses as the participants. Thematic analysis revealed three major categories of challenges: comprehension difficulties such as unfamiliar vocabulary and fast speech, technical barriers such as unstable internet connections and unclear audio, and motivational issues including boredom and anxiety. In response, students adopted strategies such as repeated listening, the use of subtitles or transcripts, and the selection of content based on personal interest. These findings suggest the need for curriculum designers and educators to integrate more learner-centered and strategy-focused approaches in teaching listening. Diversify listening materials, integrate strategy training, and create low-anxiety environments to support learners may significantly enhance learners' listening comprehension.

Keywords: *EFL students, listening difficulties, listening strategies*

INTRODUCTION

In the field of English as a Foreign Language education, listening skill is one of the most important language skills to learn and is challenging (Alzamil, 2021). Despite its importance, a considerable number of EFL learners continue to struggle with developing this skill. Listening comprehension, in particular, plays an essential role in second language acquisition but remains one of the most challenging aspects for learners to master (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Zhang & Graham, 2020). A range of scholarly investigations has explored the barriers that EFL students encounter when attempting to understand spoken English. These difficulties are frequently attributed to several influencing factors, including the learner's cultural background, linguistic proficiency, and limited exposure to authentic language use in real-world contexts (Al-khresheh, 2020).

This study seeks to examine the common obstacles faced by EFL students in listening comprehension; while also aiming to identify practical strategies, they employ to navigate and mitigate these challenges. Specifically, the study is guided by two research questions:

1. What are common difficulties faced by EFL students in listening activities?

2. What coping strategies do students implement to manage and overcome their listening difficulties?

The first research question focuses on identifying the recurring problems that EFL students face during listening activities. The objective here is to detail the specific listening comprehension issues encountered by students, as reported in existing literature. Prior research highlights several contributing factors to these difficulties, such as rapid speech, unfamiliar accents, and cultural divergences between the speaker and listener (Al-khresheh, 2020). Additionally, the complex cognitive processes involved in listening, namely perception, parsing, and interpretation are frequently noted as significant points of struggle for learners (Al-khresheh, 2020).

The second research question focuses on the adaptive strategies students use to enhance their listening capabilities. Literature in this area suggests that various metacognitive and cognitive approaches, including prediction, real-time monitoring, and drawing on prior knowledge, can substantially enhance listening comprehension outcomes (Al-khresheh, 2020). This question aims to uncover which specific strategies are most commonly employed by EFL students and evaluate their relative effectiveness in overcoming comprehension barriers.

Through investigating these questions, the study intends to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the challenges and the coping mechanisms associated with EFL listening comprehension. It is expected that the findings will contribute meaningful insights into the listening difficulties faced by EFL students, alongside the strategies they use in response.

While a substantial body of research has focused on listening difficulties by involving students actively engaged in listening courses, this study distinguishes itself by selecting a unique group of participants, EFL students in their eighth semester who have already completed formal listening courses, providing new perspectives on self-directed strategies. Moreover, while earlier studies have usually focused on either extensive or intensive listening difficulties, this research adopts a broader approach by exploring general listening comprehension challenges that encompass both extensive and intensive listening.

The Importance of Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension stands as a cornerstone in the process of language acquisition, playing a vital role in facilitating effective communication and academic achievement. As emphasized by Hardiyanto et al. (2021), listening should not be misconstrued as a passive task; rather, it constitutes a dynamic and cognitively demanding activity. It engages learners in multifaceted processes such as perception, parsing, and the utilization of spoken input, all of which are essential for decoding and understanding oral language (Alivi & Suharyono, 2016). Particularly for students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), mastering listening skills is indispensable. It allows them to participate meaningfully in both academic discourse and everyday conversations, thus contributing to their overall linguistic competence and enhancing their educational and personal development (Alzamil, 2021).

Nonetheless, despite its critical role in language learning, listening comprehension remains one of the most difficult skills for EFL learners to develop. This difficulty can be attributed to several interrelated variables, including the characteristics of the speaker, the nature of the message, and the contextual environment in which listening takes place (Alivi & Suharyono, 2016). According to Brown and Yule (1963, as cited in Alivi & Suharyono, 2016), factors such as a speaker's accent, speech rate, and pronunciation can considerably hinder a learner's ability to accurately interpret spoken content. Moreover, the complexity and unfamiliarity of the listening material itself may further impede comprehension, particularly for less experienced learners.

The significance of listening comprehension extends beyond mere linguistic decoding; it is instrumental in enabling learners to participate in authentic communication. It serves as a foundational skill that supports the development of other language competencies, including reading and speaking. Furthermore, it underpins learners' abilities to engage in coherent and meaningful interactions across various contexts. As noted by Eshmuradov (2023), proficiency in listening comprehension is essential for understanding spoken language, which, in turn, is a prerequisite for effective interpersonal and academic communication. Additionally, listening acts as a conduit for learners' integration into the cultural and social dimensions of the target language, reinforcing their immersion and engagement within its community (Zhupanyk, 2022).

Research has further demonstrated that strong listening skills contribute to vocabulary acquisition, thereby supporting improvements in both auditory and textual comprehension (Rakhimova, 2024). However, the path to developing these skills is often obstructed by numerous challenges. Learners frequently encounter difficulties when exposed to informal speech, idiomatic expressions, or rapid dialogue, which can disrupt concentration and hinder comprehension (Zhupanyk, 2022). Moreover, individual psychological traits and prior experiences with the language also shape one's ability to process spoken input effectively (Mogollon, 2023; Zhupanyk, 2022).

In light of these obstacles, the implementation of targeted pedagogical strategies becomes imperative. Approaches such as repeated exposure to listening texts and the integration of contextually relevant audio materials have proven effective in strengthening learners' auditory processing capabilities (Bashirli, 2024). These strategies not only enhance comprehension but also contribute to learners' confidence and autonomy in navigating spoken English in diverse settings.

Challenges Faced by EFL Students in Listening Comprehension

The results of prior research examining the influence of cultural background on the listening comprehension abilities of Saudi EFL learners reveal that listening remains the most demanding of all language skills. Saudi learners, in particular, face pronounced difficulties during the stages of perception, parsing, and utilization when processing spoken input, with cultural factors playing a significant role in these challenges (Al-Malki, 2018). Additional findings from Al-Malki (2018) indicate that Saudi EFL students often gravitate toward bottom-up listening strategies, such as isolating individual words or phonemes, rather than employing top-down approaches that draw on background knowledge and contextual understanding to facilitate comprehension. Similarly, research focused on Egyptian EFL students has shown that comprehension is frequently impeded by factors such as the rapid pace of speech, speaker accents, and the presence of unfamiliar lexical items (Kassem, 2015).

Mandiri et al. (2022) conducted an investigation into the difficulties encountered during extensive listening practices and identified three primary categories of obstacles: comprehension-related, technical, and motivational. Many students reported experiencing trouble understanding listening passages due to their limited familiarity with a broad range of vocabulary. Comprehension difficulties were further compounded by the swift speech rate of native speakers and the influence of regional accents, which often caused words to merge, thereby reducing intelligibility (Mandiri et al., 2022).

Beyond comprehension, learners also struggled with technical challenges, particularly in relation to online listening platforms. Issues such as unreliable internet connectivity and audio playback malfunctions were commonly cited, preventing students from effectively accessing and engaging with the assigned materials (Mandiri et al., 2022). Motivation emerged as another key area of concern. Learners reported a noticeable decline in interest when audio content was

delivered in a dull or unengaging manner. If the presentation lacked clarity or stimulation, students found it difficult to maintain focus and were less inclined to persist in listening tasks (Mandiri et al., 2022).

The challenges that EFL learners face during listening activities are multifaceted and can severely impact both their comprehension and overall engagement. These difficulties arise from several interconnected factors, including the inherent complexity of the listening material, the students' level of language proficiency, and their personal attitudes toward the listening process. Rapid speech delivery often overwhelms learners, particularly when paired with unfamiliar accents that obscure the speaker's intent (Sun, 2024; Kasim & Luwiti, 2019). Additionally, technical shortcomings such as poor audio quality further compromise comprehension by making verbal messages difficult to discern (Kasim & Luwiti, 2019).

Learners with limited language proficiency are especially vulnerable to these obstacles, as they often struggle with the cognitive load required to process and retain information from auditory sources (Sun, 2024; Thao & Long, 2022). A constrained vocabulary further limits their ability to decode meaning from spoken content, which can result in heightened frustration (Kasim & Luwiti, 2019). Furthermore, a lack of enthusiasm or reluctance to participate in listening activities exacerbates these comprehension issues (Batubara & Fatmawa, 2023). The ineffectiveness of instructional approaches and the use of suboptimal teaching materials can also hinder progress in developing listening skills, highlighting the importance of pedagogical refinement (Hanh et al., 2022).

Factors Influencing Listening Comprehension Difficulties

A multitude of interrelated factors has been identified as contributing to the challenges that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students face in developing effective listening comprehension. Among the most prominent barriers are the rapid rate of speech, varied accents, and differences in cultural context, all of which can substantially hinder students' ability to grasp spoken English (Alivi & Suharyono, 2016). Existing literature consistently emphasizes that EFL learners encounter a broad spectrum of linguistic, cognitive, and psychological difficulties during listening tasks. These challenges include, speech rate, accent, unfamiliar vocabulary, real-time language processing demands, anxiety, and the influence of cultural unfamiliarity.

From a linguistic perspective, many learners find themselves overwhelmed by the complexity and pace of spoken language. Zur (2020) found that students enrolled in English teacher education programs often struggle with fast-paced speech and lexical unfamiliarity, both of which impede accurate comprehension. Similarly, research on the integration of video materials into listening instruction has shown that characteristics of the speaker, delivery style, and surrounding environmental conditions can all influence a learner's ability to effectively process spoken input (Alivi & Suharyono, 2016).

Cognitive aspects also play a critical role in shaping the listening experiences of EFL students. Hamouda (2013) reported that learners frequently encounter difficulties in processing auditory information in real time, which negatively affects both comprehension and retention. Furthermore, psychological elements such as anxiety and low self-confidence exacerbate these cognitive burdens. Hardiyanto et al. (2021) observed that many students experience elevated levels of anxiety during listening activities, which in turn disrupts their focus and understanding. Additionally, cultural dissonance and limited immersion in authentic English-speaking environments pose further obstacles. According to Al-khresheh (2020), students often fail to grasp spoken content when it contains culturally specific references that are outside their realm of experience.

The cumulative effect of these challenges significantly impacts language acquisition outcomes for EFL students. Key contributing factors include limited metacognitive awareness, persistent linguistic hurdles, and adverse environmental influences. Su (2024) found that many EFL learners display moderate awareness of metacognitive strategies but suffer from high levels of listening-related anxiety, both of which impede their ability to comprehend spoken English effectively. Low-proficiency learners, in particular, are more likely to experience heightened anxiety and diminished metacognitive awareness when compared to their more proficient peers, underscoring the necessity of customized instructional interventions (Su, 2024). Supporting this, recent findings by Yunus and Damayanti (2024) underscore the benefits of self-regulated listening routines in enhancing metacognitive control, while research by Hanh et al. (2022) illustrates how personalized intervention programs can alleviate anxiety and improve learner confidence.

Linguistic challenges remain a main concern. Hein et al. (2020) note that unfamiliar vocabulary, rapid speech delivery, and accent variation consistently impede comprehension. These issues are particularly pronounced among learners with lower proficiency, who tend to struggle during the initial perception and parsing stages of the listening process (Sun, 2024). Additionally, extralinguistic factors such as background noise, syntactic complexity, and suboptimal physical settings further complicate the listening experience. To address these issues, scholars have recommended targeted training to improve students' perceptual and parsing abilities, coupled with the strategic use of digital platforms and technological tools to reinforce practice and facilitate skill acquisition (Mukhtorova & Ilxomov, 2024; Sun, 2024).

Strategies Employed by EFL Students to Overcome Listening Difficulties

Building upon the insights presented in previous research, an investigation into the listening strategies employed by Egyptian EFL college sophomores revealed that these learners utilize a broad spectrum of approaches, namely cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies to address the various challenges encountered in listening comprehension (Kassem, 2015). Furthermore, the study indicated a strong positive relationship between the application of these strategies and improvements in both listening performance and self-efficacy. This suggests that the deliberate and strategic use of such methods can significantly enhance EFL learners' ability to comprehend spoken English (Kassem, 2015). Cognitive strategies, in particular, have proven beneficial in this regard. Techniques such as note-taking and summarization assist learners in processing auditory input more effectively and retaining critical information (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011).

Equally important is the need for educators to tailor listening activities to the specific needs and proficiency levels of their students. Authentic auditory materials, which closely reflect real-world communication among native speakers, are essential for developing the skills required to interpret spontaneous spoken interactions (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). A study by Mandiri et al. (2022) highlighted several strategies that students adopt to manage comprehension difficulties, technical obstacles, and motivational barriers. Among the most frequently reported tactics was repeated listening, which students used to gradually increase their understanding. When repetition alone did not suffice, learners often turned to supplementary tools such as subtitles and transcripts to support their comprehension (Mandiri et al., 2022).

EFL learners demonstrate considerable adaptability in overcoming listening difficulties by employing a variety of strategic interventions, which are integral to the broader process of language acquisition. These strategies range from the use of technology-based tools to the implementation of self-directed learning practices. Exposure to diverse audio formats, such as podcasts, educational videos on YouTube, and language-learning applications has become

increasingly popular. These platforms provide valuable opportunities for students to engage with different speech rates and accents, thereby improving their listening skills in an engaging and interactive manner (Mukhtorova & Ilxomov, 2024; Waloyo, 2024). Resources such as Spotify and BBC Learning English have also been noted for their potential to foster learner autonomy and sustained engagement (Waloyo, 2024).

In many cases, learners take initiative by independently selecting their listening materials, a practice that promotes metacognitive awareness and boosts confidence in their listening abilities (Yunus & Damayanti, 2024). By reflecting on their listening experiences and articulating the specific challenges they face, students are better positioned to identify effective strategies and refine their approaches accordingly (Muslim & Sulistyaningrum, 2024).

Moreover, metacognitive and cognitive strategies remain central to effective listening. Students frequently engage in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their listening processes to better manage their comprehension (Waloyo, 2024; Sharif et al., 2024). These strategies help them anticipate potential difficulties, assess their progress in real time, and adjust their efforts to ensure successful comprehension. Techniques such as summarizing, posing questions, and negotiating meaning are commonly employed to deepen understanding and improve retention of spoken content (Sharif et al., 2024). Collectively, these strategic approaches underscore the importance of active learner engagement in overcoming listening challenges and advancing overall language proficiency.

METHOD

This research utilized a qualitative methodology, specifically adopting a case study design to explore in depth the listening comprehension challenges experienced by EFL students and the strategies they applied to manage these difficulties. As noted by Yin (2018), the case study method is particularly suited to qualitative inquiry that seeks to investigate complex phenomena within their real-life contexts. The qualitative approach was selected due to its capacity to uncover the nuanced and multifaceted experiences of learners, offering a deeper understanding of the perspectives, challenges, and coping mechanisms employed by the participants (Creswell, 2018).

Participants

This study involved participants drawn from an English education study program, specifically students in 8th semester who had successfully completed their formal listening courses. The selected participants, comprising 15 students both male and female aged between 21 and 24, were considered well-suited to provide relevant insights into the challenges and strategies associated with listening comprehension. Their prior academic experience in listening provided a solid foundation for meaningful reflection. Ethical research protocols were strictly followed; participants were fully informed about the purpose and procedures of the study and gave their consent voluntarily.

Instruments

To collect comprehensive qualitative data, two instruments were employed: a reflection questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The reflection questionnaire was designed to elicit personal narratives about the students' experiences with listening comprehension, focusing on the specific obstacles they faced and the strategies they adopted to manage those challenges. The semi-structured interviews functioned as a follow-up tool, enabling deeper exploration of participants' initial responses and allowing for clarification of key points. Both instruments were carefully constructed to ensure they aligned with the research objectives and

provided space for authentic, detailed expression. The data collected from the reflection questionnaire and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify the common themes and patterns that emerge. According to MacQueen et al. (2012, as cited in Mandiri et al., 2022), thematic analysis is a method of examining data that goes beyond simply counting how often certain words or phrases appear, and instead it focuses for both implicit and explicit ideas found in the themes of the data.

Procedures

All data collection was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure that participants could express themselves accurately and comfortably. Responses were translated into English for inclusion in the findings and discussion section. Initially, students were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study and gave their consent voluntarily. Then, researcher gave the students reflection questionnaires individually and then students completed the reflection questionnaires independently. This was followed by one-on-one interviews through Zoom meetings, which were guided by a flexible protocol that allowed for probing questions based on earlier responses. All ethical procedures were followed, including confidentiality and privacy protections.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data used in this study were derived from two primary sources: individual reflection questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. These instruments were designed to capture participants' personal experiences with listening comprehension, including both the difficulties encountered and the strategies applied to overcome them. Once the data collection phase was completed, all responses, originally written and spoken in Bahasa Indonesia, were carefully transcribed. The interview recordings were first transcribed to preserve the authenticity of participants' expressions. Following transcription, all data were translated into English by the researcher to ensure clarity for reporting purposes while maintaining the original meanings conveyed by the participants.

The translated transcripts and questionnaire responses were then imported into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to facilitate efficient management and coding of the data. Thematic analysis was employed as the analytical approach due to its simplicity and flexibility in identifying patterns within qualitative data, making it suitable for exploring students' diverse experiences. NVivo was chosen for its user-friendly environment and simple tools, which simplify the classification and categorization of data collected from the questionnaires and interviews. The analysis process involved several steps: First, all data were uploaded into an NVivo project, creating a centralized database. Second, initial coding was conducted by reading through the transcripts and responses to identify recurring concepts, such as poor audio quality, fast speech, unfamiliar accent, environmental distractions. These concepts were assigned as nodes in NVivo. Third, nodes were grouped into broader themes, such as "Comprehension-related difficulties," "Technical Difficulties," "Psychological and Motivational Difficulties", and "Coping Strategies," based on their relationships and frequency.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Comprehension-related Difficulties

Data analysis reveals that comprehension-related difficulties pose significant barriers for EFL students in listening activities, primarily due to challenges in processing spoken English in real-time. Based on reflection questionnaires and interviews, participants identified three main

issues: rapid speech rates, unfamiliar vocabulary, and diverse speaker accents. These findings highlight the cognitive complexity of understanding oral English, as expressed through students' personal experiences. The following subsections detail each factor, supported by direct participant quotes and connections to relevant literature.

Rate of Speech

Many students admitted that the fast pace of spoken English presented a serious challenge. Several expressed that they could not follow the flow of speech, especially when there were no pauses or the content was too dense.

“Sometimes when the speaker talks too fast, my brain doesn't have time to process the words. Especially in listening tests that can't be replayed” (S3, Interview)

“If the person speaks quickly and their words sound blended together, it is difficult to distinguish them.” (S4, Interview)

The pace at which the listening material is presented can impact comprehension. If the speed is too fast, students may struggle to process the information effectively (Mandiri et al., 2022). Mandiri et al. (2022) also noted that fast speech rates by native speakers were mentioned by the students as a common issue, with words sometimes blending together, making comprehension harder. This finding also resonates with Renandya and Farrell (2011), who stated that spoken information, even at a natural pace can be overwhelming for less proficient learners. The inability to "re-listen" during real-time communication or in one-shot tests further intensifies the pressure. According to Chang (2018), learners rely on decoding speech incrementally, and when the pace is too fast, it exceeds the working memory's capacity to process meaning. This suggests that teachers could use software to adjust audio speed or provide pre-listening warm-ups with slower speech.

Vocabulary and Topic Unfamiliarity

Participants reported difficulty understanding content that involved new or academic vocabulary. Topic unfamiliarity further limited their ability to infer meaning or activate prior knowledge.

“If the topic is scientific, there are usually many unfamiliar terms that I've never heard, so it's hard to grasp the content.” (S4, Interview)

“I once listened to a podcast about the environment, but it had many unfamiliar words, so I had to replay it several times to understand.” (S14, Questionnaire)

Unfamiliar vocabularies are a common source of comprehension failure, especially when combined with limited exposure to the subject matter. As noted by Mandiri et al. (2022), limited vocabulary can hinder comprehension as unfamiliar words may impede students' ability to understand the content. Hardiyanto et al. (2021) noted that topic familiarity activates cognitive schemata, allowing learners to predict upcoming information. Moreover, the overuse of idioms or collocations, especially in authentic media such as vlogs or news podcasts, further complicates the decoding process. Additionally, Thao & Long (2022) highlight that unfamiliar vocabulary and diverse accents in listening materials can significantly impede students' ability to comprehend spoken English. Furthermore, Nushi and Orouji (2020) noted that learners struggle with recognizing spoken forms of words that they are familiar with in written form,

impacting their ability to understand the content being heard. This underlines the value of pre-listening vocabulary activation, use of glossaries, and topic previews to support comprehension in listening tasks.

Speaker Accent

Participants found that accents other than American, such as British, Australian, or non-native such as Asian accents posed an additional challenge to listening comprehension.

“If the accent is British or Australian, I need time to adjust. I’ve always been more exposed to American English.” (S4, Interview)

“I once watched a video and the speaker was Asian with a very thick accent. I couldn’t understand almost half of it.” (S1, Interview)

These responses validate earlier studies (e.g., Kasim & Luwiti, 2019) which found that familiarity with a specific accent builds phonological expectations that learners subconsciously rely on. When these expectations are disrupted, such as by changes in intonation, stress patterns, or articulation, the comprehension process slows down. Zulfikar et al. (2020) also highlighted that phonological reduction in unfamiliar accents results in “blended words,” blurring word boundaries and further confusing the listener. To address this, instructors are advised to provide exposure to accent diversity (Zulfikar et al., 2020; Yunus & Damayanti, 2024), such as including a variety of Englishes, such as Indian, Singaporean, and British in listening materials and classroom practice.

Technical Difficulties

Responses from questionnaires and interviews indicate that technical difficulties significantly hinder EFL students’ listening experiences, particularly in online learning contexts. Participants reported challenges such as poor audio quality, device issues, unstable internet connections, and environmental distractions, all of which disrupt concentration and comprehension. These findings emphasize the need for reliable technological infrastructure to support listening activities. The subsections below explore each technical issue, with participant quotes illustrating their impact on learning.

Audio Clarity and Device Issues

Participants expressed frustration when audio recordings were unclear or distorted, especially in online classes and listening tests. Some students reported that even high volume could not compensate for unclear articulation.

“My earphone makes a crackling sound when touched, which makes the audio even harder to hear.” (S3, Interview)

“The audio was loud, but the pronunciation was unclear. It sounded like mumbling.” (S3, Interview)

This aligns with Mandiri et al. (2022), who found that low-quality recordings often became obstacles in extensive listening. This can lead to frustration and reduced student engagement. Poor clarity affects segmenting speech, identifying words, and building meaning. Students expend more cognitive effort trying to decode auditory signals, leaving fewer mental resources for comprehension (Zhang & Graham, 2020). In extreme cases, students disengage entirely due

to fatigue or repeated failure. Additionally, in prior research conducted by Nushi and Orouji (2020), teachers emphasized the importance of high-quality audio delivery equipment as a fundamental concern for effective listening comprehension. It highlights the importance of using high-quality audio and encouraging the use of tested hardware for online listening delivery.

Internet Instability and Streaming Platforms

Participants also reported that lag, buffering, or broken audio streams were demotivating. These problems typically occurred during Zoom classes or while using online platforms such as YouTube or Spotify.

“During Zoom, the audio once lagged and skipped. I instantly lost focus.” (S1, Interview)

“Sometimes the internet is slow during online class. I’m listening, then suddenly the video just buffers endlessly.” (S2, Interview)

As emphasized by Muslim and Sulistyaningrum (2024), self-directed web-based listening activities require reliable internet access. Any instability can disrupt these activities, affecting students' ability to engage with the material and develop their listening skills. Concentration is crucial for effective listening, and any interruptions caused by unstable internet can lead to a loss of focus and comprehension difficulties. Additionally, anxiety, stress, and lack of confidence are affective filters that can also hinder comprehension. Internet instability may increase these affective barriers by causing frustration and distraction during listening tasks (Nushi and Orouji, 2020). The shift towards digital platforms for language learning necessitates proficiency in technology and digital literacy. Students must be able to access and utilize digital resources effectively, which can be compromised by internet instability (Muslim & Sulistyaningrum, 2024).

Environmental Noise and Listening Conditions

Participants who studied online often experienced distractions such as traffic noise or conversations in shared living spaces, some reported that noisy or non-conducive testing venues disrupted comprehension.

“If there’s a motorcycle or people talking, I lose focus, especially if the audio is soft.” (S2, Interview)

“I had difficulty during the listening test because the environment was not conducive, so it was hard to focus.” (S4, Interview)

Environmental factors are often underappreciated in listening instruction. As Burns & Siegel (2018) noted, acoustic conditions have a direct impact on the effectiveness of listening comprehension tasks. Additionally, noises in the environment where listening tasks are conducted and poor acoustics pose significant hindrances to students' ability to concentrate on listening tasks (Nushi & Orouji, 2020). Nadhira and Warni (2021) also noted that environmental noise is a significant barrier to effective listening comprehension. It can disrupt the ability to focus and process auditory information, leading to misunderstandings or incomplete comprehension. Students from lower-resource backgrounds may not have access to quiet study environments, which puts them at a disadvantage. This reinforces the need for

equitable listening conditions in remote learning contexts and encourages the use of adaptive strategies such as closed captions or transcript integration (Nadhira and Warni, 2021).

Psychological and Motivational Difficulties

The study's findings reveal that psychological and motivational factors, including listening anxiety, environmental distractions, and lack of interest in materials, significantly impact EFL students' listening performance. Participant responses highlight how test pressure, external noise, and irrelevant content hinder concentration and engagement. The subsections below examine each aspect, with quotes illustrating students' personal experiences and connections to literature on affective factors in language learning.

Listening Anxiety and Performance Pressure

Participants expressed that formal listening settings, such as TOEFL prediction tests or PTESOL test, made them feel anxious and tense. This emotional discomfort frequently led to reduced concentration and increased mental blockages. They also reported that the inability to replay audio and time constraints heightened stress, hindering comprehension.

“In listening tests like TOEFL, the situation is silent and tense. If the audio is fast and the accent is unfamiliar, I get nervous and can't focus.” (S2, Interview)

“PTESOL caused panic because it was impossible to replay the audio and information had to be grasped quickly.” (S3, Interview)

This echoes the findings of Su (2024), who emphasized the link between high-stakes testing environments and performance anxiety in listening comprehension. When learners perceive that comprehension is tied directly to grades or proficiency labels, their cognitive processing is disrupted by emotional tension. Breathing exercises, preparatory warm-ups, or low-stakes listening simulations can be helpful in reducing such anxiety.

Distraction in the Learning Environment

Participants also reported that external distractions, especially in shared study spaces or noisy homes, frequently interfered with their concentration during listening practice, particularly in the context of online learning.

“The learning environment really matters. If the house is noisy or the internet lags, I lose focus completely.” (S3, Interview)

“When I listen at home, I can't concentrate due to many distractions.” (S4, Interview)

Noise from external sources, such as nearby schoolyards or poor classroom acoustics, has been identified as a common issue that affects students' listening abilities (Nadhira and Warni, 2021). Ivone & Renandya (2019) also noted, consistent listening practice requires both access and environment. Students with limited control over their surroundings, especially those from urban or crowded households face unequal learning conditions. In this light, teachers must recognize environmental inequities and adopt asynchronous, downloadable listening options and flexible time frames for task submission.

Motivation and Interest Level in the Material

Participants stated that interest in the content affected their engagement and comprehension. They felt more focused and less anxious when the material aligned with their hobbies or preferences.

“If the topic is interesting like films, music, or travel, I’m more excited. But if it’s heavy or not relatable, I lose interest.” (S2, Interview)

“I feel more confident when watching vlogs or YouTube because there’s no pressure like in exams.” (S4, Interview)

Motivation is a non-linguistic factor that plays a key role in listening comprehension. Mandiri et al. (2022) highlights that motivational difficulties arise when the listening material is perceived as boring or uninteresting. This lack of engagement can lead to a rapid loss of interest, making it challenging for students to continue listening attentively. A monotonous or flat delivery of content is another factor that diminishes motivation, as it fails to capture the listener's attention, further complicating comprehension efforts (Mandiri et al., 2022). Zhdanov & Baklanov (2020) and Kobayashi (2020) point out, interest-driven materials increase learners’ willingness to persevere through difficult content. Integrating personalized or self-selected listening materials can enhance not only understanding, but also learner autonomy and self-efficacy. Over time, this contributes to the development of intrinsic motivation, which is more sustainable than externally imposed motivation.

Coping Strategies

The research identifies a range of strategies employed by EFL students to overcome listening difficulties, reflecting their proactive approach to managing their listening comprehension challenges. Data from questionnaires and interviews highlight key strategies: repetition of materials, vocabulary note-taking, use of subtitles, selection of interest-based content, and peer discussions. The subsections below detail these strategies, with participant quotes illustrating their application and links to literature on language learning strategies.

Repetition and Note-taking

The most frequently used strategy was repetition. Participants stated that replaying the audio, either partially or fully, helped them catch missing information and reduce confusion.

“I usually replay the part I don’t understand, maybe two or three times depending on how important it is.” (S2, Interview)

“I usually repeat the audio once or twice before I understand.” (S1, Interview)

Some students also adopted vocabulary note-taking as a cognitive strategy, organizing new words into categories, to aid retention and recognition during listening tasks.

“When I encounter unfamiliar vocabulary, I usually write it down in a book or in my phone notes.” (S7, questionnaire)

“I write vocabulary words in my phone notes and categorize them into academic words, idioms, and everyday expressions.” (S2, interview)

“If it’s only audio without visuals, I write down what I hear, then replay to fill in the gaps.” (S4, Interview)

Students cope by repeatedly listening to the material until they grasp its content and the speakers' message (Mandiri et al., 2022). This also supports findings from Gilakjani & Ahmadi (2011) who state that repetition is a foundational cognitive strategy, especially for bottom-up listeners. It gives learners the chance to adjust focus, recalibrate attention, and enhance lexical recognition. Repeated exposure to audio materials reduces anxiety and builds confidence, as learners become more familiar with the language and its structures (Al-shehri & Alhamami, 2023). Additionally, vocabulary note-taking, which supports vocabulary acquisition, aligns with Sharif et al. (2024), who note that structured note-taking enhances listening comprehension by building lexical familiarity, offering a practical method for EFL learners. Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) also suggest that techniques like note-taking and summarizing help learners process and retain auditory information more effectively.

Use of Subtitles or Closed Caption

Participants used subtitles, either built-in or manually activated to match sounds with spelling and gain clarity.

“Sometimes I turn on subtitles to match the pronunciation with the spelling.” (S1, Interview)

“If it's hard to understand, I turn on subtitles or closed captions.” (S4, Interview)

According to Mandiri et al. (2022), subtitles serve as scaffolding that helps develop listening comprehension. When repetition of the material is insufficient, subtitles and transcripts are often used by students to provide an additional layer of support to comprehend the spoken content. This method is particularly helpful when students encountering unfamiliar words or phrases. It can help learners focus on key words and phrases, which are crucial for understanding the main ideas of a listening passage. By providing a written form of the spoken language, subtitles can help learners use context clues to infer meaning, which is a cognitive strategy that supports comprehension by filling in gaps in understanding. Additionally, the use of subtitles can reduce anxiety by providing a safety net for learners who might otherwise struggle with understanding spoken language alone and learners can use subtitles to plan their listening approach by predicting upcoming content based on the text. (Al-shehri & Alhamami, 2023).

Practice with Authentic and Interest-Based Content

Participants developed the habit of listening to content they found enjoyable or personally meaningful, such as vlogs, interviews, music, or podcasts.

“I often listen to English podcasts about topics I like, such as lifestyle or travel. It doesn’t feel like studying.” (S4, Interview)

“I got better at understanding British accents because I often watch interviews of my favorite British singers.” (S2, Interview)

Authentic material builds not just listening skills, but also exposure fluency. Waloyo

(2024) and Yunus & Damayanti (2024) argue that interest-based content enhances retention, lowers anxiety, and fosters learner autonomy. These findings are consistent with Zhdanov and Baklanov (2020) and Kobayashi (2020), who both argue for interest-driven listening as a way to build long-term engagement. Additionally, the incorporation of technology, such as podcasts and multimedia, facilitates an interactive learning environment that engages students and improves their auditory exposure and comprehension, creating meaningful contexts for vocabulary and syntax (Kabri & Budiyanto, 2023; Gonulal, 2022). Indeed, podcasting has been identified as an effective tool to promote listening skill, helping students navigate different accents and speech rates, thereby enhancing their resilience to listening difficulties (Gonulal, 2022; Sotlikova & Haerazi, 2023). EFL learners should be encouraged to personalize their listening habits to ensure sustainability beyond the classroom.

Peer Discussion and Clarification

Some participants used peer support to clarify parts they did not understand during listening exercises.

“If I don’t understand something, I ask my seatmate or discuss it after the listening practice.” (S4, Interview)

“My friend often re-explains things using simpler words, which really helps.” (S1, Interview)

These socio-affective strategies align with Bao (2017), who highlighted the role of peer collaboration in reducing affective barriers. Peer clarification promotes a sense of shared learning and reduces isolation, especially when comprehension issues arise during fast-paced or high-pressure tasks. Additionally, Shabani and Malekdar (2016) found that peer scaffolding, which includes discussion and clarification, significantly enhance listening comprehension by creating a supportive environment where learners feel comfortable asking questions and clarifying doubts. Peer discussion allows learners to share their interpretations and understanding of listening materials, which can lead to a more comprehensive grasp of the content. This collaborative approach helps learners fill in gaps in their understanding by leveraging the collective knowledge of the group. Moreover, engaging in peer discussions can reduce anxiety associated with listening tasks. When learners discuss their interpretations and seek clarification from peers, they often feel more supported and less anxious about making mistakes (Shabani & Malekdar, 2016; Kos, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study explored the listening comprehension difficulties experienced by EFL students and the strategies they use to overcome them. The findings revealed several recurring challenges, including comprehension-related difficulties, such as rapid speech rate, limited vocabulary, and unfamiliar accents, technical difficulties, such as audio and internet issues, and psychological and motivational difficulties such as anxiety. Students reported struggling particularly in real-time comprehension, especially during high-stakes testing or when encountering unfamiliar lexical and phonological inputs. To address these challenges, learners employed a range of cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies. Repetition and note-taking, use of subtitles, interest-based listening content, and peer discussions emerged as key methods used by the students for improving listening comprehension. These findings underscore the importance of personalized, interest-driven, and scaffolded listening instruction. Teachers are

encouraged to diversify listening materials, incorporate strategy training, and foster low-anxiety learning environments.

Future research should address the limitations of this study to further advance our understanding of EFL listening comprehension challenges and strategies. Given the homogeneity of the current sample, studies could explore listening difficulties across diverse contexts or educational levels, such as rural versus urban settings or secondary versus tertiary education, to enhance generalizability. Moreover, studies could investigate the effectiveness of specific coping strategies, such as subtitles versus repetition, to determine their impact on comprehension across proficiency levels. Additionally, investigating technology-enhanced interventions, such as adaptive listening apps or offline resources, could address technical barriers, particularly for students with limited internet access. Furthermore, exploring psychological interventions, such as mindfulness or gamified tasks, would provide solutions to reduce listening anxiety and boost engagement. These directions would build on the current findings and inform more effective EFL listening instruction.

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