



FACTORS INFLUENCING LISTENING COMPREHENSION DIFFICULTIES AMONG OMANI EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract:

This study explored the challenges faced by EFL learners in understanding spoken texts in academic listening classes through a mixed-methods design. Findings revealed that among the five listening subskills assessed, Vocabulary Building was the most difficult. Limited vocabulary emerged as a primary barrier, as unfamiliar words in connected speech increased cognitive load, delayed meaning integration, and hindered comprehension. In addition, higher-order subskills such as Inferring, Identifying the Main Idea, and Predicting Outcomes were also significant contributors to listening difficulty. These skills demand that learners move beyond surface-level decoding and engage in deeper cognitive processes, including inference-making, synthesis, and anticipation of meaning. The overall listening performance of respondents was categorized as "Below Average," suggesting that current listening instruction may not adequately support learners in achieving functional proficiency. Other challenges identified included linguistic factors (speed of speech, accent, pronunciation, vocabulary), cognitive factors (text processing, attention lapses, lack of prior knowledge), teacher and learner factors (instructional materials, contextualization, audio length), and environmental factors (classroom noise, and poor audio quality). These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of listening comprehension difficulties and highlight the urgent need for targeted pedagogical interventions.

Keywords: academic listening, listening subskills, listening comprehension, listening difficulties, EFL learners

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1. Introduction

Listening is an important skill in learning and communication. Of the four macro skills, more time is spent on listening than reading, speaking or writing. It is a key component in academic success. However, listening has always been a challenge for ELF learners. Unlike written texts, spoken texts disappear once they are heard, and real-time processing of the input is required for comprehension. Learners must recognize the sounds and words, understand the content and connect it with their background knowledge. According to Goh (2008), many learners struggle at one or other stage of this input processing, which leads to less comprehension of the text they listen to. Learning English as a foreign language is consistently challenging for Arab EFL learners. In areas where English has limited utility, the necessity and difficulty of learning are increasing. Consequently, the Oman education system has implemented numerous modifications, including the mandated adoption of communicative language teaching (CLT) in EFL classrooms. Nonetheless, numerous challenges continue to confront Arab learners in acquiring proficiency in English (Fareh, 2010), particularly in listening skills.

In the context of English language teaching, assessing listening skills effectively is necessary to help learners improve and participate better in the teaching and learning process. However, despite the clear indication of the significance of listening, it is far behind reading and writing in terms of time spent on instruction and practice. In Oman, higher education institutions (HEIs) require EFL learners to take a Foundation programme to ensure that learners' English language skills are enhanced before proceeding to the undergraduate programmes. However, some research emphasizes the role of blended technology in supporting listening classes to improve outcomes. But these studies often rely on literature reviews rather than performance-based analysis of the phenomenon. Addressing this gap, the present study used the Academic Listening Quiz results to identify specific listening subskills that are difficult to answer and consequently explored learners' views on factors that affect their listening performance. Thus, this study investigated the levels of listening ability of Omani EFL learners in academic listening and identified what makes them find listening difficult and what factors contribute to this difficulty in understanding spoken text in academic listening classes.

This study specifically attempted to answer the following questions:

- 1) What does the Academic Listening Quiz reveal about Omani EFL learners' performance on specific listening subskills (Vocabulary Building, Noting Details, Inferring, Getting the Main Idea, and Predicting Outcomes)?
- 2) What is the overall level of listening performance of EFL learners in academic listening classes?
- 3) What specific factors contribute to listening difficulties in understanding academic listening texts as perceived by Omani EFL learners?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Nature of Listening

Listening comprehension entails understanding spoken texts and sentences. It also includes the ability to use a combination of sub-skills such as perception skills, language skills, knowledge of the world, dealing with information, and interacting with the speaker simultaneously. It requires processing spoken language wherein one must concentrate at a given moment depending on the kind of text and the purpose of listening. Listening comprehension happens in interactive situations. Thus, it is not only understanding the oral message but comprehending its context (Rost, 2002). It is through listening that students learn to pronounce, understand the rhythm and intonation, and the pitch and stress of the language. Nevertheless, since EFL students do not have the opportunity to interact with native speakers, a combination of extensive and intensive listening processes would help. Extensive listening happens when an ELT teacher inspires students to choose for themselves what they listen to and to do so for pleasure and general language improvement. This style of listening can be explored outside the classroom by the students, which allows them to choose listening to materials. Such listening is extremely motivating. However, the learner must have available resources like recording devices and various listening materials. Intensive listening, however, is a series of short listening exercises that aims to practice a certain language aspect by reviewing vocabulary, learning functional language, and giving suggestions and advice. It can be administered in two ways: through taped material or live listening (Field, 2008).

2.2 Importance of Listening Skills

In EFL learning, listening skills play a significant role in successful language acquisition. Firstly, while listening learners are exposed to authentic linguistic input. According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis, for effective language learning, learners need to be provided with comprehensible input which are moderately above their current level of proficiency (Krashen, 1985). Through listening activities, learners get exposure to a wide range of vocabulary, grammatical structures, accents, intonation and speech patterns which are inaccessible in a normal text-based learning situation. Without adequate practice in listening, learners may encounter difficulty in vocabulary acquisition and linguistic development (Goh, 2008). Moreover, listening skills play a key role in building intercultural awareness and pragmatic competence. In EFL contexts, learners frequently engage with varied accents, cultural references, and discourse styles. By listening to authentic materials, learners become attuned to sociolinguistic variation and pragmatic nuances (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). This exposure cultivates sensitivity to context, speaker intention, politeness markers, and register dimensions of language use that are difficult to acquire through written input alone.

2.3 Listening Comprehension Process

In listening to a certain sound, a listener processes it as a stream of noise on several levels to achieve comprehension. These phases include distinguishing sounds, identifying the

meaning of individual words, phrases or sentences to perceive the speaker's intonation. According to Field (2008), while processing a foreign language spoken text, the listener identifies distinct words in an uninterrupted flow of sounds. This process is challenging for EFL learners, especially with a British accent wherein the end sound of the word runs into the first sound of the next. The listeners don't only need to perceive the meaning of words but also understand the syntax, such as sentences, clauses and word stress, sentence stress and rhythm. A listener also processes grammar and intonation and the overall meaning of the listening text. Richards (1985) stated that the listener's memory works with other parts of speech, not actually on the sentences, which means after listening to a piece of ideas and details, the listener doesn't only remember grammar or vocabulary but can also recall most of the meaning.

2.4 Listening Difficulties in EFL Context

Of the four macro skills in the English language, listening is perceived as the most difficult language skill as it requires more focus and profound attention to grasp the listening passage, which includes understanding the text in the form of a monologue, dialogue, and/or a podcast. Additionally, listening can be nerve-racking and even activate anxiety. Susilowati (2019) claimed that students can lose interest in learning and increase their anxiety if they are not aware of the listening difficulties. Bingol (2017) revealed that the speakers' accent and difficult vocabulary are the causes of listening difficulties. One of the factors that listening is perceived to be difficult is due to students' lack of vocabulary in their memory. Yilmaz and Yavuz (2015) said that the most common difficulties faced by students in listening include forgetting what is heard, inability to comprehend the intended message, unable to recognize some of the words. In addition, Yagang (1994) indicated that the sources of listening problems mainly came from four aspects: the message content, the speaker, the listener, and the physical settings. Moreover, a huge problem that students face in listening comprehension is the inability to concentrate. Failure to concentrate makes students miss some of the content, which will affect their understanding of the spoken text eventually. During the listening process, students must be focused due to the time limit to process and understand the information (Hamouda, 2013).

2.5 Common Struggles of EFL Learners

EFL listening skill is regarded as a problematic language skill, especially for learners of English as a foreign language where chances of real practice are less (Nowrouzi, Tam, Zareian and Nimehchisalem, 2015). Thus, teaching students listening skills may be challenging for ELT teachers and difficult for students to learn too, even for students whose speaking and reading skills are adequate (Ghaderpanahi, 2012). As stated by Buck (2001), listening is a difficult process in which the listener needs to understand the received information and interpret it based on a wide variety of linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge. The ultimate purpose of listening skill is to comprehend the L2 conversation at a normal rate in natural conditions. Learners can't learn to communicate or speak effectively without understanding the spoken text being heard.

Experts say there are some problems in listening comprehension, as cited in Hamouda (2013). Boyle (1984) classified these factors that influenced EFL listening into four inter-relating categories: listener, speaker, medium and environmental factors. Aside from these, Chang and Kuo (1995) discovered five major listening difficulties, which include: speed (a cluster of sounds difficult for segmentation, obsession with translation); association of sounds (with words and meanings, and idiomatic expressions). In addition, Yagang (1993) claimed that the sources of listening difficulties came mainly from four aspects: the message, the speaker, the listener, and the physical setting. The study of Sa'diyah (2016) concluded that the problems that are common for EFL learners are related to the content of the listening text, problems related to the listener and speaker, and problems related to linguistic features that are caused by the failure to concentrate. Also, learners' perceptions of listening problems related to psychological characteristics and listening problems related to the physical setting contributed to their challenges. Thus, most students are guessing the answer when they find difficulties in listening comprehension.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

The framework of the study is based on Vandergrift and Goh's (2012) metacognitive model of listening comprehension, which theorizes that listening subskills are the core processing abilities of the students which are influenced by contributing factors. This model highlighted those listening subskills such as noting details, inferring, vocabulary, identifying main ideas, and predicting outcomes, dynamically influenced by learners' perceptions, emotions, and awareness. This concept supports the use of both performance-based data and learners' reported perceptions to qualitatively examine academic listening difficulties among Omani EFL learners. Below is the conceptual framework that outlines the overall direction of the study:

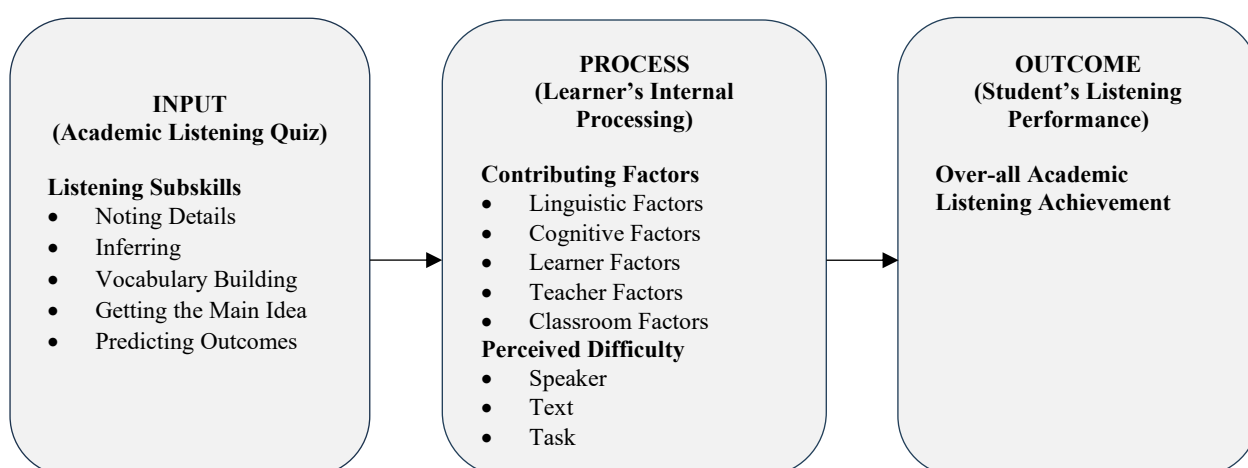


Figure 1: A Framework on the Overall Direction of the Study

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed an explanatory mixed-methods design (both quantitative and qualitative approaches) to provide a comprehensive understanding of Omani EFL learners' academic listening skills. It started with a quantitative phase by administering an academic listening exercise to measure learners' listening proficiency and identify specific listening difficulties to determine the factors that contribute to the difficulty. This was followed by a qualitative phase using semi-structured questions to supplement the quantitative findings, especially the learners' feedback on listening materials, classroom practices, and challenges. This design allowed for triangulation of data and ensured deeper analysis of learners' listening experiences.

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were Omani EFL learners registered in an academic listening course in one of the higher-education institutions in Oman. A total of 80 students were selected randomly for the quantitative phase. From this group, 15 students were identified purposively and participated in the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to provide deeper insights into their listening experiences. This combination allowed for both broad measurement of listening proficiency and rich qualitative exploration of learners' perceptions.

3.3 Instruments

Two instruments were employed in this study. First, listening Comprehension exercises consisted of 30 items containing academic audio texts (IELTS-based listening texts) from different sources. The audio contained lectures and mini-talks with scorable items from multiple-choice, write-in entry questions, fill-in-the-blank, and note-completion. Second are the structured questions used during the FGD to triangulate the results and findings in terms of their feedback and classroom experiences.

3.4 Procedure

3.4.1 Data Collection

Data in this study were collected from the students' scores in the listening exercise. Students' scores were checked, tallied and interpreted using the Five-level Rating Scale for Listening Skills adapted from a listening skills assessment framework (Teachers Institute, 2023) to find out their level of listening skills (See Appendix 1). Second, a semi-structured FGD interview was conducted to elicit learners' reflections on the difficulties they encountered during the listening exercises to enable direct triangulation between observed performance and reported challenges (Appendix 2).

3.5 Data Analysis

3.5.1 Phase 1-Quantitative Analysis

The listening performance of the students on specific listening subskills (vocabulary building, noting details, inferring, getting the main idea, and predicting outcome) was checked and tabulated using percent distribution. Similarly, students' obtained scores were grouped into ranges to determine their level of listening comprehension using mean and percent distribution along with the Five-level Rating Scale for Listening Skills, adapted from Teacher's Institute (2023), to determine the extent of their listening ability.

3.5.2 Phase 2-Qualitative Analysis

After the FGD, the researchers transcribed the data and analyzed it using thematic analysis with codes aligned to linguistic, instructional, and cognitive categories and patterns of responses to determine the factors that contribute to their struggle in listening comprehension. The theme denotes the occurrence of factors that contribute to listening difficulty during the coding of the information. The core ideas refer to the specific difficulties encountered by students that suggest the theme. The occurrence of the participants' responses dealt with the rate of occurrence of the difficulties. The theme includes General (if the occurrence of the responses was 50% or more), Typical (if the responses occurred 21-49%), and Variant (if the responses occurred 20% or less). The steps that involved in transcribing the responses include familiarization with the data, coding of responses, generation of themes, reviewing of themes, defining and naming of themes, and preparing the write-up (Caufield, 2019).

3.6 Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was obtained from Gulf College's Research Department to ensure that the conduct of this investigation is in accordance with the college's ethical conduct guidelines (GC/RD/REC-EA/25/026). All participants were informed about the purpose and objectives of the study and highlighted that their participation was voluntary. Written notice was sent to selected participants who participated in the FGD. Students were also assured that their scores and comments would be treated with confidentiality.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Phase 1

4.1.1 Omani EFL Learners' Performance on Specific Listening Subskills

Figure 1 illustrates learners' performance across five listening comprehension subskills, expressed in percentages within score ranges. The spoken text received by students contains questions that measure their comprehension ability in vocabulary building, noting details, inferring, getting the main idea, and predicting outcomes.

The graph shows that, of the five listening subskills, Vocabulary Building is the most difficult subskill in academic listening, with 90 percent of the students scoring in the (5 and below) range and 10% scoring in (6 -11), which is far higher than any other subskill, with no one scored from (12 -30) range. This means that learners have difficulty

understanding word meanings even if the words are used in sentences. Kim & Pilcher (2016) asserted that limited vocabulary is one of the top predictors of poor listening performance, as it limits learners' capacity to understand spoken texts and create meaning. The second most difficult subskill is Inferring, with 66.3 percent of students scoring 5 and below and 33.8 percent in the (6 -11) range. Similarly, no one scored from (12- 30) range.

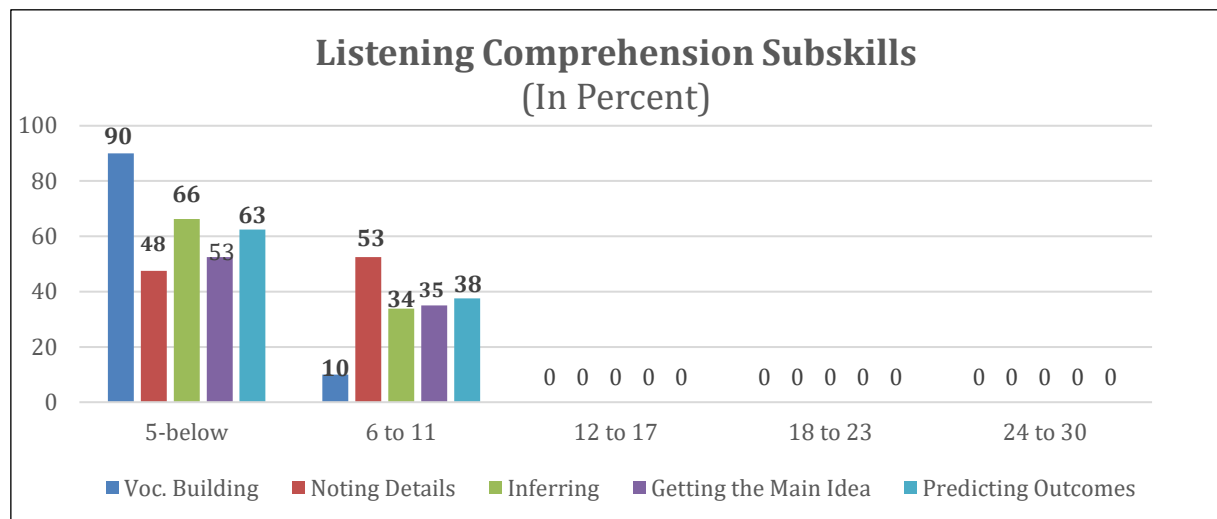


Figure 1: Performance of Omani EFL Learners on Specific Listening Subskills

Inferring entails higher-order processing, such as drawing conclusions and understanding implied meanings in the form of true or false questions. This indicates that EFL learners find it difficult to ascertain when to say “true, false, or not given” due to a lack of sufficient linguistic and cognitive knowledge. This is in line with Nguyen & Pham (2020), who highlighted that inferring requires prior knowledge to interact with the content being heard and focus to comprehend the text comprehensively.

The rest of the subskills show that, from the range of 5 and below, Noting Details indicates 47.5 percent, Getting the Main Idea is 52.5 percent, and Predicting Outcomes is 62.5 percent. These also show that there is substantial difficulty in both lower-order and higher-order comprehension skills for many learners. In the 6 to 11 range group, the percentages decreased notably, with only 10% performing better in Vocabulary, while Noting Details (52.5%), Getting the Main Idea (33.8%), and Predicting Outcomes (37.5%) displayed moderate improvement. This implies that some learners can handle mid-level comprehension questions when the information is familiar. No learners appear in the higher score ranges (12–17, 18–23, 24–30), reflecting a general absence of advanced listening proficiency across all subskills. It further implies that learners continue to show substantial difficulty in noting details. This is in line with Adi et al. (2022), who said that unfamiliar vocabulary, rapid speech, and memory limitations normally hinder learners' ability to retain specific information in spoken texts. Similarly, persistent difficulty in getting the main idea aligns with Wahidah (2024), who said that many EFL learners fail to grasp global meaning due to challenges with text organization and limited background knowledge. The struggle with predicting outcomes has been attributed to high cognitive

load, unfamiliar topics, and insufficient exposure to authentic listening inputs (Alamri, 2025).

4.1.2 Level of Listening Skills of EFL Learners in Academic Listening Classes

Table 1 presents the obtained scores, levels of listening ability, and description of listening comprehension ability of EFL learners in academic listening classes. Students' scores obtained from a 30-item listening quiz were tallied and grouped by score ranges from 1- 30.

Table 1: Level of Listening Skills of EFL Learners in Academic Listening Classes

Range of Score	Obtained Score (N=80)	Percent	Mean	Levels of Listening Ability	Description of Listening Comprehension
5 and below	-	-	-	-	-
6- 11	57	71.2	8.50	Level 2	Below Average
12-17	10	12.5	14.50	Level 3	Average
18-23	7	8.8	20.50	Level 4	Above Average
24-30	6	7.5	27.00	Level 5	Good Listener
Total	80	100	11.69	Level 2	Below Average

The table reveals that a big proportion of students fall within the 6–11 score range (57 out of 80), corresponding to Level 2, which is "below average" listening ability. The distribution of the obtained scores illustrates that a small number of students achieved higher performance levels 7 students fell in the "Above Average" range (Level 4), while 6 students achieved level 5, classified as "Good Listener". The overall listening proficiency of the group is notably low, as most learners (57 out of 80) fall within the "Below Average" category. This pattern indicates that students are struggling to understand the key information in spoken texts, which affects their level of listening comprehension performance. Kim and Pilcher (2016) highlighted that listening comprehension is a higher-order skill that requires assimilation of linguistic and cognitive processes. Weaknesses in these areas can considerably limit performance. Similarly, Trang (2021) noted that linguistic, cognitive, and affective causes often impede learners' ability to interpret spoken language effectively, which further implies that the students' low scores reflect underlying challenges common among EFL learners.

4.2 Phase 2

4.2.1 Factors that Contribute to Listening Difficulties in Understanding Academic Listening Texts

To support the results of the study, a thematic analysis of the FGD data is shown in Table 3 below. It displays the factors that contribute to listening difficulties in understanding academic listening texts as perceived by the participants, categorized into major themes.

Table 2: Themes and Central Ideas on the Perception of Participants
about the Factors that Contribute to Listening Difficulties

Factors	Difficulties	Patterns of Response
1. Linguistic Factor	• Speed of Speech • Accent and pronunciation • Complex vocabulary	General (77.5%)
2. Cognitive Factor	• Text Processing • Wandering while listening • Lack of prior knowledge	General (71.3%)
3. Learner Factor	• Length of the audio • Limited vocabulary • Notetaking skill	General (88.7%)
4. Teacher Factor	• Teacher's strategy • Listening materials • Task design	Typical (35%)
5. Classroom Factor	• Classroom size and noise • Low-quality speakers	Variant (16%)

4.2.1.1 Linguistic Factor

Generally, the learners frequently struggle with linguistic features such as speech rate, accent variation, complex vocabulary, and complex grammatical structures.

"The audio seems difficult due to the accent of the speaker and the speed of the speech." T1-P 1-3,5-7, and 10-11

*The numbers indicate the participants' code in the FGD.

When participants are asked how the listening text was during the listening quiz, most of them say that they are unable to understand the gist of the text due to the speaker's accent and the speed of speech. The inability of the participants in the listening classes is attributed to their linguistic ability to understand British and American accents. Those who have difficulty following the speed of talk and understanding the speaker's pronunciation affect students' comprehension, as they may have shortfalls in registering, storing, and consolidating information they have listened to. This is in line with Chiu & Chen (2023), who concluded that EFL students experience significant challenges related to speech rate, and accent diversity directly hinders comprehension. It implies that accented speech increases processing difficulty because learners must decode unfamiliar phonological patterns in real time. It can also be inferred that the linguistic complexity of the speaker is one of the most general sources of listening difficulty

"There are so many unfamiliar words in the audio that are so difficult." T1- P4, 7-9, and 12-15

Unfamiliar words used in the listening text appear to be another factor that contributes to learners' difficulty in processing the contents of the listening text. When students hear complex vocabulary, they tend to ignore the words instead of processing

them for understanding. Similarly, Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016) emphasized that limited vocabulary and difficulty recognizing spoken forms contribute substantially to listening breakdowns. It can be inferred that the speaker's speed of speech, pronunciation and complex vocabulary can affect the processing time in understanding the text, which increases learner's decoding difficulty.

4.2.1.2 Cognitive Factor

Listening tasks in Academic Listening classes involve cognitive load, attention and concentration. The learners need to process the ideas being heard while maintaining attention and drawing on prior knowledge.

"Listening from the audio is difficult to process, especially if the topic is unfamiliar." T2-P2-5, 7,9, 11- 15

"It makes me wander while listening to unfamiliar topics, and I lose focus on." T2-P1,6,8,10

Generally, the participants reported that the information they heard from the audio is difficult to process and understand, especially if the topic is unfamiliar. They even confess that listening doesn't allow them to recheck what has been heard, unlike reading. This means that listeners must interpret messages, understand their meaning and connect ideas in real time. This requires learners' heavy cognitive demand to process the spoken text. It can be inferred that listening difficulties are not just about hearing words but involve cognitive load, attention, and linguistic competence. It implies that most learners face overlapping challenges in text processing and focus on understanding spoken text. This is in line with the study of Hulstijn (2003), who said that when listening to an oral message, EFL learners need to find different ways to comprehend the incoming information. They must decode the information to assess whether the information received is relevant or not. The incoming message can be best comprehended when it has been heard before. Listeners also pay more attention to the spoken message if the incoming information is useful, important or relevant through a process of comparison and contrast to understand the messages from a speaker (Vandergrift, 2007).

4.2.1.3 Learner Factor

Listening is not an inert activity. It needs engagement, strategy, and focus from the learner to mentally process the spoken words, not just to hear the words. It is designed to test comprehension and help learners to become active listeners.

"The audio is very long and difficult to catch up on relevant information." T3- P6,7,9 and 11-13, 15

"I can't understand some of the words spoken by the speaker. T3- P 1-5, 8,10, and 12, 14

Learner-related issues like length of the audio, limited vocabulary, and poor note-taking skills are reported as listening barriers, as revealed by the participants. It can be noted that an additional challenge for the learners is the length of the audio, which they find makes it difficult to catch up on relevant information. They even believed that the audio length makes listening tasks harder. Additionally, learners' stock of words also affects their comprehension ability to understand the questions and process the spoken text. Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016) argued that the listening performance of the learners declines when they hear long or complex audio tasks.

4.2.1.4 Teacher Factor

Teachers have direct and indirect influence on the listening difficulty of the learners. The way listening is taught in the classroom directly shapes how learners experience and process spoken text.

"The teacher has an excellent teaching approach in the class, but still, I find listening difficult." T4- P 2,5,6-7 and 10-13

"Listening materials are not contextualized, which makes the task more complex." T4- P1,3,4,8-9, and 14-15

When participants were asked how the listening teacher teaches the course, they opined that the teacher handles the course excellently. They even narrated that the teacher has taught them how to answer questions in different subskills using keywords in the questions. However, the participants revealed that listening materials, especially the audio text, are too complex and not localized. It can be inferred that when listening materials are culturally unfamiliar, learners find it difficult to process and understand the message. Mathumathi et al. (2024) said that factors related to teacher strategies, designing listening tasks, and task design can influence learners' listening comprehension. Although these factors are less frequent compared to learner-related and linguistic issues, they still affect the learning experience.

4.2.1.5 Classroom Factor

The classroom is a critical factor in the teaching and learning process. In the academic listening classes, classrooms must be equipped with quality equipment to support listening tasks and activities.

"Classroom size is fine during the listening session, but during the exam it is too big." T5- P3,4,5, 9-11, 14

"We can't hear the sound at the back due to poor quality of the speaker." T5- P1,2,6, 7-8,10, 12-13

The participants described that classroom noise and poor audio quality are the least factors that can disrupt them during listening activities and even exams. They narrated that during listening sessions, the classroom that accommodates 25 students is fine. However, they revealed that during exam week, the listening course is assigned to a bigger classroom that accommodates 50 students, where issues like noise and poor-quality speakers disrupt them. It implies that background noise, distorted recordings and poor volume of the sound hinder learners' ability to catch the information. This is in line with Pratiwi and Andriyanti (2019), who stressed out that physical settings such as noise and unclear audio can interfere with learners' ability to focus and comprehend spoken text, negatively impacting comprehension in EFL contexts.

5. Discussion

The findings showed that five listening comprehension subskills are essential to measuring learners' ability. Among these, Vocabulary Building emerged as the most difficult, followed by Inferring. Limited vocabulary is a primary barrier because unfamiliar words in connected speech increase cognitive load, delay meaning integration, and hinder comprehension. Learners often struggle to perceive and understand the spoken message when vocabulary gaps disrupt processing. In addition, higher-order subskills such as Inferring, Getting the Main Idea, and Predicting Outcomes are also contributory factors to listening difficulty. This implies that these skills expect learners to go beyond surface-level decoding and engage in deeper cognitive processes, such as drawing inferences, synthesizing information, and anticipating meaning. It can also be inferred that when vocabulary knowledge is insufficient, these higher-order skills become even more challenging for EFL learners, reinforcing the interdependence between linguistic knowledge and cognitive strategies in listening comprehension. Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016) emphasized that limited vocabulary knowledge is one of the most widespread obstacles in listening comprehension, as learners cannot easily interpret meaning when faced with unfamiliar words.

It is also revealed that almost half of the students' listening performance levels fall under Level 2 category. These students are considered "Below Average" listeners who can slightly grasp spoken English. A small proportion of students belong to Level 3, who are "Average Listeners". These students are those who can understand a wider range of spoken languages. A few portions of the students have a listening performance in the Level 4 and 5 categories and are considered "Above Average and Good Listeners", respectively. It can be noted that the overall listening performance of the respondents is only Level 2, which is "Below Average", which is alarming. It can be inferred that EFL learners find listening class difficult, as reflected in their overall performance. The below average indicates that listening instruction is not adequately supporting learners to reach functional proficiency. This aligns with the findings of Wahidah (2018), who said that difficulties in basic comprehension and pragmatic understanding, along with environmental factors such as noise and poor audio quality, further lower listening performance levels.

In terms of participants' feedback on other factors that contribute to their listening struggle, it strongly emphasized that the internal challenges such as linguistic factors, cognitive factors, learners' factors, teacher factors, and environmental or classroom factors are parts of their struggles. Linguistic factors include struggles with speed of speech, accent and pronunciation of the speaker, and vocabulary as barriers to effective comprehension. Students also reported challenges linked to cognitive factors such as text processing, wandering of thoughts, and lack of prior knowledge of the topic being heard. Instructional materials and length of the audio are considered teacher and learner's factors that contributed to listening struggles of EFL learners. It happens when the instructional materials are not contextualized to the learners' setting, along with the long-spoken text with unfamiliar words. Several learners highlighted that variations in pronunciation or accent make it difficult to follow the speaker. Lastly, classroom environment, like number of students and poor quality of sound and speakers used, contributed slightly to the students' struggle in listening comprehension. This is in line with Al-Harbi & Mirza (2024), who concluded that the speaker's accent variation, audio quality, and length of spoken texts are significant obstacles in listening comprehension of the university students in EFL courses.

This study relies on classroom performance data and students' perceptions and feedback that might contain perception biases and overestimation of listening proficiency. However, results can contribute to the body of knowledge in general and to ELT and EFL teachers in particular. It will help teachers create a listening framework and utilize appropriate listening strategies to fill the gap. It will also help ELT teachers contextualize their listening materials to ensure that learners can relate to the contents to ensure that the learning outcomes are met.

To address students' struggles in listening comprehension, it is recommended that ELT and EFL teachers implement targeted interventions focusing on the five core listening subskills. Instruction should be structured around a clear listening framework such as pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening so that learners understand the purpose of each stage and develop strategies for effective comprehension. Classroom exercises should be localized and contextualized to ensure that learners can relate to the situations presented. As an entry point, audio materials may initially feature local speakers, gradually transitioning to recordings of native speakers. This progression allows learners to recognize differences in accent and pronunciation while building toward global intelligibility and authenticity. Furthermore, technical and environmental improvements are essential. Enhancing audio clarity, minimizing classroom noise, and using reliable sound equipment can immediately improve comprehension. Finally, ELT teachers should provide explicit task purposes and clear instructions, as well-designed listening tasks reduce cognitive load to help learners focus on meaning rather than struggling with external barriers.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Five-level Rating Scale for Listening Skills

Range of Score	Levels of Listening Ability	Description of Listening Comprehension Ability	Qualitative Interpretation
5 and below	Level 1	Weak Listener	Has significant difficulty understanding spoken English.
6- 11	Level 2	Below Average Listener	Has a slightly better grasp of spoken English
12-17	Level 3	Average Listener	Has ability to understand a wider range of spoken language
18-23	Level 4	Above Average Listener	Demonstrate strong listening comprehension
24-30	Level 5	Good Listener	Has excellent understanding of spoken language in nearly every context.

Source: Adapted from a listening skills assessment framework (Teachers Institute, 2023)

Appendix 2: Interview Guide Questions

Research Questions	Major Questions (To be asked to the participants)	Follow Up Questions
1. How is the listening performance of EFL learners in the listening comprehension activity?	How do you rate your listening performance in a listening activity or a test?	- How do you find listening to spoken text? - Do you think listening is difficult? Why? - How did you answer the comprehension questions based on the spoken text?
2. What listening difficulties do EFL learners face when listening to spoken text?	As an EFL learner learning English language, what problems do you encounter in listening a spoken text?	- Can you identify major problems you encountered in answering comprehension questions? - What about other factors/challenges that affect your listening skills? - How do you manage these factors while listening spoken text?
3. What listening strategies need to consider overcoming these listening challenges in academic listening classes?	What insights can you draw from your experiences about listening to a spoken text that can help you improve your listening skills?	- In your experience, what can you suggest mitigating the problems you encountered in listening to spoken text? - What about other factors that affect your listening comprehension? Can you suggest what English teachers can do to improve your listening skills?