



## BOTTOM-UP LISTENING SKILLS: EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND CLASSROOM PRACTICES

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### Abstract:

Research suggests that in many EFL classrooms, teachers give scant attention to the teaching of bottom-up listening skills while emphasizing top-down strategies. The purpose of this study is to address this imbalance by investigating EFL teachers' perceptions of bottom-up listening skills and their teaching practices. A primarily quantitative mixed-methods approach was employed to collect data from 25 Moroccan EFL secondary school teachers via an online questionnaire. Quantitative data were analyzed to examine teachers' beliefs regarding bottom-up listening and their reported classroom practices, with comparative analysis by years of teaching experience. A thematic analysis of the open-ended responses was utilized to gain deeper insights into teachers' perceptions. The findings reveal that teachers recognize the role of bottom-up skills in listening comprehension. However, most of them reported that in practice, they prioritize top-down activities over explicit bottom-up listening instruction. Many teachers indicated that time constraints, curricular demands, and lack of training or materials discourage intensive focus on bottom-up skills. These results align with prior research showing that listening instruction tends to focus on comprehension questions and overall understanding. The implication is that a more balanced approach to teaching listening is required to better facilitate comprehensive listening development.

**Keywords:** bottom-up listening; top-down listening; EFL listening instruction; teacher perceptions; classroom practices

### 1. Introduction

Listening has historically received less attention than other skills despite its crucial role in foreign language acquisition. It has been put on the back burner and downgraded (Field, 2008). In daily communication, listening is the most frequently used language skill, accounting for about 40-50% of communication time, more than speaking, reading, or

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writing (Gilman and Moody, 1984). Research results show slight variation depending on the groups studied, but on average, time spent communicating is divided as follows: approximately 50 percent listening, 25 percent speaking, 15 percent reading, and 10 percent writing (Morely, 1984; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). According to Dunkel (1991), for most foreign language learners, comprehending spoken language can be of more use than speaking it. Notwithstanding its importance, listening was long perceived as a passive or secondary skill. Nunan (2002) referred to it as the *"Cinderella skill of language learning, overlooked by its elder sister speaking"*. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, language teaching prioritized reading, writing, and grammar and only later did explicit focus on listening comprehension emerge (Morley, 2001; Osada, 2004). Even as communicative language teaching brought listening to the forefront from the 1970s onward, many EFL programs still consider listening more as a means of exposure or testing comprehension than as a skill to be taught in its own right (Field, 2008; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Oftentimes, teachers give students practice in listening through audio passages and comprehension questions without systematically teaching them how to listen (Graham & Santos, 2015; Abad, 2023).

A key challenge in listening instruction is finding a balance between bottom-up and top-down processing. Bottom-up processing involves the segmentation of the sound stream into meaningful units to understand the spoken message (Goh & Vandergrift, 2022). During this process, listeners construct meaning incrementally by first recognising phonemes and then combining them into words, which form phrases and sentences that eventually contribute to an understanding of the entire discourse. (Vandergrift, 2004). In contrast, top-down processing involves using prior knowledge, context, and expectations to interpret the overall meaning of what is heard. Effective listening requires an interaction of both processes: listeners must decode the acoustic input and relate it to contextual clues for full message comprehension (Vandergrift, 2007; Buck, 2001).

Nevertheless, many EFL teachers continue to emphasize top-down listening strategies to the detriment of bottom-up skills (Siegel & Siegel, 2015; Renandya & Hu, 2018). Typical listening lessons in communicative classrooms focus on getting the gist, understanding main ideas, and extracting specific information through comprehension questions. These activities rely heavily on learners' use of contextual clues and existing knowledge to compensate for gaps in their understanding. Field (2008) argues that many listening lessons follow a *"comprehension approach,"* in which teachers play audio recordings and then check understanding through questions, without instructing learners how to decode the stream of speech. If a student fails to understand, the teacher often just provides the correct answer or moves on. As a result, learners might never get guided practice in perceiving sounds, recognizing words they know in connected speech, or parsing complex sentences, which are all bottom-up skills essential for fluent listening (Siegel, 2013; Hasan, 2000). Research has shown that less-skilled second/foreign listeners often have difficulties with bottom-up processing, such as segmenting speech or recognizing known words in connected speech (Goh, 2000; Tsui & Fullilove, 1998). If teachers fail to address these decoding issues, learners' listening skills may not develop, even if they become adept at using context clues and background knowledge.

Research in foreign language listening suggests that an effective approach combines both top-down and bottom-up processing. Successful language listeners interpret meaning by both decoding sounds accurately and making sense of the input using linguistic and world knowledge (Rost, 2016; Graham & Santos, 2015). In the same vein, research has shown that differences in language listening proficiency are often related to variations in bottom-up processing skills. More proficient listeners quickly recognize words and sounds, which allows them to allocate cognitive resources to contextual analysis and meaning inference (Tsui & Fullilove, 1998). At the same time, other studies indicate that teaching learners top-down metacognitive strategies (such as planning for listening, monitoring comprehension, and making inferences) can improve listening performance, especially for less proficient listeners (Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010). This implies that an interactive model of listening, where bottom-up and top-down processes continuously support each other, is widely accepted in theory (Buck, 2001; Vandergrift, 2007).

This study sheds light on bottom-up listening skills that are often overlooked in listening instruction. It examines how EFL teachers perceive bottom-up processing and whether their classroom practices align with their perceptions. Specifically, it explores whether teachers recognize the imbalance in listening instruction, how they incorporate bottom-up exercises, and what challenges they face in doing so. Additionally, the study investigates whether teachers' experience influences their perceptions and teaching practices.

To achieve these objectives, the study purports to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are EFL teachers' perceptions of bottom-up listening skills?
- 2) How do teachers implement listening instruction in their classrooms, particularly regarding bottom-up and top-down activities and what challenges or constraints do they encounter in teaching bottom-up listening skills?
- 3) Does teaching experience affect teachers' perceptions and practices related to bottom-up listening?

This study is significant in that it can inform teacher training programs and materials development by highlighting areas where support is needed to integrate bottom-up listening work. It should also contribute empirical data to the relatively under-researched area of teachers' cognitions about listening instruction (Graham *et al.*, 2014).

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Importance of Listening Comprehension in EFL**

Listening comprehension is fundamental to language acquisition and communication (Vandergrift, 2007). It is not a passive activity but an active and complex process (Rost, 2011; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Listening is now recognized as an interpretive process in which listeners actively construct meaning based on expectations, inferences, intentions, prior knowledge, and selective processing of the input (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Anderson & Lynch, 1988).

Strong listening skills are crucial because they facilitate interaction, provide language exposure, and are linked with the development of other skills like speaking, reading and writing (Nunan, 2002; Scarcella and Oxford, 1992). As noted earlier, listening dominates real-life communication. By some estimates, adult communication time is about 45% listening, 30% speaking, 16% reading, and 9% writing (Morley, 1984; Mendelsohn, 1994). This disproportionate importance means that if learners struggle with listening, their overall language progress and confidence can be severely hindered. Listening, however, has historically received scant attention in language teaching. Prior to the 1970s, language teaching methods virtually ignored listening, and even the Audio-Lingual Method that came later treated it as a vehicle for pattern practice rather than developing comprehension. It wasn't until the advent of communicative language teaching and comprehension-based approaches that listening started to be viewed as a critical skill on its own. Works by researchers like James and Krashen highlighted that comprehending spoken language is essential to language acquisition. Nevertheless, many early classroom listening activities resembled tests where students would listen to a passage and answer questions, measuring success by the correct answers they got (Field, 2008). Field (2008) notes that this "*comprehension-testing*" approach persists in many EFL contexts. Learners are expected to develop listening skills by practicing listening rather than through explicit instruction. Similarly, Graham and Santos (2015) point out that listening in language classrooms is often treated as an exercise for practice or a comprehension test rather than a skill to be taught and improved.

## **2.1 Bottom-Up and Top-Down Processing in Listening**

Traditionally, two theoretical models have been utilized to account for how listeners comprehend spoken language: bottom-up and top-down processing. In a bottom-up model, listening is seen as a decoding process that starts with individual sounds that combine into words, phrases and sentences to create meaning. It relies on the listener's vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. Top-down processing, on the other hand, is a conceptually-driven approach (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). Instead of attending to every sound or word, listeners make sense of what they hear by relying on their prior knowledge, context, and expectations. Modern theories of listening comprehension recognize that effective listening is interactive, involving both bottom-up and top-down processes working together (Vandergrift, 2007). Listeners alternate between drawing on their understanding of linguistic knowledge and their broader knowledge to comprehend spoken language. In this connection, Anderson (2009) breaks the listening process into three interconnected stages: perception, parsing and utilization. The process begins with perception, where the listener distinguishes phonemes, word boundaries, and connected speech features. Parsing involves organizing these recognized sounds into words and phrases to establish the utterance's literal meaning using grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Utilization allows the listener to interpret meaning by integrating prior knowledge and context. While bottom-up processing is essential for perception and parsing stages, top-down processing is key in utilization. However, in practice, the three stages overlap (Kurita, 2012). Research by Vandergrift (2007) and others suggests that the

degree of reliance on each process depends on the proficiency of the listener. According to Field (2008), less-proficient listeners rely more on context and co-text to compensate for their weaker decoding skills while proficient listeners use context to only enhance their overall comprehension since they already have stronger decoding skills. In this regard, Stanovich (1980) proposed the Interactive Compensatory Hypothesis, which assumes that, unlike confident learners, those with lower confidence rely more on top-down information to make up for gaps in understanding.

Specific bottom-up skills like phoneme perception are particularly relevant in EFL contexts, as spoken English often differs from its written form. According to Goh (2000), connected speech features like weak forms, linking, and elision make word recognition challenging for EFL learners, causing difficulties in mapping spoken words to their written counterparts. Word recognition speed is another important factor in listening comprehension. While skilled listeners recognize words almost effortlessly, less-skilled listeners struggle with decoding. This makes their processing slower and more demanding, which can cause them to miss parts of the input (Field, 2008). Another key skill is syntactic parsing, which involves transferring words in the message into a mental representation of the combined meaning of the words (Anderson, 2009). If not properly parsed into meaningful segments, utterances could be confusing to the listeners. These challenges highlight the importance of explicit instruction of these bottom-up skills for accurate comprehension.

Top-down processing is also of paramount importance in comprehending spoken language. Research suggests that listeners can still grasp the overall meaning by relying on top-down strategies such as prediction, inference, and background knowledge when they struggle with comprehension (Rubin, 1994; Mendelsohn, 1998; Graham & Macaro, 2008). However, the optimal way to develop listening skills is to blend bottom-up and top-down techniques (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Nation & Newton, 2009). Students should learn to decode sounds and words accurately and to interpret messages using context and other top-down strategies. Unfortunately, research suggests that in many classrooms, bottom-up listening strategies are often deprioritized in favor of top-down strategies and have been left out of listening pedagogy research (Field, 2008; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). In the same vein, Siegel and Siegel (2015) highlight that language instruction often places emphasis on top-down strategies or comprehension questions or a combination of both while neglecting the “*nuts and bolts*” of the listening process, which has led to the belief that issues in sound and word recognition are of low importance and can be resolved through the use of context (Field, 2008). Siegel (2013) observed actual listening lesson practices and found that they emphasized comprehension-checking questions and that teachers rarely included activities to teach decoding skills. Similarly, in a study by Abad (2023), the instructional practices reported by the teachers emphasize task completion rather than developing listening skills. Likewise, Graham, Santos, & Francis-Brophy (2014) reported a similar finding with secondary teachers in the UK who treated listening as mainly a test of comprehension focusing on learners getting information and the correct answers from passages, what Field (2008) calls the “*the comprehension approach*”.

The tendency to prioritize top-down listening instruction is further reinforced by the use of course books and standardized tests that emphasize comprehension questions. If a curriculum guideline states listening objectives like *"students will be able to understand the main idea and specific details of a short conversation,"* teachers will design lessons accordingly. They might not realize that some instruction in hearing and distinguishing the sounds and words of the conversation might be useful to achieve those objectives. Additionally, many teachers might be unaware of the techniques to teach these skills unless they have specialized training or keep up with recent research. Also, in some contexts, bottom-up teaching techniques are mistakenly associated with old-fashioned pedagogy and thus avoided in modern communicative classrooms. Furthermore, Renandya and Hu (2018) point out that even though research in listening instruction has gained momentum, teachers still stick to the traditional top-down activities due to limited access to academic literature, teaching materials and restricted access to online resources. This emphasis on top-down listening skills in EFL classrooms has a negative impact on learners' listening skills. Although they develop the ability to guess meanings from context, they struggle with listening tasks that require accurate bottom-up processing such as understanding connected speech, reduced forms or specific details where context alone is of little or no use. Due to the lack of training in these skills, students often identify listening as one of the most difficult parts of learning English (Graham, 2003; Renandya & Farrell, 2011).

It is now recognized that the imbalance between bottom-up and top-down listening instruction needs correcting. Vanderplank (2014), for example, argues for placing more importance on explicitly teaching basic phonological skills that listeners need to decode spoken messages and improve their pronunciation of the foreign language alongside awareness of metacognitive strategies. Field (2008) proposes a diagnostic approach to teaching listening, recommending repeated listening to target different levels of listening such as decoding sounds and words, parsing syntactic structures, and constructing meaning. Existing research suggests that such focused, bottom-up practice positively impacts learners' overall listening ability (Field, 2008). Brown (2017) argues that listening comprehension is an active process where listeners simultaneously decode sounds and utilize contextual and prior knowledge to construct meaning. Similarly, Goh and Vandergrift (2012) highlight that bottom-up and top down-processes are interdependent, with top-down knowledge shaping how listeners interpret incoming sounds. Graham *et al.* (2014) further stress the importance of coordinating between these processes, noting that while native listeners do this effortlessly, foreign language learners struggle due to their limited linguistic resources. Consequently, listening instruction should explicitly foster the integration of both processes to enable learners to decode speech while simultaneously using contextual cues for comprehension.

### **2.3 EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Listening Instruction**

According to Borg (2003), teachers' beliefs and knowledge about language teaching guide their classroom practices. Several studies have explored teachers' beliefs regarding

listening instruction. Graham *et al.* (2014) surveyed foreign language teachers in England and found that although teachers recognized listening as a critical skill, their understanding of how to teach it was less developed. Rather than explicitly teaching listening strategies or sub-skills, many teachers in the study associated effective listening instruction with giving students plenty of listening practice and exposure. They also reported constraints like curriculum requirements and limited class time as barriers to implementing comprehensive and more explicit teaching of listening skills. In a related study, Abad (2023) explored EFL teachers' beliefs and practices and identified a mismatch between teachers' awareness of the importance of listening and even of certain bottom-up aspects and their classroom practice, which largely involved textbook-based activities prioritizing comprehension questions rather than actual listening skill development. Similarly, a survey of teacher trainees in Turkey by Solak and Altay (2014) revealed that they were quite good at employing top-down processes themselves when listening but struggled with bottom-up processing. So, it can be concluded that they might not be able to teach what they themselves are not comfortable with.

A common belief among EFL teachers is that teaching listening is challenging (Graham, 2003; Cauldwell, 2013). Unlike teaching reading or grammar, where there are established techniques, teaching listening is seen as less tangible, for you cannot see what learners fail to understand. This could prompt teachers to rely on the familiar practice of playing audio recordings and asking comprehension questions. Graham and Santos (2015) point out that many teachers are unclear about effective listening instruction and tend to teach general listening activities rather than explicitly teaching specific listening skills. They argue that teachers need to be aware of how the listening process works and of how to combine both top-down and bottom-up approaches in their instructional practices.

Another factor that shapes teachers' beliefs is their own experience as language learners. For instance, if an EFL teacher learned English in classrooms that emphasized grammar and reading, they might not have developed strong listening skills or been taught listening strategies. As a result, they might either avoid explicit listening instruction or they might compensate by focusing on comprehension activities. In Morocco, for example, older generations of English teachers learned the language in classes where listening was underemphasized. Consequently, they might not feel confident enough to teach listening explicitly and so rely predominantly on the limited listening exercises provided by coursebooks. In contrast, younger teachers who have been exposed to current teaching methods might have learned about listening strategies and activities. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that teachers' learning experience may influence their approach to listening instruction.

Overall, existing research underscores the importance of an approach to listening instruction that integrates bottom-up and top-down listening strategies. However, empirical evidence remains scarce regarding how teachers currently balance these approaches. As noted earlier, several studies indicate an emphasis on top-down listening strategies to the detriment of bottom-up listening skills despite their fundamental role in comprehension and language development. To address this imbalance, it is essential to

investigate teachers' perceptions and classroom practices. Thus, this literature identifies a critical gap which the present study aims to bridge by exploring Moroccan secondary school teachers' perceptions and self-reported classroom practices. This should provide insights that support a more balanced approach to listening instruction and inform teacher education and curriculum development.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study employs a non-experimental, cross-sectional survey design using a questionnaire for data collection. The design was considered suitable for obtaining data from teachers regarding their beliefs and self-reported practices (Dörnyei, 2007). It is descriptive and incorporates a comparative analysis to explore how responses vary based on years of teaching experience. The primary data source is teachers' questionnaire responses, which provide insight into both their perceptions and their classroom practices. A questionnaire was utilized for it is considered an essential tool in educational research (Newby, 2013; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017) that can yield substantial data within a short period (Patten, 2014). The questionnaire contained both closed-ended and a few open-ended items to enable respondents to elaborate on their answers. The survey also ensured anonymity, which encouraged teachers to respond honestly about potentially sensitive issues. Collected data were summarized using descriptive statistics, and independent sample t-tests were conducted to compare groups of teachers by experience.

#### **3.2 Participants**

The participants were 25 EFL teachers from public secondary schools in Morocco. The sample included both male ( $n = 14$ ) and female ( $n = 11$ ) teachers, reflecting a roughly typical gender distribution among Moroccan EFL teachers. Their teaching experience ranged from 2 years to 28 years, with a median of about 10 years. For analysis, we categorized teachers into two experience groups: "Less Experienced" (those with 5 or fewer years of teaching,  $n = 8$ ) and "Experienced" (those with more than 5 years,  $n = 17$ ), to explore any differences in perceptions and practices. All teachers held at least a Bachelor's degree, and many had pursued additional training such as a teaching certification or Master's degree. Participation was voluntary. We used convenience sampling, recruiting teachers via a social media group for Moroccan EFL teachers and through professional contacts. While this sampling method may introduce some self-selection bias (teachers interested in professional discussions might be more likely to respond), it enabled us to gather respondents relatively quickly. The sample size is modest, which limits generalizability, but it provides an initial data set for uncovering prevalent perceptions in this context. All participants were assured of confidentiality.



### 3.3 Data Collection

Data was collected in February 2025 through an online survey created with Google Forms. This format was selected for its flexibility and ease of access. To invite participants, a recruitment message explaining the purpose of the study and containing the survey link was shared in a popular Facebook group for Moroccan EFL teachers and was emailed to teacher contacts within the researcher's professional network. The survey was open for three weeks, and reminder messages were sent out to encourage participation. Participation was anonymous as anonymity allows respondents to provide honest answers rather than idealized ones (Dörnyei, 2007). No personal data was collected to ensure confidentiality and to encourage frank responses.

Out of approximately 53 teachers who accessed the survey, 25 completed it fully (completion rate ~47,2%). Partial responses were discarded. The data from Google Forms were checked for any inconsistent or duplicate entries (none were found, as each participant could only submit once). Given the self-report nature of the data, we are aware that some responses might reflect what teachers believe should be done as much as what they actually do (social desirability bias (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010)). To mitigate this, questions were phrased neutrally and we emphasized that we were interested in understanding challenges, not evaluating teacher performance. Nonetheless, it's acknowledged that self-reporting can differ from observed behavior, which is addressed in our recommendations for future research.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The study aims to offer a better understanding of how Moroccan EFL teachers perceive and approach bottom-up listening instruction and the challenges they face. Data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. While most of the data were analyzed statistically, open-ended responses were explored thematically. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize responses related to the perceived importance of bottom-up skills, confidence in teaching phonemic awareness, and frequency of bottom-up activities. These analyses addressed Research Question 1 about teachers' perceptions of bottom-up listening skills. To answer Research Question 2, qualitative responses were coded and thematically analyzed to uncover recurring themes related to classroom practices, the use of bottom-up versus top-down strategies, and challenges. To address Research Question 3 concerning the influence of teaching experience on teachers' perceptions and instructional practices, participants were grouped into less experienced ( $\leq 5$  years,  $n = 12$ ) and more experienced ( $> 5$  years,  $n = 13$ ). Independent-sample t-tests with Welch's correction were conducted to compare group means on the above-mentioned key variables. Assumptions such as normality and equal variance were checked prior to the analysis. Lastly, correlational analyses using Spearman's rho examined relationships between ordinal variables, particularly between the perceived importance of bottom-up skills and teachers' confidence in teaching them.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This section presents both the quantitative and qualitative findings of the study, integrating them into a comprehensive discussion that addresses the three research questions:

- 1) What are EFL teachers' perceptions of bottom-up listening skills?
- 2) How do teachers implement listening instruction in their classrooms, particularly regarding bottom-up and top-down activities? What challenges or constraints do they encounter in teaching bottom-up listening skills?
- 3) Does teaching experience affect teachers' perceptions and practices related to bottom-up listening? The presentation of results is organized to reflect these focal points, weaving in interpretations, comparisons with extant literature, and illustrative quotes from participants.

### 4.1 Participant Demographics

A total of 25 Moroccan EFL teachers participated in this study. Their years of experience ranged from fewer than 2 years to over 10 years. As noted in the methods, teachers were categorized into two groups for inferential analyses: less experienced teachers ( $\leq 5$  years;  $n = 12$ ) and more experienced teachers ( $> 5$  years;  $n = 13$ ). All participants teach in public secondary schools, representing diverse regions across Morocco. Most had not received specialized training that focused explicitly on phonetics or bottom-up listening strategies; although 16 teachers reported having taken a general listening-skills training session at some point, only 6 of those indicated that bottom-up strategies were ever addressed.

These demographic characteristics provide an essential backdrop for factors like experience, institutional constraints, and insufficient training, which can influence teachers' perceptions and implementation of bottom-up listening instruction. In this context, research highlights the importance of professional development in equipping teachers with the theoretical and practical knowledge needed to support learners' bottom-up listening skills, such as decoding and phoneme recognition (Field, 2008; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

### 4.2. Findings and Discussion

#### 4.2.1. Perceptions of Bottom-Up Listening

Teachers' perceptions of bottom-up listening skills were measured through Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. The descriptive analysis focused on three key perceptual variables :

- 1) Perceived Importance of Bottom-Up Skills,
- 2) Confidence in Teaching Phonemic Awareness,
- 3) Frequency of Bottom-Up Activities (self-reported).

Participants responded using a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree/not important/never) to 5 (strongly agree/very important/always). Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of these variables for the full sample ( $N = 25$ ).

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables (N = 25)

| Variable  | M    | SD   | Min | Max |
|---|------|------|-----|-----|
| Perceived Importance (1–5)                      | 3.92 | 0.68 | 3.0 | 5.0 |
| Confidence in Teaching Phonemic Awareness (1–5) | 2.20 | 0.85 | 1.0 | 4.0 |
| Frequency of Bottom-Up Activities (1–5)         | 2.12 | 0.51 | 2.0 | 3.0 |

The findings highlight a noticeable discrepancy between Moroccan EFL teachers' acknowledgment of the importance of bottom-up listening skills and their reported confidence in teaching them as well as their classroom practices (Table 1). On average, participants recognized that bottom-up skills are relatively important ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ). Indeed, 18 teachers (72%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "Bottom-up listening skills are essential". Seven participants (28%) were neutral, while none strongly disagreed with it. In contrast to perceived importance, reported confidence in teaching phonemic awareness was low ( $M = 2.20$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ). Seventeen out of 25 participants (68%) mentioned feeling either "Not Confident" or "Slightly Confident" teaching bottom-up listening skills. Comments such as, "Our training did not equip us with strategies for detailed sound work," suggest a disconnect between teachers' awareness of the importance of these skills and their readiness to teach them (Goh, 2000). As regards self-reported frequency of integrating bottom-up activities (e.g., phoneme drills, word recognition exercises, minimal pairs) was also low ( $M = 2.12$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ). While no teacher reported "Always" or "Frequently" using such activities, 20 teachers indicated "Rarely," and 5 indicated "Occasionally." This finding underscores the marginal role that bottom-up approaches currently play in most Moroccan EFL classrooms, echoing global trends in which the comprehension approach with its top-down strategies continues to dominate listening pedagogy (Field, 2008).

From a theoretical perspective, bottom-up skills involve decoding speech signals at the phonemic and lexical levels and they "*provide the tangible data for comprehension*" (Rost, 2011). The present findings indicate that although Moroccan EFL teachers recognize these skills, they lack the confidence and practical support to implement them regularly. This aligns with the findings of earlier research, which suggests that while teachers acknowledge the importance of both bottom-up and top-down processes for effective listening instruction, they are often constrained by curricular demands and lack of training (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012; Siegel & Siegel, 2015). This gap between teacher beliefs and classroom practice indicates the necessity for focused pedagogical interventions, teacher development, and supporting materials (Graham *et al.*, 2014).

#### 4.2.2. Classroom Practices

The following tables present information on how often bottom-up approaches are included in listening lessons, the types of activities used, and the overall balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches in the classroom. The results show an overwhelming preference for top-down approaches, with bottom-up approaches being given only incidental focus. This aligns with general trends in EFL context, where

listening instruction is widely viewed as a way of assessing understanding rather than a key skill that needs specific training in decoding (Brown, 2017).

**Table 2:** Frequency of Bottom-Up Strategies

| Response     | Number of Teachers |
|--------------|--------------------|
| Never        | 0                  |
| Rarely       | 20                 |
| Occasionally | 5                  |
| Frequently   | 0                  |
| Always       | 0                  |

Table 2 shows that a vast majority of teachers (20 out of 25) reported that they “rarely” use bottom-up strategies, while the remaining 20% use them only “occasionally.” None of the teachers reported using such strategies “frequently” or “always.” This indicates that bottom-up instruction is virtually non-existent in regular teaching practices. The average frequency score ( $M = 2.12$ ) confirms this infrequent usage. These findings highlight the marginal status of decoding skills like phoneme discrimination in actual classroom practice.

**Table 3:** Types of Activities Used

| Activity                              | Number of Teachers Reporting Use |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Phoneme recognition drills            | 0                                |
| Minimal pair exercises                | 8                                |
| Sound segmentation tasks              | 0                                |
| Listening/transcribing short passages | 0                                |
| Other                                 | 0                                |

As shown in Table 3, minimal pair exercises were the most frequently used bottom-up activity, cited by 8 teachers. Moreover, even when minimal pairs were used, they were introduced separately, not as part of an overall lesson design. Other bottom-up tasks such as phoneme drills, segmentation tasks, or transcription exercises, were absent. This limited or inconsistent use of bottom-up listening activities suggests that they are not systematically integrated into the broader instructional approach. This reinforces the prevailing emphasis on top-down strategies in EFL listening instruction.

**Table 4:** Balance Between Top-Down and Bottom-Up Listening Approaches

| Approach                                  | Number of Teachers |
|---|--------------------|
| Almost exclusively top-down               | 10                 |
| Mostly top-down with occasional bottom-up | 9                  |
| Balanced                                  | 3                  |
| Mostly bottom-up with occasional top-down | 0                  |
| Almost exclusively bottom-up              | 0                  |

Table 4 further supports the above-mentioned findings and reveals that 76% of respondents (19 out of 25) characterized their classroom listening instruction as “Mostly

*top-down with occasional bottom-up*" or *"Almost exclusively top-down."* Only three teachers reported a *"Balanced"* approach, and none claimed to emphasize bottom-up strategies. This distribution reflects the wider pedagogical tendency in EFL instruction. As Brown (2017) notes, listening instruction often prioritizes meaning-based strategies while neglecting the role of decoding and phonological awareness in comprehension development.

#### 4.2.3. Challenges and Constraints

To better understand the gap between teacher beliefs and instructional practices, participants were asked to identify the challenges they face in integrating bottom-up listening activities into their lessons. They are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5:** Reported Challenges in Teaching Bottom-up Listening Skills

| Challenges   | Number of teachers | Percentage |
|--|--------------------|------------|
| Lack of time in the curriculum                               | 22                 | 88.0       |
| Insufficient training in phonetics and pronunciation         | 20                 | 80.0       |
| Limited access to materials                                  | 18                 | 72.0       |
| Other issues (e.g., student motivation, overemphasis on CLT) | 10                 | 40.0       |

As shown in Table 5, twenty-two respondents (88%) cited a lack of curricular time as a barrier to teaching bottom-up listening skills. This highlights the pressure many teachers experience to focus on top-down listening tasks in line with CLT-based curriculum guidelines that emphasize comprehension (Nunan, 2002). Insufficient training in phonetics was mentioned by nearly as many teachers (80%) as an obstacle to integrating bottom-up listening components in their listening instruction practices, supporting Field's (2008) argument that teacher training programs devote little or no time to bottom-up listening skills. Respondents (72%) also cited limited access to suitable materials specifically designed for bottom-up listening practice. These findings suggest that these structural, pedagogical, and material constraints need to be addressed to strengthen learners' overall listening competence.

#### 4.2.4. Assessment and Student Outcomes

**Table 6:** Assessment Methods for Bottom-Up Listening Skills (n = 25)

| Assessment Method                               | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|-----------|------------|
| Informal observation or general listening tests | 20        | 80%        |
| Occasional oral quizzes on phoneme recognition  | 3         | 12%        |
| Not specified / unsure                          | 2         | 8%         |

The majority of respondents (n = 20, 80%) mentioned that they recur to informal observation or general listening comprehension tests to assess bottom-up listening skills. Only a small minority (n = 3, 12%) indicated that they occasionally use oral quizzes specifically targeting phoneme recognition. The remaining 2 participants (8%) did not respond directly or expressed uncertainty. This suggests that assessments of bottom-up

skills are scarce, and most evaluation practices focus on global comprehension rather than discrete listening subskills. As one teacher put it, *"Our tests measure overall comprehension, not specific decoding skills."*

#### 4.2.5. Perceived Impact on Student Performance

**Table 7:** Perceived Impact of Bottom-Up Activities on Student Listening Performance (n = 25)

| Reported Impact on Student Listening | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| No noticeable change                 | 16        | 64%        |
| Moderate improvements                | 6         | 24%        |
| Not sure                             | 3         | 12%        |

In terms of the bottom-up listening instruction outcomes presented in Table 7, most teachers (n = 16, 64%) reported "No noticeable change" in students' overall listening comprehension when they included short phoneme recognition drills. However, about one-quarter (n = 6) observed *"Moderate improvements,"* suggesting that even limited bottom-up practice may confer some benefit, such as better word recognition. The remaining 3 respondents (12%) expressed uncertainty as to the impact of bottom-up listening on student performance due to inconsistent implementation of such practices. Even though the reported impact appears limited, these findings point to the potential benefits of a more systematic and sustained practice of bottom-up listening instruction. This aligns with the view that learners develop listening proficiency through repeated and meaningful exposure to comprehensible spoken input, which helps build the procedural knowledge necessary for effective listening (Renandya & Farrell, 2011).

#### 4.2.6. Influence of Teaching Experience

To explore whether teaching experience affected teachers' perceptions and practices, thus addressing Research Question 3, participants were divided into less experienced teachers ( $\leq 5$  years, n = 12) and more experienced teachers ( $> 5$  years, n = 13). The same three variables previously used were examined via independent sample t-tests using Welch's correction for unequal sample sizes and potential variance differences:

- 1) Perceived Importance of Bottom-Up Skills,
- 2) Frequency of Bottom-Up Activities,
- 3) Confidence in Teaching Phonemic Awareness.

All variables were measured on a five-point Likert scale, as noted in Table 1. Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics for each group and the results of the t-tests.

**Table 8:** Comparison of Key Variables by Teaching Experience

| Variable                                | Group (Years)   | M (SD)      | Welch's t | p-value | 95% CI        |
|---|-----------------|-------------|-----------|---------|---------------|
| Perceived Importance (1–5)              | $\leq 5$ (n=12) | 4.00 (0.60) | 1.01      | .32     | [–0.29, 0.84] |
|   | $> 5$ (n=13)    | 3.85 (0.75) |           |         |               |
| Frequency of Bottom-Up Activities (1–5) | $\leq 5$ (n=12) | 2.10 (0.40) | 0.22      | .83     | [–0.38, 0.48] |
|   | $> 5$ (n=13)    | 2.15 (0.60) |           |         |               |
| Confidence in Phonemic Awareness (1–5)  | $\leq 5$ (n=12) | 2.05 (0.88) | –0.70     | .49     | [–0.62, 0.30] |
|   | $> 5$ (n=13)    | 2.30 (0.82) |           |         |               |

Table 8 shows that there were no statistically significant differences in either perceptions or practices of bottom-up listening instruction between less experienced ( $\leq 5$  years) and more experienced teachers ( $> 5$  years). Less experienced teachers rated the importance of bottom-up skills slightly higher ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ) than did more experienced teachers ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ), but this difference was not significant ( $p = .32$ ). Likewise, the frequency with which the two groups indicated they used bottom-up activities was nearly identical ( $M = 2.10$  vs.  $2.15$ ), and the difference was negligible ( $p = .83$ ). Confidence in teaching phonemic awareness also showed no significant difference ( $p = .49$ ) by years of experience. Teachers with more experience expressed slightly higher confidence ( $M = 2.30$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) than less experienced teachers ( $M = 2.05$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ). These results, which were analyzed using Welch's t-test due to uneven sample sizes, indicate that teaching experience does not influence teachers' perceptions, confidence, or use of bottom-up listening strategies. This consistency can be attributed to such factors as lack of training, limited resources, and curriculum constraints which shape classroom practice. Qualitative responses to the questionnaire confirm this interpretation, as many teachers, regardless of experience, identified barriers such as poor training in phonetics, limited instructional time, and an overemphasis on top-down comprehension tasks. These findings are in agreement with earlier work by Graham and Santos (2015), which indicated that where bottom-up instruction is deemphasized in teacher training, there exists uniformity of practice regardless of teachers' experience, with no significant differences in reported beliefs or use of bottom-up listening strategies. In the same vein, Vandergrift and Goh (2012) argue that teachers' approaches to listening instruction are strongly influenced by the nature of their training and the curricular or institutional contexts in which they teach. It can thus be inferred that without targeted support, teachers are unlikely to develop or implement effective bottom-up listening practices, regardless of how experienced they are.

#### **4.2.7. Correlational Analysis**

To further explore the correlation between teachers' perceptions and their confidence in teaching bottom-up listening skills, we conducted a Spearman's rho correlation between two ordinal variables of interest: (a) perceived importance of bottom-up skills and (b) confidence in teaching phonemic awareness. The results revealed a moderate positive correlation ( $r = .42$ ,  $p < .05$ ), indicating that teachers who believed bottom-up skills are more important indicated higher confidence in teaching those skills. Although the correlation does not imply causation, it suggests a meaningful association between attitudinal dispositions and self-efficacy in the context of listening instruction. This relationship has pedagogical implications for teacher training and professional development. Developing teachers' awareness of the importance of bottom-up listening processes is likely to enhance their confidence in teaching them. Effective professional development should not only provide teachers with teaching methodology but also enable them to understand why such skills are important.

#### 4.2.8. Thematic Analysis

To gain deeper insight into how teachers conceptualize and implement bottom-up and top-down listening strategies and the challenges they face, we conducted a thematic analysis to analyze data from open-ended items. One of the themes that emerged was the gap between teachers' acknowledgment of the importance of bottom-up listening skills and the difficulties they face in teaching them. Many teachers stressed the importance of regularly integrating bottom-up listening strategies into listening instruction. For example, one relatively new teacher noted that *"phoneme recognition is essential, especially for beginners who struggle with certain sounds."* Nevertheless, they complained that the curriculum places more emphasis on top-down comprehension tasks and often neglects bottom-up listening approaches. In this regard, an experienced teacher explained: *"Although I see the value of bottom-up processing in listening comprehension, textbooks emphasize global comprehension. There's no time to focus on sounds."* This discrepancy between teachers' beliefs and instructional practices is reflected in the data, which indicated a high perceived importance score but a very low frequency of use. This is in line with findings from Graham *et al.* (2014), where teachers' classroom practices are often shaped more by curriculum and assessment requirements than by their own belief in skill development.

Lack of training in phonetics and bottom-up listening instruction was another issue raised by participants. Several teachers indicated that their pre-service and in-service training rarely emphasized bottom-up techniques or phonological instruction. One teacher declared that *"most of their training was about communicative activities, not dissecting spoken language"*, while another experienced teacher commented: *"If we had more workshops on phonemic drills or segmenting sounds, I might feel comfortable teaching it"*. The lack of targeted professional development in this area seems to leave teachers relying more on top-down strategies with which they are more familiar and comfortable. Closely linked to this was the perceived overload created by the curriculum. Teachers mentioned that large class sizes, limited time to cover all units, and a lack of testing of bottom-up listening skills pose significant obstacles to the teaching of these skills. In this connection, a participant remarked: *"We already have to rush to finish all the units. Incorporating bottom-up exercises slows us down, and students don't see them tested in exams"*. This aligns with Field (2008), who cautions that although top-down tasks may appear more practical in time-limited classroom settings, such approaches often prioritize comprehension outcomes at the expense of crucial bottom-up skills like decoding that are essential for long-term listening development.

Despite these constraints, teachers showed a strong sense of willingness to find ways to integrate bottom-up strategies more effectively. Many participants voiced a need for training courses on incorporating bottom-up listening skills in their listening instruction. In this context, a teacher explained that they *"need good materials that can make phoneme work fun and relevant, not just rote drills"*, and another added that he *"would like to attend workshops on designing bottom-up tasks"*. These comments reflect a genuine interest in professional development and highlight the need for teachers to have better support



in bottom-up listening instruction. This aligns with Siegel and Siegel's (2015) observation that teachers often lack guidance on implementing multi-layered listening pedagogy

## **5. Practical Implications**

There are several practical implications that can be drawn from the results of this study in an effort to enhance EFL listening instruction. Curriculum developers should consider revising curricula to allocate specific instructional time to bottom-up processes such as phoneme perception and word segmentation. Similarly, teacher training courses can benefit by incorporating modules on phonemic awareness, minimal pair drills, and segmental and suprasegmental features of speech, to complement top-down listening methods. Additionally, educational stakeholders are encouraged to develop and disseminate materials, such as phoneme-based tests, that can be easily integrated into existing classroom practices. Testing procedures also need to be enhanced by the creation of short, focused exercises to measure individual bottom-up listening skills and enable teachers to monitor learners' progress. As supported by Vandergrift and Goh (2012), addressing these areas would enhance overall listeners' performance by improving their ability to process language at multiple levels.

## **6. Limitations and Future Research**

Based on its findings, the present study offers valuable insights into bottom-up listening instruction. However, several limitations must be mentioned. For instance, the sample of 25 teachers, while suitable for an exploratory mixed-methods design, may not be representative of the diversity of Moroccan EFL classrooms. Moreover, teachers' self-reports were the primary source of data for this study to measure how often they used bottom-up listening activities. However, these self-reports may not reflect what actually happens in the classroom; observational research could have yielded more objective results. Furthermore, grouping teachers based on teaching experience ( $\leq 5$  years and  $> 5$  years) may overlook other factors that might better account for differences in instructional approaches, such as teaching context, access to technological tools, or individual interest in phonetics. Consequently, these limitations can be addressed in future research by incorporating classroom observations, focus group discussions, or experimental interventions that implement structured bottom-up listening modules and monitor learners' progress over time.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study employed a primarily quantitative mixed-methods design, drawing on both survey ratings and open-ended responses to explore how Moroccan EFL teachers perceive and implement bottom-up listening instruction. The findings revealed that teachers largely recognize the crucial role of bottom-up listening skills in listening comprehension but their classroom practices emphasize top-down listening skills. They

are constrained by such factors as lack of training and appropriate materials and curricular constraints. Most participants reported not being confident teaching phonemic awareness and rarely implement bottom-up listening activities, reflecting a mismatch between their beliefs and practices. Teaching experience was shown to have no significant influence on teachers' perceptions or practices, suggesting that curricular and institutional constraints play a more fundamental role in shaping bottom-up listening instruction.

In line with the broader literature, these findings underscore the need for a balanced approach to listening that equally emphasizes top-down as well as bottom-up listening skills. To bridge the gap between teachers' beliefs and practices, it is essential to provide targeted professional development programs focusing on specific bottom-up listening strategies such as phonemic awareness, alongside accessible instructional resources and curricular revisions that explicitly incorporate and emphasize bottom-up listening skills. Through these measures, Moroccan EFL teachers can be better equipped to deliver comprehensive listening instruction, thereby enriching learners' listening experiences and overall language proficiency.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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