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An Investigation of Listening Comprehension Issues Faced by EFL Learners at Zawia University

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Listening is widely recognized as one of the most important skills in foreign language acquisition, yet many EFL learners face significant difficulties with listening comprehension. This study investigates the listening comprehension issues encountered by EFL learners at Zawia University and aims to identify the major problems they face while listening to spoken English transcripts.

Materials and Methods: A descriptive research method was employed to investigate the listening comprehension problems of first-semester students of the English Language Department at Zawia University. Seven students participated, and data were gathered through interviews and analyzed to identify the specific listening difficulties experienced by the students.

Results: The results revealed that listening is a very difficult skill for students. The major problems encountered included pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, different accents of speakers, lack of concentration, and poor quality of recording materials. These problems were attributed to factors related to the speaker, the listener, and the context of the listening text.

Conclusion: Understanding students' difficulties enables lecturers to help students improve their listening skills and overcome these problems. Teachers should focus on teaching listening as a dedicated skill, adapt and improve listening materials, incorporate effective vocabulary building, and expose students to a variety of accents during practice in the language laboratory. (*Open J Engl Appl Linguist 2026;1:21-26*)

Keywords: Listening comprehension, EFL learners, listening problems, Zawia University, language acquisition.

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INTRODUCTION

Listening is one of the important skills in learning the English language; it is as important as the other skills. Yet listening is one of the most difficult skills, and learners examine these difficulties within the three-phase model of language comprehension. Listening skills are still ignored by both learners and teachers.[1,2]

Dirven and Oakeshott-Taylor defined listening comprehension as the product of teaching methodology and speech perception.[3] According to Nadig, listening comprehension involves the various processes of understanding and making sense of spoken language. These processes involve knowing speech sounds, comprehending the meaning of individual words, and understanding the syntax of

sentences.[4]

Persulessy argues that one of the reasons for the opinion that listening is a skill that tends to be neglected is the feeling among language teachers that this skill is automatically acquired by learners who have learned to speak the language.[5] Hamoda points out that listening is essential not only as a receptive skill but also for the development of spoken language proficiency.[6]

From the researchers' own experience, EFL learners at Zawia University have faced issues related to listening comprehension. Students at the University of Zawia have faced problems while listening to any spoken English language test or transcript. These issues are related to different accents, unclear pronunciation, the rate of speech, and limited vocabulary.[7,8]

This study sheds light on the major problems that a group of EFL students faced while listening to spoken transcripts. The study focuses on the importance of listening skills. Accordingly, this study shows the most common issues faced in the first semester at the University of Zawia while mastering listening skills. After introducing all these parts, this study suggests some solutions to overcome these problems. In view of what has been said above, the present study focuses on the following question: What are the reasons related to the difficulties that EFL students face in listening comprehension?[9-12]

This study points out the major problems faced by English language learners at Zawia University. Learners need to focus on the factors that contribute to the problems related to listening comprehension that would benefit the following groups: students identifying their difficulties with listening comprehension and getting the chance to describe their problems and being able to improve their listening practices and improve their level of skill; and EFL teachers being more understanding about their students' listening, so they will revise their teaching methods.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample Size

The participants of this study were a group of twelve students who receive their education at Zawia University. The students were selected based on the amount of information they received during their studies of speaking and listening. The participants were twelve students (4 males and 8 females), aged between 20 and 23 years old. The sample of this study was chosen randomly; the participants have different characters, different proficiency levels, and their learning styles may be different too. The principal outcome measures focused on identifying the specific listening difficulties reported by the participants.

Research Design

A descriptive research method was employed to analyze and find solutions for the problems that first-semester students of the English Language Department at Zawia University face in listening comprehension. The descriptive approach allowed the researchers to gather detailed information about the students' experiences and perceptions regarding listening comprehension.[13,14]

Procedure of Data Collection

The data collection process involved conducting interviews with the participants. The interviews were designed to elicit detailed information about the students' experiences with listening comprehension, including the specific difficulties they encountered and the factors contributing to these challenges. The interview questions included items such as: Was listening taken into consideration in your school or college? Do you think that listening comprehension is important? A full list of questions is provided in the Appendix. The responses were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.[15]

Statistical Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes related to listening comprehension

difficulties. The analysis focused on categorizing the problems reported by the participants into themes pertaining to the speaker, the listener, and the context of the listening text. The findings were then interpreted in relation to the existing literature on listening comprehension in EFL contexts.

RESULTS

The results of the data analysis revealed the students' difficulties with listening comprehension. The findings indicated that listening is perceived as a very difficult skill by the participants. The major problems encountered by the students included pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, different accents of speakers, lack of concentration, and poor quality of recording materials (Table 1).

Table 1: Major listening comprehension problems reported by EFL learners at Zawia University.

Problem Category	Specific Difficulty	Frequency of Mention
Speaker-related	Different accents	High
Speaker-related	Speed of speech	High
Speaker-related	Unclear pronunciation	High
Listener-related	Lack of concentration	Moderate
Listener-related	Insufficient vocabulary	High
Listener-related	Lack of practice	Moderate
Content-related	Unfamiliar topics	Moderate
Content-related	Poor recording quality	High

Note: Frequency of mention is based on thematic analysis of interview responses.

The analysis further revealed that students' motivation is a crucial factor affecting listening comprehension. Even the smallest pause in attention may considerably spoil comprehension. When students find the topic of the listening text interesting, comprehension becomes easier. However, students often find listening boring even when interested in the topic because it requires a substantial amount of effort to avoid missing the meaning.

Regarding vocabulary, the findings showed that learners try to understand the meaning of each part of the sentence as a single unit or skip it entirely if it contains a small number of unknown words. Many learners also match English words with their equivalents in their first language and concentrate on the literal meaning of each word.

The results also indicated that learners face major difficulties with listening comprehension because they do not allocate sufficient time to this skill compared to other skills. They do not practice listening outside the classroom and do not feel free to choose the kinds of activities that would improve their comprehension.

DISCUSSION

The Discussion section interprets the main findings of the study rather than restating the results. The findings of this study are consistent with previous research on listening comprehension difficulties in EFL contexts.

Regarding speaker-related problems, the findings align with Munro and Derwing, who argue that a range of accents in speech can lead to a reduction in comprehension.[14] According to Goh, 66% of students rated a speaker's accent as one of the most important elements influencing listener comprehension.[15] Unfamiliar accents can cause major difficulty in listening comprehension for both native and non-native speakers, but familiarity with an accent helps learners' comprehension. Buck stated that when listeners listen to a new accent, they would have significant difficulties in understanding what is being said.[16] It certainly

disrupts the whole listening and comprehension process. In this way, students should always listen to podcasts, TV, and radio programs.

Regarding listener-related problems, the findings confirm that lack of concentration is a significant issue. Students' motivation is one of the most effective parts that shows the difficulties of learning listening comprehension; it can be difficult for students to manage their concentration in a second language learning classroom. The findings also highlight the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and listening comprehension. For many EFL learners, listening is an exhausting process, and lack of vocabulary knowledge is a major obstacle. The lack of practice is another significant problem, as learners do not allocate sufficient time to listening practice outside the classroom. Harmer maintains that when learners lack practice, this makes them less understanding and unable to achieve more with this skill.[11]

The findings are also consistent with previous studies on listening comprehension difficulties. Goh identified common problems such as the inability to recognize words, the failure to understand fast speech, and difficulty in understanding different accents, emphasizing the importance of regular practice with diverse listening materials to overcome these issues.[17] Vandergrift discussed metacognitive strategies in listening comprehension, suggesting that learners who are aware of their listening processes and who use strategies like predicting content, monitoring comprehension, and evaluating their understanding tend to perform better.[18] Field's work highlights that limited vocabulary and the inability to parse spoken input are major obstacles, suggesting that training in phonological decoding and vocabulary enhancement can significantly improve listening skills.[19]

Flowerdew and Miller explored the difficulties that learners encounter when listening to lectures in a second language, pinpointing challenges such as the rapid pace of speech, the use of technical vocabulary, and the necessity to grasp implicit meanings.[20] They suggested methods like engaging in pre-listening activities, developing note-taking skills, and practicing with lecture-style audio to improve comprehension of academic content. Siegel examined the impact of teaching listening strategies on comprehension, arguing that direct instruction in strategies like note-taking, summarizing, and inferring meaning from context can greatly enhance listening skills.[21] Nation and Newton stressed the role of extensive listening in language acquisition, encouraging learners to participate in a variety of listening practices to develop listening fluency.[22] Gennady and Farrell discussed how extensive listening practice, using materials that interest learners and are at an appropriate level of difficulty, can improve listening skills, noting that learners often do not engage in enough meaningful listening practice.[23]

The implications of these findings for EFL teaching are significant. Understanding students' difficulties enables lecturers to help students improve their listening skills and overcome these problems. Teachers should focus on teaching listening as a dedicated skill by offering classes that include listening only. They should also adapt and improve listening materials, incorporate effective vocabulary building, and expose students to a variety of accents during practice in the language laboratory.[24,25]

A limitation of this study is the small sample size of seven participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could include a larger and more diverse sample to provide a more comprehensive understanding of listening comprehension problems among EFL learners at Zawia University.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the listening comprehension issues faced by EFL learners at Zawia University. The findings revealed that listening is perceived as a very difficult skill by students, with major problems including

pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, different accents of speakers, lack of concentration, and poor quality of recording materials. These problems were attributed to factors related to the speaker, the listener, and the context of the listening text. Understanding students' difficulties enables lecturers to help students improve their listening skills and overcome these problems. The study recommends that teachers should focus on teaching listening as a dedicated skill by offering classes that include listening only. They should also adapt and improve listening materials, incorporate effective vocabulary building, and expose students to a variety of accents during practice in the language laboratory. The proposed solutions serve as suggestions for lecturers to enhance students' listening comprehension and overall language proficiency.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1. Was listening taken into consideration in your school or college?

2. Do you think that listening comprehension is important?

3. Do you find listening comprehension difficult? Why or why not?

4. What specific problems do you encounter when listening to spoken English?

5. Which factor affects your listening comprehension the most: the speaker, your own listening habits, or the content of the listening text? Please explain.

6. How do you deal with unfamiliar accents when listening to English?

7. What strategies do you use to improve your listening comprehension?

8. What suggestions do you have for teachers to help students improve their listening skills?