

Listening Comprehension among EFL Learners: Challenges and Pedagogical Solutions

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Abstract: Listening comprehension is widely regarded as one of the most demanding skills for EFL learners, particularly in settings where exposure to authentic spoken English remains limited. This study investigates the principal listening comprehension difficulties encountered by EFL students at the English Language Center at Al-Baha University (ELC) and explores the contributing factors and the pedagogical solutions proposed to mitigate them. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative data were gathered through a 25-item Likert-scale questionnaire administered to 124 students, followed by semi-structured interviews with 16 students and eight teachers to interpret the findings and propose instructional solutions. The results revealed five dominant listening difficulties: unfamiliar words ($M = 3.26$), unfamiliar accents ($M = 3.06$), distraction from comprehension gaps ($M = 3.04$), distractions ($M = 2.98$), and fast speech ($M = 2.93$). Qualitative findings indicated that these challenges stem from the interplay of linguistic limitations (e.g., restricted vocabulary knowledge and accent unfamiliarity), cognitive constraints (e.g., working memory overload and inefficient listening strategies), and psychological and environmental factors (e.g., low motivation and classroom distractions). In response to these challenges, the study identified multi-layered pedagogical strategies, encompassing authentic media exposure, subtitle support, vocabulary enrichment, scaffolded listening instruction, self-regulated learning, and project-based learning. The findings suggest that listening comprehension is shaped by the interplay of linguistic, cognitive, and affective dimensions. The study provides practical implications for enhancing listening instruction through integrated and learner-centered approaches that foster sustained exposure, strategic processing, and motivational support.

Keywords: Accent Variation - EFL Listening Comprehension - EFL Pedagogical Interventions - Listening Difficulties.

الاستيعاب السمعي لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية: التحديات والحلول التعليمية

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مستخلص البحث: يُعد الاستيعاب السمعي من أكثر المهارات تحدياً لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، خاصة في السياقات التي يكون فيها التعرض للغة الإنجليزية المنطوقة الأصلية محدوداً. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فحص أبرز صعوبات الاستيعاب السمعي التي يواجهها طلاب مركز اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة الباحة، واستكشاف العوامل الكامنة وراءها، بالإضافة إلى الحلول التعليمية المقترحة لمعالجتها. وقد تم اعتماد تصميم تفسيري تسلسلي قائم على المنهج المختلط. جُمعت البيانات الكمية من خلال استبانة مكونة من 25 بنداً وفق مقياس ليكرت طبقت على 124 طالباً، تلتها مقابلات شبه منظمة مع 16 طالباً وثمانية معلمين لتفسير النتائج واقتراح حلول تدريسية. أظهرت النتائج خمس صعوبات رئيسة في الاستماع، تمثلت في: المفردات غير المألوفة ($M = 3.26$)، واللهجات غير المألوفة ($M = 3.06$)، والتشتت الناتج عن فجوات الفهم ($M = 3.04$)، والتشتت العام ($M = 2.98$)، وسرعة الكلام ($M = 2.93$). كما بينت النتائج النوعية أن هذه الصعوبات ناتجة عن تفاعل العوامل اللغوية والمعرفية، إلى جانب العوامل النفسية والبيئية. واقترحت الدراسة مجموعة من الاستراتيجيات التربوية متعددة الأبعاد، منها التعرض للوسائط الأصلية، واستخدام الترجمة النصية، وتنمية المفردات، والتدريس التدريجي والتفاعلي، والتعلم المنظم ذاتياً، والتعلم القائم على المشاريع. وتشير النتائج إلى أن الاستيعاب السمعي يتشكل من خلال تفاعل الأبعاد اللغوية والمعرفية والانفعالية. كما تقدم الدراسة دلالات تطبيقية لتحسين تدريس مهارة الاستماع من خلال أساليب متكاملة ومتمركزة حول المتعلم تعزز التعرض المستمر، والمعالجة الاستراتيجية، والدافعية.

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1. Introduction

Listening comprehension constitutes a fundamental component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) proficiency, as it supplies essential input for the development of speaking, vocabulary, and overall communicative competence. However, listening is frequently regarded as one of the most demanding language skills because spoken input must be processed in real time and cannot always be revisited. Listening comprehension entails an interaction between bottom-up processes, such as sound and lexical recognition, and top-down processes, including background knowledge activation and inferencing (Field, 2009; Goh & Vandergrift, 2012). Difficulties commonly emerge when learners lack adequate vocabulary knowledge, grammatical awareness, or familiarity with spoken discourse features, particularly when listening materials contain fast speech, unfamiliar accents, reduced forms, and informal language (Goh, 2018).

Furthermore, affective and cognitive factors significantly shape listening performance. Listening anxiety, low confidence, and fear of misunderstanding can adversely affect comprehension (Graham, 2017), while cognitive constraints, such as limited working memory and difficulty sustaining attention, frequently result in comprehension breakdowns (Aryadoust, 2022). Environmental conditions, including background noise, poor audio quality, and limited opportunities for repeated listening, further contribute to listening difficulties in classroom settings.

Despite the recognized importance of listening, instruction in many EFL settings continues to prioritize comprehension testing rather than strategy-based support. Learners are often required to complete listening tasks with limited scaffolding or explicit guidance, which may foster ineffective approaches such as word-for-word translation (Goh & Aryadoust, 2023; Siegel, 2015). Recent research demonstrates the effectiveness of pedagogical practices that promote active and strategic listening, including the use of authentic media, scaffolded tasks, vocabulary support, metacognitive strategy instruction, and technology-enhanced listening through subtitle-assisted materials (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Goh & Vandergrift, 2012; Zhang et al., 2023).

In light of these issues, the present study aims to provide a thorough examination of listening comprehension in EFL contexts by focusing on the challenges encountered by undergraduate learners and the pedagogical solutions that may address these challenges. More specifically, the study seeks to identify key listening comprehension difficulties, examine the factors contributing to these difficulties, and propose pedagogical strategies to mitigate them. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

- What significant difficulties do undergraduate EFL learners encounter in listening comprehension?
- What factors contribute to these listening comprehension difficulties?
- What pedagogical solutions can assist EFL learners in overcoming their listening comprehension difficulties?

2. Literature review

2.1 Listening Comprehension Difficulties among EFL Learners

Listening is widely acknowledged as a foundational skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, as it plays a critical role in supporting overall language acquisition. Research has consistently demonstrated that effective listening skills contribute to the development of other language abilities, including speaking, reading, and writing (Alzamil, 2021). Through listening activities, learners encounter essential linguistic input, such as vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and discourse features, which constitute the basis of language development (Hsu, 2024).

Listening comprehension is not a passive process but rather an active and interactive one in which learners construct meaning by integrating auditory input with prior knowledge and contextual cues (Blancaflor et al., 2021). From this perspective, listening comprehension entails recognizing sounds, words, and sentence structures while simultaneously interpreting meaning (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Cognitive factors play a significant role in this process, as comprehension is shaped by learners' linguistic

competence, working memory capacity, and background knowledge (Díaz-Galaz, 2020). Similarly, effective listening requires the coordination of multiple cognitive processes that enable learners to integrate incoming auditory information with existing knowledge to achieve overall understanding (Zhai & Aryadoust, 2022).

As learners gain increasing exposure to authentic language input through listening activities both within and beyond the classroom, their ability to comprehend spoken texts progressively improves. However, despite the importance of listening for language acquisition, many EFL learners continue to encounter persistent difficulties in developing effective listening comprehension skills, which highlights the need for greater pedagogical attention to listening processes and targeted instructional support.

2.2 Common Listening Comprehension Difficulties in EFL Contexts

Numerous studies have documented the challenges that EFL learners face in listening comprehension. Limited exposure to native or proficient English speakers has been identified as a major obstacle that constrains learners' familiarity with natural speech patterns (Solihah et al., 2022). In addition, unfamiliar vocabulary and accents frequently impede learners' ability to follow spoken input (Hein et al., 2023). Rapid speech rates and complex sentence structures further overwhelm learners, particularly when they lack adequate linguistic resources (Apriyanti et al., 2024). Moreover, insufficient background knowledge of listening topics can significantly diminish learners' comprehension of spoken texts (Wahab & Tanasy, 2022).

Earlier research by Underwood (1989) categorized several listening difficulties commonly encountered by English learners. These encompass learners' inability to control the speed of speech, limited opportunities to request repetition or clarification, inadequate vocabulary knowledge, difficulty recognizing discourse signals, misinterpretation of meaning, diminished concentration due to physical fatigue or environmental distractions, and

discrepancies between classroom materials and authentic spoken input. These factors frequently lead to frustration and diminished motivation during listening activities.

More recent empirical studies have further identified recurring listening challenges. Adi et al. (2021) identified four principal difficulties faced by EFL learners: unfamiliar vocabulary, memory limitations, rapid speech rate, and accent variation. Vocabulary unfamiliarity remains a significant barrier that prevents learners from understanding the overall meaning, frequently resulting in missed information during listening tasks (Wahab & Tanasy, 2022). Memory constraints also affect learners' ability to retain and process spoken information, particularly in longer texts, leading to comprehension breakdowns before the message is fully conveyed (Wallace & Lee, 2020).

Speech rate has been consistently identified as another major difficulty, as learners struggle to maintain pace with fast or natural speech, especially when combined with unfamiliar vocabulary or accents (Ngoc, 2022). Additionally, limited exposure to diverse English accents can negatively influence comprehension. Learners who are accustomed to a single accent, such as American English, frequently experience difficulty understanding other varieties, whereas greater accent familiarity has been demonstrated to enhance listening comprehension (Miao, 2023).

Recent research has further stressed the importance of structured and sustained listening exposure in addressing these challenges. Jantasode and Ruangjaroon (2025) demonstrated that structured extensive listening significantly improves low-proficiency EFL learners' ability to process natural speech rates and adjust to authentic listening conditions. Their findings indicate that systematic exposure to varied and graded listening input enhances learners' fluency, alleviates cognitive strain, and strengthens adaptability to accent variation. This

evidence reinforces the argument that listening development requires not only linguistic knowledge but also sustained engagement with authentic spoken input.

2.3 Empirical Studies on EFL Listening Difficulties

Several empirical studies have investigated listening comprehension difficulties across different educational contexts. Hardiyanto et al. (2021) investigated listening difficulties among university students with varying proficiency levels and observed that learners at lower levels struggled primarily with unknown vocabulary, fast speech, and limited lexical knowledge. Intermediate learners experienced difficulties related to speech rate and environmental noise, while advanced learners reported challenges with lengthy spoken texts, accent variation, and background noise.

Similarly, Erzad (2020) reported that university students faced difficulties related to unfamiliar accents, rapid speech, environmental noise, limited vocabulary, and inadequate listening facilities. The study emphasized the importance of learner focus, vocabulary development, and improved classroom conditions for enhancing listening performance. In a different context, Lengkoan et al. (2022) examined listening comprehension difficulties in a TOEFL-like testing context and identified challenges related to learner factors, test organization, materials, and technical equipment. The authors recommended the use of varied listening media, such as music, videos, and podcasts, to support listening development.

Although these studies have yielded valuable insights into EFL listening difficulties, they have primarily focused on learners' perspectives and general higher education contexts. Moreover, limited attention has been devoted to integrating teachers' perspectives alongside learners' experiences. Consequently, there remains a need for research that incorporates both student and teacher viewpoints and explores listening challenges and solutions within specific institutional contexts. Addressing this gap can contribute to the design of more effective listening instruction tailored to learners' needs.

2.4 Studies on Listening Comprehension in Saudi EFL Contexts

Listening comprehension has received increasing attention in Saudi EFL research owing to persistent challenges faced by learners in understanding spoken English. Research suggests that listening instruction in Saudi classrooms remains largely test-oriented, with limited emphasis on strategy development or systematic exposure to authentic spoken input, which may constrain learners' ability to process natural speech effectively (Alzamil, 2021; Alseadan, 2021).

Linguistic and contextual factors have consistently been identified as principal sources of listening difficulty among Saudi EFL learners. Hamouda (2013) reported that fast speech rate, unfamiliar vocabulary, and accent variation significantly hinder listening comprehension. Similarly, Al-Khresheh (2020) demonstrated that insufficient cultural and background knowledge adversely affects learners' interpretation of spoken texts. More recent diagnostic evidence confirms that vocabulary limitations, speech rate, and limited exposure to authentic English input continue to pose challenges for Saudi EFL learners across educational levels (Al-Mohanna, 2024).

Affective factors also play a critical role in listening performance. Studies conducted in Saudi university contexts reveal that listening anxiety negatively influences learners' comprehension, confidence, and engagement during listening tasks (Alhendi, 2022; Alshehri, 2024). These affective variables frequently interact with linguistic difficulties, further complicating the listening process.

Recent research has examined the influence of instructional modes and pedagogical practices on listening comprehension in Saudi EFL contexts. Al-Saleh and Mirza (2024) found that Saudi students in online EFL courses encountered listening difficulties

related to reduced interaction, speech clarity, and limited opportunities for repetition. In contrast, technology-mediated approaches have demonstrated positive effects on listening development. The use of social media platforms such as YouTube and Snapchat has been shown to increase learners' exposure to authentic language input (Al-Harbi, 2019), while the integration of movies has been found to enhance listening comprehension through contextualized input (Alqahtani & Alhamami, 2024). Furthermore, strategy-focused research indicates that Saudi undergraduate EFL learners employ a range of cognitive and metacognitive listening strategies, although their use remains inconsistent and necessitates instructional support (Al-Shehri & Alhamami, 2023).

Overall, while Saudi EFL studies have offered valuable insights into listening difficulties, anxiety, and instructional practices, comparatively less attention has been devoted to pedagogical solutions that integrate both learner and teacher perspectives. Moreover, many previous studies have tended to examine listening difficulties in isolation, without providing a thorough explanation of the interacting linguistic, cognitive, and contextual factors underlying these challenges.

Additionally, limited research has adopted mixed-methods approaches that combine quantitative identification of listening difficulties with qualitative exploration of their underlying causes and practical solutions within specific institutional contexts.

This highlights the need for mixed-methods research that examines listening challenges and instructional practices more thoroughly within the Saudi EFL context. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by integrating quantitative and qualitative data to offer a more detailed understanding of listening comprehension difficulties and to propose contextually situated pedagogical solutions.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to obtain a thorough understanding of EFL learners' listening comprehension difficulties and the pedagogical solutions used to address them. Mixed methods enable the integration of quantitative and qualitative data, thereby providing more strong and comprehensive findings than relying on a single approach (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

A sequential explanatory design was utilized, with the quantitative phase conducted first and the qualitative phase following to explain and elaborate on the quantitative results (Sugiyono, 2015). The quantitative data identified the principal listening difficulties, while the qualitative data provided deeper insights into the underlying factors contributing to these difficulties, as well as potential instructional solutions from both students' and teachers' perspectives.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The participants in this study were recruited using different sampling techniques aligned with the mixed-methods sequential explanatory design. For the quantitative phase, 124 male and female EFL students enrolled in the English Language Center at Al-Baha University (ELC), representing health-related disciplines, including Medicine, Pharmacy, and Dentistry, were recruited through simple random sampling. These disciplines were purposefully selected because English serves as the primary medium of instruction, requiring students to engage extensively with lectures, academic discussions, and audio-based materials in English. This renders them a particularly relevant population for investigating listening comprehension difficulties in EFL contexts. This probability sampling technique ensured that each student had an equal opportunity for participation, thereby enhancing the representativeness of the sample and reducing potential sampling bias.

For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was employed to elicit in-depth and contextually rich insights into listening comprehension difficulties

and potential solutions. Sixteen students (8 male and 8 female) representing different proficiency levels (high, intermediate, and low) were selected to ensure diversity in listening abilities and to capture a broader range of experiences. This categorization was intended to enrich the qualitative data rather than to serve as a variable for comparison or statistical analysis. The selection was based on specific criteria, including students' performance in English courses, listening assessment results, and teachers' evaluations of their listening abilities. These students were identified through teacher recommendations to ensure the inclusion of diverse learning experiences.

In addition, eight English teachers from the ELC, equally distributed by gender (4 male and 4 female), were selected owing to their direct instructional experience and first-hand knowledge of students' listening challenges. Three of these teachers possessed approximately six years of teaching experience, while the remaining five had more than ten years of experience. All participating teachers had obtained a TESOL diploma, further confirming their professional qualification in English language teaching.

This sampling strategy enabled the study to integrate broad quantitative representation with detailed qualitative insights, thereby offering a more thorough understanding of the research problem.

3.3 Research Instruments

Three instruments were utilized to collect data in this study: a closed-ended questionnaire, student interviews, and teacher interviews. The questionnaire comprised 25 Likert-scale items adapted from Hamouda (2013) and was administered to 124 EFL students during the quantitative phase. The items were designed to identify the principal listening comprehension difficulties experienced by learners.

To ensure the quality of the instrument, the questionnaire was reviewed and validated by a panel of experts in applied linguistics, comprising one assistant professor and two associate professors with expertise in EFL research and language assessment. Their feedback was employed to refine the clarity, relevance, and content validity of the questionnaire items. Additionally, the reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient ($\alpha = 0.85$).

For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of 16 students who had completed the questionnaire and eight English teachers from the ELC. The interviews focused on exploring the factors contributing to the most salient listening difficulties identified in the questionnaire results and on eliciting pedagogical solutions from both students' and teachers' perspectives.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection proceeded in two sequential phases in accordance with the mixed-methods sequential explanatory design. In the quantitative phase, the closed-ended questionnaire was distributed to 124 EFL students to identify the principal listening comprehension difficulties they experienced. The questionnaire responses provided an overview of the most prevalent and significant challenges reported by learners.

Building on the results of the quantitative phase, the qualitative phase was subsequently conducted. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 16 selected students and eight English teachers from the ELC to obtain deeper insights into the factors contributing to the identified listening difficulties and to explore potential pedagogical solutions. The interviews enabled participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives, thereby complementing and contextualizing the quantitative findings.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis adhered to the logic of the sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. The researchers initially analyzed the quantitative data to identify the most significant listening comprehension difficulties reported by EFL learners. Questionnaire responses were analyzed descriptively and presented in the form of percentages, following the calculation procedure proposed by Sudjana and Ibrahim (2007). Furthermore, mean scores (M) were calculated to determine the relative importance of each listening difficulty. Based on the percentage and mean results, learners' listening difficulties were categorized into five major groups: content- and material-related factors, linguistic features, psychological characteristics, student-related factors, and physical setting factors.

After identifying the most prominent listening comprehension difficulties in the quantitative phase, the researchers proceeded with qualitative analysis to develop a deeper understanding of the underlying factors contributing to these difficulties and to explore potential solutions from both students' and teachers' perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). These phases comprised familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. To ensure systematic coding and theme development, the qualitative analysis was supported by QDA Miner (version 5.0) software. The qualitative findings were subsequently employed to explain and elaborate on the quantitative results, thereby providing a more comprehensive and integrated interpretation of EFL learners' listening comprehension difficulties and the participant-generated pedagogical solutions.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Findings

Drawing on both the quantitative and qualitative phases, the study identified five principal listening comprehension difficulties experienced by EFL students, along with the underlying factors contributing to these challenges and participant-

generated pedagogical solutions aimed at enhancing listening performance.

The findings are presented sequentially, consistent with the mixed-methods design. First, the quantitative results derived from the student questionnaire are presented to determine the most significant listening comprehension difficulties. These results address Research Question 1 by identifying the predominant challenges encountered by learners. Subsequently, qualitative data from interviews are integrated to provide richer explanations of the factors influencing each significant difficulty, thereby addressing Research Question 2. Finally, the qualitative findings are employed to present pedagogical solutions proposed by students and teachers, which respond to Research Question 3 and offer practical implications for improving listening comprehension.

4.2 Students' Listening Comprehension Difficulties

Based on the quantitative responses obtained from the questionnaire data summarized in Table 1, five principal listening comprehension difficulties were identified among EFL students at the English Language Center (ELC). These difficulties were determined based on the highest combined percentages of "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" responses, as well as the highest mean scores (M). Table 1 presents the overall distribution of responses across all questionnaire items, while the five dominant difficulties are examined in detail in the following paragraphs.

TABLE 1: Students Listening Comprehension Difficulties

No	Difficulties	SD	D	A	SA	Mean (M)
1	Unfamiliar words	4.1%	11.8%	37.9%	46.2%	3.26
2	Complex grammatical structures	3.3%	31.3%	46.4%	19 %	2.81
3	Long spoken text	7.7%	31%	46.3%	15 %	2.69
4	Unfamiliar topic	14.7%	22.9%	40.8%	21.6%	2.69
5	Unfamiliar accents	7.8%	9.7%	51.3%	31.2%	3.06
6	Fast Speech	11.7%	13.8%	44.7%	29.8%	2.93
7	Informal language & slang	11.7%	27.8%	43.2%	17.3%	2.66
8	Reduced forms	17.9%	40.6%	27.9%	13.6%	2.37
9	Discourse signals	7.8%	34.6%	39.6%	18%	2.68
10	Inferring meaning from context	8.3%	31.8%	36.5%	23.4%	2.75
11	Understanding the speaker's signs	5.6%	44.6%	39.8%	10%	2.54
12	Listening anxiety	10.9%	31.2%	48.3%	9.6%	2.57
13	Lack of confidence	20.3%	37.7%	28.5%	13.5%	2.35

No	Difficulties	SD	D	A	SA	Mean (M)
14	Distraction from comprehension gaps	6.9%	12.6%	50%	30.5%	3.04
15	Worry about material inconsistency	17.1%	52.8%	20.4%	9.7%	2.23
16	Anticipating information	10%	25.1%	47.8%	17.1%	2.72
17	Memory recall	8.1%	25.4%	39.5%	27%	2.85
18	Misinterpretation	17%	20.8%	44.2%	18%	2.63
19	Word-for-word translation	10.5%	18.4%	46.6%	24.5%	2.85
20	Noise interference	11.8%	36.4%	46.2%	5.6%	2.46
21	Speaker distance	5.5%	42.9%	39.8%	11.8%	2.58
22	Audio clarity	11.8%	21.9%	42.8%	23.5%	2.78
23	Distractions	6.5%	16.4%	49.5%	27.6%	2.98
24	Physical fatigue	8.8%	39.8%	41.1%	10.3%	2.53
25	No opportunity to listen again	11.5%	47.6%	33.5%	7.4%	2.37
Note. SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree; M = Mean.						

• Unfamiliar Words

Unfamiliar words emerged as the most salient listening difficulty ($M = 3.26$), with 84.1% of students identifying it as a considerable challenge. Specifically, 37.9% of respondents agreed and 46.2% strongly agreed that encountering unknown words prevented them from comprehending the overall meaning of the listening text. This high mean score reflects a strong level of agreement among participants regarding the severity of this difficulty. These results suggest that inadequate lexical knowledge, as well as difficulties in accurately perceiving spoken words, considerably hinder students' ability to construct a coherent understanding during listening tasks.

• Unfamiliar Accents

Unfamiliar accents were identified as the second most notable difficulty ($M = 3.06$), with 82.5% of participants reporting that accent variation hindered their listening comprehension. Specifically, 51.3% of the students agreed and 31.2% strongly agreed that understanding different English accents posed a notable challenge. The relatively high mean score reflects considerable agreement regarding the impact of accent variation on listening performance. This pattern indicates that students were more familiar with the American accent typically used in classroom instruction, as the instructional materials and curriculum predominantly follow American English.

• Distraction due to Comprehension Gaps

Distraction due to comprehension gaps ranked as the third most prominent difficulty ($M = 3.04$), with 80.5% of the participants reporting it as a substantial issue. Specifically, 50% of the students agreed and 30.5% strongly agreed that missing portions of the spoken message disrupted their focus. This mean score reflects a high level of agreement, highlighting the cognitive impact of comprehension gaps on sustained attention. The findings indicate that when learners fail to understand specific words or segments, their attention shifts away from ongoing input, leading to incomplete comprehension.

• Distractions

Distractions were identified as another substantial difficulty ($M = 2.98$), with 77.1% of students reporting that interruptions adversely affected their listening performance. In particular, 49.5% agreed and 27.6% strongly agreed that distractions interfered with their ability to process spoken input. The mean score suggests a considerable level of agreement regarding the adverse influence of attentional disruptions. These findings suggest that distractions diminish students' concentration, particularly during continuous listening tasks.

• Fast Speech

Fast speech was identified as the fifth prominent difficulty ($M = 2.93$), with 74.5% of students reporting it as a notable obstacle. Specifically, 44.7% agreed and 29.8% strongly agreed that rapid

speech rendered it difficult to process spoken input. Although slightly lower than other difficulties, the mean score still reflects a relatively high level of agreement among participants. In this study, the difficulty was associated with the naturally rapid rate of speech in authentic recordings produced by native speakers of English, rather than playback speed manipulation. Attempting to maintain pace with rapid delivery while constructing overall meaning considerably increased comprehension difficulty.

4.3 Factors and Explanations from Teacher and Student Interviews

To further interpret the quantitative findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both teachers and students to explore the underlying factors contributing to the most salient listening comprehension difficulties. The qualitative data yielded deeper insight into how and why students experienced challenges related to unfamiliar words, unfamiliar accents, distraction from comprehension gaps, distractions, and fast speech. These themes were selected as they emerged as the highest-ranked difficulties in the questionnaire results. Through participants' reflections, the interviews revealed that these challenges were influenced by interrelated linguistic limitations, cognitive constraints, motivational issues, and environmental conditions. The following discussion presents the thematic explanations of each significant difficulty in detail.

• Unfamiliar Words

The qualitative findings offered deeper clarification of why unfamiliar words emerged as the most prominent listening difficulty in the quantitative phase. Interview responses revealed that this challenge was not confined to encountering unknown vocabulary; rather, it stemmed from several interconnected factors affecting students' real-time word recognition and overall comprehension.

Teachers stressed that limited vocabulary knowledge played a central role in this difficulty. Students with restricted lexical repertoires struggled to identify spoken words accurately, which prevented them from constructing a coherent understanding of the listening text. When key vocabulary items were not immediately identified, comprehension at both the sentence and discourse levels became fragmented.

In addition, both teachers and some students explained that ineffective listening strategies intensified the problem. Many students relied heavily on word-for-word translation, focusing on literal meanings rather than identifying main ideas or contextual cues. This strategy caused them to become overly dependent on individual words and often led to comprehension breakdowns when unfamiliar vocabulary appeared.

Limited exposure to English beyond the classroom was also identified as a contributing factor. Six teachers and four students noted that students seldom engaged with authentic English input beyond academic tasks. Consequently, their ability to recognize vocabulary in natural speech remained underdeveloped. This limited exposure, combined with negative attitudes toward using English in daily life, diminished their willingness to practice listening independently.

Furthermore, rapid speech was reported as a compounding factor. Some students indicated that rapid delivery caused words to appear blended, rendering it difficult to distinguish boundaries between them. Even previously acquired words became challenging to recognize when presented at natural speed.

Finally, low learning motivation was cited as influencing vocabulary development. Most students stated that limited independent practice weakened vocabulary growth, which in turn diminished their ability to recognize spoken words efficiently. Without sustained effort to expand vocabulary knowledge, students found it challenging to improve their listening comprehension performance.

• Unfamiliar Accents

The qualitative data further clarified why unfamiliar accents emerged as one of the most significant listening difficulties in the quantitative findings. Interview responses indicated that this challenge was shaped by limited exposure, phonological variation, and motivational factors that affected students' ability to adapt to diverse speech patterns.

Teachers noted that students were predominantly exposed to American English in classroom instruction, with minimal experience listening to other accent varieties. Limited familiarity

with different pronunciation patterns, consonant articulation, rhythm, and intonation rendered it difficult for students to adjust when encountering other accents during class activities. For example, differences in the pronunciation of post-vocalic /r/ across accents created confusion, as in the word “car,” which is pronounced /kɑːr/ in American English but /kɑː/ in non-rhotic accents such as British and Australian English. Similarly, variations in vowel quality were observed in words like “dance” (/dæns/ in American English vs. /dɑːns/ in British English) and “better” (/ˈbetər/ in American English vs. /ˈbetə/ in British English).

These differences were clearly observed when short video clips from social media featuring non-American English accents were employed. Consequently, comprehension breakdown frequently occurred when students were required to process unfamiliar speech patterns.

Students further explained that discrepancies between pronunciation and written forms generated additional confusion. Variations in accent-specific phonological features heightened the complexity of decoding spoken input, particularly when speech was delivered at a natural or rapid pace. Even when students were familiar with vocabulary in written form, recognizing those words in different accents proved difficult.

Furthermore, seven teachers noted that low motivation to engage with English beyond classroom requirements limited students’ adaptability to accent diversity. Without intrinsic motivation to explore authentic English input independently, learners had fewer opportunities to develop flexibility in processing various pronunciation styles. This restricted exposure diminished their confidence and impeded their ability to comprehend listening materials featuring diverse accents.

- **Distraction due to Comprehension Gaps.**

The interview findings provided deeper insight into why Distraction from comprehension *gaps* emerged as one of the most significant listening difficulties in the quantitative results. Participants explained that this difficulty arose when students missed certain words or phrases and subsequently lost concentration, which prevented them from

following the overall message of the listening text. Several interconnected linguistic, cognitive, and motivational factors were found to contribute to this phenomenon.

Most teachers and students indicated that reliance on word-for-word translation constituted a primary cause of this difficulty. When students focused excessively on decoding individual words instead of comprehending the overall meaning, missing even a single word disrupted their processing flow. This interruption caused them to become distracted and struggle to regain focus while the listening input continued.

Cognitive factors were also identified as contributing elements. Nine students and five teachers reported that when spoken input was rapid, dense, or sequentially complex, it exceeded students’ short-term memory capacity. The accumulation of unprocessed information led to cognitive overload, rendering it increasingly difficult for learners to maintain attention. As comprehension gaps widened, students experienced cumulative distraction that further impeded understanding.

Limited vocabulary knowledge represented another contributing factor. Participants explained that when key words were not recognized, students tended to cease processing subsequent input. This pause in comprehension created a gap that expanded as the listening passage progressed, ultimately heightening distraction and diminishing overall comprehension.

Motivational aspects also contributed to this difficulty. Participants noted that low motivation caused learners to abandon efforts quickly when they failed to understand a word or sentence. Rather than attempting to infer meaning or recover from the gap, some students disengaged from the task, which further undermined listening performance.

In addition, teachers highlighted that limited exposure to English input outside the classroom increased the likelihood of comprehension gaps. Students who were unfamiliar with natural speech speed, vocabulary usage, and intonation patterns were more prone to missing information and becoming distracted during listening tasks.

Moreover, general weaknesses in language skills, particularly in reading, speaking, and writing, were reported to impair students' ability to connect spoken input with previously acquired language structures. Without a solid linguistic foundation, students struggled to process incoming information efficiently, rendering them more susceptible to losing focus when comprehension difficulties arose.

- **Distraction**

The qualitative findings further clarified why distractions emerged as a major factor influencing students' listening comprehension. Interview responses revealed that students' listening performance was adversely affected by both internal and external sources of distraction, which diminished concentration and interfered with their ability to process spoken input effectively.

Participants explained that internal distractions played a notable role in diminishing listening effectiveness. Both students and teachers reported that factors such as physical fatigue, heavy academic workload, low motivation, and boredom weakened students' cognitive focus during listening tasks. When learners were mentally or physically exhausted, their capacity to sustain attention decreased. Additionally, unclear speech delivery occasionally contributed to confusion, further diverting attention and disrupting comprehension processes. These internal conditions collectively led to cognitive disruption and reduced the efficiency of listening performance.

External distractions were likewise identified as influential barriers. Both groups indicated that environmental factors, including classroom noise, sounds from outside the room, and interruptions caused by peers speaking during listening activities, considerably hindered comprehension. Such disturbances fragmented students' attention and prevented them from following the listening text continuously. Consequently, important information was frequently missed, which weakened their overall understanding of the spoken message.

Overall, the findings suggest that listening comprehension is not only influenced by linguistic and cognitive factors but is also highly responsive to attentional conditions within the learning environment. Internal and external distractions jointly contributed to students' diminished focus and impaired listening performance.

- **Fast Speech**

The qualitative findings provided further explanation of why fast speech was identified as one of the major listening comprehension difficulties in the quantitative phase. Interview responses indicated that rapid speech disrupted students' processing ability through cognitive, linguistic, and affective mechanisms that collectively weakened their comprehension performance.

Several participants stressed the role of cognitive overload in this difficulty. Twelve students and five teachers explained that when speech was delivered at a high rate, it exceeded students' working memory capacity. The rapid flow of information curtailed the time available for processing, resulting in the loss of key details and overall meaning. This cognitive burden intensified when fast speech was combined with environmental noise or students' limited processing skills as EFL learners.

Limited exposure to authentic spoken input was also cited as a contributing factor. Participants noted that students were insufficiently accustomed to natural variations in speech speed. Because most classroom input was delivered at a moderated pace, encountering native speakers who spoke rapidly created what participants described as a form of "listening shock." This unfamiliarity diminished students' confidence and impaired real-time comprehension.

Accent variation further compounded the difficulty. Some students explained that when rapid speech was combined with unfamiliar accents, word boundaries became indistinct. The interaction between rapid delivery and phonological variation complicated the decoding process, rendering it difficult to recognize individual words and extract meaning from the listening text.

Vocabulary limitations were also identified as a contributing element. Most students stated that even when vocabulary was familiar in written form, recognizing those words in rapid spoken discourse was challenging. The inability to retrieve lexical knowledge with sufficient speed led to partial or complete loss of meaning during listening tasks.

In addition, teachers emphasized that students' reliance on word-for-word translation contributed to comprehension breakdown in fast speech contexts. When learners attempted to translate each word

individually, they fell behind the ongoing stream of speech, preventing them from processing subsequent information effectively. This excessive focus on literal meaning disrupted comprehension continuity.

A negative mindset toward English was also reported as an additional barrier. Teachers observed that students who perceived English as difficult were less inclined to persist when confronted with rapid speech. This diminished adaptability and caused some learners to disengage prematurely, further undermining their listening performance.

• Participant-Generated Solutions

Based on the semi-structured interviews conducted with both students and teachers, several pedagogical solutions emerged to address the salient listening comprehension difficulties identified in the quantitative phase. These solutions were organized according to the dimensions of the difficulties they targeted, namely linguistic, psychological, and environmental/instructional factors. The findings indicate that participants proposed interconnected and complementary strategies aimed at minimizing the identified challenges and strengthening overall listening comprehension performance.

• Linguistic-Focused Solutions

Several solutions directly addressed linguistic challenges such as unfamiliar words, unfamiliar accents, and fast speech. Participants stressed the importance of authentic media exposure as a means of increasing familiarity with natural pronunciation patterns, accent variation, and spoken discourse structures. Both teachers and students recommended incorporating real-life materials such as YouTube content, Snapchat, films, podcasts, and other multimedia resources. Teachers reported that selecting materials aligned with students' interests further increased engagement and supported meaningful listening practice.

Subtitle support was similarly identified as an effective linguistic strategy. Participants explained that subtitles assisted learners in connecting spoken sounds with their written forms, strengthening word recognition and improving decoding ability. Teachers employed subtitles strategically to assist students in mapping pronunciation to orthographic representation, thereby enhancing vocabulary acquisition and comprehension accuracy.

Vocabulary development emerged as another essential linguistic strategy. Participants described practices such as consulting dictionaries, compiling weekly vocabulary lists without direct translation, and establishing vocabulary goals linked to listening materials. Strengthening lexical knowledge was regarded as fundamental to improving comprehension efficiency, particularly when encountering unfamiliar words in spoken texts.

Authentic exposure activities were likewise noted. Storytelling sessions, interactions with proficient speakers or alumni, and participation in heritage-related visits were perceived as valuable opportunities for encountering English in natural communicative settings. Such experiences enhanced students' familiarity with accent variation, rhythm, and intonation patterns.

Gradual and interactive listening instruction was also proposed as a linguistic support strategy. Teachers reported presenting listening input progressively, beginning with slower speech rates and gradually increasing complexity, while providing clarification and interactive engagement. This scaffolding approach was considered effective in reducing cognitive overload and support adaptation to natural speech speeds.

• Psychological-Focused Solutions

Participants also proposed strategies designed to address psychological barriers such as listening anxiety, low motivation, and reduced confidence. Self-regulated learning was identified as an important approach. Students described independently seeking additional listening materials through digital platforms, driven by curiosity and personal interest. This autonomous engagement beyond the classroom was perceived as strengthening confidence and fostering long-term listening development.

The importance of cultivating positive attitudes and sustaining motivation was repeatedly noted. Participants reported that Game-Based Learning (GBL) activities, combined with engaging multimedia content, increased enthusiasm and reduced listening-related anxiety. Motivation was regarded as a foundational factor in maintaining attention, persistence, and overall improvement in listening comprehension.

Project-Based Learning (PJBL) was also suggested as a psychologically supportive strategy. Participants described activities in which students analyzed videos, engaged in collaborative discussions, and addressed listening-related problems. This approach promoted active participation, increased confidence, and encouraged meaningful engagement with listening tasks in authentic settings.

• **Environmental and Instructional Solutions**

Finally, several solutions addressed environmental and instructional conditions influencing listening performance. Instructional adaptation to different learning styles was noted as an important factor. Teachers explained that accommodating visual, auditory, and kinesthetic preferences during listening instruction supported diverse learners and enhanced comprehension outcomes.

Interactive listening activities and structured classroom practices were also regarded as essential in reducing environmental distractions. By organizing listening tasks clearly and creating an engaging learning atmosphere, teachers aimed to reduce inattentiveness and sustain students' focus during listening sessions.

5. Discussion

The discussion interprets the significant listening comprehension difficulties identified in the findings and examines the underlying factors contributing to these challenges. It further connects the quantitative results with qualitative insights to provide a deeper understanding of the linguistic barriers affecting students' listening performance.

5.1 Linguistic Challenges

• **Unfamiliar Words**

Unfamiliar words emerged as the most prominent linguistic difficulty, as reflected in the quantitative findings, and were regarded as a major obstacle in listening comprehension. This result highlights the central role of vocabulary knowledge in real-time spoken language processing.

Interview data further revealed that this difficulty was not solely attributable to limited vocabulary knowledge; rather, it resulted from the interplay of multiple linguistic and cognitive

factors. Teachers consistently stressed that insufficient lexical knowledge prevented students from recognizing key words during listening tasks, resulting in comprehension breakdowns. For instance, students frequently struggled with words such as "significant," "consequences," "interpret," "appropriate," and "response," which fall within intermediate to upper-intermediate levels (B1–B2) of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This suggests that learners' difficulties are not confined to basic vocabulary but extend to more abstract and context-dependent lexical items.

From a cognitive perspective, inefficient listening strategies, particularly word-for-word translation, were found to intensify processing demands. This strategy increases cognitive load, overloads working memory, and constrains learners' ability to construct meaning comprehensively. In addition, limited exposure to English input beyond the classroom further restricts lexical familiarity, while rapid speech exacerbates word recognition difficulties. Low learning motivation also contributes to reduced independent practice, which in turn limits vocabulary development.

This interaction between lexical recognition and global meaning construction mirrors the dynamic interplay between bottom-up processing (word recognition) and top-down processing (meaning construction) in listening comprehension (Goh & Vandergrift, 2012). When bottom-up processing falters due to lexical gaps, overall comprehension becomes fragmented and unstable.

These findings are consistent with Hardiyanto et al. (2021), who argued that successful listening comprehension requires a minimum threshold of vocabulary knowledge. They further align with Lengkoan et al. (2022), who identified vocabulary proficiency as a strong predictor of listening success. Similarly, Hang (2024) noted that cognitive overload during listening can considerably impair comprehension, particularly when learners struggle with lexical processing. However, unlike many previous studies that primarily treat vocabulary limitations as an isolated factor, the present study demonstrates that lexical difficulty interacts dynamically with cognitive load, strategy use, and exposure conditions in influencing listening performance. Taken together, this body of evidence

reinforces the view that unfamiliar words constitute a foundational linguistic constraint that interacts with strategy use, exposure, and processing capacity in shaping listening performance. This finding contributes to the EFL listening literature by demonstrating the interconnected nature of linguistic and cognitive constraints in real-time listening comprehension, particularly within the Saudi EFL context.

• **Unfamiliar Accents**

Unfamiliar accents were identified as the second major linguistic difficulty, as evidenced by the results, suggesting that accent variation hindered students' listening comprehension. This result demonstrates the importance of phonological adaptability in EFL listening contexts.

Qualitative data also revealed that limited exposure to accent diversity was a primary contributing factor. Teachers reported that classroom listening activities and exercises predominantly relied on American English materials. As a result, students' exposure remained relatively restricted and did not adequately reflect authentic accent variation. This limited and homogeneous input constrained learners' opportunities to develop flexibility in processing diverse English accents. As a result, when students encountered unfamiliar accents, they struggled to recognize words they already knew in written form. Variations in pronunciation, rhythm, and intonation disrupted their decoding processes and slowed comprehension. Furthermore, some teachers observed that low motivation to engage with English beyond classroom settings additionally limited students' adaptability to accent diversity.

These findings align with Miao (2023), who noted that exposure to diverse accent input enhances learners' phonological flexibility. Solihah et al. (2022) similarly demonstrated a strong association between accent familiarity and listening comprehension success. This result also resonates with findings in the Saudi context, where accent variation has been identified as a persistent listening barrier (Hamouda, 2013). However, the present study reveals that accent-related difficulty is shaped by the combined influence of limited exposure, motivational factors, and phonological processing constraints. Collectively, this evidence suggests

that unfamiliar accents function not only as surface-level perceptual difficulties but also as indicators of limited phonological processing experience shaped by restricted exposure. This finding contributes to the EFL listening literature by illuminating the multidimensional nature of accent comprehension, extending beyond exposure to encompass cognitive and affective dimensions within the Saudi EFL context.

• **Fast Speech**

Fast speech was identified as another significant linguistic challenge, suggesting that students experienced difficulty comprehending spoken language delivered at a rapid pace. This finding reflects the processing demands imposed by real-time speech rate in authentic listening settings.

Interview findings also revealed that fast speech amplified multiple interacting factors, including cognitive overload, limited exposure to authentic spoken input, accent variation, restricted vocabulary knowledge, overreliance on word-for-word translation, and negative attitudes toward English. Participants explained that rapid speech overwhelmed working memory capacity, diminishing learners' ability to segment and recognize words efficiently. When rapid speech occurred alongside unfamiliar accents or lexical gaps, comprehension difficulties intensified. Overdependence on literal translation further delayed processing, causing students to fall behind the flow of spoken input and disrupting overall meaning construction.

This finding is further supported by Aryadoust (2022), who noted that working memory limitations significantly constrain learners' ability to process rapid spoken input in real time.

Similarly, Hang (2024) argued that increased speech rate elevates cognitive processing demands and taxes working memory. Adi et al. (2021) also reported that rapid speech combined with unfamiliar phonetic patterns impairs word recognition accuracy, while Hein et al. (2023) demonstrated that rapid speech considerably reduces listening comprehension performance. Moreover, Jantasode and Ruangjaroon (2025) demonstrated that structured extensive listening can improve low-proficiency learners' ability to cope with natural

speech rates, suggesting that systematic exposure to varied listening input may alleviate the processing strain associated with fast speech.

Viewed collectively, these findings suggest that fast speech functions not merely as a surface-level temporal challenge but as an amplifying mechanism that intensifies existing lexical, phonological, and cognitive limitations. Furthermore, the present study demonstrates that the impact of fast speech extends beyond speed itself, reflecting the interaction between processing capacity, lexical knowledge, and listening strategies. Overall, rapid speech may function as a compounding factor that exacerbates existing linguistic and processing constraints.

5.2 Cognitive and Psychological Challenges

• Distraction from Comprehension Gaps

Distraction from comprehension gaps emerged as a principal cognitive difficulty, indicating that losing parts of the message disrupted students' overall understanding of the listening text. This finding suggests that breakdowns in moment-to-moment processing may considerably affect sustained comprehension.

The qualitative findings suggest that this difficulty was shaped by the interaction of strategy use, processing limitations, and linguistic proficiency. Students who relied heavily on word-for-word translation were particularly susceptible to losing concentration. When a single word or phrase was missed, they attempted to mentally recover the lost information, which interrupted ongoing processing and generated cumulative comprehension gaps. This pattern reflects a disruption in real-time meaning construction.

Participants also stressed the role of cognitive overload and limited working memory capacity. When input was rapid, dense, or sequentially complex, students struggled to retain earlier segments while processing new information. Consequently, attention shifted from global meaning construction to local recovery attempts. Limited vocabulary knowledge further intensified this problem, as failure to recognize key lexical items widened comprehension gaps. Low motivation and restricted exposure to English input beyond the classroom reduced students' resilience in recovering from processing breakdowns. Teachers additionally

noted that general weaknesses in language skills constrained students' ability to connect listening input with prior linguistic knowledge, heightening susceptibility to distraction.

These findings are consistent with Wahab and Tanasy (2022), who noted the importance of linguistic decoding and background knowledge in sustaining listening comprehension. Teng (2024) similarly explained that efforts to retrieve missed information impose additional demands on working memory, thereby diminishing capacity for ongoing processing. Hardiyanto et al. (2021) further argued that excessive input can exceed learners' cognitive capacity, resulting in comprehension failure. Adi et al. (2021) also observed that limited exposure and weak proficiency impede students' ability to maintain attention throughout extended listening tasks. These patterns also reflect the processing constraints discussed by Aryadoust (2022), who identified the interaction between working memory limitations and sustained attention in listening tasks.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that distraction from comprehension gaps may arise from cumulative processing strain rather than isolated comprehension errors, positioning it as a cognitively mediated breakdown in real-time meaning construction. However, the present study extends this understanding by demonstrating that such distraction is not solely a result of processing overload but is also closely linked to strategic inefficiency and limited adaptability in real-time listening situations. Overall, these findings indicate that distraction from comprehension gaps is closely linked to processing constraints and strategic inefficiency rather than solely to isolated lexical difficulty. This result advances current understanding of EFL listening by highlighting the dynamic interaction between cognitive load, strategy use, and linguistic knowledge in shaping attentional stability during listening comprehension.

• Distraction

Distraction was identified as another notable challenge, indicating that attentional disruptions interfered with students' listening performance. Unlike distraction from comprehension gaps, this difficulty was more directly associated with environmental and affective conditions influencing attention.

Qualitative data further indicated that distraction stemmed from both external and internal sources. External factors encompassed classroom noise, peer disturbances, and infrastructural limitations that reduced the clarity and consistency of listening input. Such environmental interruptions may compromise students' ability to sustain focus and process spoken information effectively. Internal distractions, conversely, were associated with fatigue, stress, boredom, and low motivation. These affective conditions weakened attentional control and diminished cognitive engagement during listening tasks.

The interaction between environmental and psychological factors suggests that listening comprehension depends not only on linguistic processing but also on sustained attentional regulation. These results align with Alzamil (2021), who identified the critical role of attentional allocation in successful listening comprehension. Hein et al. (2023) similarly demonstrated that both environmental conditions and affective variables considerably influence listening performance outcomes. Additionally, this pattern resonates with Graham (2017), who noted that affective factors such as anxiety and reduced confidence can divert cognitive resources away from comprehension processes.

Viewed in their entirety, these findings indicate that distraction may operate as an attentional barrier that constrains cognitive engagement, thereby undermining sustained listening performance. However, the present study further demonstrates that distraction is shaped by the combined influence of environmental conditions and internal affective states, rather than being attributable to a single source. Together, these findings reinforce the view that listening comprehension is a cognitively demanding activity that requires stable environmental conditions and psychological readiness to sustain attention. These findings provide further insight into EFL listening by demonstrating the role of attentional regulation as a critical mediator between environmental input and cognitive processing during listening tasks.

5.3 Pedagogical Implications

Participant-Generated Pedagogical Solutions

The qualitative findings revealed a set of pedagogical strategies proposed by both teachers

and students to address the significant listening comprehension difficulties identified in the quantitative phase. These participant-generated solutions were organized into three interrelated dimensions: linguistic enhancement, cognitive-psychological support, and instructional adaptation. Together, they reflect a collaborative effort to strengthen listening development through both teacher-guided and learner-initiated approaches.

• Linguistic Implications

Unfamiliar accents and fast speech, identified as major listening challenges, signal the need for increased exposure to authentic spoken input. Both groups stressed authentic media-based listening practices as a foundational strategy. The integration of real-life materials such as TikTok videos, films, anime, podcasts, and other multimedia resources was perceived as beneficial for exposing students to natural pronunciation patterns, varied accents, and authentic discourse structures. Participants indicated that such materials increased engagement while simultaneously enhancing familiarity with rhythm and intonation. This finding aligns with Mayer's (2009) multimedia learning theory, which posits that learners process and integrate information more effectively when audio, visual, and textual inputs are combined in a multimodal format.

Difficulties related to unfamiliar words further highlight the importance of supporting lexical recognition during listening tasks. Subtitle support was widely endorsed as an effective strategy for reinforcing the connection between spoken and written forms. Participants explained that subtitles supported phonological mapping and semantic interpretation, enabling learners to decode unfamiliar words more efficiently. This finding is consistent with Nilawati and Lutviana (2022), who demonstrated that English subtitle integration significantly enhanced listening comprehension outcomes.

The prominence of vocabulary-related challenges further indicates the need for systematic lexical development. Vocabulary enrichment emerged as another vital strategy, with both teachers and students stressing practices such as dictionary use, vocabulary lists without direct translation, and goal-oriented vocabulary learning linked to listening materials. Strengthening lexical knowledge was deemed essential for reducing comprehension breakdowns during listening tasks. This perspective

aligns with Field's (2009) lexical processing theory, which identifies vocabulary mastery as a critical determinant of successful listening comprehension.

Additionally, variability in accent and speech rate suggests the value of expanding authentic exposure opportunities. Interactions with proficient speakers, storytelling sessions, video-based discussions, and experiential learning activities were perceived as effective in strengthening learners' adaptability to different accents and speech patterns. Wahab and Tanasy (2022) similarly noted the importance of authentic input in fostering listening skill development.

- **Cognitive and Psychological Implications**

The influence of cognitive overload and rapid speech signals the importance of scaffolded listening instruction. Students noted that gradual and interactive listening activities, such as slowing down input, providing additional explanations, and incorporating guided tasks, assisted them in processing information more effectively without overwhelming working memory. This observation corresponds with Hang (2024), who argued that reducing input complexity alleviates cognitive strain. Yuliarini (2022) similarly demonstrated the positive relationship between interactive teaching methods and learner engagement.

Motivational challenges and limited engagement further signal the importance of learner autonomy. Self-regulated learning emerged as a key factor in listening improvement, as students reported independently seeking listening materials beyond the classroom, including songs and online videos. This behavior reflects Zimmerman's (2002) self-regulated learning theory, which associates learner autonomy with improved academic outcomes. Adi et al. (2021) further reinforced the role of motivation in supporting sustained language development.

Affective factors such as anxiety and low confidence additionally require targeted instructional attention. Teachers stressed the importance of fostering a positive learning environment through gamified activities, multimedia integration, and engaging classroom practices. These approaches were perceived as effective in reducing anxiety, increasing confidence, and sustaining learners' interest. Yuliarini (2022) similarly demonstrated the impact of motivation and learner attitudes on academic performance.

- **Instructional Implications**

Attention-related challenges signal the need for structured and supportive learning environments. Instructional adaptation to diverse learning styles was identified as an important strategy for sustaining engagement and reducing distraction. Teachers reported accommodating visual, auditory, and kinesthetic preferences to create inclusive listening activities that support varied learner needs. This approach aligns with Sapan and Mede (2022), who noted the importance of integrating learning styles to enhance language achievement and motivation.

The need for meaningful engagement further supports the integration of student-centered instructional approaches. Project-Based Learning (PjBL) was proposed as an effective strategy for contextualizing listening practice within authentic and interactive tasks. Through collaborative problem-solving, discussion, and real-world content analysis, students engaged more deeply with listening materials. Waloyo (2024) similarly argued that experiential and interaction-based learning environments foster more durable language acquisition outcomes.

Overall, these pedagogical implications demonstrate that effective listening instruction requires a multi-layered approach that integrates linguistic development, cognitive scaffolding, motivational support, and adaptive instructional practices. The convergence of student-initiated strategies and teacher-guided methodologies suggests that collaborative and integrative approaches may more effectively address the complex nature of EFL listening difficulties.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the significant listening comprehension difficulties experienced by EFL students at the English Language Center at Al-Baha University (ELC) through a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. By integrating quantitative findings from student questionnaires with qualitative insights from teacher and student interviews, the study provided a thorough understanding of both the nature of the difficulties and the factors underlying them.

The quantitative results revealed that unfamiliar words, unfamiliar accents, distraction from comprehension gaps, distractions, and fast speech were the most prevalent challenges affecting

students' listening comprehension. These findings indicate that listening difficulties in this context are not limited to isolated vocabulary problems but rather involve a complex interaction of linguistic limitations, cognitive processing constraints, motivational factors, and environmental influences.

The qualitative findings further clarified that limited vocabulary knowledge, insufficient exposure to accent variation, overreliance on word-for-word translation, cognitive overload, low motivation, and classroom distractions collectively contributed to students' listening comprehension breakdowns. The interaction between bottom-up processing demands and working memory limitations emerged as a central factor in explaining why students struggled to sustain attention and construct meaning in real-time listening tasks.

Importantly, the study also identified participant-generated pedagogical solutions aimed at addressing these difficulties. Both teachers and students stressed the importance of authentic media exposure, subtitle support, vocabulary enrichment, gradual and interactive listening instruction, self-regulated learning, motivational support, and project-based learning. These strategies reflect the need for a multi-layered instructional approach that integrates linguistic development, cognitive scaffolding, and affective engagement.

The findings contribute theoretically to the understanding of listening comprehension as a dynamic process shaped by the interplay among lexical knowledge, phonological adaptability, cognitive capacity, and attentional control. Practically, the study suggests that listening instruction in Saudi EFL contexts should move beyond test-oriented practices toward more authentic, scaffolded, and learner-centered approaches that promote sustained exposure and strategic listening development.

Overall, enhancing listening comprehension may require systematic vocabulary expansion, diversified accent exposure, structured cognitive support, and learning environments that reduce distractions while fostering learner motivation. Future research could explore longitudinal instructional interventions to examine the long-term effects of integrated linguistic and psychological support strategies on listening proficiency.

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