

## Investigating Factors Affecting Listening Comprehension Among EFL Students In A Saudi Girls' College

Dr. Afsha Jamal

Assistant Professor, English Department, College of Arts & Sciences for Girls  
Wadi Aldwasir, Saudi Arabia, [quddus.afsha@gmail.com](mailto:quddus.afsha@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*The present research explores the difficulties encountered by the learners in comprehending listening tasks in the classroom. The population of the study is 76 students studying English as Foreign Language (EFL) and 14 language instructors in a Saudi college of Arts & Sciences for Girls affiliated to Prince Sattam Bin Abdul Aziz University. The data is collected by administering questionnaires in terms of their understanding oral English, memory, grasping ability, vocabulary, empathy, and finally their interest. The result and findings of the data is helpful in exploring their difficulties in understanding listening. Subsequently, information provided by the language instructors ensued in suggesting strategies and measures to be taken up reducing the learners' listening apprehensions and improve their listening skills. The present research can be helpful for further research broadening the scope of the study basing on the suggestions expressed by both the learners and language teachers.*

**Keywords:** EFL, Difficulties, Understanding Listening Skills, Survey, listening strategies

### 1. BACKGROUND

Owing to the rapid transferal in emphasis from teaching to learning, the focus is on the learners and their learning strategies. With this shift in paradigm the teachers' role has also undergone a radical change. An English teacher is expected to be a manager, facilitator and a co-participant in the present teaching scenario. Yet, due to meagre participation by the learners in the language tasks, language classes are replica of traditional teaching with teacher demonstrating the language skills. Listening, a receptive and passive skill plays significant role in teaching and learning English. The listening and speaking course is taught for two levels in the English program in a Saudi college for girls. Language learning comprises four skills- Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW). The participants under the present study learn these four language skills at the beginning of the English program.

The researcher notices learners often facing difficulty in comprehending listening due to differences between their native language and second/foreign language. English worldwide is taught as Foreign Language (EFL), Second Language (ESL), and Target language (TL). Whereas, the First Language (L1) indicates the inborn, prime language and mother tongue of people belonging to a particular region in general and country precisely. It is a link language that connects people from different places and used by majority of the population. Acquiring L1 is a natural process comparatively than that of L2 acquisition. A foreign language is a language that is not spoken in the nation of the learners. A second language refers to any language that is not learners' native language, and occupies a second place in language learning both inside and outside the classroom.

Actually, language is not meant for learning instead it's an innate acquisition. language (L1) or Mother Tongue (MT) is acquired at subconscious level imbibing all its features naturally. In contrast, language learning requires instructions and training comprising all the rules, features, forms and functions of the target language. Ann Oliveri (2012) mentions in a blog ESL is a continuum process since the person learning a new language "progresses from no knowledge of the new language to a level of competency closely resembling that of a native speaker."

Nunan (1997) quotes, "Listening is a Cinderella skill in second language learning". It is a focused, intentional and voluntary act rather than accidental thereby demanding attention and effort. Listening to other people use foreign language enhances learners' ability to speak the target language better.

Listening is the first skill to master in order to be dexterous in a language. Since, communication is a two way process- listening and responding, no one can say a word before listening to it. The level of language input is considered to be higher than language production. Smith (1975) emphasizes, “Good listeners often speak more exactly and more creatively than poor listeners; they have more words at their command.” The same principle is applied in a conversation, a person can reply exactly only after listening specifically. Therefore, poor listening leads to miscommunication and misunderstandings. The students spend maximum time in the classrooms and get the information only through listening to the lectures delivered by teachers. (Kurniasih,2011)

Rost (1994) stated that listening is significant in language learning because it provides input for learners and it plays an important role in the development of learners' language. According to Krashen (1985) and Hamouda (2013), listening skill is an important element in obtaining understandable input. Listening is a decoding stage in the process of communication and Anderson and Lynch (1988) states that listener stores the received information in a similar method of tape recorder.

Goh (2000) is of the opinion that the listening teachers expect their students to reply listening questions correctly without considering the process of listening comprehension. Listening class turns out to be a testing class rather than teaching them the process of listening comprehension. Seyyedi, (2017) feels that at times learners comprehend the listening task completely but they fail to answer the questions appropriately.

Nunan (1998) mentions, that listening includes an active process of deciphering and making meaning from both verbal and non-verbal messages. It includes knowing speech sounds, comprehending the meaning of individual words, and understanding the syntax of sentences (Nadig, 2013) states Listening plays an important role in gauging the speakers' intention and responding accordingly.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

A few researchers tried exploring the difficulties faced by the non- native learners in comprehending listening in the classrooms. Darti & Asmawathi(2017) in their research found that the teachers' attempt in understanding learners' listening difficulties help them developing listening skills by adopting relevant strategies. Hamouda (2013) found major listening comprehension problems encountered by EFL Saudi learners in terms of native accent, pronunciation, speed of speech, lack of concentration, anxiety, and recording issues.It involves three basic stages in teaching and learning listening in the language classrooms. The teacher plays audio scripts while students listen carefully and complete the exercises. Ferris & Tagg(1996) in their survey revealed ESL students face great difficulty with class participation, asking and responding to questions, and general listening comprehension.

Flowerdew (1995) examines the issues surrounding the comprehension of academic lectures by L2 learners. Ostler (1980), found that her subjects felt much more proficient at everyday listening and daily conversations than with listening and speaking tasks in their classes.

Hence, only little research is done on the problems of listening describing the difficulties of the second language learners' in listening comprehension.

## **3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The present study aims to answer the following two main research questions

1. What are major obstacles faced by the students in understanding oral English at College of Arts & Sciences for Girls in Saudi?
2. What are the innovative listening methods language instructors follow and suggest in teaching listening?

#### 4. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study employs questionnaires as the research instrument among the students and language instructors to get information about the difficulties the students faced in EFL listening in a Saudi college for girls.

##### Students' Questionnaire:

The students' questionnaire is based on Likert scale 5 point questions measuring their agreement on the obstacles in understanding oral English. Out of fourteen, one question is open ended seeking their specific area of difficulty in understanding oral English.

##### Teachers' Questionnaire:

The questionnaire administered among the language instructors comprises both closed and open ended questions seeking their awareness of students' listening problems and suggestions related to improving their oral comprehension.

#### 5. DATA COLLECTION:

The data is collected through online survey using a google form sent to all the students enrolled in the EFL program under the researcher. They are given assurance as the data would be utilized only for the research purpose. The process of collecting data through google forms is the easiest and fastest. The responses are automatically saved electronically and instantly.

##### Data Analysis

The responses are stored in the google drive making it easier for the researcher to evaluate individually and summary. The responses of questions from second to thirteenth are presented descriptively besides percentages, variance, mean, and standard deviation of the results. The last question is open ended query attempted to throw a light on the specific area of difficulty in understanding oral English. The responses are presented in the descriptive form.

##### Students' Questionnaire- Findings

The age of the students learning language is described in the below table.

##### Age Group

18-20	20-25	25-30	Above 30
5	42	13	16

Table -1

Out of 76 students, 6.5% of the girls are between 18-20 years old, while 55% of them are 20 -25 years old, 17% are 25-30 years old and 21% of the girls are above 30 years old. Maximum number of girls is relatively young with sharp grasping ability.

The data of the next twelve questions based on Likert 5 point scale is presented in the below table:

##### Likert 5 Point Scale Data Analysis

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am familiar with oral English	10.5%	14.4%	3.9%	60.5%	10.5%
I understand each word while listening to the audio in Listening & Speaking course	5.2%	9.2%	7.8%	63%	14.4%

I remember the words and items after listening to an audio clip	5.2%	13%	6.5%	61.8%	13%
The speaker ought to be a little bit slower	13%	53.9%	14%	14%	3.9%
Vocabulary in the audio clip is always known to me	9%	19.7%	13%	13%	44.7%
The tone of the speaker should be pleasant	22%	35.6%	23.6%	9%	10.5%
I am anxious while listening to oral English	5%	68%	14%	5%	6.5%
I understand the feelings of the speaker while listening to oral English	10.5%	17%	13%	31.5%	27.6%
I like listening to stories in English	17%	26%	15.7%	36.8%	3.9%
I recognize the spoken words from my long time memory	7.8%	21%	17%	31.5%	22%
My teacher advises me to read, to watch movies, and share ideas in oral expression lectures.	17%	35.6%	10.5%	21%	17%
My teacher teaches listening comprehension through different methods	9%	23.6%	22%	30%	14%

Table-2

The responses are presented descriptively below

Q-2: Out of 76, 10.5% of the respondents strongly agree that they are familiar with oral English, While 14.4% agree, 3.9% are neutral, 60.5% disagree and 10.5% strongly disagree. Therefore, maximum of the students are not exposed to oral English.

Q-3: Nearly 5.2% of them replied they strongly agree each word while listening to the audio in Listening & speaking course. Whereas, 9.2% agree, 7.8% are neutral, 63% disagree and 10.5% strongly disagree to the statement. Thus, majority of the EFL students face difficulties in comprehending listening audio clips.

Q.4. The reactions to the query whether they remember the words after they finished listening to the audio clips are 5.2% strongly agree that they do remember while, 13% agree, 6.5 are neutral, 61.8% agree and 13.% of them strongly disagree. Since, their responses to the earlier 2 and 3 questions show their unfamiliarity with oral English, difficulties in understanding the words in the audio clips, the replies to this statement is most of them are unable to remember the words after listening to the audio clips. The obvious reason is their exposure to the English vocabulary is limited.

Q.5. Out of 76 students 13% of them strongly agree that the tone of the speaker should be slower while others 53.9% agree, 14.4% are neutral, 14.4 % disagree and 3.9 disagree. Thus, one of the problems in listening is due to the hasty because majority of them agree to this statement.

Q.6. Almost 9.2% of them strongly agree that they understand the vocabulary in the audio clip, 19.7% strongly agree, 13% are neutral, 13% agree and 44.7% strongly agree. Hence, their vocabulary is limited as most of them strongly disagree to the fact that the vocabulary is known to them.

Q.7. To the statement whether they regard that tone of the speaker is a barrier in their understanding listening to oral English 22.3% strongly agree it is whereas 35.6% agree, 23.6% are neutral, 9.2%

disagree and 10.5 % strongly disagree. Therefore, the unpleasant tone of the speaker is one of the barriers in understanding oral English.

- Q.8. Anxiety might be one of the factors, the present study queried upon and the replies affirms the statement because most of the students confirmed nearly, 68.4% while, 5.2 strongly agree, 14.4% are neutral, 5.2% disagree and only 6.5% strongly deny it. Hence, anxiety is one of the factors responsible for listening problems.
- Q.9. Out of 76 respondents, 10.5% strongly agree while, 17% agree, 13% are neutral, 31.5% disagree and 27.6 strongly disagree. Thus, learners are unable to understand the feelings of the speaker while listening to oral English.
- Q.10. 17% of them strongly agree, 26.3% agree, 15.7% are neutral, 36.8% disagree and 3.9 % strongly disagree to the statement that they like listening to stories. Since they fail to understand oral English most of them are apprehensive towards any kind of oral speaking activity including listening to stories. Almost 26% of them agree so it can be employed as a listening strategy.
- Q.11. The responses from the students regarding their recognition of the vocabulary in their earlier stage of life 7.8% strongly agree, 21% agree, 17% are neutral, while 31.5% disagree and 22.3% of them strongly disagree. Their knowledge in oral English is poor and restricted.
- Q.12. The responses for the probe language teachers' role in making them understand oral English is 17% stated strongly agree, 35.6% agree, 10.5% neutral, 21% disagree and 17% strongly disagree. There is a little variation between agree and disagree hence, a few language teachers motivate them and others need to do so.
- Q. 13. Out of 76 students, 9.2% strongly agree, 23% agree, 22.3% are neutral, 30% disagree and 14.4% strongly disagree to the statement that their teacher employs different strategies in teaching listening comprehension. Most of them disagree, some are neutral and others replied positively that their teachers employ strategies in the listening classes.
- Q.14. The responses for the final question as to mentioning their specific area of problems in comprehending listening are presented below as factors hindering the comprehension of listening skills.
- ❖ Anxiety: Nervousness due to performing simultaneous tasks of listening, comprehending and writing.
  - ❖ Speed of the audio system: This is one of the technical reasons mentioned by the girls performing listening tasks face in the classroom. The task require them to write while listening and the speed of the audio system being fast they miss out the necessary information leading to omissions in writing.
  - ❖ Pronunciation: There is a vast difference in pronunciation of a few words between English and Arabic paving way to listening problems.
  - ❖ Accent: English being foreign to the Arabic learners the accent affects their listening comprehension.
  - ❖ Inadequate Vocabulary: They admit that their limited vocabulary knowledge is one of the reasons. Most of the words are unknown to them listening first time in the classroom.
  - ❖ Disinterest: The topics are found to be uninteresting and boring due to cultural differences of the context.
  - ❖ Lack of Concentration: Listening demands complete concentration and external barriers due to noises distract their concentration.
  - ❖ Foreign accent is one of the major reasons because there is a difference in a few sounds between English and Arabic language.
  - ❖ Unknown names and occasions in the course contents confuse them.

### ***Students Questionnaire- Statistical Analysis***

The statistical representation of the data is displayed in the below table

**Statistical Analysis**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Std Deviation</b>	<b>Variance</b>	<b>Mean</b>
Q.1.I am familiar with oral English	1.13	1.28	2.7
Q.2. I understand each word while listening to the audio in Listening & Speaking course	0.98	0.97	2.6
Q.3.I remember the words and items after listening to an audio clip	0.93	0.87	2.5
Q.4.The speaker ought to be a little bit slower	0.99	0.98	3.5
Q.5.Vocabulary in the audio clip is always known to me.	1.43	2.07	2.3
Q.6.The tone of the speaker should be pleasant	1.19	1.43	3.5
Q.7.I am anxious while listening to oral English	0.89	0.79	3.6
Q.8.I understand the feelings of the speaker while listening to oral English	1.32	1.74	2.5
Q.9.I like listening to stories in English	1.24	1.55	3.1
Q.10.I recognize the spoken words from my long time memory	1.23	1.53	2.5
Q.11.My teacher advises me to read, to watch movies, and share ideas in oral expression lectures.	1.37	1.9	3.1
Q.12. My teacher teaches listening comprehension through different methods	1.2	1.4	2.8
Total	0.16	0.14	2.8

Table-3

The statistical analysis of the standard deviation, mean and variance of the students' agreement in questionnaire is used in the present study. Standard deviation looks at how spread out a group of numbers is from the mean, by looking at the square root of the variance. The variance measures the average degree to which each point differs from the mean—the average of all data points.

Therefore, the standard deviation of all the queries is 0.16, Variance is 0.14 and mean is 2.8. It proves that majority of the respondents agree in their opinions regarding problems faced during listening comprehension.

### ***Teachers' Questionnaires- Findings***

The teachers' questionnaire comprises both closed-ended, frequency scale and open-ended queries as mentioned earlier.

Q.1. The first query is based on the working experience of the instructors. The response to this inquiry are a teacher has 10yrs of experience while others have 23yrs, 19yrs, two teachers have 18yrs, another 15yrs, 14yrs, 10yrs, 8yrs, 7yrs, 4 and two others have 3yrs and only one is a fresher. Therefore, the maximum year of experience a language instructor has is 23 years and minimum is 1 year. The remaining teachers are also highly experienced with above 10 years. A few have below 8 years of experience in teaching EFL and only one is a fresher.

Q.2.The second inquiry is closed-ended question seeking information regarding their involvement in teaching listening course. All of them imparted listening skills in their teaching EFL career.

Q.3.The query is to find their ability in making students understand listening and the responses are out of 14 language instructors 35.7% of them are able to do it always while, 35.7% often,

7% sometimes, 14% rarely and only 7% never. Thus, maximum number of the EFL is successful in making their instructors clearer.

Q.4.The inquiry is based on the assumption that they realize students facing difficulty in comprehending listening. The replies are 28.5% always recognize their problem, 35.7% often and 57% sometimes and none replied for rarely and never. Hence, the students' problems are known to the teachers sometimes. It implies due to their busy schedule concentrating only on the completion of syllabus rather than empathizing the learners' difficulties.

Q.5. The inquiry is to explore their attempts in employing listening strategies in the classroom. 7%replied they always adopt innovative listening strategies in the classroom, 28.5% often, 57% sometimes, only 7% rarely and none never. The language instructors adopt innovative listening strategies only sometimes.

Q.6. To the query if they find students trying listening strategies, none of them replied that they try, 21.4% often, 21.4% sometimes, 35.7% rarely and 21.4% never. The responses indicate that the learners rarely try improving their listening skills.

Q.7.The query is open-ended query aiming to explore possible factors responsible for 'students' difficulty in completing listening skills. The sum of the responses are lack of comprehension in second language, less exposure to English outside the classrooms, lack of concentration, disinterest in topics, difficulty in understanding the native accent, limited vocabulary, unfamiliarity with certain vocabulary, native speaker's pronunciation, and finally no command over English language. Surprisingly, the responses of the language instructors match with those of the students.

Q.8.The final inquiry is throwing light on the teachers' suggestions regarding innovative strategies to be adopted by the students to improve their comprehension of oral English. The replies are as follows

- ❖ The teacher concerned feels that students require more of input that improves listening comprehension.
- ❖ Listening activities like role plays and analyzing the discourses assist the learners in understanding listening better since they speak and listen to others often.
- ❖ One of the respondents suggests encouraging them to listen to news in English on regular basis. Moreover, their exposure to English also increases.
- ❖ Training them in phonetics and let them listen continuously to the native accent of the language is one of the teachers' suggestion. In fact, they face problem in pronunciation a lot.
- ❖ An instructors recommends giving them more exercises in listening, ask students to listen to English podcasts and broadcasts daily to practice listening to oral English.
- ❖ The learners' face difficulty in coping up with the pace of the audio so a teacher suggests reduce the speed of the audio initially and then increase the pace with time.
- ❖ The teacher should get to know her/his students and create simple commands.
- ❖ Teaching listening tasks with interesting games improves their listening comprehension.
- ❖ Another suggestion is to integrate listening with a visual task. For example: Listen to the instructions carefully and follow the directions by marking them on the given worksheet to reach the new shopping mall/ airport / university quickly and easily by avoiding busy traffic signals and main streets etc.
- ❖ Many such innovative ideas based on students' interest can be planned. Point to note is that there should be more of visuals and less of words. The aim is to improve listening skill and not increase their knowledge of spelling or vocabulary. A skill can be improved only when the learner is keen on doing so. Hence, we need to work in that direction.
- ❖ Practice listening to English speeches, audio, dialogues
- ❖ They require more practice sessions

- ❖ Audio aids, exposure to more native accents , conversations with targeted language speakers,
- ❖ Using computer labs could be one. Share some videos via the Blackboard such as TED and ask them to listen to it without Arabic subtitles and then ask them to speak about it in the class using some words mentioned in that video.

## 6. LISTENING STRATEGIES

The listening tasks employed in the Saudi classrooms are beyond the comprehension of the learners since the topics are not related to their cultural background neither the vocabulary known to them, besides the fast speech delivery of the speakers and lack of interest among them. Hence, a new listening course ought to be designed keeping all these factors in mind. The repeated vocabulary in a series of dialogues with related meanings assists the learners in comprehending listening to a large extent. A few students mentioned the topics are boring, so interesting contexts with specific information may attract the learners.

Presently, it is generally recognized that both bottom-up and top-down strategies are necessary. It is necessary to help learners use what they already know rather than new vocabulary, context, accent and topics. The teachers' role is to adopt innovative strategies to improve their listening comprehension at every level. The researcher feels it happens only with building activities for the listening tasks in the classrooms meeting the learners' requirements.

The involvement of the learners in the language learning process brings about a drastic improvement among the EFL including listening skills. Listening tasks can be devised in which the classroom action is centered on the learner not the teacher. In tasks exploiting this idea, students actively get involved in structuring and restructuring their understanding of the language and in building their skills in using the language. Secondly, teaching materials, like any other type of materials can be given a learner-centered dimension by getting learners involved in the processes underlying their learning and in making active contributions to the learning.

Key strategies can be imparted in the listening classroom including selective listening, listening for different purposes, predicting, progressive structuring, inferencing, and personalizing. These strategies not be separated from the content teaching but woven into the ongoing process of the lesson so that learners can see the applications of the strategies to the development of effective learning.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The present study presents the difficulties faced by the EFL girls in a Saudi college and the findings expose factors responsible for their poor performance in listening course. Both the teachers and learners expressed vocabulary, anxiety, accent, tone and the fastness of the speakers in the audio clips played in the classroom are the major hitches. In respective of the need analysis the present study provides a few suggestions and strategies to improve listening comprehension among the language learners.

- ❖ Listening Strategies be incorporated in the listening curricula
- ❖ Listening practice be provided outside the classroom by sharing the audio clips electronically prior to the lectures.
- ❖ The purpose of the listening tasks should be clear.
- ❖ Play video and audio clips in the classroom to make the context and ideas clearer.
- ❖ Online listening tests help the learners improve their listening skills.

Thus, the present study concludes with the above suggestions relating listening strategies and paves scope for further research in the field of EFL in Saudi background.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY



1. Anderson, A. and T. Lynch. 1988. Listening. London: Oxford University Press.
2. Ann E. Oliveri (2012). Ann E. Oliveri, "How do we learn a second language" in a blog Five Stages of Second Language Acquisition. Available at <https://education.cu-portland.edu/blog/classroom-resources/five-stages-of-second-language-acquisition/>
3. Dana Ferris & Tracy Tagg (1996) Academic Listening/Speaking Tasks for ESL Students: Problems, Suggestions, and Implications. Quarterly Vol. 30, No. 2
4. Darti Andi Asmawati (2017) Analyzing Students' Difficulties toward Listening Comprehension DOI: 10.24252/Eternal.V32 December
5. David Nunan (1997) Listening In Language Learning. The English Centre, University of Hong Kong.
6. Eka Kurniasih (2011) Teaching the Four Language Skills in Primary EFL Classroom: Some Considerations Volume 1, Number 1, February Pg: 70-81.
7. Flowerdew, J. (Ed.). (1995). Academic Listening: Research Perspectives (Cambridge Applied Linguistics). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9781139524612
7. Goh, C. C. (2000). A Cognitive Perspective on Language Learners' Listening Comprehension Problems. System, 28(1), 55-75. Available at [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0346-251X\(99\)00060-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0346-251X(99)00060-3)
8. Hamouda, Arafat (2013) An Investigation of Listening Comprehension Problems Encountered by Saudi Students in the EL Listening Classroom. International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development. April 2013, Vol. 2, No. 2. ISSN: 2226-6348, p-113
9. Krashen, S.D. (1985). The Input Hypothesis. London: Longman.
10. Nadig, A. (2013). Listening Comprehension. Encyclopedia of Autism Spectrum Disorders, 1734.
11. Nunan (1998) (Ed) In Hamouda, Arafat (2013) An Investigation of Listening Comprehension Problems Encountered by Saudi Students in the EL Listening Classroom. International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development. April 2013, Vol. 2, No. 2. ISSN: 2226-6348, p-113
12. Ostler, S. E. (1980). A survey of academic needs for advanced ESL. TESOL Quarterly, 14, 489–502.
13. Rost, M. (1994). Introducing listening. London: Penguin.
14. Smith, James A. (1975). Creative Teaching of the Language Arts in the Elementary School, Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
16. Seyedeh Masoumeh Ahmadi (2016). The Importance of Listening Comprehension in Language Learning. International Journal of Research in English Education Vol.1 Available at [www.ijreeonline.com](http://www.ijreeonline.com)