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RESEARCH PAPER

An Investigation of the Factors Contributing to Inadequate Listening Comprehension in Non-Elite Private Secondary Schools, Punjab, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This quantitative research was conducted to perceive the perceptions of L2 non-native students in Punjab, Pakistan. Data was collected to answer the questions of problems encountered by the L2 students on listening comprehension in non-elite private secondary schools. Questionnaire was segregated into four categories. A high mean score of all categories justified the actual problems faced by the students in L2 classrooms. The sample for this study consisted of 40 students who answered the questionnaire on the Likert scale. The investigation results showed that students frequently faced difficulties in listening comprehension due to insufficient vocabulary, speed of speech delivery, form of language, lack of interest, complex grammatical sentences, and physical setting of the classrooms that have a problem with volume or the quality of sound. The use of digital learning strategies can remediate the difficulties of more or less skilled learners' during listening activities in the classroom. The recommendations for further research are also suggested in this article.

Introduction

In modern Listening is a complicated process that requires understanding the target language's linguistic knowledge (bottom-up), linguistic experience (top-down), cultural norms, social standards, gestures, emotional responses, religious beliefs, festivals, and mythological backdrop. Listening takes up more time in our everyday lives than other linguistic elements such as speaking, reading, and writing. Furthermore, according to Mendelsohn (1994), we spend 35% of our time speaking, 9% writing, 16% reading, and 40% listening throughout our daily conversation. According to Rost (2002), there is no language without listening. Students have a hard time learning it, and teachers have a hard time passing it on to their pupils (Vandergrift, 2004; Field, 2008). Pre-listening (preparation), listening (self-monitoring), and post-listening (assessment) are all steps in the listening process that may be successful if the correct listening skills and strategies are used. Flowerdew and Miller (2005) list five types of knowledge needed to comprehend spoken

language. The first is phonological, which focuses on the sound system; the second is syntactic, which addresses the placement of words. The third is semantic, which focuses on the word and propositional knowledge. The fourth is pragmatically based on contextual knowledge. Last, is kinesic knowledge based on nonverbal communication (facial expressions, body movement, and eye contact).

In addition, Field (1998) asserts that rather than instructing students on "how to listen," teachers often focus on the results of students' listening (the "product") (process). As a consequence, learners are frequently overwhelmed and frustrated by language obstacles. Many of our colleges and universities put a higher value on skills such as essay writing, report writing, reading comprehension, and vocabulary development than on other subjects. Speaking and listening skills are commonly undervalued in curriculum, textbooks, and lesson plans. Hamouda (2013) and Mirza et al. (2021) assert that teachers believe that listening skills develop naturally as part of the language acquisition process. According to Jiang and Farquharson (2018), listening comprehension classes typically follow a traditional format that includes teaching new vocabulary, extensive listening (questions for general context understanding), intensive listening (questions for specific details), doing comprehension exercises, checking answers (vocabulary or grammar), and explaining some difficult points.

According to previous studies on listening skills, L2 teachers give little attention to what listening is, how to teach it, how to develop it in learners, or how to make them independent learners (Mirza et al., 2021). Teachers, however, continue to use conventional teaching techniques (teacher-centred classroom), notably in the Punjab.

Listening and Hearing

Listening is a psychological act, while hearing is a physiological reality (Barthes, 1985). Furthermore, listening comprehension is the ability to understand the native speaker's spoken message (Mendelsohn, 1994). According to Rost (2002), hearing includes sound perception, while listening is deliberate. Similarly, Underwood (1989) states that listening is an act of paying attention and finding the meaning of what we hear. According to Rost (2002), listening is a cognitive and psychologically complicated process that includes receptive, constructive, and interpretative cognition that allows the listener to understand the spoken message.

Listening is the ability to perceive sound and recognise patterns in target language speech. According to Rost (2002), there are four types of listening skills. The first is receptive (listening means getting the speaker's idea and content, decoding the message, receiving the images, thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, impressions, and emotions from the spoken message), and the second is constructive (listening means getting the speaker's idea and content, decoding the message, receiving (listening means reframing, constructing, finding, understanding, and interpreting the message in terms of the past experiences and future expectancies). The third skill of listening is collaborative (coordinating the context, reacting, and signalling to the speaker which ideas are clear and acceptable to the listener), while the fourth skill is transformational (listening is the process of altering the cognitive environment of

both the speaker and listener). Listening comprehension has been described as a sophisticated process that permits us to understand what is being said (Rost, 2001). English is widely used as a lingua franca in Pakistan. This study focused on the listening difficulties of non-native English language learners in the context of Punjab. This study focused on non-elite private schools in Punjab. The fact that this is an understudied subject is one of the reasons for choosing this form of study. The current study's findings would benefit both instructors and students in their teaching and learning techniques.

Literature Review

Availing listening competency in second language acquisition (SLA) is usually a complex and challenging task for non-native learners. Moreover, it was observed that students could not get the intended meaning of the spoken message even though they had understood the literal meaning of the words. All this is related to the learner's ability to make useful elaborated inferences or get the intended meaning of the message. To this end, they need to carry out good listening practices inside and beyond the classroom. Moreover, it is the teacher's responsibility to offer all the facilitating devices and strategies at their disposal to put the students in the most advantageous position to learn what is said by people, with the intention to communicate in the second language (Anderson & Lynch, 1988). In the same vein, Shireen (1987) states that effective listening needs activity-based teaching with positive feedback, reflections, errors, and remedial actions. In the whole process of listening, students need to operate certain mental steps to solve their listening difficulties. Byrnes (1984) states that listening is a process of matching speech with what listeners already know about the topic. Therefore, teachers need to activate the background knowledge to help students mentally organise and enable them to make predictions in order to prepare themselves for the listening lesson.

Consequently, it would reduce the burden of comprehension upon listeners. Most English language courses focus on improving reading and writing skills in Pakistani educational scenarios. Moreover, researchers have demonstrated that adults spend 40-50% of communication time using listening skills (Gilman & Moody, 1984). However, we rarely teach our listeners how to listen (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). In most of the listening comprehension lessons, tapes are played, then learners attempt question papers, and finally, feedback is given in the form of right answers ((Sreena & Ilankumaran, 2018). Vandergrift (1997) mentioned that listening activities in most language classrooms tend to test the learners listening abilities through listening test procedures where they have to understand the listening text and respond appropriately. Therefore, it increases their stress and anxiety levels because they are assessed in the language classroom on how well they can listen or what they have not understood (Vandergrift, 1997). In such situations, they feel demotivated. Furthermore, learners also face difficulties in listening input due to not knowing how to listen; this creates unknown problems for both the teachers and learners in the classroom.

Teaching listening comprehension is a complex process where professionally trained teachers can plan appropriate pedagogical methods and use authentic materials in teaching listening lessons. Moreover, course designers need to plan the systematically designed course to fix the problems that could improve the teachers'

and learners' perceptual levels at the university level. Furthermore, teachers need to use advanced teaching resources such as strategies-based devices and updated equipment to promote self-directed learning habits in learners. Unfortunately, teachers do not have much knowledge of teaching listening skills and strategies in many language classrooms. They do not teach language-learning strategies in the classroom (Rost, 2001). In addition, Vandergrift (1997) states that learners did not get sufficient support in learning how to process and manage the listening input they received. For Rubin (1975), strategies are techniques or devices that a learner may use to acquire knowledge. Strategies-based instruction makes the listening process more sophisticated, smooth, and faster and turns it into a time-saving mode. In addition, the "individual differences" matter in the language acquisition process and refers to the personal baggage that a learner brings to the classroom. These individual differences are some factors including motivation, personality, interest, gender, age, beliefs and attitude (Cohen, 2010).

Listening Comprehension

Chastain (1971) defines listening comprehension as an ability to understand a native speaker's message at a normal speed in real-life situations. The term listening comprehension is matched with the psycholinguistic research by such expressions, for example, "speech recognition," "speech perception," "speech understanding," and "spoken language understanding." Some researchers like Goh (2002) and O'Malley and Chamot (1989) focused on the mental process of listeners (perception, parsing and utilisation). According to them, proficient listeners simultaneously interacted with both top-down and bottom-up processes. However, the less-proficient learners use the bottom-up processes and cognitive strategies.

Furthermore, Goh (2002) states that more-proficient learners use cognitive and metacognitive strategies to achieve meaningful text interpretation. A better balance of top-down and bottom-up activities can make the comprehension process easier and faster. The present study explores L2 learners' listening comprehension problems and provides some useful suggestions to remediate the listening problems.

Material and Methods

Quantitative data shows statistical relationships among variables in the numerical data. This study is descriptive and thus utilises the quantitative method approach. This research approach was required to identify pedagogical problems in classroom practices while teaching English as a second language. From this perspective, 40 private non-elite high school students were randomly selected from four private high schools following the Government Punjab Textbook Board (PTB) curricula. The data was collected during personal visits. The collected data was arranged and analysed accordingly.

Furthermore, the numerical data was measured and analysed using mean and standard deviation statistical formulae. Then statistical data were tabulated and reported to interpret the findings. Discussions and recommendations were presented in the article. The present study used SPSS as a tool for statistical analysis. Students' opinion was asked regarding the causes of lower proficiency in L2 listening. Data

was collected through a 5-item Likert scale. Before conducting the actual study, the pilot study was conducted to measure the Cronbach alpha, and the results indicated that the reliability score was .792, which is considered suitable for quantitative studies Table 1. The survey questionnaire is available in appendix A. Table 2 presents the division of survey questions according to the variables.

Reliability Score of the survey

Respondents	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
30	.792	32

Results and Discussion

First, the statistical procedure through SPSS was carried out to make a dataset to analyse the data. Further, the data were analysed based on the mean score to know whether the causes were less important or more important within the category. The data were analysed and interpreted using the mean and standard deviation descriptive statistics. The findings of this study have been discussed under four headings: (a) social-related factors, (b) teacher-related factors, (c) classroom-related factors and (d) student-related factors.

Table 2
Distribution of questions in the survey according to variables

Causes of lower proficiency	
Social Related Reasons/Factors	Items: 22, 25, 29
Teacher related Reasons/Factors	Items: 1, 5, 6, 9, 12, 19, 21, 30
Classroom Environment related Reasons/Factors	Items: 4, 7, 23, 26
Student related Factors	Items: 2, 3, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17,18, 20, 24, 27, 28, 31, 32

Description of the findings

The current study's findings were analysed based on the data collected for variables. Detail description is given below.

Social Related Factors

Students were provided with a survey to collect the data, and table 3 describes the social factors of low listening proficiency in the L2 classroom.

Table 3
Social Factors

Items		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
22	Students from low-income families listen more attentively than children of the middle class.	40	4.02	.659
25	Prejudice culture is one of the causes of low listening.	40	4.20	.757

29	Two different cultures with great social distance create a problem for listening in a second language.	40	3.95	.932
	Cumulative score	40	4.05	

The study findings indicate that social factors had highly affected the listening communication of the students as most of the students in the schools were from low-income families. They responded that they listened to the lecture more attentively than the middle-class income students, as a high mean score (M = 4.02, Std .659) suggests that students had a high perception of the statement. They also responded positively to the prejudiced culture in the classroom (M= 4.20. Std .757), indicating students had a high sense of this perception. Statement of item 29 also supports the finding of item 25 as it also has a high mean score of (M= 3.95, Std .932), indicating that cultural differences had a strong impact on the low listening in the classroom.

Table 4
Teacher related Factors

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	The passive listener feels difficulty comprehending a second language when the teacher is teaching.	40	3.62	.978
5	Listeners feel difficulty comprehending a second language when the teacher does not make eye contact with the listeners.	40	4.60	.496
6	If teachers are changed in each session, it causes a hurdle for the listeners in the listening process.	40	4.07	.828
9	Listeners find it difficult to understand the target language if the teacher's speech volume is too low.	40	4.45	.503
12	When a teacher fails to convey an idea to students, the listening process of second language learners becomes very challenging.	40	3.32	.916
19	A small amount of time for L2 listening is ineffective for listeners.	40	4.30	.607
21	Unplanned teaching methods are the causes of lower proficiency among L2 listeners.	40	4.27	.784
30	The difference between vowels, consonants, grammar, and word formation between native and target languages cause great difficulty for the listener.	40	3.60	1.007
	Cumulative Mean Score	40	4.02	

When students were asked about passive listeners, they responded positively that low listening was due to passive and inactive students (M=3.62, Std .978). Another predictable reason they mentioned was the least eye contact of teachers while teaching comprehension (M=4.60 Std=.49). This high mean score supports the finding of item 1 of the survey that both teachers and students were responsible for

low listening, and teachers' least eye contact with the students aggravated the problem of low listening. Frequent change and instability of teacher in each session was reported as a problem of low students' proficiency as most of the students agreed with item 6 with a high mean of 4.07 and Std .82. Students also affiliated the speaking volume of the teachers with low listening as a 4.45 mean score, and Std .503 indicates that students highly agreed with the statement of item 9. However, they slightly agreed with the statement that the incompetency of the teacher in conveying the idea had an impact on the low listening. Hence, the mean score of 3.32 and Std .916 demonstrate that students did not strongly agree with the statement of item 12.

In contrast, they strongly agreed with the time limitation as a high mean score of 4.30 and Std .607 demonstrate that they strongly agreed with the statement that limited time of speaking at the end of the teacher had strongly impacted the listening proficiency. In support of the small amount of time, the high mean score of 4.27 and Std of 0.784 demonstrate that they felt that when teachers enter class without a lesson plan, it is not beneficial for them. It negatively impacts their listening proficiency. They also supported the idea that the morphological formation of sound and grammar rules impact their listening skills (Mean= 3.60, Std 1.007).

Classroom Environment-related Factors

Some factors are related to the classroom environment and impact on the listening. The table below describes the factors impacting the listening attributed to the classroom.

Table 4
Classroom environment-related Factors

	Classroom Environment-related Factors	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
4	Listeners fail in listening due to pressure in the learning atmosphere of a second language.	40	4.07	.916
7	Listeners are unable to comprehend the meanings of words in a stressful atmosphere.	40	4.35	.699
23	Students in small classes listen more attentively than those who listen to language in crowded classrooms.	40	3.77	.999
26	Low marks in class make a listener inactive in listening.	40	4.17	.594
	Cumulative Mean Score	40	4.09	

Several students (M=4.07, Std= .916) believed that class pressure had negatively impacted their listening of L2 and it probably affected their listening skills as they might expect a conducive environment. The finding of item 7 also supports the finding of item 4 that most of the students believed that they could not comprehend in the stressed environment as a high mean score of 4.35 and Std .699 demonstrates this finding. Item 23 is the true depiction of the impact of classroom environment on listening proficiency, as most of the students (Mean= 3.77, Std .999) favoured that less crowded classrooms are efficient for listening. Statement of item 7 supplemented the item 26 that most of the students (M=4.17, Std = .594) thought that students who achieve low marks could not perform better in listening, as this

statement is supported by the statement of item 7 that and 4 where stress and pressure had negatively impacted the performance of students.

Table 5
Student Psyche related Factors

	Student Psyche related Factors	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
2	The Non-attentive naughty listeners feel difficulty in the comprehension of a second language.	40	4.02	.767
3	Inactive listeners feel difficulty due to aimless material in the second language listening.	40	4.20	.911
8	Listeners who suffer from psychological problems like inferiority complex feel difficulty listening to a second language.	40	3.80	.822
10	Listeners' ability to understand language is attributed to a lack of motivating elements.	40	4.37	.867
11	The listener has a significant challenge in understanding the second language due to their anxiety about being insulted.	40	3.45	1.131
13	Listeners feel difficulty in comprehension of instruction when the teacher speaks too fast.	40	3.92	.888
14	A common symptom of low-proficient listeners is that they fail to differentiate between multiple meanings of the same word.	40	3.97	.831
15	Listeners feel difficulty thinking and, finally, logically, they remain confused.	40	3.57	1.034
16	Listeners confuse context with speech and loose meanings.	40	4.20	.911
17	Listeners rely on their native language's grammar to grasp the target language, resulting in difficulties and incomprehension.	40	4.60	.496
18	Non-attentive listeners cannot manage omission, addition, substitution, and word order problems.	40	3.92	.572
20	Listeners confuse phonology, morphology, syntax and vocabulary.	40	4.35	.483
24	Girls, in comparison to boys, are admirably good L2 listeners.	40	3.95	1.060
27	Anxiety has a negative effect on the process of listening to a language.	40	4.00	.599
28	Students prefer to interact in their language; therefore, the proficiency in foreign language learning becomes slow.	40	4.45	.677
31	Lack of willingness to interact in the target language causes learners to become low-proficient listeners.	40	4.02	.767
32	Sometimes listeners have some health diseases, which make them slow in listening.	40	3.87	1.113
	Cumulative Mean Score		4.03	

Some psychological factors impact the listening proficiency of the students. The statement in item 2 states that non-attentive and naughty students have problems comprehending a second language as many students (M= 4.02, Std .767) responded positively with a high mean score. Most of them agreed with the statement. In addition, coupled with this statement, most of the students (M= 4.20 Std .911) responded that inactive listeners provided with aimless material do not perform better in the listening. Many students responded with a slightly high mean score (m 3.80, Std .822) on the statement that many students who have the psychological problem of inferiority complex do not perform better in listening and their ability to understand listening is attributed to their motivation (M=4.37, Std .867). In support of the previous statement, they responded positively to item 11, where they consider that anxiety of being insulted affects the listening of the students (M=3.45, Std= 1.131).

In contrast, some students psychologically think that teachers speak fast and cannot understand, so a mean score of 3.92, and Std of .888 demonstrates that students consider this problem real. Many students M=3.97, Std .831 consider that the common symptom of low proficient listeners is that they cannot understand multiple meanings of the same words. This problem is probably related to low vocabulary knowledge. Many students M=3.57 Std 1.034 consider low listening proficiency because they cannot logically connect ideas with thinking, confuse text with speech, and lose meaning (M=4.20, Std .911). Many consider (M=4.60, .496) that this problem is due to students' focus on native language grammar, and they remain unable to grasp the target language and end in difficulty in comprehension. Statement of item 18 supports the finding of item 1, and this statement non-attentive students are responsible for low proficiency and data shows that (M=3.92, .572) most of the respondents consider students responsible for being inattentive. They cannot focus on word formation. The vast majority (M=4.35, Std .483) of the students opine students have problems understanding linguistic features of the language, for example, phonologically and syntax. In contrast, many students (M=3.95, Std 1.060) opine that girls are admirably better listeners than boys. Anxiety in the class also negatively impacts the listening (M= 4.00, Std= 599); other than these reasons, many students responded with a high mean of 4.45 and Std .677 that students prefer to communicate in their native language, and that is why they cannot focus on L2 listening. Lack of willingness to interact in the target language causes them to become low proficient (M=4.02, .767). In addition to it, many students (M=3.87, Std= 1.113) considered health issues also a cause of impact on low listening.

Results and Discussion

The data presented in the table elicited that most of the respondents believed that social, teacher, classroom and students related factors were the problem which always existed during the listening process in the classroom. The table further highlighted that classroom-related problems had the highest mean score, while all other problems also had a mean grater of 4.00, which is considered a high score. Cultural issues and forms of language were not given more importance concerning the cause of listening problems.

Causes of lower proficiency		Cumulative Category Mean score
Social Related Reasons/Factors	Items: 22, 25, 29	4.05
Teacher related Reasons/Factors	Items: 1, 5, 6, 9, 12, 19, 21, 30	4.02
Classroom Environment related Reasons/Factors	Items: 4, 7, 23, 26	4.09
Student related Factors	Items: 2, 3, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17,18, 20, 24, 27, 28, 31, 32	4.03

Bhatti (2013) finds similar results for problems with reading skills in the English language. Teachers heavily rely on textbooks and model writings that hinder learners' creativity and freedom of expression. They are not taught through modern digital gadgets, have insufficient vocabulary knowledge and cannot comprehend the listening. Such practices are in line with the findings of Warsi (2004). Corresponding to the findings of (Vazir & Ismail, 2009), providing relevant vocabulary items could help students become efficient listeners. Gurmani et al. (2022) concluded in a study that technological gadgets with academic vocabulary help students learn academic vocabulary. That might be beneficial for students in improving listening comprehension. English language skills also cover learners' deficient command of vocabulary, grammar and spelling. Parallel to the findings of Cutler and Graham (2011), a short period is also found to be a major challenge faced by the learners.

Conclusion

This research was conducted to explore students' problems from non-elite private schools at the secondary level. Findings of this study report some traditional teaching practices in the Pakistani context, such as inappropriate classrooms, lack of motivation, and anxiety in learning English as an L2. The findings also reveal that listening practices are not up to the mark and are concurrent. This study also explored problems faced by students during a teaching in the classrooms. Problems faced by the students are passive listening, low vocabulary knowledge, a small amount of time allocated for listening by the teachers, unplanned lessons, stress, and low achievement of scores. While teaching listening skills, students also encountered learners' lack of ideas to comprehend the text, limited vocabulary, grammar, and phonology of the language. These findings are based on the data collected from four selected non-elite private secondary schools; hence generalizability of the findings is limited. Further research can be conducted in this area with larger sample sizes.

Recommendations

Based on data interpretation and conclusions of the study, the following recommendation was made. Teachers should use audio-visual aids for the development of listening skills. They should emphasize proper pronunciation, use of grammar and phonetics during the listening speaking process. Teachers should use dialogues, conversations, and discussions in English as activities in the class. Yusoff et al. (2022) state that teaching material should be according to students' proficiency,

which can be measured through the English Vocabulary Profile Score Card (EVP). Instead of random vocabulary, the target vocabulary should be academic. Curriculum designers and pedagogical developers should incorporate technology-assisted material in textbooks (Gurmani, 2022).

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