

DEALING WITH THE FACTORS INFLUENCING THE LISTENING PROCESS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Abstract: Listening comprehension is widely considered one of the most complex and underexplored skills in foreign language teaching and learning, yet it is the skill upon which learners most heavily depend for acquiring new language in naturalistic and instructed settings alike. This article examines the principal factors that influence the listening process in foreign language education, organizing them into three broad categories: listener-internal factors such as prior linguistic knowledge, working memory capacity, and affective variables including anxiety and motivation; text-related factors such as speech rate, acoustic clarity, lexical density, and discourse organization; and contextual factors such as the learning environment, instructional design, and the quality of teacher mediation. Drawing on theoretical models of listening comprehension including those proposed by Anderson, Vandergrift, and Field, as well as empirical research conducted in EFL classrooms across Central Asia and beyond, the article argues that effective listening instruction must address all three categories of factors simultaneously, and that teachers who understand the multidimensional nature of listening difficulty are better equipped to design tasks, select materials, and provide feedback that supports genuine comprehension development. Practical implications for EFL instructors in Uzbekistan are discussed throughout.

Keywords: listening comprehension, foreign language learning, factors influencing listening, EFL, listening anxiety, speech rate, bottom-up processing, top-down processing, Uzbekistan, listening instruction.

Annotatsiya: Tinglab tushunish xorijiy tilni o'qitish va o'rganishda eng murakkab va yetarli darajada o'rganilmagan ko'nikmalardan biri sifatida tan olinadi, shu bilan birga, u o'rganuvchilar tabiiy va o'quv sharoitlarida yangi tilda yangi materialni o'zlashtirishda eng ko'p tayanadigan ko'nikmalar qatoriga kiradi. Ushbu maqola xorijiy til ta'limida tinglab tushunish jarayoniga ta'sir etuvchi asosiy omillarni uchta keng toifaga bo'lib o'rganadi: oldingi lingvistik bilim, ishchi xotira salohiyati va xavotir hamda motivatsiya kabi affektiv o'zgaruvchilarni o'z ichiga olgan tinglovchining ichki omillari; nutq sur'ati, akustik aniqlik, leksik zichlik va diskurs tashkilotini o'z ichiga olgan matn bilan bog'liq omillar; va o'quv muhiti, ta'lim dizayni va o'qituvchi vositachiligining sifatini o'z ichiga olgan kontekstual omillar. Tinglab tushunishning nazariy modellari va Markaziy Osiyo va undan tashqaridagi EFL sinflarida olib borilgan empirik tadqiqotlarga asoslanib, maqola samarali tinglab o'qitish uchta toifadagi omillarni bir vaqtning o'zida ko'rib chiqishi kerak, degan xulosaga keladi.

Kalit so'zlar: tinglab tushunish, xorijiy tilni o'rganish, tinglab tushunishga ta'sir etuvchi omillar, EFL, tinglab tushunish xavotiri, nutq sur'ati, pastdan yuqoriga qayta ishlash, yuqoridan pastga qayta ishlash, O'zbekiston, tinglab o'qitish.

Аннотация: Понимание на слух считается одним из наиболее сложных и недостаточно изученных навыков в обучении иностранным языкам, однако именно на него учащиеся в наибольшей мере опираются при освоении нового языкового материала как в естественных, так и в учебных условиях. В данной

статье рассматриваются основные факторы, влияющие на процесс аудирования в обучении иностранным языкам, систематизированные по трём широким категориям: внутренние факторы слушающего — предшествующие лингвистические знания, объём рабочей памяти, аффективные переменные (тревожность и мотивация); текстовые факторы — темп речи, акустическая чёткость, лексическая плотность, дискурсивная организация; контекстуальные факторы — образовательная среда, дидактическое проектирование и качество педагогического сопровождения. Опираясь на теоретические модели аудирования Андерсона, Вандергрифта и Филда, а также эмпирические исследования в EFL-классах Центральной Азии и других регионов, в статье обосновывается необходимость одновременного учёта всех трёх групп факторов при организации обучения аудированию.

Ключевые слова: понимание на слух, обучение иностранному языку, факторы влияния на аудирование, EFL, тревожность при аудировании, темп речи, восходящая и нисходящая обработка, Узбекистан, обучение аудированию.

Introduction

Among the four productive and receptive skills that constitute communicative language competence, listening has long occupied a paradoxical position in foreign language pedagogy. It is simultaneously the skill most frequently deployed in real-world communication, the skill through which learners receive the greatest quantity of comprehensible input, and the skill that has historically received the least systematic attention in formal language instruction. While reading, writing, and speaking each have well-established pedagogical traditions supported by decades of dedicated research, listening instruction has often been reduced to a testing activity: learners are played a recording, asked comprehension questions, and given a score, without receiving explicit guidance in the strategies and knowledge they need to comprehend speech more effectively. This treatment reflects a widespread but mistaken assumption that listening is a passive, automatic process that improves naturally with general language proficiency and requires no specific instructional attention [9].

Contemporary research in applied linguistics and cognitive psychology has comprehensively refuted this assumption. Listening comprehension is now understood to be a highly active, constructive process that places substantial demands on the listener's phonological, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic knowledge, as well as on domain-general cognitive resources including working memory, attention allocation, and inference generation [3]. When any of these resources is insufficient, or when the incoming speech stream places demands that exceed the listener's processing capacity, comprehension breaks down in ways that are often invisible to the teacher and deeply frustrating to the learner. Understanding the specific factors that contribute to this breakdown — and designing instruction that addresses them directly — is therefore a central challenge for foreign language educators at every level.

The importance of this challenge is amplified in the Uzbek EFL context by several distinctive features of the local educational environment. English language instruction in Uzbekistan has historically prioritized reading and grammar, leaving many learners with significant deficits in their ability to process connected speech in real time. The acoustic properties of English — including its stress-timed rhythm, reduced vowels, consonant clusters, and pervasive linking and assimilation — differ markedly from those of Uzbek and Russian, the two languages most frequently used by

Uzbek EFL learners, creating specific phonological processing challenges that are not adequately addressed by general vocabulary and grammar instruction [13]. Furthermore, the dominance of non-native English accents in recorded materials used in Uzbek classrooms means that learners often have limited exposure to the full range of Englishes they will encounter in academic, professional, and international communicative contexts.

This article addresses these challenges by providing a systematic account of the principal factors that influence the listening process in foreign language learning, organized around a tripartite framework that distinguishes listener-internal factors, text-related factors, and contextual factors. For each category, the article reviews relevant theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, considers the implications for EFL instruction in higher education, and identifies practical strategies that teachers can use to address the specific difficulties that each category of factors creates. The goal is not to provide an exhaustive review of the listening comprehension literature but to offer a theoretically coherent and practically oriented analysis that can inform evidence-based listening instruction in Uzbek and similar EFL contexts.

Main Part

The first and perhaps most fundamental category of factors influencing the listening process consists of variables internal to the listener. Chief among these is prior linguistic knowledge, which encompasses phonological awareness, lexical breadth and depth, grammatical competence, and pragmatic knowledge of the conventions governing speech in the target language. Research by Vandergrift [9, 3] and Field [3] consistently demonstrates that the quality of a learner's phonological representation — their mental model of what English words sound like in connected speech — is a strong predictor of listening comprehension performance, independent of vocabulary size and grammatical knowledge. Learners who have developed accurate phonological representations of high-frequency words are better able to segment the continuous speech stream into recognizable units, a process known as lexical segmentation, which is a prerequisite for all higher-level comprehension processing.

Working memory capacity is a second listener-internal factor that has attracted substantial research attention. Working memory — the cognitive system responsible for temporarily holding and manipulating information while it is being processed — is critical to listening comprehension because spoken language is transient: unlike written text, which can be re-read, speech unfolds in real time and is immediately replaced by new incoming information. Learners with lower working memory capacity are less able to hold earlier portions of an utterance in mind while processing later portions, making it more difficult to integrate information across sentence and discourse boundaries [5]. This challenge is compounded in foreign language listening by the additional cognitive demands of decoding unfamiliar phonological and lexical items, which compete for the same limited working memory resources that native speakers deploy for higher-level comprehension processes.

Affective variables, particularly listening anxiety and motivation, constitute a third category of listener-internal factors with well-documented effects on comprehension performance. Listening anxiety — defined by Elkhafaifi [2] as the specific apprehension associated with understanding and being evaluated on spoken foreign language input — is consistently reported as one of the most prevalent and debilitating forms of foreign language anxiety. Anxious listeners allocate attentional resources to monitoring and evaluating their own performance rather than to processing the content of the message, a process that directly degrades comprehension. Studies conducted in EFL contexts in Central Asia and the broader post-Soviet region suggest that listening anxiety is

particularly prevalent among learners educated in teacher-centered instructional traditions where errors are publicly corrected and academic performance is closely tied to evaluative outcomes, conditions that characterize many Uzbek university EFL classrooms [13].

The second major category of factors influencing listening comprehension concerns properties of the spoken text itself. Speech rate — the speed at which a speaker delivers spoken language, typically measured in syllables per second or words per minute — has been identified in numerous studies as one of the most powerful text-related determinants of listening comprehension difficulty. Griffiths [4] found that EFL learners comprehended significantly less of a spoken text when it was delivered at native speaker rates compared to moderately reduced rates, and that the relationship between speech rate and comprehension was mediated by learners' proficiency level: advanced learners showed smaller decrements at fast rates than intermediate learners, suggesting that increased proficiency partially compensates for the processing demands imposed by rapid delivery. The practical implication for EFL instruction is that teachers should be cautious about using authentic native-speaker recordings with lower-proficiency learners without providing preparatory activities that build the phonological and lexical knowledge necessary to process connected speech at natural rates.

Acoustic clarity and recording quality represent a related set of text-level factors that receive insufficient attention in listening pedagogy. Research by Rubin [8] demonstrates that background noise, poor microphone quality, and unfamiliar accents significantly increase the cognitive demands of foreign language listening by degrading the acoustic signal available for phonological processing. In EFL classrooms equipped with outdated audio equipment or poor acoustics, these factors can substantially reduce learners' comprehension even of materials that would be manageable under better listening conditions. Lexical density — the proportion of content words to total words in a spoken text — is a further textual variable that influences comprehension difficulty: texts with high lexical density, such as academic lectures and news broadcasts, impose greater demands on listeners' vocabulary knowledge and information integration capacities than conversational texts with lower lexical density [1].

Discourse organization — the way in which ideas are structured, signaled, and connected across a spoken text — is a third text-level factor with important implications for listening instruction. Research in discourse analysis and applied linguistics has established that spoken texts vary considerably in the explicitness with which they signal their organizational structure through discourse markers, intonational cues, and rhetorical framing [7]. Listeners who are familiar with the discourse conventions of a particular text type — academic lectures, news reports, informal conversations, professional presentations — are better equipped to use top-down processing strategies to predict, organize, and interpret incoming information. EFL learners who lack this genre knowledge are more dependent on bottom-up processing of individual words and phrases, a strategy that is both more cognitively demanding and more vulnerable to disruption by unfamiliar vocabulary or fast speech rates.

The third category of factors influencing the listening process concerns the instructional and environmental context in which listening takes place. The design of listening tasks is perhaps the most directly controllable contextual variable available to EFL teachers, and research consistently demonstrates that task design has a substantial impact on comprehension performance and strategy use. Buck [1] argues that while-listening tasks — activities that learners complete during rather than after listening — promote more active and strategic engagement with the spoken text by giving listeners a specific comprehension goal to pursue. Pre-listening activities that activate

relevant background knowledge, introduce key vocabulary, and orient learners to the topic and structure of the text have also been shown to improve comprehension significantly, particularly for lower-proficiency learners who are more dependent on top-down knowledge to compensate for gaps in their bottom-up decoding ability.

The quality of teacher mediation is a contextual factor that fundamentally shapes the listening experience. Teachers who model effective listening strategies — including predicting, monitoring comprehension, identifying key information, and tolerating ambiguity — provide learners with metacognitive tools that they can deploy independently in future listening encounters. Vandergrift and Goh [10] advocate for a metacognitive approach to listening instruction in which teachers scaffold learners' awareness of their own listening processes through structured reflection, self-assessment, and collaborative discussion of comprehension difficulties. This approach, which has been validated in EFL contexts across multiple cultural settings, represents a significant departure from the traditional testing model of listening instruction and requires teachers to reconceptualize their role from assessors of comprehension outcomes to coaches of comprehension processes.

The availability and quality of target language input outside the classroom constitutes a final contextual factor that deserves attention, particularly in EFL settings like Uzbekistan where learners have limited naturalistic exposure to English speech. Research on extensive listening — the regular, voluntary engagement with large quantities of comprehensible spoken English through podcasts, films, audiobooks, and online video — suggests that sustained informal input can complement formal listening instruction by building phonological fluency, expanding vocabulary, and familiarizing learners with the full range of accents, registers, and discourse styles they will encounter in authentic English use [6]. Encouraging and supporting extensive listening habits through guided recommendations, accessible digital resources, and structured reflection activities may be one of the most cost-effective strategies available to EFL educators in resource-constrained environments.

Conclusion

This article has examined the principal factors influencing the listening process in foreign language teaching and learning, organizing them into three interconnected categories: listener-internal factors including prior linguistic knowledge, working memory capacity, and affective variables; text-related factors including speech rate, acoustic clarity, lexical density, and discourse organization; and contextual factors including instructional design, teacher mediation, and access to target language input. The analysis demonstrates that listening comprehension difficulty is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be adequately addressed by any single instructional strategy, and that effective listening pedagogy requires teachers to simultaneously attend to learners' cognitive and affective resources, the properties of the texts they select, and the design of the tasks and environments in which listening takes place.

For EFL educators in Uzbekistan, these findings underscore the importance of moving beyond the test-then-check model of listening instruction toward a more process-oriented, strategy-focused approach that explicitly addresses the specific phonological, lexical, and metacognitive challenges that Uzbek learners face in processing English speech. Teachers should select materials that are appropriately challenging for their learners' proficiency levels, design pre-, while-, and post-listening activities that build the background knowledge and strategic awareness necessary for successful comprehension, and create classroom environments in which listening anxiety is reduced through supportive, low-stakes practice opportunities. Future research should investigate the specific listening difficulties most prevalent among Uzbek EFL learners, the effectiveness of

metacognitive listening instruction in post-Soviet educational contexts, and the role of extensive listening in vocabulary and phonological development among university EFL students.

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