



The Listening Skill: Neglected, Tested, and Rarely Taught: The Realities of Teaching Listening in the Libyan Context

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Abstract

Listening is an important language learning skill and communication depends solely on its mastery along with the other skills. Yet, its importance suffered from neglect in the field of language acquisition resulting in teaching it as a passive skill; one that, somehow, would improve automatically. The Libyan context of teaching EFL has not been exceptional as listening has been overlooked and seen as a passive skill too. This, together with teachers' use of outdated teaching methods, may have been counterproductive in listening teaching, learning and comprehension. This article aims at addressing these issues through exploring the nature of listening and its features, its importance as a skill in developing other skills and in language learning, and its processes and strategies that can improve listening teaching and comprehension in Libya. In addition, it intends to report some suggestions for Libyan policymakers, teachers and educational institutes with respect to listening improvement.

Keywords: *listening, teaching, learning, comprehension*

Introduction

Listening plays a crucial role in language learning and/or language acquisition. Regardless of whether it is a first, second or even a foreign language, listening contributes to learning it being one of the forms of input learners receive during learning languages. According to Rost (1994 in Nunan and Miller, 1995), listening is an important input supplier whose proper interpretation determines whether or not learning succeeds. Etman and Zaida,(2009) regard listening as the primary vehicle that is responsible for developing other language skills because it is the skill that learners initially use to contact the target language. It is, therefore, not only a vital skill in its own right, but also for the development of other skills. Scholars and researchers such as (e.g., Brown, 2007; Vandergrift, 2007; Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011) confirm this by stating that listening has a great effect on all other language skills and plays an indispensable role in developing language competency at all levels. Also, (Bozorgian, 2012; Cheung, 2010& Morley, 1984) stress the same belief that listening has a great influence on language learning that makes it the most important skill with regard to overall language proficiency. This means that the success or

failure of language acquisition and learning can heavily rely on listening and listening comprehension. It is our responsibility, then, as teachers, researchers and educators to pay great academic attention to this influential skill so that we can avoid delays, shortages, prolonged learning, or failure in the language learning process.

These negative consequences of neglecting the importance of listening and teaching it have been noticed in the Libyan context of learning languages, namely English. Teachers, for instance, are said to assume that listening improves automatically without being explicitly taught to learners. The problem, here, in the Libyan case of teaching listening seems to be far more serious than merely this assumption. It might be in viewing it as a passive skill. Vandergrift (2004) and Osada (2004) state that listening has often been seen as a passive skill, which would develop on its own when the hearer receives sufficient input. This could be the attitude or the belief Libyan teachers hold or have held towards listening teaching and comprehension which tends to lead to the deterioration of the other skills and, therefore, learning in general. Another problem might be the methods adopted for teaching this crucial receptive skill for Libyan teachers have been reported to overuse the GTM (Grammar Translation Method) in their classrooms meaning that the focus has been directed towards grammar, vocabulary, and writing with little or no attention to listening or to teaching it. Because of such reasons, this literature review aims to show the importance of listening, teaching listening and comprehension in the development or mastery of language. Also, it aims to explore strategies and processes that can be alternative and effective in the Libyan context of teaching EFL (English as a Foreign Language).

Literature review

Definition and characteristics of listening and listening input

Listening is not hearing. Hearing is one of the five senses human beings are born with; it is an ability for listening. On the other hand, listening is a skill that is somewhat similar to other talents such as drawing and singing in that they all seem to require improvement by practice. They demand activities, exercise, and special techniques to become effective. There is a difference between the following sentences: I heard some noise and I listen to music. The first, perhaps, is received effortlessly while the second seems to urge the listener to pay close attention to the lyrics in order to interpret, analyze and taste a song. This aligns with Barthes [Barthes 1985 (1976) in Vargas, 2025, p. 238) who points out "Listening, then, involves attention and intention, in contrast with the more automated processes of hearing". Christopher (2023, p.1) defines hearing as "the sense that obtains information about the world using the pressure fluctuations in the air that are produced by vibrating objects".

This distinction between hearing and listening may be true for a native speaker of English or native speakers of languages. However, for learners of English as a second

or as a foreign language, once sound is perceived, listening is applied regardless of the degree of difficulty and what the activity input is. Lynch and Mendelsohn (2002) argue that native speakers tend to understand listening without effort being made and that they might listen consciously only when faced with obstacles in the listening input. This, they argue, is similar to listening comprehension in second or foreign language learning meaning that it is a conscious process. Listening is defined by Musayeva, Nozima, et al. (2025, p. 483) as "a complex process of receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding to both verbal and nonverbal messages". O'Malley, Chamot, & Kupper (1989,p.19) define it as the process that is actively and consciously conducted by learners for the construction of "meaning" by the use of "cues from contextual information and from existing knowledge," depending on a number of strategies to "fulfill the task requirements". Worthington et.al (2024) lists more than nine definitions whose authors unanimously state that listening includes processes related to behavior, effectiveness, and cognition and agree on its complexity.

This complexity, perhaps, stems from the characteristics of this receptive skill and its input compared to, for example, reading. On the one hand, readers have the advantage of visualizing the text and are able, when confusion occurs, to stop and repeat the process so that they can comprehend (Osada, 2004). They can also recognize the beginning and ending of sentences thanks to punctuation and they seem to have authority over the reading time in that they can decrease or increase the speed of reading when required (Osada, 2004; Nurphami,2015). On the other hand, listening is mentally transforming sound texts into meaning involving an invisible variety of colloquially constructed grammatical structure and vocabulary which appear in sentences whose phrases are short and boundaries are only recognized via phonology (Osada, 2004; Vandergrift, 2007 in Walker, 2014). Unlike reading, listening must be accompanied by immediate comprehension by listeners as they might not have the privilege of listening again. This is because of the nature of listening being encoded in "real-time" meaning that it is a "one-shot" opportunity whose pace is in the hands of the speaker and whose text cannot be recovered unless by asking the speaker (Osada, 2004; Walker, 2014; Lynch and Mendelsohn, 2002).

Furthermore, the phonological processes produced when speech is articulated rapidly, such as emission, assimilation, juncture, intrusion, and use of weak and strong forms and so forth can preclude listening comprehension and prevent it (Osada, 2004, Walker, 2014, Lynch and Mendelsohn, 2002). These processes, again, are features of spoken not written language; therefore, it is a necessity for listeners to be aware of the time and the reason they occur for the sake of comprehending a listening text.

Similarly, culture, too, can contribute to the complexity of listening as there are historical inferences, traditional aspects, symbolic, and idiomatic expressions and so forth which force translators, let alone listeners, to search languages to pinpoint their

meanings and equivalents (Walker, 2014; Alkateb, 2016; Quifan et al., 2025). This process requires effort and time which are not available in the case of listening.

It is evident, then, that the complexity of listening and listening input springs from these characteristics which should exist as tools in listeners' experience and prior knowledge for the comprehension of the listening text. This complexity, again, is also evidence for the importance of this skill in second or a foreign language learning and teaching as it is associated with the development of the other skills as well. Nonetheless, it was once neglected and considered passive which may have made it demanding both to learn and to teach. The same is believed to be true in Libya where the significance of this skill was, maybe still is, overlooked and marginalized resulting in poor or prolonged improvement of all other language skills.

The significance of listening

Understanding listening is a key factor for successful teaching, learning, and communication in a second or a foreign language. It is somewhat similar to understanding concepts. Listening is characterized by being invisible, temporary, instant, phonological, rapid, uncontrollable and so forth. It is the skill by which learners are first introduced to foreign languages (Etman and Zaida, 2009), and it is almost the most used among the four skills. Morley (1999) states that listening is utilized more frequently than other skills in language learning let alone daily life. This suggests that listening is the skill that contributes to acquiring a great deal of our knowledge. In fact, eighty per cent of our learned knowledge is acquired through listening (Swaine, Friehe, & Harrington, 2004, in Altun, 2023). Statistically, 40-50% of communication time is spent on listening, speaking, 25-30%, reading 11-16%, and writing about 9 % (Mendelsohn, 1994). This acknowledges and confirms the significance of listening, listening teaching and learning and comprehension, and cements its role as a critical input medium.

Nevertheless, this importance of listening was neglected for decades and did not attract sufficient attention until the 70s. At the beginning of the 20th century in the United States of America, listening was only a tool for imitation and repetition in the Audiolingual Approach (Osada, 2004), and in the 40s, 50s, and 60s, in Britain, in the Situational Approach, it had a similar function (Morley, 2001 in Osada, 2004). The 70s, however, witnessed the shift in the view of listening becoming a medium with an essential impact on language learning. Osada (2004, p.55) points out that "the status of listening began to change from being incidental and peripheral to a status of central importance" gaining a role in teaching and learning along with the other skills. Morley (1984) states that the importance of this medium in language learning increased qualitatively and quantitatively in the pedagogical and theoretical aspects of language learning in the 70s. From neglected to important and from passive to active, listening reformed the criterion of learning and acquiring language as being an influential input for its improvement (Karrar et al., (2026). This shift continued, although listening did not receive as much research as reading, writing and speaking

which is acceptable as listening, as mentioned above, only began to be explored late compared to other skills (Vandergrift, 2007). In the 80s, listening flourished and investigations and research about its criticality in language learning boosted due to Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis and Asher's Total Physical Response (Nurpahmi, 2015; Nunan and Miller, 1995; Patani, 2022). This progress expanded throughout the 90s to include the effect listening had on the improvement of other language skills. Rost (1994 in Nurpahmi, 2015) argues that listening is the most influential among the rest of the skills, especially for beginners. Also, listening teaching, during the 90s, witnessed a dramatic increase and its function as an effective language acquisition vehicle became a field of observation and research (Osada, 2004).

Now, as a result of this long time spent on exploring listening, there are listening comprehension processes, listening types, and strategies. These can be used to facilitate comprehension and enhance listening teaching, each at a certain stage in the lesson, for a different purpose, and for a different function. Teachers, therefore, should know which, how, when, and why they are used.

Listening comprehension processes

Listening comprehension occurs through intentional stages beginning with reception, interpretation and construction of meaning from the input by means of contextual, linguistic and experiential clues involving different cognitive processes. Listeners apply such processes in an instantaneous and simultaneous manner to interpret a given auditory content (Osada, 2004). They employ top-down and bottom-up processes dealing with different components of the input. According to Nunan and Miller (1995, p.52), *bottom-up* processing is sequentially processing of listening beginning with small meaning-bearing segments of language which are connected to one another to ultimately form "complete meaningful texts". It is, then, a linear accumulative process where small phonetic, lexical, syntactic, and grammatical items in the input are tied to each other by the listeners to create large interpretive meaningful utterances and texts.

Top-down processing, on the other hand, is reliant on listeners' prior knowledge. This is the knowledge drawn from learners' previous experience that is used to interpret and understand the message. Meaning making in this process stems from the learners' contextual and situational knowledge of the input being heard such as the topic, the speaker, and even the genre of the input (Lynch and Mendelsohn, 2002; Nunan and Miller, 1995). This listening processing is based on schema theory in that comprehension occurs through summoning past learned experience stored in memory to make sense of the auditory input. Nurpahmi (2015) defines it as an "abstract, generalized mental representation of our experience that is available to help us understand new experience." Schema operates through the input and guides the construction of comprehension by comparing the information received to prior knowledge and if they match, comprehension occurs; if they do not, listeners then

modify their schema by including the new information (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Hmouma, 2024). Thus, top-down listening processing is conditioned by and dependent on schemata (plural of schema) as a key element for its success in comprehending the content. It is also somewhat secondary to bottom-up and opposite to it. According to Lynch and Mendelsohn (2002), bottom-up is inevitable as it builds up comprehension from linking small units of language, whereas top-down constructs meaning from meaningful complete utterances which suggests that bottom-up serves as a facilitator for top-down. This suggests that top-down listening processing relies on bottom-up. However, both are significant to comprehension and both are simultaneously applied by learners.

In addition to these cognitive processes, listeners use metacognitive ones to deduce meaning and enhance listening learning. Flavell (1999) and Veeman, et al. (2006), state that metacognition was originally referred to as the knowledge about and regulation of one's cognitive activities in the learning processes. In addition, Wenden (1991), as cited by Vandergrift (2002), describes multiple kinds of metacognitive knowledge: personal knowledge, strategic knowledge, and task knowledge. She stated that personal knowledge includes knowledge of cognitive and affective factors that facilitate learning and what learners know about themselves as learners. Task knowledge includes knowledge of the purpose and nature of the task, its demand on the learner, and when deliberate effort is required. Strategic knowledge includes knowledge about effective strategies for particular tasks as well as knowledge about how best to approach language learning. Moreover, as cited by Ishler (2010), Macaro (2006) stated that a learning strategy is a conscious mental activity or action, which has been initiated by a goal. Thus, a learning strategy is measured according to learning situation. The metacognitive strategies are used to coordinate multiple tactics to achieve specific learning tasks. In doing so, students are mindful of their use and understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. As an example of these, Ishler (2010) includes planning and monitoring learning as metacognitive strategies. They also include planning for learning, thinking about the learning process as it takes place, monitoring one's production or comprehension, and evaluating learning after an activity is completed. Such strategies are considered more effective for the betterment of listening comprehension as they result from listeners' own conscious noticing and observation of learning. Anderson (2005 in Walker, 2014) argues that acquiring languages can accelerate when learners are aware of conducting these metacognitive strategies for regulating learning. Altun (2023, p.59) mentions, "the use of this strategy enables learners to learn faster and apply the knowledge easily"

Thus, these strategies play a key role in transforming cognitive processes' interpretation of meaning into successful language learning. Nevertheless, the benefits of other processes are equally important and they, cognitive and metacognitive, go hand in hand towards the same goal. Each one has a distinctive role in the process of listening comprehension. This role is for teachers to recognize, acquire and teach to

learners as it has been argued that trained learners tend to have better opportunities for improvement than untrained ones. This applies to Libyan teachers too who are reported to rely heavily on outdated teaching methods. Pathan et. al (2026) mention, as a result of their study, that GTM is overused by Libyan teachers who have also been found to lack professional teaching training. This necessitates the need for a shift in the view of listening and listening teaching in the Libyan context towards more communicative teaching approaches which assign essential importance to listening as an influential input in language teaching and learning and which deploy all the aforementioned strategies and processes.

These processes and strategies have been proven effective in teaching listening through different studies, such as Al-qaraghooly & Al-bermani (2010) who conducted a study to examine the effectiveness of **bottom-up and top-down** processing on developing EFL learners' listening comprehension besides developing EFL college students' skills in listening comprehension. The results of the study suggest that because both bottom-up and top-down listening strategies hold great importance in listening proficiency, it seems necessary to use them both in the process of teaching. Goh & Taib (2006) conducted a small-scale study aiming to explore the benefits of **metacognitive** training in listening. The key finding was that students reported an increase in their metacognitive knowledge indicating that metacognitive instructions contribute to students' improvement in some listening test scores.

Recommendations

According to the studies mentioned above and their results which can be considered successful and promising in teaching, learning and, consequently, improving listening skills, it is suggested that policymakers should reconsider the present strategies of teaching and learning listening as, indeed, they are outdated and shown to be somewhat ineffective. This is because listening is introduced as a passive skill in these strategies where it is thought to develop automatically without any instructions. In addition, it is necessary for teachers, particularly Libyans, to become aware of more effective techniques for teaching this significant skill. These can be cognitive, metacognitive and listening strategies and so forth which have been proven to be, to some extent, productive in expanding students' listening capacity leading to its improvement. Another suggestion is that teachers, in their turn, should introduce these strategies to their students teaching them their types, differences, uses, and applications in the classroom in order to obtain the desired results. To achieve this, teachers should be adequately trained in teaching EFL by adopting methods and approaches that concentrate on listening as a vital input for language learning. This is policymakers' responsibility because their role is to provide instructors with the appropriate training, materials, and qualified EFL trainers to guarantee the success of this significant shift in listening teaching and in language learning in general.

Conclusion

In conclusion, listening is a crucial input provider in the classroom and in daily life. It is the most used skill according to statistics. 40-50% of communication time is spent on listening. It plays a vital role in developing other language skills and language learning and acquisition as a whole. However, it is a complex process whose function in learning languages suffered from long neglect and misunderstanding. It was long thought of and taught as a passive skill that incidentally would develop on its own until the 70s. Nonetheless, the 80s witnessed the theoretical change regarding listening with Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Asher's Total Physical Response. Listening, then, fell under a great deal of investigation and scrutiny which generated theoretical and pedagogical frameworks for listening teaching and comprehension. Still, listening teaching does not necessarily lead to comprehension. It can be hindered by unqualified teachers and by the use of outdated teaching principles where listening may not lead to comprehension and teaching may not lead to learning. This is the case in Libya's EFL teaching. Teachers were found to rely almost entirely on GMT which does not assign much importance to listening and were found lacking training. Again, it is the responsibility of policymakers, scholars and researchers to adopt the shift and move beyond these old-fashioned methods and practices. It is the responsibility of the Libyan Ministry of Education to provide teachers with sufficient professional training, materials and professional trainers. It is our responsibility to pay attention to teaching listening rather than assuming we are teaching it when we are only testing it.

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