

Looking through the Lens of Locus of Control: Investigating the Problems in Listening Comprehension

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Abstract: For students learning English as a foreign language (EFL), listening comprehension plays a crucial role. It is common that many students struggle with listening comprehension during class listening activities. The present study aims to achieve several objectives: firstly, it seeks to elucidate the prevalent challenges in listening comprehension encountered by Iranian (EFL) learners. Secondly, it aims to explore the attitudes of learners towards listening comprehension across different tertiary levels. Thirdly, the study intends to determine Iranian EFL learners' locus of attribution concerning the sources of these difficulties. Finally, the research endeavors to enhance the generalizability of its findings through additional investigation in this field. The respondents of this study were B.A. and M.A. EFL students in IAU, South Tehran Branch in 2024. This study used a questionnaire and a two-question interview adopted by the researcher's advisor as data collection instruments. The questionnaire contained six factors, namely process, input, listener, task, affect, and context and consisted of 40 items. The results show that the context factor ($M = 3.05$), followed by the input factor ($M = 2.84$), are the main factors. The findings can have implications for EFL learners and teachers to tackle the challenges related to listening.

Keywords: Attitudes, EFL learners, listening Comprehension Difficulties, Locus of Attribution.

I. Introduction

In many Iranian schools, the predominant focus lies on teaching language structure and vocabulary. This pedagogical approach reflects a traditional perspective wherein language is regarded primarily as an academic pursuit rather than a tool for practical communication [1]. Although fundamental skills, namely listening comprehension in learning a second language are required, they are almost ignored in the Iranian pedagogical system.[2] asserted that "listening comprehension delivers the right conditions for language achievement and development of other language skills" (p.138). Therefore, listening is critical and essential not only as a receptive language skill but also as a tool required for the development of spoken language ability. Despite the rapidly growing body of research on the various aspects of L2 listening, few studies have focused on identifying listening problems among the foreign language learners (e.g. [3]; [4]). A review of previous literature confirmed the presence of listening comprehension difficulties among learners, with a focus on personal, physical, and linguistic factors. However, limitations in previous studies, such as single-gender participant samples, specific English proficiency levels, and small sample sizes, suggest the need for further research.

Furthermore, there exists a notable lack of evidence regarding EFL learners' attitudes toward listening comprehension, particularly in terms of delineating the specific sources of their challenges. Therefore, this study goes one step further by attempting to investigate listening problems in relation to finding the sources of these problems based on Locus of Control (LOC), which was initially introduced by [5] in her social learning. It refers

to the extent to which a person believes they are accountable for the results of their actions. Rotter drew upon the empirical law of effect, which postulates that individuals are motivated to avoid unpleasant stimuli and seek out rewarding ones. It is supposed that finding the pertinent sources in contribution to listening comprehension can be noteworthy step in order to fade EFL learners' problems in listening comprehension classes.

II. Review of the Related Literature

Numerous studies have examined aspects of listening such as ([6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11], (2024) [12], [13], [14], [15], and [16]). Regarding this gap in the research, the locus of control has received relatively little attention from researchers of the field. Rotter described LOC as a psychological concept and divided into two categories: internal and external. This research highlights the importance of LOC in the role it plays in the challenges they face in listening comprehension of EFL learners to find out the extent they attribute the challenges to the internal or external locus of control.

The relationship between LOC and EFL university students' reading and writing development was investigated by [17]. In a separate study, [18] investigated the connection between EFL learners' reading proficiency and LOC. Similarly, [19] explored the link between Iraqi EFL students' writing proficiency and their internal and external LOC orientations. [20] investigated how male Emirati students learn within the context of locus of control. In another study, [21] investigated the relationship between LOC and English language competency in an online environment. [22] explored attributions made by students while reflecting on their success and failure in learning English as a second language (ESL).

Despite the increasing volume of research on various aspects of second language (L2) listening, there remains a dearth of studies focused on identifying listening barriers among EFL learners in Iran, their attitude toward this skill, as well as their locus of attribution regarding the sources of these barriers.

Thus, this study endeavors to bridge these gaps by delving into the intricacies of listening comprehension difficulties among Iranian EFL learners, encompassing both undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts. Moreover, it seeks to elucidate their attitudes towards this critical skill, offering a more comprehensive understanding of their learning experiences. Furthermore, the study aims to discern the locus of attribution regarding these challenges among Iranian EFL learners, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the underlying factors influencing their learning processes. By undertaking additional investigation in this domain, the study ultimately endeavors to enhance the applicability and robustness of its findings within the broader educational context. The current study addresses the following research question:

Q1- what are the common difficulties faced by Iranian EFL learners in listening comprehension?

Q2. What are the Iranian EFL learners' attitudes about the difficulties they face in their listening comprehension?

Q3. What is Iranian EFL learners' locus of attribution of the sources of difficulties they face in the listening comprehension?

Q4. Is there any significant difference between undergraduate and postgraduate EFL learners' attitudes about the difficulty they face in their listening comprehension?

III. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Seventy EFL learners participated in the current study comprising 55 female and 15 male learners. Demographic information about participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Educational level of participants		BA	MA	Total
Gender	Female			55
	Male			15
Total		33	37	70
Percent		47.14	52.86	100
Age Range		20-	25-	
		26	40	
Mean Age		23	32.5	

As shown in Table 1, 33 participants were studying at BA level (47.14%) and 37 (52.86%) at MA level. The participants' ages ranged between 20 and 42. They were assured of the confidentiality of their personal information and were informed that their involvement was solely for research purposes.

3.2 Instrumentation

3.2.1 Questionnaire

Primarily, to investigate the participants' difficulties with listening comprehension, a Likert scale questionnaire was used. The Questionnaire of Beliefs on English Language Listening Comprehension Problems (Q-BELLP) was specifically developed to identify and differentiate listening comprehension challenges among Iranian EFL learners [23]. Consisting of forty items, the questionnaire encompassed six distinct subscales including process, input, listener, task, affect, and context. Each item in the Likert-scale questionnaire offered respondents a range of choices, including "never", "seldom", "sometimes", "usually", and "always"; each assigned a corresponding value from 1 to 5, respectively to allow the participants to express their feelings.

3.2.2 Interview

A semi-structured interview approach was employed to inquire about the attitudes of learners at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Also, semi-structured interview was employed to ask participants to describe sources of difficulties with listening comprehension task. The interview questions were designed by the researchers and validated by two experienced EFL instructors.

IV. Results

4.1 Difficulties with Listening Comprehension Skill

This section aims to find the answer of first question relating to common difficulties Iranian EFL learners experience with listening comprehension. In order to do so, the participants' responses to each Likert scale item were fed into SPSS to allow for calculations. Values were assigned to each degree in the Likert scale to facilitate calculations and further interpretations being 1 for never, 2 for seldom, 3 for sometimes, 4 for usually, and 5 for

always to express their feelings about each item's statement. Mean score of the assigned values were calculated to show results obtained from the participants.

Table 2: Difficulties with Listening Comprehension

Areas	No.	Questions	Mean
Problems	1	Before listening, it is difficult for me to predict from the visuals what I will hear	2.53
	2	It is difficult for me to relate what I hear with something from an earlier part of the listening text	2.41
	3	While listening, I have problems making meaningful personal associations with the new information.	2.54
	4	During listening, I have difficulty checking whether I correctly understand the meaning of the whole chunks of the listening text.	2.44
	5	I have difficulty with finding out what the main purpose of the listening task I am going to do is.	2.11
	6	When I listen to texts in English, I experience difficulty with listening for the main idea of the text	2.34
	7	I find it challenging to focus on the text when I have trouble comprehension.	2.90
	8	While listening, I find it difficult to guess the meaning of foreign words by linking them to known words.	2.61
	9	I find it difficult to make a mental summary of information gained through listening.	2.33
	10	While listening, I have difficulty to check my comprehension of the text based on what I already know about the topic.	2.36
	11	I find it difficult to use the context to guess those parts of a listening text that I cannot hear clearly.	2.34
	12	After listening, I find it difficult to evaluate the overall accuracy of my comprehension.	2.43
Total			2.44
List	13	When thinking about meaning of unfamiliar words, I neglect the next	2.67

ne		part of the listening text.	
r	14	I am slow to recall the meaning of words that sound familiar.	2.37
	15	I find it difficult to quickly remember words or phrases I have just heard.	2.71
	16	During listening, although some words sound familiar, it is difficult for me to recall their meaning immediately.	2.23
	17	When I hear the new words, I forget the content which was mentioned before.	2.44
	18	I lose the flow of speech because I concentrate very hard on comprehension every word or phrase I hear.	2.27
	19	I find it difficult to remember the meaning of a long listening text.	2.67
	20	I find it difficult to really concentrate on listening.	2.36
	21	I have difficulty comprehending the listening text because I don't know which strategy to use while listening.	2.33
	22	I have difficulty comprehension a listening text because I cannot understand every single word I hear.	2.17
Total			2.38
Ta	23	I find it difficult to do listening tasks, such as filling a grid, for which I need to draw on specific information from the text.	2.50
sk	24	I find it difficult to do listening tasks for which I need to combine information to make generalization while listening to the text.	2.49
	25	I find it difficult to answer Wh- questions in a listening task.	2.26
Total			2.41
In	26	I find it difficult to understand listening texts in which there are too many unfamiliar words.	3.04
pu	27	I find it difficult to understand the meaning of words which are not pronounced clearly.	2.81
t	28	I find it difficult to understand	2.64

		listening texts which have difficult grammatical structure.	
	29	I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast.	2.96
	30	Unfamiliar stress and intonation patterns of English interfere with my listening comprehension.	2.76
	31	I find it difficult to understand the listening text when speakers speak with varied accents.	2.91
	32	I find it difficult to understand the listening text when the speaker does not pause long enough.	2.70
	33	I find it difficult to interpret the meaning of a long listening text.	2.81
	34	I have difficulty comprehension speakers with unfamiliar accents.	2.99
	Total		2.84
Affect	35	I stop listening when I have problems in comprehension a listening text.	2.54
	36	If I don't arrive at a total comprehension of an oral text, I feel disappointed	2.81
	37	I find it difficult to reduce my anxiety before doing the listening task	2.50
	38	Before doing listening comprehension tasks, I fear that I cannot understand what I will hear.	2.67
	Total		2.63
Content	39	Unclear sounds resulting from a poor-quality CD-player interfere with my listening comprehension.	2.99
	40	Unclear sounds resulting from poor acoustic conditions of the classroom interfere with my listening comprehension.	3.11
	Total		3.05

The highest mean scores are 3.11 and 3.04 observed for items 40 and 26 respectively. The scores demonstrate that the most serious challenges for the participants is related to the physical conditions in which recordings are played indicating the poor facilities and also the level of vocabulary items used in the recordings.

The lowest mean scores are 2.11 and 2, observed for items 5 and 22 respectively. The scores demonstrate that dealing with the process of tasks and their types is the least challenging factor for the .Having examined the

challenging items in each area, it is worth comparing mean scores of the items belonging to each subscale to see which one seems highly problematic and challenging for the participants. The result is presented in fig. 1.

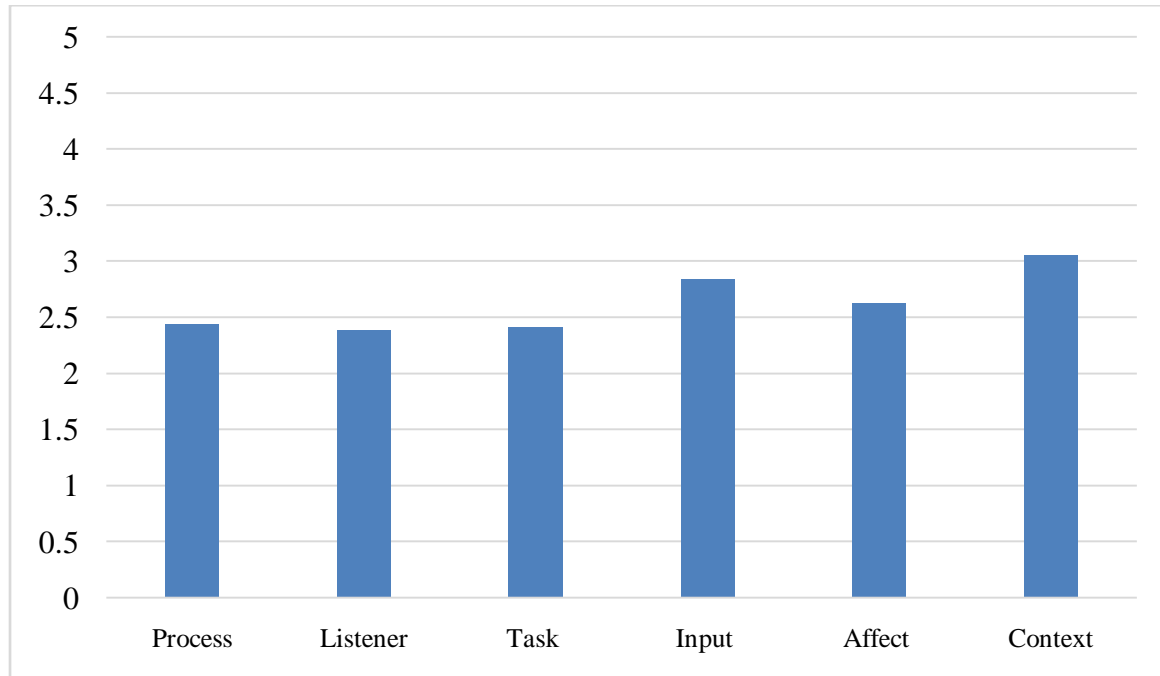


Figure1. comparing mean scores of listening difficulties subscale

Fig. 1 illustrates mean scores of subscales of listening difficulties. The result shows that ‘context’ and ‘input’ were two primary listening comprehension problems that the participants experienced challenging, while factors related to the listeners’ knowledge and abilities were not considered challenge.

4.2. Iranian EFL Learners’ Attitude toward Difficulties with Listening Comprehension

Interview was conducted by asking 15 undergraduate and 15 postgraduate participants, to explain their perspectives about listening comprehension which relates to second question. Fig. 2 illustrates the number of

participants with positive, negative, and mixed feelings at B.A. and M.A. tertiary levels separately.

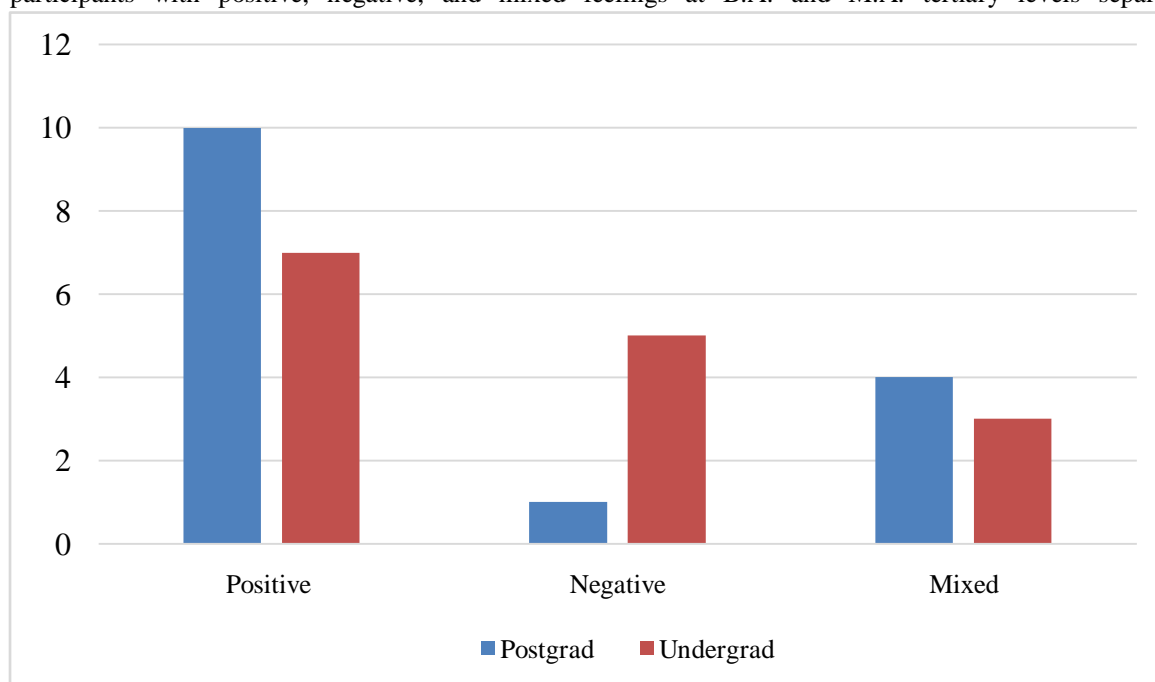


Figure2. participants' feeling towards listening comprehension

The vertical axis in Fig. 2 shows the number of participants participating in this question, and the horizontal one show their attitudes classified in three groups including positive attitude, negative attitude, and third groups represents participants hesitating between positive and negative.

When Iranian EFL learners have mixed feelings about listening comprehension, considering their needs and interest in choosing appropriate listening content can maintain their positive attitude and keep them interested in the task.

4.3. Locus of Attribution

To find the source of Iranian EFL learners' difficulties with listening comprehension as the third question, the following question was asked in an interview.

What is the main reason about your difficulty with listening comprehension tasks?

Based on Locus of Control (LoC) theory, it can play a role in EFL learning. LoC was used as a framework to find the internal or external sources of Iranian EFL learners' difficulty with listening comprehension.

Meticulously analyzing the interviews transcripts, nine common themes were extracted in the participants' responses; they believed their difficulties with listening comprehension mainly stemmed from:

1. Unfamiliar vocabularies and phrases,
2. Rapid speech rate,
3. Speakers' accent,
4. Lack of correct curriculum in educational system,

5. Lack of complicated grammar and structure,
6. Inability to remember what was heard,
7. Physical problems: a poor-quality CD player, acoustic conditions of the classroom,
8. Lack of confidence,
9. Insufficient time to be exposure to English-speaking environment

Ultimately, the themes were fed into SPSS to allow for further calculations. The calculations are shown in Fig. 3. In line with the internal/external LoC of the aforementioned phrases, it can be concluded that phrases 1 to 4, 7, and 9 can belong to the external LoC, while phrases 5 through 8 belong to the internal LoC.

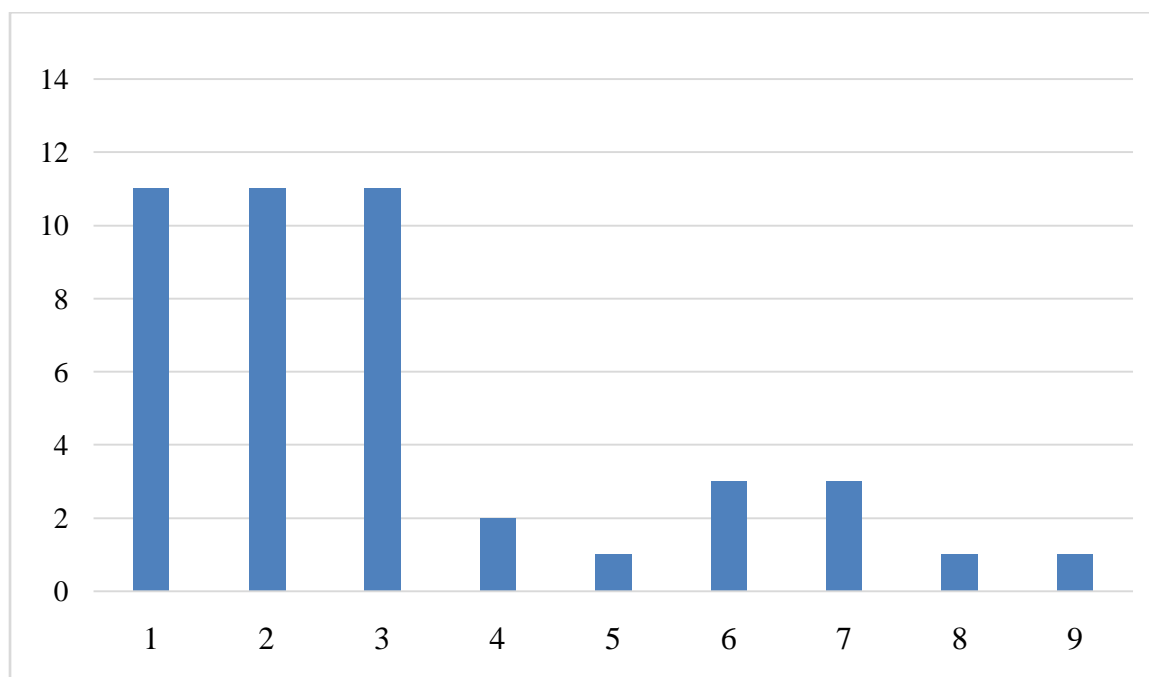


Figure3. learners' locus of attribution of the sources of difficulties

Obviously, the most common sources of difficulties with listening comprehension skill were the first three themes found in the participants' responses including unfamiliar vocabularies and phrases, rapid speech rate, and speakers' accent. This is consistent with results obtained from the questionnaire, and also in line with their responses to the first interview question. Familiarity of vocabulary and topics in recording along with speakers conversing with an easy-to-follow accent could help the listeners maintain the interest and lessen the task difficulty. On the other hand, the least agreed-upon sources of difficulty were lack of complicated grammar and structure, and also lack of self-confidence. Once again, factors related to learners' knowledge and ability were regarded as the least challenging and problematic. In general, regarding external and internal LoC, the findings show that listening comprehension difficulties experienced by the participants, representing Iranian EFL learners, were primarily caused by external factors.

4.4. Differences between Undergraduates and Postgraduates

To find the answer of last but not least important question, Mann-Whitney U test is used to compare differences between two independent groups when the dependent variable is either ordinal or continuous, but not normally distributed [24]. In this part, Mann-Whitney U test was used to find out whether attitudes towards difficulties in

listening comprehension, measured as positive, negative, and mixed feeling on an ordinal scale, differed meaningfully.

Table 3: Mann-Whitney U Test Report

Variable	No.	Mean Rank	U	P value
BA Group	15	14.03	90.50	.36
MA Group	15	16.97		
Total	30			

Based on Table 3, there is no statistically significant difference between attitudes of the undergraduate and the postgraduate participants toward listening comprehension ($P > 0.05$, $P = .36$). It can be concluded that Iranian EFL learners have the same attitudes toward listening skill. However, mean ranks of 14.03 for BA group and 16.97 for MA group show the MA participants have more positive, even though not meaningfully different, attitude toward listening comprehension.

V. Discussion

Although both instructors and learners recognize the significance of listening understanding for scholastic achievement in educational settings, there remains a dearth of studies focused on identifying listening barriers among learners, with a focus on personal, physical, and linguistic. Besides, limitations in previous studies, such as single-gender participant samples, specific English proficiency levels, and small sample sizes, suggest the need for further research. Furthermore, there exists a notable lack of evidence regarding EFL learners' attitudes toward listening comprehension, particularly in terms of delineating the specific sources of their challenges.

At the outset of the study four research questions were formulated, which were later examined and addressed in results' section. A brief summary of these findings is presented here. First of all, the study investigated the barriers faced by Iranian EFL learners in listening comprehension at the tertiary level at Islamic Azad University-South Tehran Branch (IAUSTB). For many years, the main focus of English instruction in Iran has been preparing learners for tests, especially college and high school admission exams. This problem has persisted for decades, with traditional grammar-translation methods heavily relied upon in both junior and senior high schools. Consequently, most students lack real-life communicative English competency due to examination-oriented EFL training typified by a heavy emphasis on required textbook materials. Many Iranian students struggle with listening comprehension due to insufficient vocabulary development, and the lack of opportunities for English-speaking interactions has hindered the improvement of their oral skills. Additionally, insufficient time to be exposure to English-speaking environment exacerbates the issue. Iranian students frequently experience anxiety when speaking in English in class because they worry about being mocked or scorned by their peers or teachers. After collecting the information and analyzing them through SPSS software, the outcomes uncovered that 'context' and 'input' were two primary listening comprehension problems the participants experienced. Thus, the pedagogical system, ministry of education and other relevant authorities need to address these issues to create an environment free from distractions and obstacles.

Next question was about participants' feelings and attitudes toward listening comprehension among Iranian EFL learners participated. An interview was conducted with a number of the participants, and then answers were investigated. The findings revealed that the participants generally had mostly positive attitude toward this vital skill. Therefore, the educators and relevant authorities should acknowledge this sentiment and show respect for it, and work to resolving or minimizing the listening comprehension problems identified in the earlier question.

Through examination of third question of this research, common sources were found among the participants; as it was presented in Fig. 3, the highest means revealed the most significant source of difficulties in listening comprehension responses including unfamiliar vocabularies and phrases, rapid speech rate, and speakers' accent among Iranian EFL learners are external.

Ultimate issue under investigation was to examine if there is difference between undergraduate and postgraduate participants' feelings and attitudes toward listening comprehension. As a result of employing Mann-Whitney U Test, attitude of two groups was not significantly different. It means there is no significant difference between Iranian EFL Learners' attitudes at bachelor and master level. It is concluded that Iranian EFL learners have the same attitude toward this skill, or EFL learners' attitudes do not have congruency with their tertiary level.

VI. Conclusion

The primary message of this study is directed toward educational policymakers, curriculum developers, and creators of listening course materials, emphasizing the pivotal nature of addressing these difficulties as integral components for the academic and future vocational success of EFL learners. It is evident that the identification of these difficulties is a crucial precursor to effective educational planning and intervention strategies.

Drawing upon the findings of this study, it is suggested that EFL/ESL instructors adopt pedagogical approaches and instructional strategies aimed at mitigating these obstacles, particularly when confronting intricate tasks such as listening comprehension. In essence, the overarching objective is to illuminate pathways toward preventing misunderstandings in listening comprehension among EFL learners, thereby averting potential adverse repercussions within social, educational, and occupational spheres. Through proactive measures and targeted interventions, educators can empower EFL learners to navigate the complexities of listening comprehension with confidence and proficiency; thus, facilitating their holistic language acquisition journey and broader societal integration.

The primary goal of this study was to identify the factors contributing to the common challenges faced by Iranian EFL learners at the M.A. and B.A. levels in English listening comprehension. The data analysis revealed several factors influencing the perceptions of difficulties in English listening, including:

1. Context Factors: Students struggled with listening when recordings had poor quality and unclear sound.
2. Input Factors: Students faced challenges in understanding the meaning of words.
3. Affective Factors: Students experienced disappointment when they couldn't fully grasp the content.
4. Process Factors: Students found it difficult to maintain focus while listening to texts.
5. Task Factors: Students had trouble when required to integrate information.
6. Listener Factors: Students encountered problems with long-term recall.

Among these, context factors were identified as the most significant challenge, followed by input factors. Interestingly, listener factors were considered the least problematic, suggesting that learners believed their difficulties stemmed mainly from external sources rather than personal shortcomings, indicating that for them external locus of attribution was more dominant than the internal one. Despite these challenges, the participants showed positive attitudes toward listening skill as an important skill to master. The implication for educators can be that they need to address the poor facilities in listening classes to improve the quality of the outcomes in listening classes.

As Iranian EFL learners identified themselves and their own factors as the least problematic among the issues affecting listening comprehension, the possibility of internal sources of problems can be largely dismissed. This suggests that external factors, such as context or input, are more significant barriers in listening comprehension. Therefore, it can be concluded that by eliminating all external sources of problems—such as context, input, affect, process, and task—the success rate in listening comprehension among Iranian EFL learners will increase.

The research also found that Iranian EFL learners at both M.A. and B.A. levels generally held positive attitudes toward listening tasks, experiencing a sense of enjoyment while engaging with it. At first glance, the interview findings suggest that the level of education does not have a significant impact on learners' attitudes. However, upon deeper reflection, it might be concluded that further studies could reveal different results, indicating that everything could change.

The key point is that about 23 percent of participants believed that if the topics were familiar, they would be more interested and have a positive feeling toward listening comprehension. Therefore, it is clear that the level of education may positively affect learners' familiarity with the topic. In this regard, it can be said that more education can lead to exposure to more new topics, which in turn leads to greater familiarity. Thus, it can be concluded that a higher level of education results in greater interest in listening comprehension, although this finding did not turn out to be significant enough to be generalized. It is strongly recommended that more studies be conducted to strengthen this conclusion. Based on these findings, English instructors and curriculum designers should be mindful of this positive disposition and work to reinforce it.

Moreover, based on the locus of control theory it was determined that the most significant sources of problems for Iranian EFL learners in listening comprehension were unfamiliar vocabulary and phrases, rapid speech rate, and speakers' accents. The first notable point is that all these identified sources of problems stem from external factors. Another important observation is that factors such as “lack of confidence” and “the absence of an immersive English-speaking environment,” which have internal and external origins respectively, also appeared on the list, though they were at the bottom. Despite their lower ranking, the participants still mentioned these factors as problematic in developing their listening skills. Therefore, these issues should be considered as significant barriers in English classes.

In conclusion, both respondents and English instructors should focus on addressing these issues to better support EFL learners in listening courses. Concerning contextual factors, instructors should implement new strategies in setting up rooms for practicing and assessing listening comprehension. Regarding input factors, if vocabulary items are unfamiliar to EFL learners, they should engage in more listening practice to improve their understanding of words and passages. Mass media can also play a role in helping EFL learners develop their listening skills and encouraging them to listen more frequently. Teachers trained in listening skills can enhance EFL learners' abilities by designing more engaging syllabi or adapting existing ones. Curriculum designers should ensure that syllabi include appropriate vocabulary levels to help learners overcome challenges in comprehending input.

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