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Investigating Listening Difficulties Faced by Undergraduate English Major Students at Kabul University

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Abstract

This study explores the causes of listening difficulties among students in the English Language and Literature Department at Kabul University. Although listening challenges have been widely studied globally, limited research has addressed this issue in Afghanistan. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 50 undergraduate students through a questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used for analysis. The findings revealed that students face listening problems due to both external and internal factors. External challenges include noise, large class sizes, and inadequate teaching materials, while internal factors include limited vocabulary, difficulty understanding fast speech, and difficulty concentrating. The study concludes with recommendations to help students and educators improve listening comprehension and suggests directions for future research.

Keywords: Listening comprehension, Listening difficulties, English language learners, Undergraduate students, Kabul University, EFL learning.

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Introduction

Language learning involves the acquisition of four major skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These are generally divided into receptive skills, such as listening and reading, and productive skills, such as speaking and writing (Richards, 2008). Receptive skills involve understanding and interpreting language, whereas productive skills require the learner to produce language actively. Among these, listening plays a central role in communication and overall language development.

Scholars have defined listening in various ways. Hamouda (2013) described it as a vital skill for acquiring comprehensible input, emphasizing that learning cannot take place without adequate input. Similarly, Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) highlighted that listening is one of the most essential skills in the communication process and the foundation for developing other language abil`ities. They further explained that during listening comprehension, learners

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construct meaning as they process information from listening sources. In this sense, listening is not a passive act but an active process of making sense of auditory information.

According to Nijat et al. (2024), listening involves receiving, comprehending, and analyzing the message conveyed through spoken communication. It plays a crucial role in English language learning and is therefore a compulsory course in the English Language and Literature departments of many universities. In Afghanistan, listening is taught alongside speaking as a single course. Students majoring in English Language and Literature, particularly those in the Education Faculties, are required to complete this integrated course across eight semesters of their bachelor's program (Noori, 2024). This emphasis reflects the recognized importance of listening skills in English departments throughout the country.

To achieve proficiency in all language skills, learners must regularly practice each of them. However, listening skills are often underdeveloped during instruction, despite their central role in communication (Rost, 2016). Listening forms the foundation for oral communication, academic success, and effective participation in daily life. It enables learners to understand meaning, interpret intent, and respond appropriately during conversations. Vandergrift and Goh (2012) describe listening as an active process involving both bottom-up decoding of sounds and words and top-down use of context and prior knowledge. Proficient listening allows learners to acquire vocabulary, understand pronunciation, and participate more confidently in academic discussions.

Listening is particularly challenging in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, such as Afghanistan, where learners have limited exposure to diverse accents and lack access to systematically planned listening courses (Noori, 2024; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). At Kabul University, English majors are required to attend lectures and discussions conducted in English, making listening proficiency vital for academic success. Nevertheless, students report persistent challenges in listening comprehension. This difficulty often stems from an educational focus on grammar, reading, and vocabulary at the expense of listening practice. Furthermore, limited exposure to authentic materials and inadequate classroom resources intensifies these problems (Noori, 2018). Many students struggle with fast speech, unfamiliar accents, limited vocabulary, and poor audio quality, all of which hinder comprehension.

The multilingual environment of Afghanistan, where Dari and Pashto dominate communication, adds another layer of difficulty. In many institutions, English instruction still prioritizes grammar and reading, leaving little time for real-time listening practice (Hamouda, 2013). This imbalance restricts students' communicative competence and limits their academic and professional development. Effective listening is necessary not only for understanding lectures and discussions but also for engaging meaningfully in global academic and intercultural exchanges.

Listening is widely acknowledged as one of the most cognitively demanding aspects of language acquisition. It requires learners to decode sounds, interpret vocabulary, and process meaning almost instantaneously. Despite this importance, there remains a significant gap between intended learning outcomes and the actual listening proficiency of many undergraduate English majors (Nijat et al., 2024). This gap is concerning because successful listening comprehension is essential for academic performance, career preparation, and

communication in international settings. Students who fail to comprehend spoken English may struggle in lectures, discussions, and professional environments, limiting their academic progress and employability.

Research has identified several contributing factors contributing to poor listening skills, including fast speech delivery, unclear pronunciation, unfamiliar accents, and limited opportunities for listening practice (Nijat et al., 2024). Moreover, Afghan EFL classrooms are often characterized by large class sizes, under-resourced environments, and insufficient exposure to authentic English materials (Noori, 2018). These conditions increase listening anxiety and reduce comprehension. Addressing these difficulties is essential for improving students' listening proficiency and fostering more effective participation in oral communication tasks.

If such challenges remain unresolved, they will continue to affect future cohorts of students, producing the same adverse outcomes each year. However, developing and applying strategies to help students overcome these listening difficulties can significantly enhance their academic success, confidence, and communication skills. While listening difficulties have been widely studied in other countries, the issue remains under-researched in Afghanistan, especially within higher education. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the listening challenges faced by undergraduate English major students at Kabul University and identifying the main factors contributing to these difficulties.

To provide the conceptual framework, the study draws on Vandergrift and Goh's (2012) metacognitive model of second language listening, which posits that adequate comprehension arises from the interplay of metacognitive knowledge (awareness of person, task, and strategy factors), metacognitive experiences (real-time monitoring and evaluation during listening), and targeted strategy use (planning, problem-solving, and directed attention). This framework underscores how learners' self-regulated awareness can mitigate barriers to input processing, particularly in EFL contexts where exposure is limited. In Afghanistan's multilingual environment—dominated by Dari and Pashto—English majors often experience disrupted metacognitive cycles due to unfamiliar accents, rapid speech, and resource constraints, hindering their ability to activate prior knowledge or infer meaning. By applying this model, the present study examines how external and internal factors impede metacognitive engagement, offering insights into tailored pedagogical interventions.

The primary aim of this research is to investigate the specific reasons that make listening comprehension difficult for English major students and to explore the influence of vocabulary limitations, speech rate, accent familiarity, and environmental factors on their metacognitive processes. Despite completing several semesters of English study, many students continue to struggle with listening comprehension, suggesting that underlying challenges persist beyond basic instruction. Understanding these difficulties is crucial to improving teaching methods and learning outcomes.

To guide the investigation, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What external environmental factors (e.g., classroom conditions and speech characteristics) most commonly contribute to listening difficulties among undergraduate English major students at Kabul University?
2. What internal cognitive and affective factors (e.g., vocabulary knowledge, anxiety, and motivation) primarily impede their listening comprehension?
3. How do these external and internal factors interact to affect students' metacognitive awareness and strategy use in listening tasks?

The findings of this study hold practical implications for students, teachers, and curriculum developers. For students, identifying key listening barriers—such as fast speech, unfamiliar accents, and limited authentic exposure—enables targeted strategies to boost comprehension and confidence in academic and daily contexts. Teachers can leverage these insights to refine methods, incorporating slower pacing, repetition, real-life audio, and scaffolded instruction (Kochkorova, 2025). Curriculum developers and policymakers may apply the results to foster balanced English programs that counter the current overemphasis on grammar and reading in Afghan institutions like Kabul University (Nijat et al., 2024) by integrating all four skills through modern materials, technology, and reduced class sizes to deliver authentic communicative practice. Beyond institutions, the study enriches global language education by addressing Afghanistan's underrepresentation in research, offering insights into Afghan EFL challenges and a foundation for comparative studies in similar contexts, thereby advancing discourse on listening pedagogy.

Methods and Materials

This section presents the research design, population and sampling, instrumentation, data collection procedures, and data analysis methods used in this study. The methodology was designed to ensure accuracy, reliability, and ethical integrity in investigating the common listening difficulties faced by undergraduate English major students at Kabul University.

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive survey design, which is appropriate for identifying and analyzing the nature and extent of listening difficulties among a defined group of students (Creswell & Guetterman, 2024). Quantitative methods were selected to allow for objective measurement and statistical analysis of students' responses. The survey approach enabled the collection of data from a relatively large number of participants within a limited timeframe.

The design focused on identifying patterns, frequencies, and relationships among variables related to listening challenges. It also aimed to provide a general overview of how students perceive and experience these challenges, rather than testing a specific hypothesis (Creswell & Guetterman, 2024).

Population and Sampling

The study population consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in the Department of English Language and Literature at Kabul University. Specifically, the participants were

selected from junior and senior year students because these two levels represent distinct stages in language development and exposure to academic listening tasks.

A simple random sampling technique was used to ensure that each student had an equal chance of being selected. In total, 50 students participated in the study—25 juniors and 25 seniors. Their ages ranged from 18 to 24 years, and their English proficiency levels ranged between intermediate and advanced, based on their coursework and academic performance.

The sample size of 50 was deemed appropriate for this exploratory quantitative descriptive study, which prioritizes identifying patterns and frequencies over generalizable inferences. This aligns with statistical recommendations for language testing and EFL research, which suggest that a minimum of n=46 supports reliable descriptive analyses (Kunnan, 2020). In the resource-constrained context of Afghan higher education—marked by limited access, large cohorts, and logistical barriers—obtaining a larger sample was infeasible within the study's timeframe and ethical approval constraints. The balanced stratification by academic year (50% juniors, 50% seniors) enhances representativeness, allowing meaningful comparisons across proficiency levels while mitigating the risk of underpowering for the employed frequency-based metrics. This sampling approach included both relatively new learners and more experienced students, providing a more balanced understanding of listening difficulties across academic levels.

Instrumentation

The main data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire developed by the researchers. The questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data about students' listening practices, difficulties, and perceptions regarding listening comprehension in English.

The questionnaire consisted of two main sections:

1. Demographic Information – including age, gender, and academic year.
2. Listening Challenges – a series of closed-ended questions addressing specific difficulties commonly faced in listening comprehension. These included challenges related to vocabulary recognition, understanding idioms and figurative language, following fast speech, dealing with different accents, background noise, and the quality of instructional materials.

The items were adapted and modified from previous research on listening comprehension difficulties to ensure content validity. A pilot test was conducted with 10 students from the same department to verify clarity, reliability, and ease of understanding. Feedback from the pilot study was used to refine the final version of the questionnaire.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process was conducted with full approval and cooperation from the Department of English Language and Literature at Kabul University. The researchers distributed the questionnaires to the selected participants during regular class sessions, with the consent of the course instructors.

Before distribution, the purpose and significance of the study were clearly explained to the participants. They were informed that participation was voluntary, and informed consent was

obtained. Students were also assured of anonymity and confidentiality, meaning that no personal identifiers were included in the data.

Each participant completed the questionnaire individually during class time, which took approximately 10–15 minutes. The researchers remained present to clarify any questions and to ensure the accuracy and completeness of responses. After collection, the questionnaires were reviewed and organized for data entry.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, primarily frequencies and percentages, to identify the most common listening problems and their distribution among participants. The data were entered and processed using Microsoft Excel, which facilitated the calculation of descriptive statistics and the creation of summary tables.

Descriptive analysis was used to interpret patterns and trends in students' listening difficulties, the sources of problems (internal or external), and the relative frequency of each issue. The results were then discussed in relation to previous studies and relevant literature to highlight similarities, differences, and implications for English language teaching and learning.

To ensure the validity and reliability of findings, both researchers cross-checked data entry, and all incomplete questionnaires were excluded from analysis. Internal consistency of the questionnaire was further assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding $\alpha = 0.79$ in the pilot test (n=10) and $\alpha = 0.86$ for the full sample (n=50), indicating good reliability across scales (Nunnally, 1978). The study followed ethical guidelines concerning informed consent, voluntary participation, and data confidentiality.

Findings

This section presents the results of a questionnaire conducted to investigate the reasons for the listening difficulties faced by undergraduate students in the English Language and Literature Department at Kabul University. The data are organized into two key themes: demographic information and questionnaire responses regarding listening difficulties faced by undergraduate students at Kabul University. A total of 50 students participated in the survey.

Respondents' Demographic Charateristics

Table 1 provides an overview of the respondents' demographic characteristics, including year of study, age, and self-reported English proficiency level (on a scale of 1–10, where 1 is beginner and 10 is advanced). The sample was evenly split between junior and senior students, with the majority aged 20–22 years (54%) and reporting intermediate English proficiency (levels 4–6; 58%).

Table 1: *Respondents' Demographic Characteristics*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Year of Study	Junior	25	50%
	Senior	25	50%
Age	20–22	27	54%
	23–25	21	42%

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
	26+	2	4%
English Proficiency Level	1–3	11	22%
	4–6	29	58%
	7+	10	20%

Listening Difficulties

The results in Table 2 below indicate that most students face significant challenges with listening due to the classroom environment and related factors. Specifically, 64% agreed or strongly agreed that classroom noise hinders listening, 70% agreed or strongly agreed that teachers speak too fast, 66% agreed or strongly agreed that the classroom size impedes audibility, and 74% agreed or strongly agreed that classroom audio quality is poor. Additionally, 68% agreed or strongly agreed that classmate interruptions make it difficult to hear the teacher, and 50% agreed or strongly agreed that the overall classroom environment is unsuitable for listening.

Table 2: *Listening Difficulties*

No.	Statement	SD (0%)	D	N	A	SA
1	The classroom is noisy when I listen.	0 (0%)	8 (16%)	10 (20%)	20 (40%)	12 (24%)
2	The teacher speaks too fast in class.	0 (0%)	11 (22%)	4 (8%)	22 (44%)	13 (26%)
3	The classroom is too big to hear well.	0 (0%)	7 (14%)	10 (20%)	27 (54%)	6 (12%)
4	The audio in class is not clear.	0 (0%)	5 (10%)	8 (16%)	35 (70%)	2 (4%)
5	It is hard to hear the teacher when others talk.	0 (0%)	9 (18%)	7 (14%)	24 (48%)	10 (20%)
6	The classroom is not good for listening.	0 (0%)	10 (20%)	15 (30%)	18 (36%)	7 (14%)

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree. Percentages are based on n = 50.

Vocabulary Comprehension

Vocabulary knowledge, as indicated in Table 3 below, emerged as a significant barrier to listening comprehension. Exactly 48% agreed or strongly agreed that understanding English words during listening is difficult, and 54% agreed or strongly agreed that they often do not know the meanings of heard words. A substantial 74% agreed or strongly agreed that following long sentences is challenging, 54% agreed or strongly agreed that they forget heard information quickly, and 54% agreed or strongly agreed that fast speech confuses. Additionally, 36% agreed that comprehending longer talks or stories is difficult.

Table 3: *Vocabulary Comprehension*

No.	Statement	SD (0%)	D	N	A	SA
7	It is hard to understand English words when I listen.	0 (0%)	23 (46%)	3 (6%)	23 (46%)	1 (2%)
8	I do not know the meanings of many of the words I hear.	0 (0%)	15 (30%)	8 (16%)	25 (50%)	2 (4%)
9	I cannot follow long sentences when listening.	0 (0%)	9 (18%)	4 (8%)	28 (56%)	9 (18%)
10	I forget what I hear very quickly.	0 (0%)	12 (24%)	11 (22%)	19 (38%)	8 (16%)
11	I feel confused when the teacher speaks fast.	0 (0%)	14 (28%)	9 (18%)	20 (40%)	7 (14%)
12	It is difficult to understand English talks or stories.	0 (0%)	15 (30%)	17 (34%)	18 (36%)	0 (0%)

Different Accents

Challenges with diverse English accents (Table 4) were reported by 54% of students who agreed or strongly agreed that they have difficulty understanding them. Furthermore, 72% agreed or strongly agreed that certain accents are more difficult than others, and 80% agreed or strongly agreed that a strong accent requires more careful listening.

Table 4: *Different Accents*

No.	Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
13	I have problems understanding different English accents.	1 (2%)	12 (24%)	10 (20%)	21 (42%)	6 (12%)
14	Some accents are harder than others for me.	0 (0%)	10 (20%)	4 (8%)	32 (64%)	4 (8%)
15	I need to listen more carefully when the speaker has a strong accent.	0 (0%)	8 (16%)	2 (4%)	36 (72%)	4 (8%)

Idioms and Figurative Language

Table 5 below indicates challenges in terms of idioms and figurative language.

Table 5: *Idioms and Figurative Language*

No.	Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
16	English idioms are hard for me to understand.	0 (0%)	8 (16%)	4 (8%)	23 (46%)	15 (30%)
17	I do not understand special expressions in English.	0 (0%)	3 (6%)	0 (0%)	33 (66%)	14 (28%)
18	I need help to understand new expressions in listening.	0 (0%)	5 (10%)	1 (2%)	23 (46%)	21 (42%)

This category of challenges proved particularly challenging, with 76% of students agreeing or strongly agreeing that English idioms are hard to understand. An overwhelming 94% agreed

or strongly agreed that they do not comprehend special expressions in English, and 88% agreed or strongly agreed that they require assistance with new expressions during listening.

Listening Anxiety

Listening anxiety was a prominent issue (Table 6), with 82% of students agreeing or strongly agreeing that they cannot focus well during listening tasks. Similarly, 80% agreed or strongly agreed that they feel nervous when required to listen in class, 84% agreed or strongly agreed that misunderstanding content causes stress, and 74% agreed or strongly agreed that they fear asking questions about listening material.

Table 6: *Listening Anxiety*

No.	Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
19	I cannot focus well when I listen.	0 (0%)	2 (4%)	7 (14%)	18 (36%)	23 (46%)
20	I feel nervous when I have to listen in class.	0 (0%)	3 (6%)	7 (14%)	21 (42%)	19 (38%)
21	I feel stressed if I do not understand everything.	0 (0%)	7 (14%)	1 (2%)	20 (40%)	22 (44%)
22	I am afraid to ask questions about listening.	0 (0%)	10 (20%)	3 (6%)	16 (32%)	21 (42%)

Listening Motivation

The survey also assessed motivation and practice habits Table 7.

Table 7: *Listening Motivation*

No.	Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
23	I like listening to English to get better.	7 (14%)	14 (28%)	0 (0%)	20 (40%)	9 (18%)
24	I try to listen to English outside the class.	8 (16%)	27 (54%)	5 (10%)	9 (18%)	1 (2%)
25	I feel happy when I understand listening tasks.	0 (0%)	9 (18%)	6 (12%)	21 (42%)	14 (28%)
26	I enjoy listening to English songs, videos, or audio.	2 (4%)	13 (26%)	10 (20%)	19 (38%)	6 (12%)
27	I want to improve my listening to speak better.	0 (0%)	9 (18%)	6 (12%)	18 (36%)	17 (34%)
28	I do not often watch English movies or videos.	9 (18%)	20 (40%)	12 (24%)	8 (16%)	1 (2%)
29	I do not often listen to English songs or podcasts.	1 (2%)	10 (20%)	10 (20%)	21 (42%)	8 (16%)
30	I do not have many chances to hear English in daily life.	0 (0%)	5 (10%)	7 (14%)	24 (48%)	14 (28%)
31	I cannot practice listening with my friends.	10 (20%)	15 (30%)	9 (18%)	11 (22%)	5 (10%)
32	I do not listen to English outside the classroom.	14 (28%)	22 (44%)	11 (22%)	3 (6%)	0 (0%)

Positive attitudes were evident: 58% agreed or strongly agreed that they like listening to English to improve, 70% agreed or strongly agreed that understanding tasks brings happiness, 50% agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoy English songs, videos, or audio, and 70% agreed or strongly agreed that they want to enhance listening for better speaking skills. However, practice was limited: 70% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they try to listen outside class, 58% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they often watch English movies or videos, 22% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they often listen to English songs or podcasts, 58% agreed or strongly agreed that daily life offers few opportunities to hear English, 50% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they can practice with friends, and 72% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they listen to English outside the classroom. These patterns reveal intrinsic motivation but insufficient out-of-class exposure and practice, which likely impedes progress.

In a nutshell, the study reveals that undergraduate students' listening difficulties stem from both external and internal factors. External challenges include poor classroom audio, noise, large class sizes, and rapid teacher speech, while internal barriers include limited vocabulary, difficulties with idioms and long sentences, listening anxiety, and insufficient out-of-class practice despite strong motivation. The most pronounced issues were unclear or fast speech (74% and 70% agreement, respectively), idiomatic expressions (94% agreement), long sentences (74% agreement), stress from misunderstanding (84% agreement), and limited external exposure (72% disagreement with out-of-class listening). To address these, instructors should adopt slower speech rates, ensure clear audio equipment, and integrate targeted vocabulary and idiom instruction. Additionally, fostering out-of-class practice opportunities and anxiety-reduction strategies could enhance confidence and overall listening proficiency.

Discussion

This section interprets the study's findings in relation to extant literature and theoretical frameworks, elucidating the multifaceted nature of listening difficulties among undergraduate students in the English Language and Literature Department at Kabul University. The results delineate a confluence of external and internal factors that impede listening comprehension, aligning with ecological models of second-language listening (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012), which posit that comprehension emerges from the interplay among linguistic input, learner cognition, and environmental contexts. By weaving together these dimensions, the discussion highlights consistencies with prior research, contextual nuances in the Afghan EFL setting, and actionable pedagogical implications.

The predominance of external barriers—such as unclear audio, classroom noise, large class sizes, and rapid teacher speech—corroborates Vandergrift and Goh's (2012) assertion that suboptimal acoustic conditions and rapid speech rate exacerbate perceptual processing demands in L2 listening. These elements disrupt bottom-up decoding processes, compelling learners to allocate cognitive resources to filtering noise rather than to semantic integration. In the resource-constrained Afghan higher education landscape, where infrastructural limitations are commonplace (Orfan, 2020), such issues are likely to amplify disparities in access to comprehensible input. This underscores the situated cognition perspective (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in which listening efficacy hinges on participatory classroom ecologies, suggesting

interventions such as acoustic upgrades, flexible seating, and teacher pacing training to cultivate a more supportive auditory milieu.

Transitioning to internal linguistic hurdles, vocabulary deficits, long-sentence processing, and idiomatic opacity resonate strongly with Rost's (2016) schema-theoretic model of listening, which emphasizes lexical access and inferential bridging as cornerstones of comprehension. Unknown vocabulary not only fragments input but also triggers metacognitive overload, leading to rapid forgetting and disorientation from syntactic complexity, as evidenced by working memory constraints in L2 auditory processing (Baddeley, 2015). The acute difficulty with figurative language extends Rost's (2016) observations on idioms' cultural-linguistic opacity, which disrupts top-down expectancy and pragmatic inference in non-native contexts. For Afghan undergraduates at intermediate proficiency, these patterns likely stem from curricula prioritizing grammar over idiomatic fluency, widening the gap in handling authentic discourse. Targeted remedies, such as pre-listening vocabulary activation, sentence-parsing drills, and corpus-informed idiom modules, could thus enhance schema-building and retention, in line with task-based language teaching principles (Ellis, 2003).

Accent-related challenges elicited more nuanced responses, with many acknowledging comprehension issues and perceiving certain accents as more challenging or requiring heightened attention. This partially aligns with Nijat et al.'s (2024) findings on accent familiarity among Afghan EFL learners, where exposure deficits predict perceptual strain; yet the moderate endorsement here tempers their view of accents as a pervasive obstacle, possibly attributable to the sample's predominant familiarity with standardized instructional varieties. From a perceptual assimilation framework (Best, 1995), intermediate proficiency may enable partial adaptation to common accents (e.g., American or British) but falter with non-native variants, highlighting the role of input diversity in perceptual normalization. Incorporating varied accent simulations—via podcasts or TED Talks—could therefore bridge this exposure-proficiency divide, promoting indexical sensitivity and reducing novelty-induced disruptions.

Equally salient are the affective dimensions, where listening anxiety proved a formidable inhibitor: many reported stress, nervousness, and reticence to seek clarification, echoing Rabab’ah's (2020) extension of the affective filter hypothesis to L2 listening, in which emotional arousal impairs attentional focus and the fulfillment of the input hypothesis (Krashen, 1982). This cascade—misunderstanding fueling anxiety, which in turn erodes confidence—manifests in struggles with sustained focus, perpetuating avoidance and suboptimal processing. Within Afghanistan's collectivist educational cultures, where error aversion heightens stakes (Hofstede, 2001), these dynamics intensify, calling for anxiety-attenuating pedagogies such as low-stakes journals, collaborative debriefs, and mindfulness integrations to normalize errors and bolster self-efficacy (Horwitz et al., 2010).

The motivational landscape reveals further tensions: despite assets such as enjoyment, task satisfaction, and improvement aspirations, practice remained scant, with most disagreeing about out-of-class engagement (media consumption, peer practice). This dissonance mirrors Orfan's (2020) analysis of Afghan EFL contexts, where intrinsic interest collides with barriers such as limited digital access and time scarcity, thereby impeding incidental acquisition through extensive input (Nation, 2007). Drawing on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan,

2000), autonomy-supportive scaffolds—such as mobile apps (e.g., Duolingo, BBC Learning English), peer groups, and gamified challenges—could harness positive orientations, turning motivation into habitual engagement.

In synthesis, these findings affirm an integrated model of L2 listening (Vandergrift and Baker, 2015), wherein external acoustics intersect with internal linguistic and affective processes to shape comprehension trajectories. External remediation warrants infrastructural advocacy, while internal enhancements demand linguistic scaffolding; effectively, resilience-building is key, and motivationally, bridging enthusiasm with habits unlocks potential. Pedagogically, hybrid approaches—slowed, idiom-enriched deliveries with visuals; anxiety-sensitive classrooms; and tech-mediated immersion—offer promise. Future inquiries might longitudinally assess interventions or probe urban-rural differences, enriching Afghan ELT praxis and empowering learners to engage fluently with global Englishes.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the multifaceted challenges of listening comprehension faced by undergraduate English majors at Kabul University, revealing how external barriers (e.g., noise, poor audio, and rapid speech) intersect with internal hurdles (vocabulary gaps, idiom opacity, and anxiety) to disrupt metacognitive processes essential to EFL success. Synthesizing these insights through Vandergrift and Goh's (2012) framework, the persistent motivation-practice disconnect emerges as a pivotal tension: while intrinsic drive persists, structural scarcities stifle habitual exposure, perpetuating a cycle of underpreparedness that undermines both academic and communicative agency.

In post-conflict Afghanistan, where English serves as a vital conduit for reconstruction—facilitating economic mobility, intercultural dialogue, and escape from isolation—these findings underscore the role of listening proficiency in empowering youth within global Englishes (Coleman, 2021). By equipping learners to navigate diverse accents and authentic discourses, targeted interventions can transform English from a mere survival tool into a catalyst for peace-building and societal resilience, bridging local multilingualism with transnational opportunities. Ultimately, this calls for equitable, integrated pedagogies that not only address immediate gaps but also foster a generation of adaptive global citizens, ensuring Afghanistan's linguistic landscape contributes meaningfully to worldwide Englishes scholarship and practice.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical results, the following targeted recommendations are proposed to alleviate the identified barriers and foster listening development. These are delineated for educators and learners, emphasizing actionable, contextually feasible strategies.

For Instructors

- Incorporate diverse listening materials, such as podcasts, TED Talks, and subtitled videos featuring varied accents and idiomatic usage, to acclimate students to authentic speech patterns and enhance perceptual flexibility.

- Implement pre-listening scaffolds, including vocabulary preloading, thematic priming, and predictive exercises, to activate prior knowledge and mitigate cognitive overload from unfamiliar lexicon or syntactic structures.
- Design scaffolded tasks with graduated complexity—ranging from segmented audio clips to extended narratives—coupled with immediate feedback and self-assessment rubrics, to incrementally bolster confidence and metacognitive awareness.

For Students

- Cultivate consistent self-directed practice routines, allocating 15–30 minutes daily to accessible resources like mobile apps (e.g., BBC Learning English), YouTube channels, or peer dialogues, prioritizing comprehensible input to build automaticity.
- Prioritize lexical expansion through targeted interventions, such as idiom flashcards, contextual reading-listening pairings, and corpus explorations, to fortify semantic networks essential for real-time decoding.
- Adopt affective regulation techniques, including deep-breathing exercises or journaling reflections post-listening, to attenuate anxiety and promote a growth-oriented mindset toward auditory challenges.

Limitations of the Study

Notwithstanding its contributions, this research is subject to several constraints that temper the generalizability and depth of inferences. Primarily, the sample comprised only 50 juniors and seniors from a single department at Kabul University, potentially overlooking variations across disciplines, institutions, or regions in Afghanistan. This localized scope limits extrapolations to broader EFL populations, where socioeconomic or curricular divergences may modulate listening dynamics.

Methodologically, reliance on self-reported questionnaire data introduces subjectivity; perceptual biases, social desirability effects, or interpretive ambiguities could skew responses, precluding direct behavioral corroboration of professed difficulties. Moreover, the cross-sectional design precluded causal attributions, and unexamined variables—such as precise acoustic metrics (e.g., decibel levels), technological affordances, or longitudinal exposure histories—may confound the isolated effects of self-perceived factors.

Suggestions for Future Research

To extend this inquiry and address its lacunae, subsequent studies could pursue the following avenues:

- Employ mixed-methods paradigms, integrating qualitative protocols such as semi-structured interviews, think-aloud protocols, and ethnographic classroom observations, to triangulate perceptual data with observable processing behaviors and uncover nuanced experiential narratives.

- Experimentally evaluate the efficacy of interventions, such as randomized controlled trials assessing technology-enhanced strategies (e.g., AI-driven adaptive listening apps) or collaborative peer-tutoring models, using metrics such as anxiety reduction, retention rates, and comprehension gains.
- Undertake comparative analyses across learner strata—disaggregating by proficiency tiers, gender, urban-rural divides, or multilingual backgrounds—to delineate heterogeneous needs and inform differentiated instructional frameworks in resource-variable contexts.

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Authors Contributions

Shams Ur Rahman Sarwar designed the research methodology, collected and analyzed the data, and drafted the initial manuscript. Abdullah Noori served as the supervisor, providing conceptual guidance, methodological oversight, and critical revisions throughout the research process, and performed the final editing and polishing of the manuscript for clarity and coherence. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version.

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