Exploring Factors that Restrain Listening Skill Improvement among English Learners: A Systematic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

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| **Aims:** To identify and analyze the factors that hinder the development of listening skills among English learners by conducting a systematic review of qualitative studies published between 2019 and 2024.  **Study design:** It employed a qualitative meta-synthesis design, analyzing 30 peer-reviewed studies selected through a rigorous inclusion and exclusion process based on their relevance to the topic.  **Place and Duration of Study:** The study was not confined to a specific location, and the review covered studies within a five-year period.  **Methodology:** The methodology involved thematically analyzing the selected studies to identify recurring patterns and challenges in listening skill acquisition.  **Results:** The findings revealed five primary themes: internal challenges, external barriers, pedagogical and instructional issues, sociocultural and contextual factors, and learner autonomy and motivation. These results demonstrate the complicated relationship among individual, environmental, and systemic factors that impede listening proficiency.  **Conclusion:** The study highlights the need for targeted interventions and strategic pedagogical approaches to effectively address these challenges and enhance learners’ overall language competence. |

*Keywords: Listening Skill Development, English Learners, Systematic Review, Barriers to Listening, Pedagogical Strategies*

1. INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension is a foundational skill in language acquisition, yet it remains one of the most challenging aspects for English learners. Globally, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners encounter numerous challenges in mastering listening skills. Research highlights factors such as vocabulary limitations, speech rate, and accent variability as significant barriers. Hardiyanto et al. (2021) observed that Indonesian EFL students across proficiency levels struggle with unfamiliar words, fast speech, and diverse accents. Similarly, learners in Saudi Arabia report demotivation stemming from factors like course materials, time constraints, and a lack of conducive environments (Holbah & Sharma, 2021). Technological barriers, such as poor-quality audio systems, also contribute to these difficulties (Nurkhamidah, 2020), reflecting the complex interplay of internal and external factors affecting listening skills.

In the Philippines, English learners face similar challenges compounded by socio-economic and educational disparities. Despite being a second-language context, limited exposure to authentic English listening materials and inadequate teacher preparation hinder listening proficiency (Azures & Garcia, 2020; Garcia, 2021). Few systematic studies have focused on the specific barriers Filipino students face, leaving gaps in understanding how cultural and contextual factors influence listening skills. Addressing these gaps is essential to tailor interventions that meet the needs of Filipino learners within their unique linguistic and educational landscape.

While international studies provide valuable insights, they primarily emphasize macro-level issues, overlooking micro-level influences such as individual learner experiences and localized instructional practices. Existing research often focuses on other language skills, leaving listening under-explored (Kabir, 2024). The dearth of comprehensive and systematic analyses of listening challenges specific to diverse educational and cultural contexts highlights the need for further investigation. This study seeks to bridge this gap by synthesizing findings from both global and Philippine settings to offer a nuanced understanding of the barriers to listening improvement.

This research is critical in emphasizing the necessity of a systematic analysis to unpack the multifaceted challenges hindering listening skill development. Systematic analysis not only ensures a rigorous examination of existing literature but also identifies recurring patterns and unique variables that affect listening proficiency. Understanding these factors is vital for developing targeted pedagogical strategies and policy interventions. By addressing the factors that restrain listening skills, this study aims to identify and analyze factors that restrain the improvement of listening skills among English learners by contributing to enhancing learner outcomes, fostering better communication skills, and meeting the increasing demands for English proficiency in a globalized world.

**Research Objective**

To identify and analyze factors that restrain the improvement of listening skills among English learners.

**Research Questions**

1. What are the key factors that restrain the improvement of listening skills among English learners?
2. How do learner-specific (internal) and environmental (external) factors collectively impact the listening skill acquisition of English learners across diverse contexts?
3. What role do pedagogical practices, cultural differences, and technological limitations play in restraining listening skill improvement in English learners?

2. methodology

This study employed a **systematic review** to synthesize findings from existing research on the factors restraining listening skill improvement among English learners. A systematic review is a rigorous approach for identifying, appraising, and synthesizing relevant studies to address specific research questions (Astrid et al., 2024; Holbah & Sharma, 2021). This method ensures a comprehensive understanding of the topic while minimizing bias.

#### ****Data Collection****

The study gathered data from peer-reviewed journal articles using **Google Scholar** as the primary database. Searches were conducted using keywords such as "listening challenges”, "English learners”, "listening skills improvement”, and "EFL barriers”. The focus was on articles published from **2019 to 2024** to ensure relevance and timeliness.

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

The following table outlines the criteria used for selecting studies:

Table 1 : Inclusion and exclusion criteria of the study

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| **Category** | **Inclusion Criteria** | **Exclusion Criteria** |
| **Study Type** | Qualitative studies exploring listening skill challenges | Quantitative studies or mixed-method studies |
| **Document Type** | Peer-reviewed journal articles | Conference papers, book chapters, or unpublished manuscripts |
| **Language** | Articles published in English | Articles in languages other than English |
| **Publication Year** | Studies published between 2019 and 2024 | Studies published before 2019 |
| **Research Context** | Studies focusing on barriers to listening skill improvement in EFL | Studies unrelated to English listening or focusing on other skills |

#### ****Process for Inclusion and Exclusion of Data****

#### *****Initial Search.***** Conducted a search on Google Scholar using defined keywords.

#### *****Screening of Titles and Abstracts.***** Reviewed study titles and abstracts to identify relevance based on inclusion criteria.

#### *****Full-Text Review.***** Accessed the full text of potentially relevant studies to ensure they met all inclusion criteria.

#### *****Quality Appraisal.***** Assessed the methodological quality of the included studies using guidelines from systematic review methodologies (e.g., relevance, rigor, and clarity).

#### *****Exclusion.***** Studies not meeting the inclusion criteria were excluded with reasons documented (e.g., incorrect study type, outdated publication).

#### ****Flow of Inclusion and Exclusion****

#### *****Search Results.*** 19,400** studies retrieved from Google Scholar.

#### *****Title and Abstract Screening.***** Reduced to 5,280 studies based on relevance.

#### **3.***Full-Text Screening.***** Narrowed to 100 studies after excluding non-qualitative research, irrelevant topics, or non-peer-reviewed articles.

#### 4. *****Final Inclusion.***** 30 studies included in the systematic review after quality appraisal and alignment with research objectives.

3. results and discussion

The results and discussions of this study identify a diverse range of factors that hinder the improvement of listening skills among English learners, categori zed into five primary themes: internal challenges, external barriers, pedagogical and instructional issues, sociocultural and contextual factors, and learner autonomy and motivation. Each theme encompasses specific sub-themes and core ideas, revealing the complex interplay between individual learner experiences, environmental influences, and systemic obstacles. A systematic analysis of recent literature (2019-2024) highlights these challenges, emphasizing how they collectively impede listening proficiency development. This comprehensive examination provides a foundation for understanding the multifaceted nature of these barriers and their implications for English language education.

Table 2 : Implications for English language education

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| **Themes** | **Sub-themes** | **Core Ideas** |
| **Internal Challenges** | Vocabulary Deficiency | Students often struggle due to limited vocabulary, which hampers comprehension of listening materials. |
| Listening Anxiety | Emotional barriers like nervousness, lack of confidence, and fear of failure disrupt listening focus and effectiveness. |
| Concentration Issues | Difficulty maintaining attention, often exacerbated by high-speed speech or extended listening sessions. |
| **External Barriers** | Physical Environment | Noisy settings, poor classroom acoustics, and subpar audio equipment hinder listening. |
| Material Challenges | Unfamiliar or monotonous materials, unclear pronunciation, and rapid delivery negatively affect comprehension. |
| Technological Limitations | Unreliable internet connections and outdated devices compromise access to quality resources. |
| **Pedagogical and Instructional Issues** | Teaching Approaches | Inconsistent strategies and lack of preparation by teachers reduce the effectiveness of listening instruction. |
| Inadequate Feedback | Absence of constructive and timely feedback limits learners’ ability to identify and address weaknesses. |
| Curriculum Gaps | Misalignment between classroom practices and assessment strategies leads to a disconnect in learning outcomes. |
| **Sociocultural and Contextual Factors** | Cultural Differences | Accents, unfamiliar speech styles, and culturally specific references create comprehension barriers. |
| Family and Peer Influence | Lack of support from family or peers and negative attitudes toward English learning contribute to demotivation. |
| Time Constraints | Limited practice opportunities in and outside the classroom affect listening proficiency development. |
| **Learner Autonomy and Motivation** | Self-Directed Learning | Limited use of podcasts, movies, or digital platforms reduces opportunities for self-driven skill improvement. |
| Motivational Challenges | Lack of clear goals and reward systems weakens learners’ drive to engage in active listening. |

**Internal Challenges**

***Vocabulary Deficiency.*** Many learners struggle with listening comprehension due to a lack of vocabulary, which makes decoding spoken language difficult. Limited recognition of word sounds and meanings contributes significantly to listening difficulties (Handayani et al., 2023; Syukur & Prasetyo, 2024). These limitations often result in cognitive overload, especially when learners encounter unfamiliar words or fast-paced speech (Adnan et al., 2020).

***Listening Anxiety.*** Anxiety manifests in various forms, including nervousness, low self-confidence, and apprehension about comprehension abilities (Iftanti & Prastiyo, 2021). Such emotional barriers hinder concentration, exacerbating learners' difficulties in understanding spoken English (Astrid et al., 2024).

***Concentration Issues.*** Sustaining attention during listening activities is a common problem. Learners frequently report difficulty focusing during long or complex listening tasks, which can be further complicated by external distractions (Rosa, 2020; Pratama & Nurkhamidah, 2023).

**External Barriers**

***Physical Environment.*** Poor classroom acoustics, background noise, and inadequate audio equipment significantly hinder listening skill development. Noise levels outside classrooms or poor-quality recordings further exacerbate comprehension difficulties (Handayani et al., 2023; Nurkhamidah, 2020).

***Material Challenges.*** Listening materials that are monotonous, overly complex, or culturally irrelevant can demotivate learners. Materials that lack variety and authenticity fail to engage students effectively (Coskun & Uzunyol-Kopru, 2021; Yunus & Damayanti, 2024).

***Technological Limitations.*** Technological challenges, such as unreliable internet connections or inadequate access to digital devices, disrupt virtual or technology-assisted listening exercises (Adnan et al., 2020; Aldina et al., 2020). These issues became particularly pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic when online learning was predominant.

**Pedagogical and Instructional Issues**

***Teaching Approaches.*** Teaching methods that fail to address individual learner needs, such as insufficient preparation for listening activities or lack of exposure to authentic materials, restrain listening improvement. Effective strategies like gamification and multimedia integration have shown promise but remain underutilized (Rahayu, 2024; Yildirim & Karahan, 2023).

***Inadequate Feedback.*** The absence of formative assessments and constructive feedback limits students' opportunities to identify and address their listening weaknesses (Saifullah, 2024; Kabir, 2024).

***Curriculum Gaps.*** Misalignment between curriculum design, teaching practices, and assessment policies, especially the lack of evaluation for listening skills, creates a gap in effective learning (Kabir, 2024).

**Sociocultural and Contextual Factors**

***Cultural Differences.*** Cultural gaps, such as unfamiliar accents and references in spoken English, pose significant barriers to comprehension. Learners often find it challenging to decode speech influenced by diverse cultural contexts (Holbah & Sharma, 2021; Handayani et al., 2023).

***Family and Peer Influence.*** Limited encouragement from family and peers or a negative attitude toward English learning contributes to reduced motivation and support for skill improvement (Coskun & Uzunyol-Kopru, 2021).

***Time Constraints.*** Insufficient time for listening practice, both in and outside the classroom, restricts learners' opportunities to refine their skills (Rosa, 2020).

**Learner Autonomy and Motivation**

***Self-Directed Learning.*** Autonomy in listening practice, such as using podcasts or online resources, is crucial for improving proficiency. However, a lack of guidance and self-regulation prevents many learners from adopting effective self-directed learning strategies (Yunus & Damayanti, 2024).

***Motivational Challenges.*** Low motivation and unclear learning goals hinder sustained effort in listening practice. Studies emphasize the need for motivational strategies, including rewards and positive reinforcement, to keep learners engaged (Pratama & Nurkhamidah, 2023; Saifullah, 2024).

4. Conclusion

This study underscores the multifaceted nature of the challenges that hinder English learners in improving their listening skills. By categorizing these challenges into internal, external, pedagogical, sociocultural, and motivational factors, it offers a holistic understanding of the barriers learners face. The systematic review revealed that limited vocabulary, listening anxiety, and concentration issues are major internal hurdles, while noisy environments, inadequate materials, and technological limitations represent significant external challenges. Furthermore, gaps in teaching strategies, lack of feedback, and cultural influences exacerbate the problem, highlighting the need for context-sensitive and learner-centered approaches.

The findings emphasize the importance of addressing these interconnected factors through targeted interventions. Strategies such as the integration of authentic listening materials, enhancing technological resources, and promoting metacognitive techniques can mitigate these issues. This comprehensive analysis contributes to the growing body of literature on English language education, providing actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers aiming to enhance listening proficiency among learners.

Disclaimer:

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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