STUDYING STUDENTS' ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND SPEECH WITH DIFFERENT SPEEDS, ACCENTS, AND DIALECTS AND FINDING WAYS TO IMPROVE IT

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Annotation

This article examines students' ability to understand spoken English presented at different speeds, accents, and dialects. Listening comprehension is considered one of the most challenging language skills, especially for learners who have limited exposure to authentic speech. The study analyzes common difficulties faced by students in listening activities and identifies factors that influence their comprehension, such as speech rate, pronunciation, and unfamiliar vocabulary. Furthermore, the article discusses practical teaching strategies that can help improve listening skills, including the use of multimedia resources, repeated listening practice, and exposure to various accents. The findings highlight the importance of systematic instruction and supportive classroom environments in developing students' confidence and listening competence.

Key Words: Listening comprehension; speech speed; accents and dialects; listening strategies; authentic materials; EFL learners; communication skills.

Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqolada o'quvchilarning turli tezlik, aksent va dialektlarda berilgan ingliz nutqini tushunish qobiliyati tahlil qilinadi. Tinglab tushunish til o'rganishda eng murakkab ko'nikmalardan biri hisoblanadi, ayniqsa haqiqiy nutq bilan yetarli darajada tanish bo'lmagan o'quvchilar uchun. Tadqiqot tinglash jarayonida o'quvchilar duch keladigan asosiy qiyinchiliklarni hamda tushunishga ta'sir etuvchi omillarni, jumladan nutq tezligi, talaffuz va notanish so'zlarni o'rganadi. Shuningdek, maqolada tinglash ko'nikmalarini rivojlantirishga yordam beradigan samarali o'qitish strategiyalari, masalan, multimedia vositalaridan foydalanish, takroriy tinglash mashqlari va turli aksentlarga muntazam ravishda duch kelish muhokama qilinadi. Natijalar tizimli o'qitish va qo'llab-quvvatlovchi o'quv muhiti o'quvchilarning ishonchi hamda tinglash kompetensiyasini rivojlantirishda muhim rol o'ynashini ko'rsatadi.

Kalit so'zlar: Tinglab tushunish; nutq tezligi; aksentlar va dialektlar; tinglash strategiyalari; autentik materiallar; ingliz tilini chet tili sifatida o'rganuvchilar (EFL o'quvchilari); muloqot ko'nikmalari.

Аннотация

В данной статье рассматривается способность учащихся понимать английскую речь, представленную с различной скоростью, акцентами и диалектами. Аудирование считается одним из наиболее сложных языковых навыков, особенно для обучающихся, имеющих ограниченный опыт восприятия аутентичной речи. В исследовании анализируются основные трудности, с которыми сталкиваются учащиеся при выполнении заданий по аудированию, а также факторы, влияющие на понимание речи, такие как темп речи, произношение и незнакомая лексика. Кроме того, в статье обсуждаются практические педагогические стратегии, направленные на развитие навыков аудирования, включая использование мультимедийных средств, повторное прослушивание и знакомство с различными акцентами. Результаты подчеркивают важность систематического обучения и поддерживающей образовательной среды для формирования уверенности учащихся и развития их навыков слушания.

Ключевые слова: Аудирование; темп речи; акценты и диалекты; стратегии аудирования; аутентичные материалы; изучающие английский язык как иностранный (EFL); коммуникативные навыки.

Introduction

In contemporary language education, listening comprehension is widely acknowledged as a fundamental aspect of communicative competence and a necessary ability for effective language acquisition. Listening is the most important of the four basic language skills—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—because it is the main way that students are exposed to language. Students may find it difficult to participate in discussions, follow directions in the classroom, comprehend lectures, or have meaningful interactions in everyday situations if they lack strong listening skills. As a result, improving listening comprehension skills has emerged as a key goal in contemporary language instruction.

In many educational settings, students are introduced to English through structured classroom instruction where teachers use clear articulation, controlled vocabulary, and relatively slow speech rates to support learners' comprehension. While this instructional approach is beneficial during the early stages of language learning, it often creates a gap between classroom listening experiences and authentic communication outside the classroom. In real-life situations, speech is rarely delivered in a slow and carefully pronounced manner. Instead, natural speech is characterized by variations in speed, rhythm, pronunciation, and vocabulary. These variations may include reduced sounds, connected speech, informal expressions, and regional

pronunciation differences, all of which can create significant challenges for language learners.[1]

Understanding speech differences is more crucial in today's globalized world, when English serves as an international language for education, commerce, travel, and digital communication. Students are likely to interact with persons from many linguistic and cultural backgrounds, each having their own unique pronunciation patterns and speaking styles. As a result, mastering the capacity to understand speech presented at varying speeds, accents, and dialects is critical for effective communication, academic accomplishment, and professional growth.

This study used a mixed-methods research methodology, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies to provide a more complete and triangulated knowledge of learners' listening comprehension performance. The quantitative component assessed students' ability to understand spoken English under a variety of acoustic and linguistic conditions, whereas the qualitative component investigated learners' subjective experiences, perceived difficulties, and cognitive strategies during listening tasks. This dual strategy was used to ensure methodological complementarity and increase the validity of the findings.

The study included 40 intermediate-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students engaged in a university-based language course. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 22 years old, making up a comparable academic group in terms of competence level and educational background. Intermediate learners were chosen specifically because this proficiency level is typically characterized by partial linguistic competence, in which learners can understand structured classroom input but struggle with authentic, variable speech input such as accent diversity and increased speech rate. Participation was optional, and all respondents were told about the study's goal prior to data collection.[2]

Data were collected through two carefully designed instruments aimed at capturing both measurable listening performance and learners' internal cognitive-affective processes.

➔ A **structured listening comprehension assessment** was developed to evaluate participants' ability to process spoken English across systematically manipulated phonological and temporal conditions. The test was designed in alignment with authentic listening variability, ensuring both ecological validity and controlled experimental consistency.[3]

The assessment comprised four audio stimuli, each representing a distinct variation in speech input:

[1] Richards, J. C. (2008). *Teaching Listening and Speaking: From Theory to Practice*. Cambridge University Press
[2] Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge University Press.
[3] Jenkins, J. (2015). *Global Englishes: A resource book for students*. Routledge.

- **Standardized slow speech**, characterized by controlled articulation, reduced speech rate, and simplified lexical density to represent pedagogically adjusted input commonly used in classroom settings.
- **Fast-rate speech**, reflecting natural conversational tempo with reduced pauses and increased phonological reduction, simulating real-life spoken interaction.
- **British English accent**, introduced as a regional phonological variation to examine learners' familiarity with non-native standard accents commonly encountered in global English communication.
- **Mixed-dialect interaction**, involving multiple speakers with differing accents and speech patterns, representing complex communicative environments typical of authentic multilingual discourse.

Following each audio passage, participants completed a set of comprehension questions targeting two levels of understanding: **global comprehension** (identification of main ideas and overall meaning) and **selective comprehension** (retrieval of specific factual details). The test was carefully standardized to maintain comparable linguistic difficulty across all conditions while isolating speech rate and accent as the primary independent variables.

➔ A **post-listening structured questionnaire** was administered immediately after the comprehension assessment to capture learners' cognitive processing experiences and affective responses during the listening tasks. This instrument was designed to complement performance-based data by accessing internal learner variables that cannot be directly measured through test scores alone.

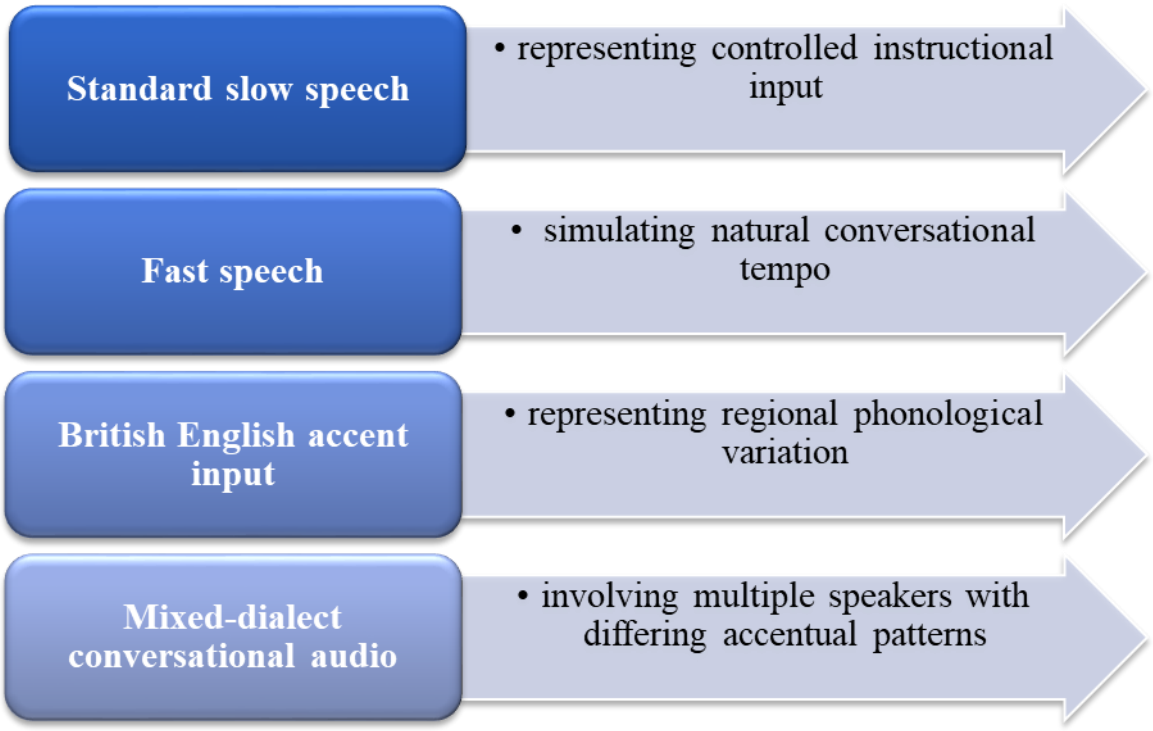
The design of the questionnaire allowed for both quantifiable attitudinal measurement and qualitative insight into learner perceptions. This dual-format structure enhanced the depth of analysis by enabling triangulation between objective performance data and subjective learner experiences, thereby strengthening the overall validity of the study.

The data collection process was carried out in a **controlled classroom environment** to ensure consistency across testing conditions and to minimize potential external influences such as noise, peer interaction, or environmental distractions. This controlled setting was essential for maintaining the reliability and internal validity of the experimental procedures.

All participants completed the **listening comprehension assessment individually** under standardized acoustic conditions. The same audio equipment, playback volume, and instructional guidelines were used for all sessions to eliminate technical variability. Prior to the test, participants received uniform instructions to

ensure that task expectations were clearly understood and consistent across the sample.[4]

The listening assessment was administered in a **fixed and non-randomized sequence**, which was maintained for all participants to preserve procedural consistency and comparability of results. The sequence of audio stimuli was as follows:



The quantitative analysis of the listening comprehension assessment revealed clear performance differences across the four listening conditions: *slow speech, fast-rate speech, British English accent*, and *mixed-dialect interaction*. Students demonstrated the highest comprehension accuracy when listening to standardized slow speech and the lowest performance during mixed-dialect interaction tasks.[5] These findings indicate that both speech rate and accent variability significantly influence listening comprehension outcomes among intermediate-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners.

The listening test results were calculated using percentage scores based on correct responses to **both global comprehension** and **selective comprehension questions**. The comparative analysis demonstrated a gradual decline in comprehension performance as linguistic complexity increased.

Students achieved an average comprehension score of **85%** when listening to ***standardized slow speech***. This condition represented the most familiar listening format for learners because it closely resembled classroom instruction characterized by controlled articulation and reduced speech speed. The high level of performance

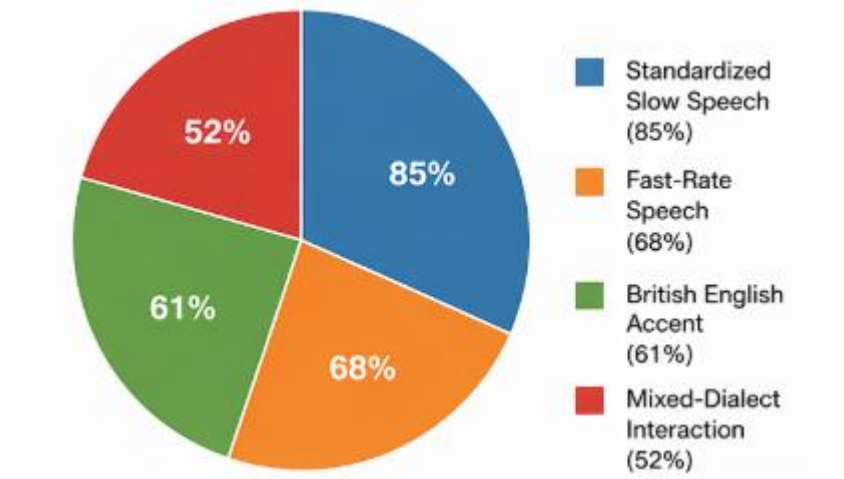
[4] Schmitt, N. (2010). *Researching vocabulary: A vocabulary research manual*. Palgrave Macmillan.
[5] TESOL International Association (research articles) https://www.tesol.org

suggests that students possess sufficient linguistic competence to process carefully structured input when cognitive processing demands remain relatively low.

In contrast, performance decreased to **68%** during ***the fast-rate speech condition***. Many students reported difficulty keeping pace with the rapid delivery of information, particularly when sounds were reduced or words were connected in natural speech patterns. Observation notes indicated that learners frequently missed key lexical items and experienced delays in processing meaning, which led to incomplete comprehension of the overall message.

Further reduction in performance was observed ***in the British English accent condition***, where the average comprehension score reached **61%**. Although British English is widely represented in educational materials, students demonstrated noticeable confusion when encountering unfamiliar vowel sounds, stress patterns, and intonation features. This result suggests that exposure to a single dominant accent in classroom settings may limit learners' ability to adapt to phonological variation.

The lowest performance level was recorded in the ***mixed-dialect interaction condition***, with an average comprehension score of **52%**. This listening task involved multiple speakers with different accents and speech styles, simulating authentic communicative environments. Students reported significant cognitive overload during this condition, as they were required to adjust continuously to changing pronunciation patterns and speech rhythms. The results confirm that listening comprehension becomes more challenging as linguistic variability increases.[6]



A more detailed analysis revealed that students performed better on **global comprehension tasks** than on **selective comprehension tasks** across all listening conditions. Global comprehension questions required learners to identify the main idea or general meaning of the listening passage, while selective comprehension questions focused on specific details such as numbers, names, or factual information.

The average ***accuracy rate for global comprehension tasks*** was **72%**, whereas ***selective comprehension accuracy*** averaged **63%**. This pattern indicates that students

[6] **Flowerdew, J. & Miller, L. (2005)** *Second Language Listening: Theory and Practice*. Cambridge University Press.

were generally able to understand the overall message but struggled to process detailed information in real time. The difference between these two performance levels suggests that cognitive processing limitations, rather than vocabulary knowledge alone, play a significant role in listening difficulties.

Classroom observations further supported this finding. During listening activities, students often demonstrated an ability to summarize the general topic of a conversation but failed to recall precise details when asked follow-up questions. This behavior reflects the natural tendency of learners to prioritize meaning over accuracy when processing complex auditory input.[7]

The questionnaire results provided valuable insight into learners' subjective experiences during the listening tasks. When asked to rate the difficulty level of each listening condition on a five-point scale, students consistently identified fast speech and mixed-dialect interaction as the most challenging listening scenarios.

Approximately **78%** of participants reported that ***fast speech*** created significant comprehension difficulties due to limited processing time. Students explained that they often understood individual words but could not connect them quickly enough to form a coherent message.[8] Similarly, **82%** of participants identified ***mixed-dialect interaction*** as highly challenging because they were unfamiliar with the pronunciation patterns used by different speakers.

In contrast, only **21%** of participants reported difficulty understanding ***slow speech***, confirming that controlled speech rate significantly reduces cognitive load during listening tasks.

Analysis of open-ended questionnaire responses revealed several **recurring listening difficulties** experienced by students across different speech conditions. The most frequently reported challenges included:

- Difficulty recognizing words in fast speech
- Confusion caused by unfamiliar pronunciation patterns
- Limited ability to distinguish connected speech sounds
- Loss of concentration during long listening passages
- Anxiety when encountering unfamiliar accents
- Dependence on repetition to understand meaning

These findings highlight the complex interaction between linguistic knowledge and cognitive processing skills in listening comprehension.

The analysis of the collected data indicates that students' listening comprehension abilities are significantly influenced by variations in speech speed, accent, and dialect. The findings demonstrate a clear relationship between linguistic complexity and comprehension performance, confirming that as speech becomes faster

[7] Munro, M. J., & Derwing, T. M. (2005). "Foreign accent, comprehensibility, and intelligibility."
[8] British Council TeachingEnglish (listening strategies & research) https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk

and more variable, learners experience increased difficulty in processing spoken information. These results are consistent with established theories in second language acquisition, which emphasize the role of exposure, processing capacity, and familiarity in successful listening comprehension.[9]

One of the most notable findings of the study was the strong performance observed in the standardized slow speech condition. Students achieved the highest comprehension scores in this listening format, suggesting that controlled speech rate and clear articulation support effective processing of auditory input. This outcome reflects the typical structure of classroom instruction, where teachers intentionally modify their speech to facilitate understanding. While this approach is beneficial for developing foundational listening skills, the results indicate that excessive reliance on simplified input may limit learners' readiness for authentic communication environments.

In contrast, the decrease in performance during the fast-rate speech condition highlights the importance of processing speed in listening comprehension. Rapid speech requires learners to recognize sounds quickly, identify word boundaries, and interpret meaning in real time.[10]

Many participants reported difficulty following the pace of natural speech, particularly when phonological reduction and connected speech patterns were present. These findings suggest that students may possess sufficient vocabulary knowledge but lack the automatic processing skills necessary to manage time pressure during listening tasks. Therefore, listening instruction should include gradual exposure to faster speech rates in order to strengthen learners' auditory processing efficiency.

The results obtained from the British English accent condition further demonstrate the impact of phonological variation on listening comprehension. Although students are frequently exposed to standard forms of English in textbooks and classroom recordings, unfamiliar pronunciation features can still create confusion and misunderstanding. Differences in vowel quality, stress placement, and intonation patterns may reduce intelligibility for learners who have limited experience with diverse accents. This observation supports the view that listening competence is not solely determined by grammatical knowledge but also by phonological flexibility and perceptual adaptation.[11]

The lowest comprehension scores recorded in the mixed-dialect interaction condition provide additional evidence of the cognitive demands associated with authentic communication. Listening to multiple speakers with varying accents and speech styles requires learners to continuously adjust their perception and

[9] Rost, M. (2011). *Teaching and Researching Listening* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
[10] Vandergrift, L., & Goh, C. C. M. (2012). *Teaching and Learning Second Language Listening*. Routledge.
[11] Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D., & Goodwin, J. (2010). *Teaching Pronunciation*. Cambridge University Press.

interpretation processes. This constant adjustment increases cognitive load and may lead to temporary breakdowns in comprehension. The findings suggest that students need systematic training in handling linguistic variability in order to function effectively in real-life communication settings.

Another important pattern identified in the study was the difference between global and selective comprehension performance. Students demonstrated greater success in identifying the main idea of a listening passage than in recalling specific details. This pattern indicates that learners tend to focus on overall meaning rather than precise information when processing spoken language. From a cognitive perspective, this behavior reflects the limited capacity of working memory, which requires listeners to prioritize essential information while filtering out less important details. Consequently, listening instruction should include activities that develop both general understanding and detailed listening skills.

The qualitative data collected through questionnaires and classroom observations provided valuable insight into students' emotional and cognitive responses during listening tasks. Many participants reported feelings of anxiety and frustration when confronted with unfamiliar accents or rapid speech.[12] These emotional reactions may reduce concentration and negatively affect listening performance. However, repeated exposure to varied listening materials appeared to increase learners' confidence and willingness to engage in challenging listening activities. This finding emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive learning environment that encourages persistence and gradual skill development.

Conclusion

The present study examined students' ability to understand spoken English delivered at different speeds, accents, and dialects and explored practical ways to improve listening comprehension. The findings revealed that listening performance is strongly affected by linguistic variability, particularly changes in speech rate and pronunciation patterns. Students demonstrated the highest level of comprehension when listening to slow and clearly articulated speech, while performance decreased significantly when speech became faster or when multiple accents and dialects were introduced. These results confirm that listening comprehension remains a challenging skill for many learners, especially when they have limited exposure to authentic spoken language.

From a pedagogical perspective, the results emphasize the need for systematic and balanced listening instruction in language classrooms. Teachers should incorporate diverse listening materials that represent real-life communication, including different accents, speech speeds, and conversational styles. In addition, explicit training in

[12] Cambridge University Press ELT research https://www.cambridge.org/elt

listening strategies—such as predicting meaning, identifying key information, and using contextual clues—can help students manage listening difficulties more effectively. Providing regular opportunities for guided listening practice can strengthen learners' processing skills and prepare them for authentic communication situations.

In short, developing students' ability to understand speech with different speeds, accents, and dialects is essential for successful communication in modern multilingual environments. By integrating varied listening experiences, structured practice, and supportive learning environments, educators can help learners become more confident, flexible, and competent listeners in both academic and everyday communication contexts.[13]

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