

## The Impact of Cultural Background on Listening Comprehension of Saudi EFL Students

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### Abstract

One of the most critical areas where considerable attention is required in teaching a foreign language involves listening skills. Listening plays an essential role in both communication and learning, and it is one of the most crucial necessary language skills in the field of language learning. Recent studies in foreign language listening have extensively focused on the prevailing difficulties of listening. There has been little research on the cultural- background as a sociolinguistic dimension of listening. Therefore, this study set out to determine whether Saudi EFL students face particular difficulty in their listening comprehension, to identify possible reasons for the problems, and to find out whether the cultural- background affects the listening process. To achieve these objectives, a triangulation method was followed. A diagnostic test and a questionnaire were used on a group of 31 Saudi students of English and a reflective essay was carried out on eight EFL teachers. The findings suggest, first, that listening is the most challenging language skill and, second, that Saudi EFL students encounter substantial difficulty in the perception, parsing, and utilization phases of their listening comprehension for many reasons. The findings also suggest that the cultural background has a significant effect on their listening process. This study is expected to contribute markedly towards increasing the understanding of listening difficulties in language learning, and improving the teaching-learning process, by recommending effective remedies for addressing such challenges.

**Keywords:** Cultural background, English language teaching, language learning, listening comprehension problems, Saudi students

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## Introduction

In Saudi Arabia, English is taught as a foreign language (FL). At the tertiary level, students must pass English as a core subject during a preparatory year in which they undergo an intensive English program. Although English is regarded as the language of 'science and technology, business, industry and commerce', Saudi Arabian students do not generally pay sufficient attention to its importance as an international language (Ur Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). Instead, it is viewed as a mandatory subject for proceeding to the next level of education.

According to the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education, one of the main objectives of teaching English is to enable students "to acquire basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing)" (Ur Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013, p. 114). With this goal, students can benefit linguistically from interacting with individuals in English-speaking nations. This can enhance global collaboration, expanding the understanding of and respect for international intellectual and cultural differences. To achieve this goal, the government of Saudi Arabia made various initiatives to improve the proficiency level of the English language in the country. The educational reform efforts resulted in establishing 'the language preparatory year programs' in 2006 to further advance the English proficiency of Saudi students. As a matter of follow-up-process, the curriculum was then changed three times to meet the students' levels. Despite the reform efforts of local education authorities in the kingdom, English education has remained irregular (Al-shumaimeri, 2003; Fareh, 2010; Hussain, Albasher, & Salam, 2016). This irregularity might be attributed to the fact that English in Saudi Arabia is highly influenced by economic, social, and religious factors. Although the Saudi government has hardly worked to increase the use of English in its institutions to meet the globalization and modernization policies, English remains resisted due to cultural and religious beliefs (Elyas & Mahboob, 2017).

A particular important skill that has suffered from education reform inconsistencies is listening (Al-Nasser, 2015). It is a crucial skill that should be focused on teaching a FL. Listening plays an essential role in both communication and learning. It is one of the most vital necessary language skills in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) and learning. Previous research has confirmed that listening is the most widely used language skill in daily interaction (Rost, 2002). In addition to being the first skill acquired through all spoken languages, listening is also the key to learning a FL or second language (L2) quickly and efficiently. Undoubtedly, speakers cannot communicate effectively without receiving information accurately. Therefore, focusing on listening as a receptive or passive skill is the first concept upon which teachers and learners should focus during language learning. Moreover, listening naturally develops more rapidly than in the other three language skills (Oxford, 1990; Al-khresheh, Khaerurozikin, & Zaid, 2020).

Concerning the time spent on communication, studies have revealed that listening consumes more daily communication time than other communicative skills, accounting for approximately forty to fifty percent of the total time spent. This confirms that listening is the most frequently used classroom skill, and is also one of the most challenging components of language acquisition. Without adequate listening skills, FL/L2 learners are less likely to communicate effectively, given the complexities of learning and recognizing the sounds, rhythms, intonations, and stresses of the target language (TL). Listening is consistently interconnected with all the other language skills in that it is the basis for developing and improving such skills and for stimulating

consciousness during human language development. Accordingly, listening forms the basis for ultimately achieving language proficiency (Gilbert, 1988; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992; Mendelsohn, 1995 & 1998; Morley, 1991; Graham, 2006; Graham & Macaro, 2008; Renukadevi, 2014; Kassem, 2015).

In contrast to reading, writing, and speaking, listening is believed to be relatively more difficult for FL/L2 learners, because it involves interpreting, understanding, evaluating, and memorizing. Since listening is one of the most difficult language skills, FL learners are expected to face significant barriers to acquiring proficient listening comprehension. As Hamouda (2013) observed, some university departmental syllabi focus more on English grammar, reading, and vocabulary than on listening; moreover, FL/L2 teachers typically pay more attention to teaching reading, speaking, and writing. This might be due to the fact that many curricula and textbooks inadequately cover listening skills. Similarly, Renukadevi (2014) confirmed that “listening is not yet fully integrated into the curriculum and needs to be given more attention in a language learning setting” (p. 60).

In light of such studies, the present study sets out to confirm the importance of listening to learning a new language. More specifically, listening plays a crucial role in helping language learners acquire vocabulary and correct pronunciation because there is a strong correlation between vocabulary and listening. Listeners might recognize 50% of the words in a passage and make use of them unintentionally while trying to understand the meaning (Paran, 1996; Milton, Wade & Hopkins, 2010; Nowrouzi, Tam, Zareian, & Nimehchisalem, 2015). Improving vocabulary always involves the receptive skills of listening and reading. Even if language learners mostly listen and read, acquiring the correct pronunciations of new vocabulary words can help them construct new sentences (Al-khresheh & Al-Ruwaili, 2020). The most important consideration in language learning is knowing what, where, when, to whom, and how to listen. This study suggests that apprising FL/L2 teachers of the difficulties of listening comprehension helps them to develop instructional listening strategies more effectively.

Although listening in language teaching has recently received exceptional focus due to technological devices that support and enhance language learners' listening skills, research on the specific listening problems encountered by Saudi EFL learners is limited. The insufficiency of research on Saudi EFL learners' listening skills has been noticeably acknowledged by several researchers who have declared that despite the prominent role of listening in language acquisition, it has not received adequate attention. This prompts research on the listening problems of EFL learners. Therefore, the present study sought to fill this gap through an in-depth investigation of listening problems by Saudi EFL students. In particular, the study aimed, first, at ascertaining whether Saudi EFL students face difficulty in their perception, parsing, and utilization phases of their listening comprehension and, second, identifying possible reasons for the problems to provide appropriate solutions. The study also aimed to determine whether the cultural background has any significant effect on their listening comprehension. To achieve these objectives, one instrumentation was carried out on eight EFL teachers and two instrumentations were used on a group of Saudi EFL students who live in a traditional, conservative, and family-oriented society where religion plays a highly significant role in shaping its culture.

In light of the above objectives, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- [1] Do Saudi EFL students face difficulty in their perception, parsing, and utilization phases of their listening comprehension?
- [2] What are the possible reasons for the low achievement of Saudi EFL students in their listening comprehension?
- [3] Does the cultural background of Saudi EFL students have any significant effect on their listening comprehension?

## Literature Review

### *Listening Comprehension*

There are four essential dimensions of the listening-comprehension process that reliably describe listening: physiological, psychological, sociological, and communicative (Wolvin, 2010). Given the breadth of these components, researchers of listening skills have approached the topic from myriad perspectives. To point, consider the range of descriptions that concern listening comprehension. As Goss (1982) stated, listening is the process of understanding what is heard and organizing it into specific lexical components of which meaning may be determined. Nowrouzi et al. (2015) indicated that applying listening skills to an FL requires understanding the accents of various speakers. This means that an active listener can understand pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary simultaneously. In 1997, Purdy proposed a new definition of listening as receiving, constructing meaning, and responding to verbal and, or nonverbal messages. Rost (2002) asserted that listening is a receptive process that entails creating, representing, negotiating, and responding to what a speaker says. Steinberg (2007) presented a different definition of listening, claiming that it is the individual ability to use the auditory sense for deriving meaning and understanding from a message. Richards and Schmidt (2010) stated that listening comprehension is

the process of understanding speech in a first or second language. The study of listening comprehension processes in second language learning focuses on the role of individual linguistic units (e.g. phonemes, words, grammatical structures) as well as the role of the listener's expectations, the situation and context, background knowledge and the topic. (p. 344)

Finally, Jafari and Hashim (2015) defined listening as a channel for receiving understandable and explicable input, indicating that it is the most used skill and, therefore, needs the most attention in learning and teaching an EFL.

According to Rost (2002), the variety of definitions that researchers have proposed might be due to two main explanations. First, there is a general and individual propensity among researchers to define listening. The second explanation involves the discrete characteristics of listening. According to definitions as mentioned earlier, listening in oral communication generally means trying to derive meaning from uttered sounds or comprehending the spoken language of native speakers efficiently. In other words, listening comprehension is a conscious and dynamic process wherein the listener builds meaning concerning cues, commencing with existing knowledge based on compound tactical resources to accomplish the required task.

### ***Teaching Listening***

Listening involves three main types of activities in language learning: pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening. Pre-listening activities generally entail two significant goals, starting with activating students' prior knowledge of the language to clarify and develop their expectations and assumptions of what they are going to hear, followed by providing the environment necessary for completing the involved listening task. Building on prior knowledge can give background information on the speakers, the main topic, and the ideas and vocabulary embedded in the text, thereby stimulating students' interest. Such activities require well-constructed questions by language teachers to utilize the language components necessary to comprehend the text. Simply put, this stage helps students prepare to listen. Besides, teachers should be familiar with the challenges that students might face, such as accents, slang, vocabulary, and colloquialisms (Kazouz, 2014; Rajaei, 2015; Underwood, 1989).

Contemporary scholarship on the pre-listening stage has concluded that teachers must make specific preparations before students begin listening to the material that will be used during the lesson. First, teachers should set up the listening activity by offering students a brief glance of the listening text to activate their prior knowledge and connect it to the context, thus allowing them to predict what they are going to hear. Second, allowing learners to preview the material (e.g., a worksheet) is crucial. In general, a listening track in language learning should be accompanied by a worksheet that matches the students' English proficiency level. Because their students are learning a new language, teachers should first be familiar with the description of each level and take into account that the sounds, vocabulary, and grammar of English might be unlike anything they know in their mother tongue. In this case, the natural approach might work effectively because its main focus is on listening and speaking. Accordingly, speech production comes gradually and is certainly not compulsory (Alkhresheh, 2016; Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Hamouda, 2013; Nation, 2006).

There are three cognitive models for the pre-listening process: bottom-up, top-down, and interactive processing. First, a bottom-up pre-listening activity focuses mainly on pre-teaching the grammar and vocabulary, which are primarily related to the listening track. Second, a top-down activity focuses on students' prior knowledge to comprehend listening text. This activity involves prompting students to remember what they might know about the topic. For instance, if the listening track occurs in a zoo, the students could be asked what people see and do in a zoo or what animals they might see. Keeping the pre-listening activities brief is optimal. Third, interactive listening activities can be conducted in a communicative context, wherein the listener assumes the role of a participant or an addressee to discuss the meaning or to ask for explanations. This can assist teachers in achieving the main objective of student interaction, which shapes discourse and helps solve communication problems (Chiu, 2006; Kurita, 2012; Rajaei, 2015; Renukadevi, 2014; Richards, 2008; Rost, 2005; Zohrabi & Sabouri, 2015)

While-listening activities are generally conducted for centering students' intellectual capacity for the speaker's language along with organizational patterns. This can give students more confidence to use language, react and respond to the speaker's ideas and perform the involved task. Accordingly, students should listen to both the general idea and specific details to make necessary inferences. Generally, students should listen to the text at least three times. The first time helps



them comprehend the general idea and confirm the accuracy of their predictions, thereby assisting them in setting up an initial framework to catch further information in subsequent listening. The second and third times allow them to obtain specific details of the text. Accordingly, teachers should be able to differentiate between two listening models at the while-listening stage, namely, holistic and segmental listening. Since the former involves students listening to the complete text so that they can use appropriate strategies and build listening stamina, the latter model should follow the holistic one because it is related to particular segments of the listening text. Specifically, there are different stages of speech perception: recognizing message sounds, identifying sounds, storing the aural message in long-term memory, and retaining for later use (Kazouz, 2014; Long & Tanh, 2016; Richards, 2005; Underwood, 1989; Zohrabi & Sabouri, 2015).

In post-listening activities, knowledge obtained from listening is targeted for improving the productive skills of speaking and writing. Simply put, this listening stage allows for further learning of vocabulary along with structures, and for engaging students in a two-way discussion to confirm that they have understood the text. Its purpose is to take students further than the listening text can by letting them practice what they have gained and explore what they have trouble understanding. At this stage, they can understand more clearly the words, phrases, and sentences that they could not understand while listening (Eltayeb, 2017; Long & Tanh, 2016; Underwood, 1989).

### *Classification of Listening Problems*

According to the cognitive theoretical framework of listening comprehension proposed by Anderson (1995), the three phases of listening comprehension are perception, parsing and utilization. According to Buck (2001) and Nowrouzi et al. (2015), all listening difficulties can occur during these phases. Previous studies have reported that a cognitive framework is practical for understanding language learners' listening problems because "it pinpoints those places in cognitive processing where comprehension can break down" (Goh, 2000, p. 57). Such knowledge can facilitate understanding the challenges that FL/L2 learners contend with in their listening comprehension (Anderson, 1995; Goh, 2000; Hu, 2009; Sun & Li, 2008; Vandergrift, 2003; Zhang & Zhang, 2011). Throughout a particular listening event, phases mentioned above can coincide because they are interconnected and heuristic.

Anderson (1995) stated that perceptual processing is the first stage concerned with encoding the aural message once the listener receives the stimuli. The listener might encounter segmental phonemes retained in echoic memory for the subsequent stage of processing. According to Goh (2000), listening problems related to the perception phase might be because learners "do not recognize words they knew; neglect the next part when thinking about meaning; [cannot] chunk streams of speech; miss the beginning of texts; and concentrate too hard or [are] unable to concentrate" (p. 59). During the previous phase, low language proficiency seems to cause lexical and phonological problems (Goh, 1999; Nowrouzi et al., 2015). Nation (2006) clarified the strong relationship between vocabulary and listening, claiming that roughly 6,000–7,000 vocabulary words are necessary for a language learner to comprehend 98% of authentic discourse.

The second stage of cognitive processing is parsing, where what is heard can be transformed "into a mental representation of the combined meaning of [the] audio or visual

stimuli” (Zhang & Zhang, 2011, p. 165). This mental representation is associated with the knowledge stored in long-term memory. Parsing takes place once an utterance is segmented by syntactic structures to create a meaningful representation. Accordingly, EFL/L2 learners might encounter syntactic and semantic problems. At the stage of utilization, completing the interpretation to make it more meaningful requires the listener to accumulate different inferences. Ockey (2007) and Nowrouzi et al. (2015) reported that practical and discoursal problems are highly common at this stage, adding that practical problems are expected to occur because of the learner fails to comprehend the intentional implications, despite understanding the meanings of the words. In contrast, discoursal issues are generally due to an inability to realize the flow of ideas in the involved dialogue.

### ***Culture and Language Learning***

People around the world come from varied cultural backgrounds and speak different languages. While culture and language may seem distinct, there is an entangled mutual relationship between them. Language is a defining characteristic of culture and plays an integral role in its creation. When outsiders interact with a language, they are interacting with its culture. Understanding a person’s culture without knowledge of their language is infeasible. Language is not just a product of culture, it is also an important symbol. Language and culture develop reciprocally, with customs, cognition, and other cultural patterns being overtly coded into language (Lustig & Koester, 2010; Rallis & Casey, 2005)

The inability to understand social behaviors and cultural settings of a language may result in breakdowns, errors, misunderstandings, and misinterpretations during communication. Language is not just about receiving or sending information, it also maintains appropriate social behaviors in a culture. Communication and culture are two branches of the same tree. Culture dictates both the path and the form that communication takes – a message cannot be understood without knowledge of one’s culture (Emitt & Komesaroff, 2003; Wang, 2011).

Cultural differences involving speakers and listeners may possibly create communication barriers. Such differences comprise variations in vocabulary, accents, confusion regarding roles, and assumptions regarding shared data. Therefore, an effective communicator understands the cultural biases inherent to them. Exercising empathy, a focus on content, and suspending arbitrary judgments can alleviate such biases effectively (Garcia, 2002; Samovar, Porter, & Jain, 1981).

Lustig and Koester (2010) indicated that cultures have unique communication patterns that restrict effective listening if listeners are unaware of appropriate language patterns. Comprehending culture properly endows every word with the right context and meaning. Knowledge of a language’s sociocultural background makes it easier to learn new expressions, words, and speaking methods. Besides, understanding the role of culture is crucial for successful communication with native speakers. It increases engagement levels and promotes thinking in foreign languages. Understanding the lifestyles of native people personalizes the language, making it easier to learn the language (Diaz, 2001).

Knowing your counterpart’s culture enables you to speak eloquently. Instead of translating phrases developed in one’s native language, you can think, speak, use appropriate words within

the right context in the foreign language. For instance, certain concepts only make sense in English, which do not translate accordingly into other languages. But by understanding a language and its sociocultural context, you can develop alternative phrases to express them. Understanding the cultural background of a language, including lifestyle, literature, art, and other factors, makes you proficient in it. Without culture, only garbled machine translations remain, forcing people to use the language mechanically (Hayati, 2009; Namaziandost, Sabzevari, & Hashemifardnia, 2018).

### ***Previous Studies on Listening Problems***

Numerous studies have addressed the issue of listening problems encountered by EFL/L2 learners. Underwood (1989) declared that "many English language learners believe that the greatest difficulty with listening comprehension is that the listener cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks" (p. 16). In a study on a group of Omani EFL learners conducted to assess their knowledge in listening comprehension, Higgins (1997) identified three main factors that might hinder or enhance listening: pronunciation, vocabulary, and speech rate. Similarly, Hasan (2000) and Buck (2001) have cited almost the same difficulties that can be mitigated in listening tasks: unfamiliar words, different accents, and complex grammatical structures. Batel (2014) asserted that Saudi EFL learners' listening comprehension might be improved if teachers focus on video utilization rather than the audio one.

Goh (2000) identified ten listening issues through a triangulation method of three self-reported sources: listening diaries, oral reports, and recall protocols. Following the cognitive theoretical framework of language comprehension by Anderson (1995), 50% of the problems were perceptual, but the remaining problems were due to parsing and utilization.

In another study, Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) reviewed the factors that affect EFL learners' listening comprehension. The most important outcomes of this study are as follows: First, the most effective way to teach listening is by creating a right environment that encourages listening. Second, teachers should be well prepared, and textbooks should ideally guide teachers by providing suggestions, strategies, and various activities.

Hamouda (2013) and Bingol, Celik, Yildiz, & Mart (2014) confirmed that teaching listening comprehension is replete with difficulties that are worth addressing. They revealed that many schools focus excessively on the skills of reading and writing while paying little attention to listening. The fact is that some teachers believe listening skills develop naturally. They also confirmed that understanding listening problems allows English instructors to assist their students in developing effective listening strategies.

Various English learners with diverse linguistic backgrounds encounter multiple problems in listening and that such problems should be solved. Listening comprehension was considered the weakest of the four language skills. It might be affected by factors such as a lack of background information and sufficient listening materials, poor quality of listening equipment, speech rate, proficiency level, and teacher training. The difficulty of recognizing and understanding grammatical structures could be due to a lack of interest. Researchers recommended that vocabulary building, improving syllabi, and providing appropriate English labs can help resolve such problems (Kazouz, 2014; Nowrouzi et al., 2015; Assaf, 2015; Eltayeb, 2017).



To summarise, a review of the literature confirms that listening in language acquisition is a worthy topic of research. The current study adopted the cognitive theoretical framework of language listening comprehension proposed by Anderson (1995). Moreover, the study also used two methods: a diagnostic test, to affirm that Saudi EFL students experience difficulty in applying their listening skills, and a reliable and valid questionnaire, to explore the three listening phases of perception, parsing, and utilization. These listening phases were not investigated in the Saudi context. Therefore, the focus of the study was on Saudi students, who face considerable difficulty in English learning. Unlike other FL students from the same or diverse linguistic backgrounds, Saudi EFL students are different because of the cultural environment in which they live in, where Islam is the only religion, and in which Arabic is the first and official language. According to Alrashidi and Phan (2015), English in Saudi Arabia was influenced by political, cultural and religious factors. Accordingly, Saudi EFL students do not start learning English in the kindergarten stage. Instead, they start at very late stages (at the age of 14). Elyas and Picard (2010) pointed out that Arabic is hugely valued by Saudi people because of its holiness as the language of a religion. As a matter of language maintenance, they avoid introducing it in the early stages of a child's education. For a long period, English, in Saudi Arabia, used to be taught merely in the intermediary and secondary school stages. Moreover, the number of English classes has been quite limited (e.g., four classes per week), taking into account that Saudi Arabia is a monolingual country; therefore, the only way to practice English is inside classrooms (Alhajailan, 2009). Besides, the Arabian Saudi culture and the English ones are different. The former is a conservative one while the latter is more open-minded. All the English curricula presented in the Saudi context reflect the cultural aspects of western societies. Hussain et al. (2016) revealed that separating culture from language makes the language learning process as a matter of difficulty. In the words of Alrashidi and Phans (2015), the current English listening curricula do not reflect the factual aspiration of the Muslim nation since they are designed based on western culture which is utterly far-off from Islamic principles. Most Saudi university departmental syllabi provide one or two listening courses during the four years of a bachelor's degree. This was acknowledged by Hamouda (2013) and Renukadevi (2014), who stated that listening had not been included in the Saudi English curricula until recently. All of these mentioned factors can be considered an appropriate motivation for choosing Saudi EFL students as subjects for this study.

### **Research Methodology**

The research methodology used in this study followed a cross-sectional research design for generalizing the results to the whole population of the study. Besides, it requires less time and is less demanding for subjects than other methodologies, thereby facilitating successful completion.

### ***The Subjects***

The study comprised a group of Saudi EFL students and teachers at Northern Border University. All the students were English majors between 19 and 36 years of age. To investigate the main problems that Saudi male EFL students confront in applying listening skills, a sample of 31 sophomore students were selected during the second academic semester of 2018–2019. Eight EFL teachers were also involved in this study.

The subjects of this study started learning English in the seventh grade, which means that they had already been learning English for seven years. Also, they had received a university

intensive English program for a year, which is intended to be preparatory and is compulsory for all students. Accordingly, all Northern Border University students are expected to master the four language skills in English, regardless of their major. The subjects had already passed the entrance exam. They had taken two listening courses, which were the only courses available, according to their English programme syllabus.

### *Instruments*

In contrast to previous studies where only one instrument was used to gather data, the current study used a triangulation method that included three tools for achieving the research objectives. Buck (2001) elucidated that “one useful way of focusing on what particular tasks are measuring is to identify the necessary information” (p. 129). A diagnostic listening test and a closed-ended questionnaire were administered to 31 students to ascertain whether Saudi EFL students confront difficulty in their perception, parsing, and utilization phases of their listening comprehension and, second, identifying possible reasons for the problems. To determine whether the cultural background has any significant effect on their listening comprehension, eight EFL teachers, who teach the same subjects, were asked to write a reflective essay on how the cultural background may affect the subjects' listening comprehension. Data obtained from this instrumentation was analyzed qualitatively.

The diagnostic test entailed a short conversation by native English speakers. The approximately two-minute dialogue was an excerpt from Gillett's (2004) *Speak English Like an American*, accompanied by an audio CD containing all the dialogues written in the book. Gillett wrote and designed the manual to address listening concerns and help EFL/L2 students improve their pronunciation. She asserted that pronunciation could not be enhanced unless listening skills are mastered. The diagnostic test is multiple-choice with ten items that assess students' knowledge of listening skills. The test was selected based on the researcher's familiarity with the participating students' academic levels. The conversation was chosen because of its appropriateness to the subjects' cultural and religious beliefs.

The second instrument used for assessing the subjects' ability was a closed-ended questionnaire designed to determine processing problems in listening comprehension. The 'Listening Comprehension Processing Problems Questionnaire' comprises a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = usually, and 5 = always. This scale is used to measure the level of difficulty encountered by subjects during listening comprehension. It was developed based on related literature and theory, and its validity and reliability have been established by Goh (2000), Noorzi, Tam, Nimehchisalem, and Zareian (2014), and Nowrouzi et al. (2015). The questionnaire contains 23 items divided into three groups. The first ten items cover subjects' perception problems, items 11 to 17 address parsing problems, and items 18 to 23 involve utilization problems.

Both instruments were used on a group of 31 students over two days. On the first day, the students were given ten minutes to review the test. The audio recording was then played three times, and the students were asked to listen carefully and complete the multiple-choice test. They were also given five minutes to review their answers. On the second day, after the test was marked and analyzed, the students were given back their test papers and a discussion between the

researcher and his subjects was carried out. Afterward, the questionnaire was administered to the subjects. The primary purpose of administering the questionnaire on the second day was, first, to give the students a chance to review their marks on the test and, second, to discuss their low achievement candidly on the test, thus increasing their awareness of the importance of listening and the main factors that affected them in taking the test and during their English learning in general. Such an approach to administering a questionnaire can encourage subjects to complete the questionnaire honestly.

### Data Analysis and Discussion

A descriptive statistical method was applied to analyzing the data by using Microsoft Office Excel. The percentages, means, and standard deviations were provided. The overall rates of their English proficiency are compared in Figure one, where the mean is 2.97 and the standard deviation is 0.61.

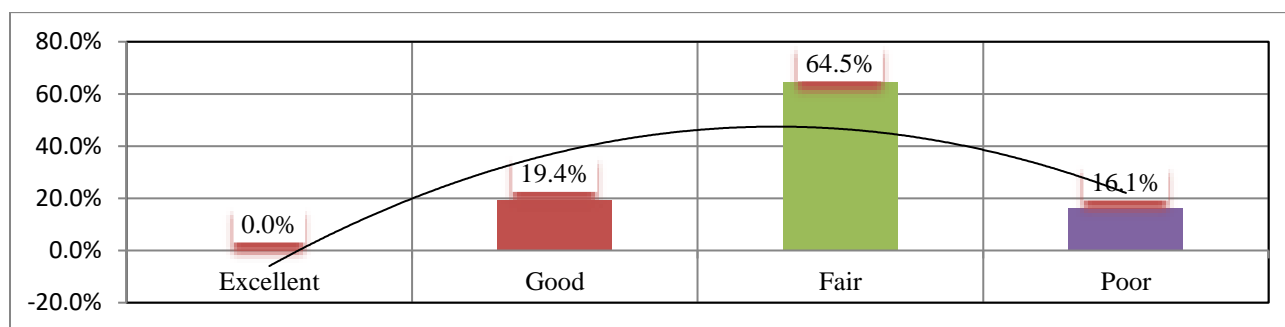


Figure 1. English proficiency-based students' self-rating

Figure one shows that more than half of the subjects rated themselves as fair at English, whereas only 19.4% considered their overall English proficiency to be good. The percentages of the remainder of the subjects who rated themselves as poor and excellent were 16.1% and 0%, respectively. The percentage of 80.6% comprising fair and poor indicates that the subjects had severe problems in their English language learning. Possible explanations for this rating are the subjects' previous experience in using English, insufficient FL exposure because of Arabic being the only language used in their local environments, inadequately trained language teachers, and inappropriate teaching methods, curricula, and syllabi. Thus, this rating that indicates fair and poor can be considered a proper motivation for this study.

Figure two below presents the overall rates of the four English skills, as reported by the subjects. It shows that the subjects faced difficulties in applying all their English skills. The figure indicates that the poorest skill was listening, with a percentage of 51.6%, followed by speaking and writing skills. Proportionately, a low percentage of them (12.9%) rated themselves as good at listening, whereas 32.3% of them deemed themselves fair at listening. This supports our claim that listening is a difficult task and Saudi EFL students face particular difficulty in their listening skills. Figure two also demonstrates that a great portion of the subjects rated themselves as fair at all language skills. Generally, listening seemed to be slightly difficult for the subjects because of their inability to transfer their L1 to the L2. It is well known that FL/L2 learners tend to transfer certain structures from their L1 to the L2 to facilitate their language learning process (Al-khresheh, 2015).

Other explanations might be a lack of interest, concentration, or motivation; different pronunciation and accents; or the speech rate.

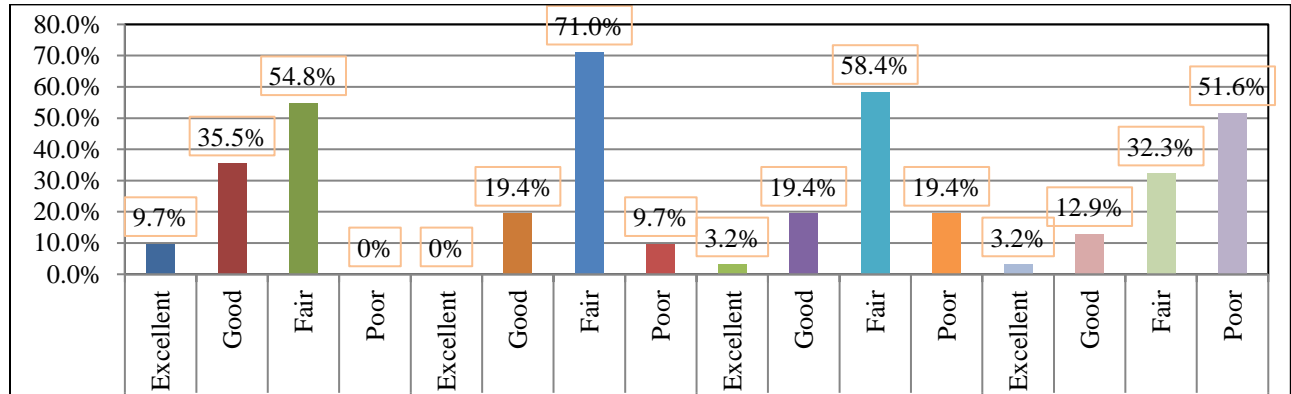


Figure 2. English skills-based students' self-rating

**The Diagnostic Test**

The analysis of the diagnostic test revealed that the subjects contended with a severe problem in their listening comprehension. Of the 31 subjects, 20 failed the test, whereas the remainder passed. Figure three presents the percentage of students who failed the test compared with those who passed, showing that more than half of the students failed the test with a percentage of 64.50%, whereas only 35% passed.

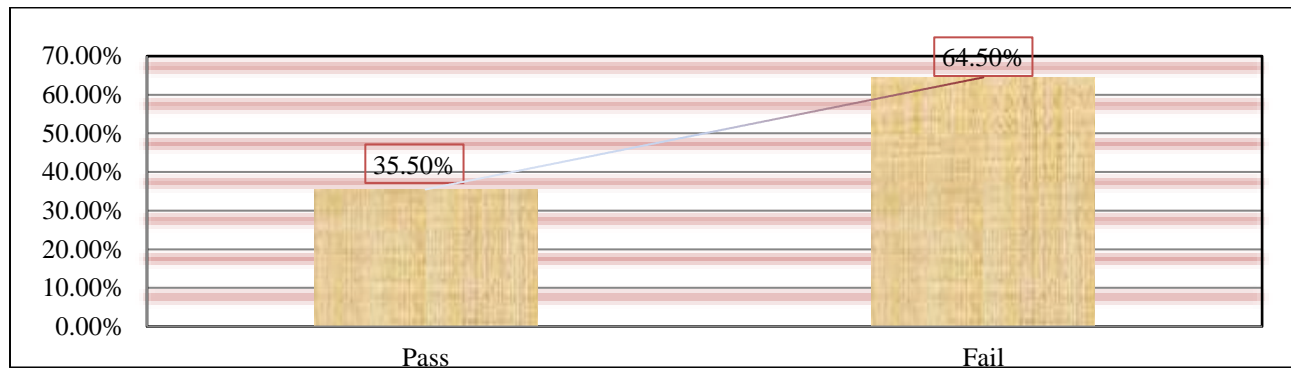


Figure 3. Percentage of students passing and failing the test

Figure four presents the percentages of correct and wrong answers for the diagnostic test questions. It shows that the percentages of wrong answers are markedly higher than the correct ones. The results of this test also affirmed that the subjects faced a severe problem in applying their listening skills. As the figure shows, the highest percentage of correct answers was for Question one. This indicates that the subjects became less attentive as the conversation progressed.

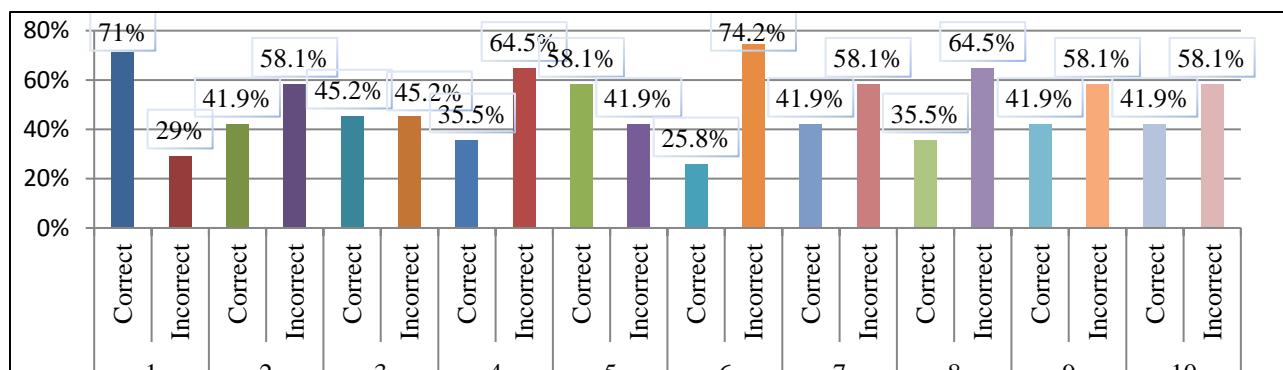


Figure 4. Percentages of correct and incorrect answers

### The Questionnaire

Analysis of the questionnaire results revealed severe problems in the three cognitive phases of the listening process: perception, parsing, and utilization; the results for which are shown in Tables one, two, and three—respectively. Determining the difficulty level of listening problems was calculated according to the number of answers related to the 5-point Likert scale. For mean values  $\leq 2$ , a 'low' level of difficulty was expected; however, a mean ranging 2–3.4 was considered 'moderate'; finally, if the mean was  $\geq 3.5$ , a 'high' level was assigned.

### Perception Problems

Table one presents the results for perception problems, which are covered by the first ten items in the questionnaire.

Table 1. Perception problems

Items	Mean	Std.	Level
1. Hearing sounds but not clear words	3.32	0.83	Moderate
2. High speech rate	3.52	0.85	High
3. Missing the beginning of the text	3.65	0.95	High
4. Knowing the meaning of a word when seeing it	3.58	1.29	High
5. Slow in recalling the meaning of familiar words	3.81	1.17	High
6. Mistaking one word for another	3.77	1.01	High
7. Too many unfamiliar words or expressions	3.61	1.15	High
8. Not recognizing many sounds or words	3.9	0.83	High
9. Missing the next part of the text while thinking about the meaning	3.71	1.01	High
10. Difficulty in concentration	4.16	1.10	High

\*Means values  $\leq 2$  (low), 2-3.4 (moderate); and  $\geq 3.5$  (high) levels of listening problems

Table one shows that the subjects reported experiencing high levels of listening problems in all areas of perception expect for the first item, 'Hearing sounds but not clear words', which yielded a moderate level. 'Difficulty in concentration' was apparently the subjects' least concern. However, it was reported more frequently than other problems in the perception phase. This is evident because of the high percentage of subjects who could answer the first test question correctly. Students lost their concentration directly after the first question, however, and thus answered the



remaining questions incorrectly. A high speech rate might also be a reason for low concentration. This explanation can be supported by Hamouda (2013), who stated that a high speech rate might compromise concentration and cause the listener to miss the beginning of the text. The subjects of this study also seemed to be intimidated by the high speech rate of native speakers. As pointed out by Nowrouzi et al. (2015), this might be because “English is a stress-timed language and the presentation rate is too fast for those whose native language is syllable-timed” (p. 267). This might explain why the subjects encountered difficulty concentrating while listening. It is well known that comprehension might be affected by diminished concentration. EFL/L2 learners generally find it difficult to listen to a forthcoming sentence while thinking of previous ones.

The items 'Not recognizing many sounds or words' and 'Slow in recalling the meaning of familiar words' were additional problems that severely influenced the learners' listening comprehension. Generally, EFL/L2 students do not recognize many English sounds because their lack of knowledge of pronunciation in connected speech. Another possible reason is that phonological modification might considerably decrease the level of students' comprehension.

#### *Parsing Problems*

The means, standard deviations, and levels of problems pertaining to the parsing phase are presented in Table two.

Table 2. *Parsing problems*

Items	Mean	Std.	Level
11. Forgetting words or phrases just heard	3.68	1.30	High
12. Not understanding the meaning of sentences	3.77	1.12	High
13. Difficulty in dividing long sentences into several parts	3.55	1.26	High
14. Difficulty in guessing the accurate meaning of words in sentences	3.84	1.13	High
15. Difficulty in following unfamiliar topics	4	1.03	High
16. Difficulty in understanding a lot of new information in a short time	3.9	1.04	High
17. Missing the next parts because of previous problems	4.23	1.01	High

\*Means values  $\leq 2$  (low), 2–3.4 (moderate); and  $\geq 3.5$  (high) levels of listening problems

The results in Table two reveal that the subjects reported high levels of difficulty for all the items. 'Difficulty in following unfamiliar topics' and 'Difficulty in understanding a lot of new information in a short time' were reported to be the highest of difficulty, with means of 4 and 3.9, respectively. These results are in line with those of Nowrouzi et al. (2015). Generally, this phase involves creating a meaningful representation of words. As shown in Table two, the problem of connecting meaning with words is clearly pertinent. As pointed out by Rost (2005), L2 students should carry out a mixture of inferential processes while listening. This means that the ability to infer meaning is reduced because FL/L2 students are considered 'word-by-word processors'.

Homophonic forms can also pose difficulty in understanding how to confront a lexical problem. Because homophones are very common in English, listeners might see that the pronunciations and meanings of words are different contextually. It is evident that the subjects

required further training in sound discrimination and understanding semantics to achieve this phase of listening.

*Utilization Problems*

The failure to understand the entire meaning of an utterance throughout a listening task is a utilization problem. As mentioned, pragmatic and discoursal problems are highly common at this stage, because of the failure to understand the intended meaning. Although the subjects were able to recognize words, they could not understand the message. In Table three, the results of analyzing the utilization problems emphasize the existence of clear difficulty in the subjects' listening comprehension, with a mean of 3.97 and a standard deviation of 1.05. The table also shows that the subjects experienced moderate or high levels of difficulty in realizing the flow of ideas in the involved dialogue.

Table 3. *Utilization problems*

Items	Mean	Std.	Level
18. Understanding words but not the intended message	3.97	1.05	High
19. Difficulty in comprehending the order of ideas in text	3.77	0.88	High
20. Becoming confused about the main idea	3.55	1.09	High
21. Difficulty in obtaining details	3.13	1.12	Moderate
22. Difficulty in discerning the relationships among ideas	3.68	1.22	High
23. Difficulty in deriving the supporting ideas	3.68	1.08	High

\*Means values  $\leq 2$  (low), 2-3.4 (moderate); and  $\geq 3.5$  (high) levels of listening problems

The next-highest levels of problems in the utilization phase were 'Understanding words but not the intended message', 'Difficulty in comprehending the order of ideas in text', and 'Difficulty in deriving the supporting ideas'. In contrast to the participants of Nowrouzi et al. (2015), the subjects in the current study reported a moderate level of difficulty in obtaining details.

Generally, the analysis of the questionnaire results revealed severe problems in all the listening phases, with moderate and high levels of difficulty. The analysis also indicated that the frequency of the problems pertaining to the parsing phase was slightly higher than those related to the perception and utilization phases of listening comprehension. Table 4 summarises the results for the listening processing problems.

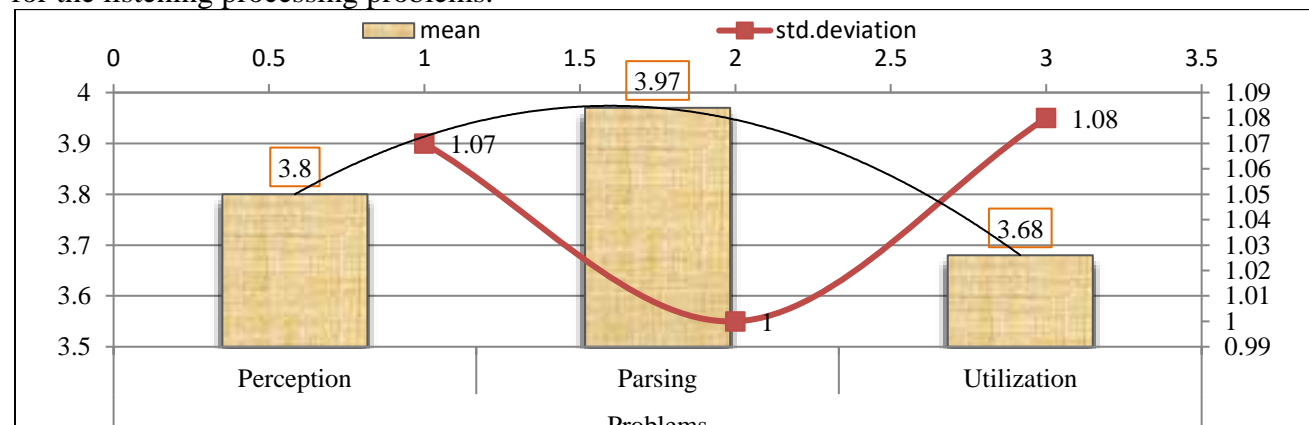


Figure 5. A summary of listening processing problems

***Teachers' Reflective Essay Analysis***

In light of the detailed analysis above, the study confirmed that Saudi EFL students face considerable adversities in English and particularly in listening. The overall qualitative analysis of the teachers' reflective essay summarized that the Saudi environment, where the subjects of the topic studied live in, is believed to play an essential role not only in the acquisition of listening skills but also on English skills. The first issue is that Saudi EFL students start learning English at very late stages. According to the Critical Period Hypothesis, the best time for learning any FL is in early childhood. Scientifically, most of the brain's connections are formed at the age of 10. After this age, learning a new language becomes harder. This can be one of the factors that affect learning English, listening comprehension skills in particular. The main reason for delaying introducing English in schools might be the influence of certain religious, political, and cultural factors. Because Saudi Arabia is one of the most religious countries in the world and where Islam and Arabic are highly valued, there is a general belief that learning any FL may harmfully affect their Arabic language and their customs and cultures.

The second issue is that the only way that Saudi students practice English is inside the classroom. Linguistically, this artificial environment is not the ideal one for language learning. Thus, listening comprehension problems tend to happen because it is continuously consistent with all the other language skills, and it forms the basis for ultimately achieving language proficiency. The quantitative analysis confirmed that more than half of the subjects rated themselves as having average English proficiency, whereas 19.4% of them considered their overall English proficiency to be good. The analysis also reported that listening is the weakest skill among the subjects.

Interviewees have also pointed out in their reflective essays that culturally, there are significant differences between the English culture and the Arabian Saudi one. Therefore, teachers try to separate language from culture to remain in line with their customs, cultures, and religion. This dramatically affects learning English because language and culture are indivisible. The familiarity of cultural-linguistic knowledge plays an indispensable role in understanding the context. Separating culture from language hinders the language learning process. Most listening materials presented to the Saudi students are influenced by western culture and have more diverse cultural aspects than the students have been accustomed to. This is also another problem that attributes to a lack of interest in Saudi students to practice their listening skills and thus creates a low level of listening comprehension. The lack of cultural and social awareness can also be considered one of the essential factors that influence English teaching in the Saudi context. Consequently, English teachers should be more conscious and knowledgeable about the Saudi context to effectively accomplish the aims of EFL teaching and learning.

Another factor behind the low listening comprehension achievement of the subjects in the study is that most Saudi universities' departmental syllabi provide one or two listening courses throughout a bachelor's degree, and the number of English classes at schools is limited. This was acknowledged by several researchers (Hamouda, 2013; and Renukadevi, 2014).

Lastly, the results of this study are in line with previous literature regarding what might cause listening problems. The discussion is slightly different in terms of cultural environment where the subjects of study live in (Bingol et al., 2014; Buck, 2001; Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011;

Hamouda, 2013; Hasan 2000; Hasan, 2000; Higgins, 1997; Nowrouzi et al., 2015; Underwood, 1989). All of these previous studies confirmed the urgency of paying substantial attention to the problems of listening.

### **Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations**

Having identified the main problems that L2 listeners face, the mitigation of listening problems becomes a crucial teaching task. Establishing firm control over listening comprehension requires implementing various well-designed activities.

As discussed, pre-listening, listening, and post-listening activities are reliable for conducting a successful listening lesson. Defining teaching goals and fitting them into the overall curriculum can facilitate the teaching process. One of the significant principles in teaching listening comprehension is to plan a listening lesson carefully, taking into consideration the three listening stages explained earlier, and thereby lending communicative importance to recall in order to assist students in developing their concentration. Making use of students' prior knowledge in the selection of listening courses is another remarkable idea for teaching listening and can highly improve their comprehension. In addition, teachers must remember that the main objective of a listening lesson is teaching, not testing. This means that teachers' feedback should be viewed as a means of making students feel more comfortable and informing them of their progress. One of the misconceptions of teaching listening comprehension is that EFL teachers want their students to understand each word they hear by repeating its pronunciation (Eltayeb, 2017). The consequence of this approach is that students are likely to worry when they do not understand a particular word or phrase clearly. Therefore, they become less motivated, more disappointed, and more discouraged by failure.

Listeners must be able to utilize a mixture of advanced techniques, strategies, and interactive processes in order to derive meaning and access prior relevant linguistic knowledge. Listeners should also be aware of the variety of native-speaker accents. Teachers, on the one hand, should use a low rate of speech; choose the right learning environment and provide authentic listening materials; apply different types of inputs such as news, interviews, radio programs, general lectures, and films; stimulate students' vocabulary; and encourage predicting the content of forthcoming messages while providing as much feedback as possible. On the other hand, listening activities should be designed according to the students' needs, academic or English proficiency levels, and interests, because these factors profoundly affect the choice of appropriate activity. Moreover, FL teachers should assist their students in becoming more familiar with different native speakers' accents, by teaching them the pronunciation rules and using facial expressions to strengthen verbal messages. Listening comprehension classrooms should also be transformed from teacher-centred to student-based. This can help students expand the skills essential for listening comprehension.

Teachers should also become familiar with the difficulties that their students might face while learning listening comprehension. They should implement task-based approaches, apply schema theory, and adapt their teaching methods accordingly. For instance, teachers should not teach listening separately but should instead combine it with other skills. In so doing, they should follow an integrated teaching approach, bearing in mind that language skills are interrelated and

complement each other. Generally, the reasons for the barriers to disciplined listening comprehension are as follows: the difficulty of concentration in a FL because many sounds are indistinguishable and different from what listeners are accustomed to in their native language, a lack of, or insufficient vocabulary, the speed of the speaker, idiomatic expressions, the quality of recording, pronunciation, accent, anxiety, cultural differences, failure to identify the cues which signify the movement of a speaker from one point to another, providing an illustration, or a recurring point (Flowerdew & Miller, 1996; Renukadevi, 2014).

Syllabus designers in the Arab world in general and Saudi Arabia in particular, should be more inspired in terms of designing outstanding syllabi that take into account the religious and cultural beliefs of such conservative societies and reflect the great message of Islam.

Given this, the study suggests that the English language curriculum in such a conservative, religious, and family-oriented society should be circumspectly selected. Although language should not be separated from culture, listening materials should avoid including conversations about some non-Muslim (western) habits, customs such as dating and drinking alcohol which is ultimately rejected in the Saudi community. Western culture(s) and different concepts of thinking and behaving should be carefully introduced. Some miss-beliefs that call English as the (language of infidels), as mentioned by Elyas and Mahboob (2017), and consider that western culture may destabilize Islamic values and subsequently prejudice Islamic youth, should be well reconsidered.

To improve such EFL students' listening comprehension skills, the study suggests developing their positive attitude towards English in general and listening in particular through providing authentic materials that address their beliefs and are in line with their Islamic values. Integrating video-podcasts into listening courses can profoundly improve their comprehension and reduce many difficulties such as 'difficulty in concentration', which was reported more frequently than other problems in the perception phase. Video-podcasts in conjunction with visual aids is believed to create a good teaching listening comprehension environment and thereby better understanding. According to Shahid and Ali (2017), "using both visual and auditory sensory channels can aid students comprehend and retain information better than using one channel" (p. 147).

## Conclusion

The main objectives of this study were to ascertain whether Saudi EFL students face difficulty in their perception, parsing, and utilization phases of their listening comprehension and, second, identifying possible reasons for the problems to provide appropriate solutions. The study also aimed to determine whether the cultural background has any significant effect on their listening comprehension. The findings of this study can substantially contribute towards increasing the understanding of listening difficulties in language learning in general, and to improving the teaching-learning process in Saudi Arabia more specifically.

The analysis affirmed that Saudi EFL students face severe problems in their listening comprehension. The highest percentage of the subjects (64.5%) rated themselves as fair at English. Listening was reported to be the deficient skill (51.6%). The analysis also showed that slightly more than half of the subjects (64.5%) failed the diagnostic test. The data obtained from the



questionnaire revealed 23 processing problems, divided into three major phases; perception, parsing, and utilization. The problem of concentration was reported more frequently than the other problems in the perception phase. Parsing problems comprise a variety of difficulties in following unfamiliar topics, guessing the accurate meaning of words and sentences, and understanding an abundance of new information within a minimal time. In the utilization phase of listening comprehension, it was found that the subjects faced considerable difficulty in understanding the intended message of the speaker despite their understanding of words used. The qualitative analysis of the teachers' reflective essay confirmed that the Saudi environment plays an indispensable role not only in the acquisition of listening skills but also on English skills. This is because language and culture cannot be separated.

Finally, the conclusion supports the earlier claim that despite the educational reform efforts of local education authorities in the kingdom, English Education has remained irregular. Therefore, this study hopes to increase the awareness of policymakers, educational reformers and educational program directors on what could be done to help Saudi EFL students overcome difficulties as mentioned earlier, improve their language skills, and accomplish academic success. It is also hoped that the findings will increase the sensitivity of education officials to the needs and concerns of Saudi EFL students. Mutual collaboration among syllabus designers, researchers, textbook writers, and decision-makers can lead to highly favorable results. To attain a clearer picture of listening problems and their adverse effects on the English learning process, it is highly recommended that further studies be carried out with a large sample of students from different institutions.

#### About the Author

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