

## LISTENING COMPREHENSION DIFFICULTIES FACED BY ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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**Annotation:** This article explores the multifaceted challenges that adult language learners face in developing effective listening comprehension skills. It begins by emphasizing the significance of listening as an active, meaning-making process essential for communication and language development. The discussion highlights several common difficulties such as memory limitations, fast speech, limited vocabulary, pronunciation issues, and cultural unfamiliarity. Drawing on various studies, the article further examines how age-related cognitive and sensory decline affects auditory processing and comprehension, especially in second language (L2) contexts. It also reflects on the role of metacognitive strategies and learner confidence in overcoming these obstacles. The article concludes by urging educators to apply appropriate teaching methods and strategies that consider the diverse needs and limitations of adult learners to foster effective listening comprehension.

**Key words:** Listening comprehension, adult language learners, second language acquisition, hearing difficulties, short-term memory, speech rate, pronunciation, vocabulary limitations, metacognitive strategies, age-related decline, auditory processing, EFL/ESL, communication skills, language proficiency, listening strategies.

Listening is more than just hearing—it's the active process of making sense of what we hear. In both real-life communication and academic settings, listening plays a crucial role, especially when it comes to listening comprehension skills. These skills, often tested in language exams, measure a person's ability to

understand, interpret, and respond to spoken language. In my view, strong listening comprehension isn't just about catching every word—it's about grasping meaning, tone, and intention. It reflects how well we can process information in real time, making it a key indicator of overall language proficiency and effective communication.

If learners want to learn to speak, they should first learn to understand the spoken language they hear. If learners want to communicate with native speakers, they should first learn to understand in real language situations to comprehend the main point of what native speakers are telling. Therefore, listening is very important to which teachers and learners should pay enough attention to obtain communication aims. Listening is very important in language learning because it provides input for learners and it has also an important role in the development of learners' language knowledge (Rost, 1994).

Listening has long been recognized as an important skill among the four language skills that students at the tertiary level need to master. Although listening is important, it is a neglected skill that researchers only recently began to recognize as compared to speaking, reading and writing. A review of previous research regarding the four language skills used by EFL students indicates that listening is a skill that students are often not good at. This claim is

in agreement with some recent research studies which show that most students have problems in EFL listening comprehension. Studies reveal that if typical factors affecting language learners' listening comprehension are recognized, students can overcome the difficulty faced in comprehending listening tasks. Depending on the purpose of the research, factors influencing L2 listening can be grouped in different categories labelled with different names. The researchers in this thesis would like to group factors influencing language learners in three categories: linguistic factors, cognitive factors and affective factors recommended by because it seems by grouping this way, factors that affect students' listening comprehension process can be easily identified. (Minh Trang Nguyen p68)

Linguistic factors refer to language-specific elements such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and the complexity of spoken texts that affect L2 listening comprehension. Cognitive factors involve the mental processes used during listening, such as attention, memory, processing speed, and the use of listening strategies. These help learners interpret and make sense of what they hear. Affective factors include emotional and psychological aspects like motivation, anxiety, confidence, and attitude toward the language. These influence a learner's willingness to engage with listening tasks and their overall performance. Together, these categories provide a comprehensive understanding of L2 listening challenges. There are such kinds of listening problems that many adults commonly face, particularly in the context of listening comprehension. One major issue is short-term memory, as adults often find it difficult to retain and process information while simultaneously listening to new input. This can cause them to miss key points or forget the beginning of a sentence by the time it ends. Additionally, the speed of speech can be overwhelming, especially when speakers talk quickly or blend words together. Accents and pronunciation differences further complicate understanding,

as do limited vocabulary, background noise, and unfamiliar cultural references or idioms. Together, these challenges can significantly hinder effective listening. Different studies about the use of listening strategies by learners have been carried out. Vandergrift (1999) said that metacognitive strategies lead to listening achievement when they deal with cognitive strategies. Less efficient learners utilized cognitive and memory strategies most frequently and social strategies least frequently.

Higgins (1995) studied Omani students' problems in listening comprehension and found that the factors which facilitate or hinder listening are speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation. After examining 81 Arabic speakers learning English as a foreign language for academic purposes and their perceived LC problems, a study conducted by Hasan (2000) shows that 'unfamiliar words', 'difficult grammatical structures', and 'the length of the spoken text' are the most important message factors for listening problems. In terms of speaker factor, it was revealed that 'clarity' was the main cause of EFL listening difficulties. As to listener factor, 'lack of interest' 'the demand for full and complete answers to listening comprehension questions' were the two main difficulties encountered by EFL students.

I also point out that speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation are three major factors that affect listening comprehension. When people speak quickly, listeners may struggle to keep up, missing key words or ideas before they can process them. A limited vocabulary also makes it difficult to understand spoken content, especially when unfamiliar words are used without context. Pronunciation adds another layer of challenge—variations in accent, intonation, or

unclear articulation can make even familiar words hard to recognize. Together, these elements can overwhelm the listener, especially in real-time situations, reducing their ability to fully understand what's being said.

Listening comprehension can be challenging for adult language learners, and age plays a key role. Younger learners often hear sounds more clearly and adapt quickly to new accents or pronunciation. In contrast, older adults may struggle with hearing clarity due to age-related decline, making it harder to distinguish unfamiliar sounds in a second language. They might also process auditory information more slowly, which affects their ability to keep up with native speakers in real-time conversations. Background noise or fast speech can make it even harder. These physical and cognitive changes add to the typical challenges of learning a new language.

The first systematic assessment of listening comprehension in a native language across the adult lifespan was provided by Sommers. A total of 433 participants in the age group 20—90 listened to spoken passages and answered comprehension questions. In addition, measures of auditory sensitivity were obtained from all participants to determine if hearing loss and listening comprehension changed similarly across the adult lifespan. As expected, auditory sensitivity declined from 20 to 90 years of age. However, listening comprehension remained relatively unchanged until approximately age 65—70, with declines evident only for the oldest participants. This conclusion was also confirmed by follow-up research (Sommers, 2015).

Extensive research led by Hoffman et al. (2017) shows that compared to participants aged 20 to 29 years, those aged 60 to 69 years had a 39.5 higher odds of bilateral speech-frequency hearing impairment, which means that they have trouble hearing speech clearly. Based on empirical evidence, Henry et al. (2017) state that speech comprehension decreases during healthy aging, especially when speech is fast or presented against background noise. These age-related listening and comprehension difficulties are likely the consequence of an interaction between sensory and cognitive changes. Compared to listening in a native language, listening in a FL poses more challenges because FL listeners may have varying levels of proficiency and therefore may be more or less familiar with particular sounds and speech production patterns in that target language (Güvendir & Hardacre, 2018, p. 1). However, there are not many studies that provide evidence on the relationship between age and listening comprehension achievement in a foreign language. One of them was conducted by Seright (1985) who investigated age and aural comprehension achievement in 36 francophone military personnel learning English. Younger (aged 17 to 24 years) and older (aged 25 to 41 years) learners were compared with respect to short-term development in aural comprehension. The results showed that the achievement in L2 listening comprehension declined significantly with increasing age, given the same time span and learning conditions. On the other hand, the relationship between the achievement in L2 listening comprehension and other studied variables, namely nonverbal intelligence, education and previous English language instruction, proved to be statistically insignificant.

How Can Teachers Help their Student Overcome their Listening Comprehension Problems?

Not all the problems described above can be overcome. Certain features of the message and the speaker, for instance, are inevitable. But this does not mean that the teacher can do nothing about them. S/he can at least provide the students with suitable listening materials, background

and linguistic knowledge, enabling skills, pleasant classroom conditions, and useful exercises to help them discover effective listening strategies. (Dwi Rara Saraswati p7) Here are a few helpful ideas (Hamouda, 2013):

- **Adapting and Improving Listening Materials.** It is obvious that students differ in their learning styles and ability, therefore, teachers should adopt and adapt listening materials that match their students' interest and background since the listening materials only become stimulating and motivating them when they are slightly challenging to what they have already known and suit their interest.
- **Activating your Students' Vocabulary.** From the investigation, one of the great causes for the students in listening comprehension is their lack of vocabulary. The majority of all the students report not to have sufficient vocabulary in listening comprehension and a small number complains that their vocabulary is too poor to understand. It is, therefore necessary for teachers to equip students with certain key words needed for listening comprehension since lack of vocabulary becomes a great obstacle to them in listening comprehension, which is also realized by Underwood (1989) and Higgin (1995). However, it is better to activate students' vocabulary by asking them to guess the meaning of words used in the listening context before explaining the meaning to them, since whenever students are able to relate what they have already known to what they are supposed to listen for, they are likely to listen better or more effectively.
- **Using Different Kinds of Input.** The teacher should also provide students with different kinds of input, such as lectures, radio news, films, TV plays, announcements, everyday conversation, interviews, storytelling, English songs, and so on.
- **Using Visual Aids.** Teacher exploits visual aids or draw pictures and diagrams related to the listening topics to aid students to guess and imagine actively. Visual aids draw learners' attentions, increase their motivation on the topic and help them relate to content of the spoken text, thus listener overcome difficulties such as unknown words, minimal pairs of words.
- **Accents.** Make students aware of different native-speaker accents. Of course, strong regional accents are not suitable for training in listening, but in spontaneous conversation native speakers do have certain accents. Moreover, the American accent is quite different from the British and Australian. Therefore, it is necessary to let students deal with different accents, especially in extensive listening.

In conclusion, listening comprehension is a fundamental yet often challenging skill for adult language learners. It involves more than simply hearing sounds; it requires the ability to decode, interpret, and respond to spoken language in real time. Various factors contribute to these difficulties, including limited vocabulary, unfamiliar accents, fast speech, and short-term memory constraints. Age-related factors such as hearing decline and slower cognitive processing further complicate the listening process, especially in noisy or fast-paced environments. Research highlights that while listening comprehension may remain stable until later in life, age-related changes eventually affect auditory sensitivity and speech understanding. Moreover, unfamiliar cultural references, grammar complexity, and low language proficiency can hinder learners' confidence and performance. These challenges underline the importance of integrating targeted listening strategies and providing meaningful input in real-life contexts.

Teachers should support learners with age- appropriate methods and resources, helping them overcome barriers and enhance their overall communication competence in a second language.

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