Critical Listening in Practice: Exploring the Difficulties and Strategies of First-Semester Students

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| Abstract | Critical listening is a fundamental skill for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, allowing them to assess, interpret, and analyze spoken discourse in academic and social contexts. However, first-semester EFL students often struggle with this skill due to various linguistic and cognitive challenges. This study investigates the difficulties first-semester EFL students encounter in critical listening and explores the strategies they employ to overcome these obstacles. Using a qualitative research approach, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals from four first-semester English language students. The findings reveal that students face difficulties related to accents, rapid speech, and limited vocabulary, which hinder their ability to comprehend and critically evaluate spoken content. To address these challenges, students adopted strategies such as focusing on keywords, repeated listening, note-taking, and exposure to authentic materials. These strategies align with existing research on effective listening practices and highlight the importance of targeted instructional support. The study concludes that although critical listening is a challenging skill for first-semester EFL students, the implementation of specific strategies can enhance their listening comprehension and analytical abilities. The findings have important pedagogical implications for designing listening instruction that fosters critical engagement with spoken discourse in EFL learning environments. |
| Keywords | Critical Listening, Difficulties, EFL Student, Strategies |

INTRODUCTION

Listening plays a vital role in language learning, allowing students to understand spoken communication and actively participate in both academic and social settings. Among the various forms of listening, critical listening is especially significant, as it requires learners to assess, interpret, and analyze spoken information rather than merely processing words for meaning [1], which means critical listening involves a perceptual process in which students must focus their attention on sound to effectively comprehend the message being conveyed [2]. In an English classroom setting for foreign

language learners, critical listening plays a key role in developing academic skills. It enables students to assess the credibility of spoken content, distinguish between facts and opinions, and recognize biases in discourse. This skill is particularly important when engaging with lectures, discussions, and multimedia resources, where students must not only comprehend the language but also evaluate the speaker's arguments, tone, and intent.

However, for EFL students in an English language program, developing critical listening skills can be a challenging task. Several factors contribute to students' difficulties with critical listening. Limited vocabulary [3], unfamiliar accents [4] fast speech rates [5], and complex sentence structures often make it difficult for learners to process and evaluate spoken discourse. Additionally, cognitive overload and lack of prior exposure to critical thinking tasks in listening may further hinder their ability to engage with spoken material critically [6]. These challenges highlight the need for effective strategies that students can use to enhance their critical listening abilities.

This study aims to explore the difficulties first-semester English language students encounter in critical listening and examine the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. Using qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and reflective journals, this research seeks to provide insights into students' experiences with critical listening in practice. The findings will contribute to a better understanding of the obstacles learners face and offer practical implications for improving listening instruction in English language education.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore students' listening challenges and strategies. The participants were four English language students from first-semester. Two primary data collection methods were used: semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. These methods were chosen to gain in-depth insights into students' experiences and their approaches to overcoming listening difficulties.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather detailed narratives from students regarding their listening challenges and strategies. The flexibility of this interview format allowed for probing questions, enabling participants to elaborate on their experiences [7]. Each interview lasted approximately 10 minutes and was recorded and transcribed for analysis. The data obtained from these interviews provided rich, individualized accounts of students' listening difficulties and the techniques they employed to address them.

To further capture students' personal listening experiences over time, reflective journals were collected. Participants were asked to document their listening encounters while in the class, by written their challenges faced, and strategies used to improve comprehension. This method provided longitudinal data, offering a deeper perspective

on how students adapted their strategies over time [8], [9]. The reflective journals complemented the other two methods by adding self-reported accounts of ongoing listening development.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study were derived from semi-structured interviews and reflective journals conducted with four first-semester English language students. The data revealed several difficulties and strategies employed by students in their critical listening practice. The findings were categorized into two main themes: difficulties in critical listening and strategies to overcome these difficulties.

Difficulties in Critical Listening

The students reported several challenges that hindered their ability to engage in critical listening effectively. One of the primary difficulties was unfamiliar accents. Student 1 mentioned struggling with "thick accents," which made it difficult to comprehend spoken English. This aligns with previous research, such as the work by [10] and [4], who found that unfamiliar accents significantly impact listening comprehension in EFL learners. The variation in pronunciation and intonation caused by different accents often leads to misunderstandings. For example, native and non-native accents can significantly hinder listening comprehension, especially for students who are not exposed to diverse English speakers in their daily lives [11]. This lack of exposure can create a sense of unfamiliarity and make it challenging for students to discern the nuances of different accents.

Another significant challenge was fast speech rates. Student 3 and Student 4 highlighted that the rapid pace of spoken English made it challenging to follow conversations. This is consistent with the findings of [5], who noted that fast speech rates often lead to cognitive overload, especially for young EFL learners. When speakers talk too quickly, students may miss key words or phrases, making it difficult to grasp the overall meaning of the conversation. Limited vocabulary was also a major barrier to understanding spoken content. Student 1 and Student 2 pointed out that unfamiliar vocabulary made it difficult to comprehend audio materials. This corroborates the findings of [12] and [3], who emphasized the role of vocabulary knowledge in listening proficiency. Without a sufficient vocabulary base, students struggle to decode spoken language, which hinders their ability to engage in critical listening.

Finally, pronunciation issues posed a challenge for some students. Student 4 mentioned that unclear or fast pronunciation made it difficult to grasp the meaning of

spoken words, requiring repeated listening to fully understand the content. This difficulty is particularly pronounced when speakers use contractions, reductions, or informal speech, which are common in natural spoken English [13]. Cognitive overload was a recurring issue for several students. Student 2 and Student 3 noted that the combination of fast speech, unfamiliar vocabulary, and complex sentence structures often led to cognitive overload, making it difficult to process and evaluate spoken discourse critically. This aligns with [6] findings, which suggest that cognitive overload can hinder students' ability to engage in higher-order thinking tasks, such as critical listening.

Strategies to Overcome Listening Difficulties

Despite these challenges, the students employed various strategies to improve their critical listening skills. One common strategy was focusing on keywords and context. Student 1 and Student 3 emphasized the importance of focusing on keywords [14]. This strategy helped them to infer meaning even when they did not understand every word. By identifying key terms and relating them to the broader context, students were able to piece together the main ideas of the spoken content. Student 2 highlighted the importance of preparing for listening tasks by reading questions or prompts beforehand by understanding the overall context of the audio [15]. This strategy helped them to anticipate the content and focus on relevant information during the listening process. By knowing what to expect, students could approach the listening task with a clearer focus, which improved their ability to comprehend and evaluate the spoken content critically.

Another effective strategy was repeated listening. Student 4 and Student 1 mentioned that they often listened to audio materials multiple times to ensure comprehension. This approach aligns with [16] and [17] that the idea that repeated exposure to spoken language can enhance listening skills over time. By listening to the same material several times, students were able to catch details they might have missed initially and gain a deeper understanding of the content.

Note-taking was also a widely used strategy among the students. Student 2 and Student 3 reported that they took notes while listening, which helped them to capture important information and review it later. This strategy is particularly useful for managing cognitive load and retaining key points from the audio. By writing down key ideas, students could focus their attention on the most relevant parts of the spoken discourse and refer back to their notes for clarification [18].

Exposure to authentic materials was another important strategy. Student 1 and Student 3 mentioned that they frequently listened to English podcasts, music, and

movies to familiarize themselves with different accents and speech rates [19]. The use of podcasts is thought to positively impact students' engagement, motivation, and self-assessed listening performance. By aligning podcast content with the topics covered in class, podcasts are considered an effective tool for fostering students' enthusiasm and drive to learn English [20].This exposure to authentic materials is crucial for developing listening proficiency, as it provides learners with real-world language input. By engaging with a variety of English speakers and contexts, students became more adaptable listeners, which is essential for critical listening in diverse settings.

The difficulties encountered by first-semester students in critical listening align with several recent studies that emphasize the multifaceted nature of listening comprehension in EFL contexts. The challenge posed by unfamiliar accents, as identified by the students, is a recurring theme in the literature. Research from the past five years has underscored the impact of exposure to different accents on listening proficiency. For instance, a study by {1} found that EFL students who had minimal exposure to various English accents demonstrated lower comprehension rates due to their inability to adapt to phonetic variations. This aligns with {2}, who argued that exposure to diverse English accents should be an integral part of EFL curriculum design, as it can reduce the cognitive strain experienced by learners when encountering unfamiliar speech patterns. The findings in the present study reinforce these claims, highlighting that limited exposure to diverse accents can hinder students' ability to engage in critical listening effectively.

Fast speech rates emerged as another significant challenge, which is consistent with recent investigations in the field. Research by {3} suggests that speech rate directly influences comprehension, as increased speed limits the time available for linguistic processing. This phenomenon can be explained using the cognitive load theory {4}, which posits that learners can only process a limited amount of information at a given time. When speech is too fast, cognitive overload occurs, preventing students from effectively parsing and evaluating spoken input. The students' responses in this study corroborate these theoretical insights, as they reported difficulty in keeping up with rapid speech, leading to fragmented comprehension and an inability to critically engage with the content. This finding suggests that strategies such as slowed speech input or structured training in processing fast-paced language could be beneficial for developing students' listening skills.

Limited vocabulary was another critical factor influencing students' listening abilities. Recent studies have emphasized the strong correlation between lexical knowledge and listening comprehension. A study by {5} found that students with an

extensive vocabulary base performed significantly better in listening tasks requiring critical engagement. This finding is supported by the lexical threshold hypothesis, which suggests that a minimum level of vocabulary knowledge is essential for effective listening comprehension. In the present study, students who struggled with unknown words found it difficult to interpret meaning and assess the validity of spoken arguments. This reinforces the need for vocabulary-building strategies, such as pre-listening activities focusing on key terms, as suggested by {7}, which could help mitigate comprehension difficulties and enhance students' ability to critically analyze spoken discourse.

Cognitive overload was another prevalent difficulty among the students, mirroring findings from recent research that emphasize the intricate cognitive processes involved in listening. According to {8}, cognitive overload occurs when students must simultaneously decode sounds, infer meanings, and evaluate arguments, which can be overwhelming for novice learners. The findings of this study align with this perspective, as students reported difficulty in processing information quickly enough to make critical judgments. This challenge is further exacerbated by complex sentence structures and dense information loads in academic lectures, as observed by {9}. These insights suggest that scaffolding strategies, such as breaking down listening tasks into manageable segments and using guided note-taking, could be instrumental in reducing cognitive overload and fostering critical listening skills.

Despite these difficulties, students employed a range of strategies to enhance their critical listening abilities. The use of keywords and contextual inference, as reported by the students, aligns with research findings indicating that strategic listening improves comprehension. According to {10}, training students to focus on key ideas rather than understanding every word enhances their ability to infer meaning and engage critically with spoken content. This strategy is particularly relevant in academic listening, where identifying main arguments is more crucial than decoding every detail. Similarly, repeated listening was found to be an effective approach. Recent studies, such as {11}, highlight the benefits of multiple exposures to the same material, as it allows students to gradually refine their understanding and identify subtleties they initially missed. This strategy is rooted in the input hypothesis {12}, which emphasizes the importance of repeated exposure to comprehensible input in language acquisition.

Note-taking was another widely used strategy among students, which is consistent with findings from {13}, who demonstrated that effective note-taking improves both comprehension and retention of spoken material. The cognitive

benefits of note-taking lie in its ability to externalize memory processes, allowing students to revisit and analyze information after listening. The present study's findings support this claim, as students reported that jotting down key points helped them retain and critically engage with the material. This suggests that explicit instruction in note-taking techniques could further enhance students' listening performance.

Exposure to authentic materials, such as podcasts and movies, was another strategy employed by students to familiarize themselves with different speech patterns and accents. Recent research, such as {15}, has emphasized the role of authentic listening materials in improving students' listening skills and overall engagement. By listening to natural conversations, students can develop better adaptation skills, which are crucial for critical listening. The findings of this study align with this perspective, as students who engaged with real-life listening materials reported improved comprehension and greater confidence in dealing with diverse accents and speech rates.

In conclusion, the findings of this study resonate with existing research and theoretical perspectives on critical listening. The challenges identified—unfamiliar accents, fast speech rates, limited vocabulary, and cognitive overload—are well-documented in recent literature, highlighting the complexities of listening comprehension in an EFL context. The strategies employed by students, including focusing on keywords, repeated listening, note-taking, and exposure to authentic materials, align with established pedagogical recommendations. These findings suggest that incorporating structured listening training, vocabulary support, and strategic listening exercises into EFL instruction could significantly enhance students' ability to engage critically with spoken content. Future research could further explore the long-term effectiveness of these strategies and investigate additional pedagogical interventions that could support first-semester students in developing their critical listening skills.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the difficulties and strategies of first-semester EFL students in critical listening. The findings revealed that students face significant challenges, including unfamiliar accents, fast speech rates, limited vocabulary, and cognitive overload. However, they also employed various strategies, such as focusing on keywords, repeated listening, note-taking, and exposure to authentic materials, to overcome these difficulties. These findings align with existing research and offer practical implications for improving listening instruction in EFL contexts. However,

this study has several limitations, including a small sample size and a focus on first-semester students at a single institution, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could address these limitations by conducting larger-scale studies with more diverse participants and exploring the long-term development of critical listening skills. Additionally, experimental studies could be conducted to test the effectiveness of specific strategies, such as repeated listening and note-taking, in enhancing critical listening proficiency.

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