

# Experiences, Challenges, and Adaptive Strategies of ESL Learners in Listening in English

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## Abstract

Listening is one of the most challenging skills for ESL learners. It requires active effort to understand spoken English in real time, often with different accents and fast speech. Despite its importance, listening often gets less attention in language teaching compared to speaking, reading, and writing.

This study investigates the lived experiences of ESL learners as they navigate the complexities of listening in English. It employed a qualitative research approach using transcendental phenomenology to investigate challenges and adaptive strategies of ESL learners in listening in English. The research focused on Grade 7 students at Cebuano National High School in Tupi, South Cotabato, during the school year 2024-2025. Semi-structured interview was utilized to gather insights from 10 purposively selected participants (5 male and 5 female). Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, to identify patterns and themes in the students' experiences.

These difficulties often lead to misunderstandings and hinder effective

comprehension during listening activities. ESL learners, particularly Grade 7 students, face several challenges in listening to English, including poor comprehension, limited vocabulary, noisy environments, peer distractions, and lack of interest. These obstacles negatively impact their focus, understanding, and overall progress in developing effective listening skills. To cope with challenges in English listening, ESL students use strategies such as active listening, maintaining concentration, note-taking, seeking clarification, and asking questions from experts like teachers. These methods help learners stay focused, understand spoken content better, and retain important information.

The study concluded that the experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of ESL learners in developing English listening skills highlight the complexity of the learning process. Recommendations include the need for supportive teaching approaches, clearer communication, and an engaging learning environment to help ESL learners improve their listening comprehension effectively.

**Keywords:** *ESL learners, listening comprehension, listening challenges, adaptive strategies, English listening skills, language learning, listening difficulties, coping strategies, learner experiences*

## INTRODUCTION

In the globalized landscape of language education, listening is a foundational skill that supports the development of speaking, reading, and writing competencies. As English continues to serve as a global medium of communication, the ability to process and comprehend spoken English becomes essential for second language (L2) learners striving for overall proficiency. Despite its importance, listening remains one of the most challenging skills for ESL learners, as it requires not only linguistic knowledge but also the ability to decode spoken language in real time.

Numerous studies have highlighted the range of difficulties ESL learners encounter in listening, including language anxiety, unfamiliar accents, background noise, limited exposure to native speakers, and insufficient access to authentic listening materials (Fathi, Derakhshan, & Torabi, 2020). In response to these challenges, learners adopt various cognitive and metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring, and self-evaluation to enhance their comprehension skills (Fu, Wang, Min, Zhou, & Pan, 2023). These adaptive strategies often vary based on individual learner profiles shaped by sociocultural context, educational background, and even gender.

Meanwhile, research has shown that learners' listening experiences are deeply influenced by sociocultural factors and learning environments. For instance, female learners in several contexts including Japan, Sweden, and Southeast Asia tend to employ collaborative and reflective strategies more effectively than their male peers (Alamdari & Bozorgian, 2022; Deregozu, 2021). Conversely, male learners often prefer independent learning styles and task-based approaches, focusing on problem-solving rather than collaboration (Fu et al., 2023). Nevertheless, Rezai, Namaziandost, and Hosseini (2023) conclude that both genders encounter similar challenges, including difficulty accessing quality listening resources and limited practice with authentic English input.

In the Philippines, these global trends are reflected in the local context. Studies show that Filipino ESL learners, particularly in rural settings, face numerous barriers to developing listening proficiency, as noted by Robillos and Bustos (2022). Factors such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of exposure to spoken English outside school, and limited instructional materials continue to hinder effective listening instruction.

The most appropriate research gap addressed by this study is the contextual gap, as existing literature on ESL learners' listening experiences, challenges, and adaptive strategies is predominantly based in Western or urban contexts, with limited exploration in Southeast Asian, particularly Philippine, public high school settings. This study focuses on learners at Cebuano National High School in Tupi, South Cotabato, providing a localized perspective that captures the unique sociocultural and educational factors influencing ESL listening development. By addressing this underrepresented population and context, the study contributes region-specific insights to the global ESL discourse, informs more culturally responsive teaching practices, and supports the development of contextually relevant educational policies and interventions.

Moreover, Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) results have consistently indicated low listening comprehension levels among Grade 7 learners, with 65% falling below proficiency standards at Cebuano National High School. This prompted the researcher to examine learner-specific challenges and strategies in this locale.

Given this backdrop, the present study aimed to explore the experiences, challenges, and adaptive strategies of ESL learners in developing their listening skills, focusing on students at Cebuano National High School. By analyzing learners' firsthand experiences and the strategies they employ, the research sought to inform more inclusive, responsive, and effective ESL listening instruction tailored to the real-world needs of Filipino students. Ultimately, this study contributed to a deeper understanding of how ESL



learners cope with and adapt to listening challenges, emphasizing the need for learner-centered pedagogical approaches that address cognitive development and the contextual realities influencing language learning.

### **Research Questions**

Generally, this study aimed to explore and analyze the experiences, challenges, and adaptive strategies of ESL learners in listening in English, offering insights into how these factors influence the development of listening skills and overall language learning outcomes. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do ESL learners characterize their experiences in listening to English?
2. What challenges do ESL learners encounter in listening English?
3. How do ESL learners strategize to overcome challenges in listening English?

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study utilized a qualitative research approach, particularly, the Transcendental Phenomenology design. This design is a qualitative research methodology derived from the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, as articulated by Edmund Husserl (1931). It focuses on exploring and describing individuals' lived experiences with a specific phenomenon, seeking to uncover the essence of those experiences while minimizing biases and preconceptions.

#### ***Locale of the Study and Respondents***

The research was conducted at Cebuano National High School, situated in Brgy. Cebuano, Tupi, South Cotabato, specifically in Grade 7 learners of the School Year 2024-2025. In this study, the population comprised 201 Grade 7 students from Cebuano National High School. To explore the experiences, challenges, and adaptive strategies of ESL learners in listening in English, the researcher employed purposive sampling a non-probability technique commonly used in qualitative research. This approach enabled the deliberate selection of 10 respondents (5 female and 5 male students), ensuring gender balance and facilitating a comparative analysis of how learners experience and adapt to listening tasks in English.

#### ***Sampling Technique***

In this study, the researcher employed a purposive sampling strategy, a widely used approach in qualitative research for identifying and selecting information-rich cases that offer deep insights into the research topic (Patton, 2002). This technique enabled the researcher to focus on participants who met specific criteria and were most likely to provide relevant data.

A total of ten participants were selected, aligning with qualitative research recommendations that emphasized depth over quantity. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a sample size of 5 to 25 participants is appropriate for phenomenological studies, as it ensures a comprehensive exploration of lived experiences while maintaining data manageability. By selecting ten participants, this study aimed to capture diverse perspectives on learners' experiences, challenges and adaptive strategies in ESL listening.

### *Data Analysis Method*

The data analysis in this study employed Thematic Analysis, following the framework described by Braun and Clarke (2006), TA followed several steps, beginning with familiarizing the researcher with the collected data from participants' statements. This process involved thoroughly reading and reviewing the data to gain an initial understanding. The next step involved generating initial codes by extracting important and necessary details from the responses. After coding, the researcher searched for themes by grouping the gathered data into meaningful categories based on initial themes. These themes were then reviewed to ensure they accurately represented the data and captured its core meaning. Once reviewed, the themes were further refined and defined to provide a deeper understanding of the overall narrative. Finally, the decoded themes were written and analyzed to draw meaningful conclusions from the data.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### *The Experiences of ESL Learners in Learning English Listening Skills*

In understanding the experiences of ESL learners in listening to English, the first emerging theme is on the fast speech of the language teacher. Teachers tend to forget that the learners are not experts in listening in English. This experience leads to misunderstanding of the things they need to learn. These are all evident, as the Grade seven students mentioned:

*"My experience in listening English, it is sometimes difficult because of the speed in speaking,"-P3*

*"My experience in learning listening skills in English is sometimes I find it difficult to understand the words and expressions, most especially if the speaker talks so fast and it is my first time to hear them,"-P2*

These statements explain the lived experiences of the ten Grade seven participants of ESL learners in listening English. Teachers usually speak very fast and students find it difficult to understand the words and expressions. Moreover, it is sometimes difficult because of the speed in speaking.

### *Vocabulary Gaps*

The next emerging theme is vocabulary gaps. The students are encountering unfamiliar words and expressions that hinder listening skills comprehension. This is evident to the response of the Grade seven students mentioned as follows:

*"For me, the specific challenges that I encountered as a learner in developing this skill is that sometimes I couldn't what the teachers are saying, because the words that they use are so deep and I don't understand them, or maybe I've only heard them now, that is why I really have a hard time. And sometimes, I couldn't understand what they are saying,"- P1*

*"For me, I find it difficult to listen in English since I don't understand it,"-P4*

These statements reveal the experiences of the ten Grade seven participants of ESL learners in listening to English having weak vocabulary. There are words that are not familiar to the students and sometimes, it was their first time hearing the words. Moreover, they have experiences of difficulty to understand the English words.



### *Lack of Background Knowledge*

The third emerging theme was ESL learners were having a struggling experience to understand English due to insufficient context or background knowledge. This theme is evident with the following evidence:

*"I can say that it is difficult for me to immediately understand the English word I heard," - P5*

*"My experience in learning English listening skills is a journey of continuous improvement. I struggle because sometimes I can't understand," - P9*

These statements show how students feel outcast due to no idea or not in the context of what the teacher is saying. Moreover, students have difficulty to listen in English since students don't understand the idea/context.

### *Audio-Quality Issues*

The last emerging theme is on the difficulty of the students in listening and understanding due to poor audio quality, background noise and distractions. This theme is evident with the following evidence:

*"I can describe my experience in learning English listening skills, I sometimes find it difficult to listen because I talk to my seatmate while the teacher is teaching in front, and sometimes I do not understand English words," -P6*

*"I can describe my experience in learning English listening skills, I am struggling because sometimes I cannot understand just by listening, and sometimes I cannot hear what is said because of the noise in the surroundings," - P8*

These statements explain one of the experiences of the ten Grade seven participants of ESL learners in listening English. They are having issue on the quality of the voice/audio of the teacher or speaker during the listening processes. Students have issues with the voice of the teacher, and sometimes their classmates are noisy because they cannot hear the lesson properly.

### *The Challenges of ESL Learners Encountered in Listening English*

#### *Poor Listening Comprehension*

The first emerging theme on the challenge encounter of the grade seven learners is having poor listening comprehension. This is the inability of the learners to fully understand spoken language which may lead to misunderstanding, information loss and communication barriers. This is evident by the following statements:

*"The specific difficulties that I face when trying to understand spoken English are if the word is new to me, I have a hard time understanding it because I don't know what it is," -P1*

*"The specific difficulty that I have is I do not understand if it is difficult. But if it is an easy word, I can immediately understand but if it is difficult, I want that it will be translated in Tagalog," -P5*

These statements illustrate the challenges of the ten Grade seven participants of ESL learners in listening English. They find it difficult to understand what the teacher is saying and there are words that students do not know the meaning, so they have difficulty understanding its meaning and the messages they are saying. This complaint from the students is leading to poor listening comprehension.

#### *Limited Vocabulary*

The second emerging theme is the lack or limited vocabulary of the grade seven learners. Students tend to have unfamiliarity of words or expressions. This is true with the following statements:

*"The challenges that we face ESL learners in acquiring listening are the*



*difficulty in understanding English words,”-P4*

*“The specific difficulties that I face when trying to understand spoken English are if the word is new to me, I have a hard time understanding it because I don't know what it is,”- P-1*

These statements illustrate one of the challenges of the ten Grade seven participants of ESL learners in listening English. Students are being challenge by understanding English words. They are trying to understand spoken English because they are not familiar with majority of the words and their meaning. This can lead to the challenge of the limited vocabulary of the students.

#### *Noisy Environment*

The third most challenging among the Grade seven students on learning listening skills. They are always having noisy environments which leads to miscommunication and lack of understanding. This is evident with the following testimonials:

*“I have a difficulty when there are people who are noisy around me. Like people who are talking to each other and other noise. We will have a difficulty understanding what they said,”-P3*

*“Yes, there are situations where I find it particularly hard to focus or comprehend. For example, if the teacher talks fast or if there's noise in the surrounding, I really find it hard to understand English words,”-P5*

These statements reflect on how the ten Grade seven participants of ESL learners in listening English being affected by the noise they encounter in the surroundings. This noisy environment leads to miscommunication and hindrance for acquiring listening skills.

#### *Peer Distraction*

Students tend to be easily distracted among their peers. The learners are very connected among their peers that they are easily distracted. This can lead to distraction of their focus, productivity, and learning outcomes in general. This is manifested from the following statements:

*“Yes, there are situations wherein I found it difficult to focus and understand when my seatmate disturbed me,”- P4*

*“Yes, if my seatmates are noisy and I could not hear what is being said,”-P8*

*“Yes, because sometimes my seatmate is noisy,”-P10*

These statements illustrate the problems that the ten Grade 7 ESL learners have when listening to English language due to lack of focus because they are busy with multiple tasks. Furthermore, ESL students are unable to listen since their seatmates are conversing with them, and they are unable to focus as a result.

#### *Lack of Interest*

Finally, the last emerging theme is the lack of interest of the students in learning listening skills. Students tend to be overwhelmed by the challenges in listening skills. This is evident with the following statements:

*“Yes, because most of the time I do not have interest and just keep on talking with my seatmate,”- P7*

*“Yes, because of my seatmates are very noisy or sometimes I feel sleepy,”  
-P5*

These statements reflect one of the problems that the ten Grade 7 ESL learners have when developing English listening skills. Students do not have interest and just keep on talking with their seatmates while some of them is not very fond of learning English.

### *Strategies of ESL Learners to Overcome Challenges in Listening Skills*

#### *Active Listening*

Staying focused and avoiding distractions are the most dominant listening skills strategies among the grade seven learners. This is evident with the following statements:

*“When I encounter difficulties in listening, usually the thing I did is to ask the teacher about this and I focus more on listening,”- P1*

*“I transferred to a place where I could listen attentively,”-P3*

These statements highlight that active listening is one the coping mechanisms used by 10 Grade 7 ESL learners to improve their listening in English. Students tend to concentrate on the teacher while avoiding their talkative seatmates. They also change seats to stay focused on the teacher's instruction.

#### *Concentration*

The second emerging theme is on the concentration of the students. They give their full attention to the speaker and try to understand the message conveyed. This is evident in the following statements:

*“When I encounter difficulties in listening, I usually face it by avoiding things that can destroy my concentration,”- P4*

*“By avoiding those seatmates who are noisy and by transferring in front, so I can listen attentively,”-P8*

These statements reveal one of the coping methods used by 10 Grade 7 ESL learners to improve their listening English. Students pay closer attention, listen intently, and do their best to comprehend what they are saying. They frequently avoid situations that could disrupt their concentration. Furthermore, learners try to avoid seatmates who are overly talkative.

#### *Note-Taking*

The next emerging theme is on the notetaking. Students take note to help them remember key points and retain information. Evidence of this can be found in the following statements:

*“When I encounter difficulties in listening, what I usually do is to jot down the important details, study this and ask the teacher to know what I should learn,”-P6*

*“The strategy that for me that is effective as a female student is to listen effectively and I write what I heard,”- P3*

These statements reflect emphasizes one of the coping strategies employed by ten Grade 7 ESL students to improve their listening English comprehension. Students listen carefully and take notes on crucial topics. According to the students, taking notes is a good approach for listening, and they write down what they hear.

#### *Clarification*

The fourth emerging theme of this research question is the strategy of clarification. Students ask questions to clarify any points that they are not sure only from the not so experts like their seatmates and classmates. This is demonstrated by the following statements:

*“When I encounter difficulties in listening, I ask my female classmates,”-P7*

*“When I experience difficulty in listening, sometimes I ask my seatmate,”- P9*

These statements show the coping strategies used by 10 Grade 7 ESL students to improve their listening comprehension. Students clarify things for their peers and seatmates. Clarification refers to the process of seeking or providing additional information to ensure understanding, resolve ambiguity, or clear up confusion. In communication, clarification helps to avoid misunderstandings, ensure accuracy, and improve comprehension.



### *Asking Questions from Experts*

The final emerging theme is on the strategy of asking questions from experts like their teachers. The following statements illustrate this:

*“When I encounter difficulties in listening, usually the thing I did is to ask the teacher about this and I focus more in listening,”- P1*

*“If I have a difficulty in listening, I ask my teacher,”-P10*

These statements illustrate that the final coping strategy used by the ESL is asking questions from the experts. When students encounter difficulties in listening, they usually ask the teacher about this and focus more in listening.

### **Conclusions**

The following conclusions are based from the results of the characterized experiences of the grade seven ESL learners in Listening to English.

As language educators, we should reduce speech rate when students struggle with comprehension. Educators should aim for clear articulation, varied pitch, and purposeful pauses. Moreover, we should use repetition, paraphrasing, and simplified vocabulary to support understanding especially for lower-proficiency learners. In addition to this, we educators should limit lecture-style talking; promote more dialogic interaction (questions, discussion) to increase engagement and student participation. We should also be mindful of students' emotional state, excessive teacher talk may lead to fatigue unless balanced by opportunities for active involvement. Finally, we language educators should support student self-efficacy by encouraging small successes, interactive learning, and clear, manageable tasks.

After discussion from this study, the researcher found that Grade seven learners are having very good listening experience. These experiences are valuable for them, and they could use this as they move to their grade level.

On the challenges of the Grade seven ESL learners' participants in listening to English, we can conclude that most of the students is having poor listening comprehension. We teachers should be alarmed about this matter because we all know that listening is the fundamental macro skills in English. If this skill will not be trained and used by the learners, the rest of the macro skills will be affected. Students should have vocabulary bank or programs in schools that will enhance their vocabulary. Moreover, we can also conclude that most of the learners are noisy, and the environment should always be conducive for learning all the times.

Peers are very important part of the listening skills enhancement in English. We language educators should know who the friends of our students are. In this case, we can immediately relate to them and can talk about pressures in life. It is important that teachers should always be alive in teaching. Language educators should always think of interesting activities that will suit the students' needs and interests.

As language educators, we should promote active listening, concentration, note-taking and asking clarifications or questions from the experts. To address these, we need to give the students time to concentrate especially when the activity is on the listening skills. We must create more activities that will enhance their active listening skills, concentration skills, note taking skills and being curious to things around them.

### **Recommendations**

1. The researcher suggests that the educational policymakers and school administrators may prioritize enhancing listening instruction by integrating effective listening strategies and authentic materials into the curriculum. Provide teachers with training on effective listening strategies, such as speaking at an appropriate pace, pre-teaching vocabulary, and offering sufficient context before lessons.

2. The researchers suggests that teachers may use effective strategies include authentic materials to make lessons more engaging and relevant, teaching metacognitive strategies to help students manage their listening process, and encouraging active listening through discussions, debates, and role-plays. Use differentiated instruction to meet the diverse needs of students to ensure that all learners have the opportunity to develop their listening skills.
3. The researcher suggests that teachers and school administrators may integrate explicit instruction on active listening, note-taking, vocabulary building, and the use of contextual clues into the English curriculum, supported by teacher training and varied listening activities. Providing quality listening materials and opportunities for practice will help ESL learners strengthen their skills and confidently overcome comprehension challenges.
4. The researcher suggests that researchers and academic institutions may conduct further studies on effective listening strategies and their impact on language learning outcomes, exploring the role of technology in enhancing listening skills. Additionally, they can also investigate the influence of contextual factors, such as culture and prior knowledge, on listening comprehension to provide valuable insights. Longitudinal studies can also track the development of listening skills over time, identifying effective instructional practices.

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