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Unpacking the Silence: Exploring Listening Comprehension Challenges in Moroccan EFL High School Classrooms

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Abstract— *Listening comprehension remains one of the most challenging yet underemphasized skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, particularly in input-limited educational contexts. In Moroccan secondary education, learners frequently experience persistent difficulties in understanding spoken English despite several years of formal instruction. This study investigates the nature and sources of listening comprehension difficulties among Moroccan high school students in the Kénitra region. Using a descriptive quantitative design, data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 80 second-year Baccalaureate students. The analysis focused on learners' perceptions of listening difficulties across seven interrelated dimensions: listening materials, linguistic features, concentration processes, psychological factors, listener-related strategies, speaker characteristics, and physical learning conditions. The findings indicate that listening difficulties arise from a combination of cognitive, linguistic, affective, and environmental factors. In particular, learners exhibited overreliance on bottom-up processing strategies, limited ability to use prediction and inference, short-term memory constraints, and inadequate metacognitive awareness. These cognitive challenges were compounded by high levels of listening anxiety, low interest in certain topics, unfamiliar vocabulary, rapid speech rate, and difficulties with prosodic and connected speech features. The study highlights that listening comprehension problems are not merely linguistic in nature but reflect broader deficiencies in strategic competence and instructional practice. It argues for a pedagogical shift toward explicit listening strategy instruction, increased metacognitive training, and more systematic exposure to authentic spoken English in EFL classrooms.*

Keywords— ***Listening comprehension; EFL listening difficulties; Moroccan high school learners; listening strategies; cognitive processing; metacognitive awareness; listening anxiety; strategy-based instruction.***

I. INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension occupies a central position in second and foreign language acquisition because it constitutes the primary channel through which learners receive linguistic input. Despite its crucial role in facilitating language development, listening has historically remained one of the least emphasized and least systematically taught language skills in many EFL contexts. Early listening research had already emphasized the foundational role of listening in second language acquisition and communicative development (Rost, 1994; Rubin, 1994). Nevertheless, listening instruction in many EFL classrooms continues to receive comparatively limited pedagogical attention, particularly in examination-oriented educational systems where productive and grammar-based skills are prioritized. Nunan (1997) famously referred to listening as the "Cinderella skill" of language learning, a characterization that continues to resonate in contexts where classroom practices prioritize grammar, reading, and examination performance over communicative competence. In secondary education settings, listening is frequently approached as a product to be tested rather than a complex cognitive skill requiring explicit instruction and strategic support.

Field (2009) similarly argues that listening pedagogy has often focused excessively on comprehension outcomes

rather than on the cognitive and strategic processes underlying successful listening. As a result, learners are frequently evaluated on listening performance without being systematically taught how to listen effectively.

Recent developments in applied linguistics have increasingly highlighted the multidimensional nature of listening comprehension. Rather than representing a passive reception of auditory input, listening involves the dynamic interaction of cognitive, linguistic, affective, and sociocultural processes. Listeners must decode rapidly unfolding phonological streams, recognize lexical and grammatical patterns, activate relevant background knowledge, maintain information in working memory, and continuously monitor meaning construction in real time (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). For many EFL learners, particularly those studying in input-poor environments, this complex process generates considerable comprehension difficulties and cognitive overload.

These challenges become particularly salient in foreign language contexts such as Morocco, where learners' exposure to authentic spoken English outside the classroom remains relatively limited. Although English has gained increasing importance within Moroccan education and professional life, listening instruction in many public secondary schools continues to suffer from several pedagogical limitations, including insufficient strategy instruction, limited authentic auditory exposure, examination-oriented teaching practices, and inadequate technological resources. Consequently, many learners experience persistent difficulties understanding naturally occurring spoken English despite years of formal instruction. Time constraints within language teaching programs may further limit opportunities for sustained listening practice and strategy development in secondary classrooms (Cross, 2015).

While international scholarship on listening comprehension difficulties has expanded considerably over the last two decades, learner-centered empirical research within Moroccan secondary education remains relatively scarce. Existing studies in the Moroccan EFL context have often focused on general language proficiency, reading, grammar, or speaking skills, whereas listening comprehension has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. Moreover, relatively few studies have examined listening difficulties through an integrated framework that simultaneously considers cognitive, linguistic, affective, speaker-related, and environmental variables.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating Moroccan high school students' perceptions of the listening comprehension difficulties they encounter in EFL classrooms. More specifically, the study argues that learners' listening problems cannot be reduced solely to insufficient vocabulary or grammatical knowledge. Rather, these difficulties emerge from the interaction between underdeveloped strategic competence, cognitive processing constraints, affective barriers such as anxiety, and pedagogical practices that frequently emphasize comprehension testing over listening strategy development.

This study contributes to the literature in several important ways. First, it provides one of the few learner-centered investigations of listening comprehension difficulties in Moroccan public secondary education. Second, it adopts an integrated analytical framework that examines multiple dimensions of listening difficulty simultaneously rather than treating linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors separately. Third, the study highlights the pedagogical implications of strategy underdevelopment in resource-constrained EFL environments where opportunities for authentic listening remain limited.

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are Moroccan high school students' perceptions regarding the importance and difficulty of listening comprehension?
2. What specific listening comprehension problems do Moroccan EFL learners encounter in classroom listening activities?
3. How can listening instruction be improved to help students overcome these difficulties?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to provide pedagogically relevant insights for teachers, curriculum designers, and teacher educators seeking to improve listening instruction in Moroccan EFL classrooms and similar educational contexts.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Listening comprehension is widely recognized as one of the most cognitively demanding language skills because it requires learners to process and interpret spoken language in real time. Unlike reading, where learners can revisit textual input, listening involves the rapid and transient processing of auditory information, often under significant time pressure. Contemporary listening research therefore conceptualizes listening as an active meaning-construction process rather than a passive act of hearing (Field, 2008; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

From a cognitive perspective, successful listening comprehension requires the coordination of multiple simultaneous processes. Listeners must discriminate phonological sounds, segment speech into meaningful units, recognize lexical items, process syntactic structures,

activate relevant background knowledge, infer implied meanings, and retain information in working memory long enough to integrate it into coherent discourse representation. These operations occur almost simultaneously and place considerable demands on learners' attentional and cognitive resources.

One of the most influential frameworks for understanding listening comprehension difficulties is the distinction between bottom-up and top-down processing. Bottom-up processing refers to the listener's ability to construct meaning sequentially from linguistic input by decoding sounds, words, grammatical structures, and propositional meaning. This process depends heavily on linguistic knowledge such as vocabulary, pronunciation, syntax, and phonological recognition. Learners who rely excessively on bottom-up processing often attempt to understand every individual word, which may hinder global comprehension when they encounter unfamiliar lexical items or rapid speech.

In contrast, top-down processing involves the use of prior knowledge, contextual information, expectations, and inferencing strategies to construct meaning. Through top-down processing, listeners draw upon background knowledge and contextual clues to anticipate content and compensate for gaps in linguistic understanding. Skilled listeners typically employ prediction, inferencing, monitoring, and selective attention strategies to facilitate comprehension during listening tasks. Research on listening strategies has consistently demonstrated that successful listeners differ from less-skilled listeners in their ability to deploy flexible cognitive and metacognitive strategies during listening activities (Graham et al., 2007).

Contemporary listening research increasingly emphasizes that effective listening depends on the interaction between bottom-up and top-down processing rather than the dominance of one mode alone. Interactive processing models propose that successful listeners dynamically shift between linguistic decoding and conceptual interpretation according to task demands and contextual conditions (Field, 2008). Consequently, listening difficulties may arise when learners experience breakdowns in one or both processing systems.

In addition to cognitive processing models, recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of metacognitive awareness in listening comprehension. Metacognitive listening involves learners' ability to plan, monitor, evaluate, and regulate their listening processes strategically (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Research has consistently shown that less-skilled listeners often lack strategic flexibility and tend to focus disproportionately on lexical decoding at the expense of global meaning construction. Vandergrift (1999) similarly observed that less-skilled listeners frequently experience difficulty regulating comprehension processes and monitoring listening performance effectively during real-time listening tasks.

Another important dimension concerns the affective variables associated with listening comprehension. Foreign language listening anxiety has been identified as a significant obstacle that interferes with learners' concentration, confidence, and processing efficiency. High levels of anxiety may increase cognitive overload, reduce working memory capacity, and negatively affect learners' willingness to tolerate ambiguity during listening tasks. Krashen's (1985) affective filter hypothesis further suggests that emotional barriers such as stress and fear of failure can impede the processing of comprehensible input. This interaction between affective and cognitive variables may be particularly problematic in foreign language contexts where learners possess limited exposure to authentic spoken input and consequently lack confidence in their listening abilities.

Previous empirical studies have identified numerous sources of listening comprehension difficulty among EFL learners, including unfamiliar vocabulary, rapid speech rate, connected speech, accent variation, concentration problems, inadequate background knowledge, memory limitations, and ineffective listening strategies (Goh, 2000; Graham, 2006; Hamouda, 2013). However, the relative significance and interaction of these factors may vary according to educational context, learner background, and instructional practices. Studies examining strategy instruction have further demonstrated that explicit metacognitive training can significantly improve listening performance and learner self-regulation (Cross, 2011; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010). Similarly, Graham and Macaro (2008) found that strategy-based instruction enhanced listening comprehension among lower-intermediate foreign language learners by helping them manage cognitive demands more effectively.

The present study builds on this body of research by examining listening comprehension difficulties within the Moroccan high school context through an integrated framework encompassing linguistic, cognitive, affective, speaker-related, and environmental dimensions. In doing so, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how multiple variables interact to shape learners' listening experiences in Moroccan EFL classrooms.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to investigate Moroccan high school students' perceptions of listening comprehension difficulties in EFL classrooms. The study formed part of a broader MA research project conducted earlier and focused specifically on the quantitative dimension of learners' reported listening problems.

A quantitative approach was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to identify recurring patterns and determine the relative prevalence of different listening comprehension difficulties across a sizeable group of learners. The study aimed not only to document the existence of listening problems but also to categorize them according to cognitive, linguistic, affective, speaker-related, and environmental dimensions.

Participants

The participants consisted of 80 second-year Baccalaureate students recruited from three public high schools in Kénitra, Morocco: Lycée Abdelmalek Saadi, Lycée Taha Houssein, and Lycée Technique. A convenience sampling technique was employed due to accessibility and institutional considerations.

The participants ranged in age from 16 to 19 years and had studied English for at least three years within the Moroccan public education system. The sample included students from different academic streams and represented varying levels of self-reported English proficiency. Second-year Baccalaureate students were selected because they had accumulated more classroom exposure to English listening activities than lower secondary learners and were therefore expected to possess greater awareness of the difficulties associated with listening comprehension.

Instrumentation

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire adapted from previous studies investigating listening comprehension difficulties among EFL learners (e.g., Underwood, 1989; Hasan, 2000; Hamouda, 2013). The questionnaire was designed to elicit students' perceptions regarding the nature and frequency of the listening problems they encountered during classroom listening activities.

Prior to administration, the questionnaire was reviewed by university specialists in applied linguistics to ensure content relevance and clarity. The instrument was also piloted with a small group of students from a similar educational context in order to identify ambiguous items and improve comprehensibility. Minor linguistic modifications were subsequently introduced.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section collected demographic and background information, including years of English study and self-assessed proficiency level. The second section investigated students' exposure to English listening activities and their perceptions of the importance and difficulty of listening comprehension. The third and principal section contained 46 Likert-scale items examining specific listening comprehension problems across seven categories: listening material, linguistic factors, concentration problems, psychological factors, listener-related factors, speaker-related factors, and physical setting.

A five-point Likert scale ranging from "Never" to "Always" was used to measure the frequency with which students experienced each difficulty.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted during regular classroom sessions in the second trimester of the 2018–2019 academic year. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed of the purpose of the study prior to questionnaire administration. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process.

To minimize possible misunderstandings, the researcher provided oral clarification whenever necessary and occasionally translated difficult items into Arabic to ensure accurate interpretation.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical procedures. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to identify the prevalence of specific listening comprehension difficulties. The findings were subsequently grouped and interpreted according to the seven predefined categories included in the questionnaire.

Rather than treating listening difficulties as isolated phenomena, the analysis adopted an integrated interpretive perspective emphasizing the interaction between cognitive, linguistic, affective, and contextual variables shaping learners' listening experiences.

IV. RESULTS

Overview of Students' Perceptions of Listening Comprehension

The findings revealed that listening comprehension constituted one of the most challenging language skills for the majority of participants. Although most students acknowledged the importance of listening for language learning and communication, they simultaneously perceived it as highly difficult and cognitively demanding. A considerable proportion of respondents also demonstrated limited awareness of listening strategies, suggesting that many learners approached listening tasks

without sufficient metacognitive preparation or strategic support.

More specifically, the results indicated that listening comprehension difficulties extended beyond purely linguistic limitations and involved the interaction of multiple cognitive, affective, speaker-related, and environmental factors. The data further suggested that students tended to rely heavily on inefficient bottom-up processing strategies, particularly word-by-word decoding, while demonstrating comparatively limited use of predictive and inferential listening strategies.

For analytical purposes, the findings are presented according to the seven categories included in the questionnaire: (1) listening material, (2) linguistic factors, (3) concentration problems, (4) psychological factors, (5) listener-related factors, (6) speaker-related factors, and (7) physical setting.

4.1. Problems Related to the Listening Material

The findings indicated that the nature and complexity of the listening texts represented a major source of difficulty for many participants. Lexical unfamiliarity emerged as one of the most frequently reported obstacles, with a large proportion of students indicating that unknown vocabulary significantly hindered comprehension. Many learners reported becoming excessively focused on individual unfamiliar words, often at the expense of understanding the overall message.

This tendency suggests a strong dependence on bottom-up processing strategies and limited ability to tolerate partial comprehension during listening tasks. Instead of using contextual clues or inferencing strategies to maintain global understanding, many students appeared to interrupt comprehension processes in order to decode isolated lexical items.

In addition to vocabulary difficulties, students reported considerable problems processing grammatically complex sentences and extended listening passages. Long texts were frequently associated with fatigue, loss of concentration, and reduced comprehension efficiency. These findings suggest that lengthy listening tasks may impose substantial cognitive demands on learners' attentional resources and working memory capacity.

Topic familiarity also played a significant role in listening performance. Students generally reported greater comprehension difficulties when listening texts addressed unfamiliar topics or culturally distant subject matter. This finding highlights the importance of background knowledge and schema activation in facilitating top-down processing during listening comprehension.

Overall, the findings related to listening material suggest that learners struggled not only with linguistic decoding but also with maintaining cognitive engagement and constructing coherent meaning across extended stretches of spoken discourse.

4.2. Linguistic Factors

Linguistic features of spoken English constituted another major source of listening comprehension difficulty. Participants reported considerable challenges related to pronunciation, connected speech, stress patterns, and rapid lexical processing.

One particularly salient difficulty involved learners' inability to recognize familiar words in their spoken form. Although many students were already familiar with certain lexical items in writing, they often failed to identify these words during real-time listening. This discrepancy points to an imbalance between orthographic knowledge and phonological recognition skills, likely resulting from the predominance of reading-oriented instruction within many EFL classrooms.

Participants also experienced difficulties understanding naturally occurring features of spoken English, including contractions, reduced forms, assimilation, and connected speech. These findings indicate that learners were more accustomed to carefully articulated pedagogical input than to authentic spontaneous speech.

Prosodic features such as stress and intonation further complicated comprehension processes for many students. Since English and Arabic differ considerably in their rhythmic and prosodic structures, learners may experience additional processing difficulties when attempting to interpret stress placement, intonation contours, and discourse emphasis in spoken English.

Another important finding concerned students' difficulties with inferencing and discourse-level processing. Many learners reported struggling to infer the meaning of unknown words from contextual clues or to recognize discourse markers signaling transitions and logical relationships within spoken texts. Such difficulties may negatively affect learners' ability to construct global coherence and follow the organizational structure of spoken discourse.

Collectively, these findings suggest that linguistic difficulties extended beyond isolated vocabulary problems and involved broader challenges associated with phonological decoding, discourse processing, and strategic meaning construction.

4.3. Concentration Problems

The findings further revealed that maintaining concentration during listening activities represented a major

challenge for many participants. Several factors appeared to contribute to attentional breakdown during listening tasks, particularly text length, unfamiliar vocabulary, poor recording quality, and excessive cognitive effort devoted to lexical decoding.

A substantial proportion of students reported losing concentration while attempting to interpret difficult words or recall answers to previous comprehension questions. This finding suggests that listening tasks frequently overloaded learners' working memory resources, thereby reducing their ability to process incoming auditory information efficiently.

Students also reported that excessive concentration on individual words or phrases often caused them to lose track of the overall flow of speech. This tendency again reflects overreliance on bottom-up processing strategies and limited strategic flexibility during listening comprehension.

Furthermore, poor audio quality and environmental distractions were found to intensify concentration difficulties. Inadequate technological equipment, background noise, and classroom overcrowding frequently interfered with learners' ability to maintain sustained attentional focus throughout listening activities.

Overall, the findings indicate that concentration problems were closely interconnected with cognitive overload, inefficient processing strategies, and environmental constraints.

4.4. Psychological Factors

The affective dimension emerged as another significant factor influencing listening comprehension performance. Many participants reported experiencing anxiety, nervousness, fear of failure, and frustration during listening activities.

A considerable proportion of students indicated that they became anxious whenever they failed to understand parts of a spoken text. In many cases, this anxiety appeared to disrupt concentration and further reduce comprehension efficiency. Such findings support previous research suggesting that foreign language listening anxiety may interfere with processing capacity and increase learners' cognitive burden during listening tasks.

Fear of misunderstanding or missing important information also appeared to contribute to negative listening experiences. Some students reported entering listening tasks with low confidence and anticipating failure before the activity even began. These affective reactions may increase learners' dependence on word-by-word processing and reduce their willingness to tolerate ambiguity during comprehension.

The findings additionally revealed that topic interest significantly influenced learners' engagement and comprehension. Students generally reported greater motivation and concentration when listening materials addressed familiar or personally relevant topics, whereas lack of interest frequently resulted in reduced attentional investment and lower comprehension.

Feelings of disappointment and discouragement were also common when learners failed to achieve complete understanding. Some students reported abandoning listening efforts altogether after encountering comprehension difficulties, thereby reinforcing negative perceptions toward listening activities.

These findings highlight the important interaction between emotional factors and cognitive processing during listening comprehension and underscore the necessity of creating supportive low-anxiety learning environments.

4.5. Listener-Related Factors

Several difficulties were associated with learners' own listening habits, strategic competence, and cognitive processing abilities. One of the most significant findings concerned students' limited use of predictive and inferential listening strategies.

Many participants reported difficulty predicting the content of listening texts based on titles, contextual clues, or prior knowledge. This finding suggests that learners were not sufficiently accustomed to employing top-down processing strategies during listening activities.

Short-term memory limitations also emerged as an important obstacle. Students frequently reported difficulty retaining previously heard information long enough to integrate it with subsequent input. Such difficulties may negatively affect learners' ability to construct coherent mental representations of spoken discourse.

Another important issue involved learners' tendency to translate mentally while listening. This habit likely slowed processing speed and increased cognitive overload, particularly during rapid speech.

The findings further indicated that many learners lacked confidence in their listening abilities and possessed limited awareness of effective listening strategies. The high proportion of students unfamiliar with the concept of listening strategies suggests that listening instruction may not have adequately emphasized metacognitive development and strategic listening behavior.

Overall, listener-related difficulties reflected substantial weaknesses in strategic competence, attentional management, and cognitive flexibility during listening comprehension.

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4.6. Speaker-Related Factors

Speaker-related variables also exerted considerable influence on learners' listening comprehension. Among these variables, speech rate emerged as the most significant difficulty reported by participants.

Many students indicated that native or fluent speakers spoke too quickly for them to process information effectively. Rapid speech appeared to intensify learners' dependence on bottom-up decoding and reduced their ability to retain information in working memory.

Participants also reported difficulties understanding unfamiliar accents and unclear pronunciation. Although accent variation was not perceived as problematic by all learners, many students struggled when exposed to speech patterns differing from the standardized pronunciation typically presented in classroom materials.

In addition, the natural hesitations, pauses, repetitions, and self-corrections characteristic of spontaneous speech were found to complicate comprehension processes. Learners appeared more accustomed to carefully scripted pedagogical recordings than to authentic spoken interaction.

These findings suggest that limited exposure to diverse and authentic auditory input may negatively affect learners' ability to adapt to natural variations in spoken English.

4.7. Physical Setting

Finally, the findings indicated that environmental and physical conditions constituted additional obstacles to effective listening comprehension. Several participants reported that external noise, overcrowded classrooms, and poor acoustics frequently interfered with concentration during listening activities.

Technological limitations also emerged as an important issue. Poor recording quality and malfunctioning audio equipment reduced the clarity of spoken input and increased comprehension difficulty. In some cases, distorted sound quality forced students to expend additional cognitive effort simply attempting to identify words and sounds.

Although environmental factors were not always the primary source of listening difficulty, the findings suggest that unfavorable physical conditions may intensify existing linguistic and cognitive challenges.

Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the results demonstrate that Moroccan high school students' listening comprehension difficulties cannot be attributed to a single isolated factor. Rather, the findings reveal a complex interaction between linguistic limitations, cognitive overload, insufficient strategic competence, affective barriers, speaker-related variables, and environmental constraints.

Across the different categories, several recurring patterns emerged. First, learners demonstrated substantial overreliance on bottom-up processing strategies, particularly word-by-word decoding. Second, many students appeared to possess limited metacognitive awareness and insufficient strategic flexibility during listening tasks. Third, affective variables such as anxiety and fear of failure significantly influenced listening performance. Finally, classroom and technological limitations frequently compounded these difficulties by reducing learners' opportunities for successful listening experiences. This pattern closely resembles Tsui and Fullilove's (1998) characterization of less-skilled listeners, who tend to depend heavily on local lexical processing rather than integrating top-down inferential strategies during listening comprehension.

These interconnected findings provide important insight into the multidimensional nature of listening comprehension difficulties in Moroccan EFL classrooms and establish the basis for the interpretive discussion presented in the following section.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study reveal that listening comprehension difficulties among Moroccan high school students are multidimensional and cannot be explained solely by limited linguistic knowledge. Rather, the results suggest that learners' difficulties emerge from the interaction between cognitive processing limitations, inadequate strategic competence, affective barriers, speaker-related variables, and contextual classroom constraints. This multidimensional pattern supports contemporary views of listening comprehension as a complex and cognitively demanding process involving the simultaneous coordination of linguistic decoding, inferencing, memory management, and meaning construction (Field, 2008; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Rubin (1994) similarly emphasized that listening comprehension difficulties emerge from the interaction between text characteristics, task demands, listener variables, and processing strategies rather than from isolated linguistic deficiencies alone.

One of the most significant findings concerns learners' strong dependence on bottom-up processing strategies. Many participants reported concentrating intensely on individual words, attempting to decode every lexical item, and interrupting comprehension processes whenever unfamiliar vocabulary appeared. Such findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that less-skilled listeners often rely excessively on lexical decoding at the expense of global comprehension (Goh, 2000;

Graham, 2006). Rather than constructing meaning holistically, many students appeared trapped in a linear processing mode that overloaded attentional resources and hindered discourse-level understanding.

This overreliance on bottom-up processing may partly explain students' difficulties with rapid speech, connected discourse, and extended listening passages. Since spoken language unfolds in real time, learners who attempt to process every word individually are more likely to experience cognitive overload and memory breakdown. The findings therefore suggest that many participants had not yet developed the automaticity necessary for efficient listening comprehension. This interpretation aligns with cognitive processing theories emphasizing the importance of automatized lower-level decoding skills in reducing working memory demands during listening tasks. Longitudinal research has also suggested that listening development is closely associated with learners' strategic awareness and their ability to regulate listening processes metacognitively (Graham et al., 2011).

Equally important was the apparent weakness of learners' top-down and metacognitive processing abilities. Many students reported difficulty predicting content, inferring meaning from context, and using background knowledge strategically during listening activities. These findings suggest limited strategic flexibility and insufficient awareness of how successful listening operates cognitively. Previous research has consistently shown that skilled listeners actively employ prediction, monitoring, inferencing, and selective attention strategies in order to compensate for gaps in linguistic understanding (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). In contrast, the learners in this study appeared to approach listening primarily as a decoding exercise rather than a meaning-construction process.

The high percentage of students unfamiliar with listening strategies further reinforces this interpretation. This finding may reflect the limited emphasis traditionally placed on explicit listening strategy instruction in many EFL classrooms. In examination-oriented educational contexts, listening activities are often reduced to comprehension testing, with insufficient attention devoted to teaching learners how to listen strategically. Consequently, students may develop the perception that successful listening depends primarily on knowing vocabulary rather than on employing flexible cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Such instructional patterns may prevent learners from developing the strategic competencies necessary for flexible and autonomous listening comprehension.

Another important dimension highlighted by the findings concerns the role of affective variables in listening comprehension. Anxiety, fear of failure, frustration, and low confidence emerged as recurrent themes across participants' responses. These findings support previous studies indicating that foreign language listening anxiety may significantly interfere with learners' concentration and processing efficiency (Hamouda, 2013). From the perspective of Krashen's (1985) affective filter hypothesis, heightened anxiety may block or reduce learners' ability to process incoming auditory input effectively.

The relationship between anxiety and cognitive overload appears particularly important in the present study. Learners who became anxious after missing a word or sentence frequently reported losing concentration and abandoning comprehension efforts altogether. This suggests that affective reactions did not merely accompany listening difficulties but actively intensified them. Such findings illustrate the reciprocal relationship between cognition and emotion during listening comprehension: comprehension breakdown generates anxiety, while anxiety further disrupts comprehension processes.

The findings additionally underscore the importance of background knowledge and schema activation in listening comprehension. Students consistently reported greater difficulty understanding texts addressing unfamiliar topics or culturally distant subject matter. This result supports schema-theoretic perspectives emphasizing that comprehension depends partly on the listener's ability to connect incoming information with existing knowledge structures. When learners lack sufficient contextual familiarity, they may struggle to generate predictions, infer meanings, and maintain coherent interpretation throughout the listening task.

Speaker-related variables also played a major role in learners' listening experiences. Rapid speech rate emerged as one of the most frequently reported difficulties, confirming findings from numerous previous EFL listening studies. Fast speech likely increased cognitive pressure by reducing the time available for lexical recognition and meaning integration. Similarly, learners experienced considerable difficulty with authentic spoken features such as contractions, reduced forms, hesitations, and accent variation. These findings suggest that many students had limited exposure to authentic auditory input and were more accustomed to carefully scripted pedagogical recordings than to naturally occurring spoken English. This finding reinforces arguments supporting increased exposure to authentic listening materials capable of familiarizing learners with naturally occurring speech patterns and discourse structures (Siegel, 2018).

The discrepancy between learners' familiarity with written vocabulary and their inability to recognize spoken forms

further highlights an imbalance in language instruction. In many EFL contexts, including Morocco, reading and grammar frequently receive greater pedagogical emphasis than listening and pronunciation. As a result, learners may acquire substantial orthographic knowledge without developing corresponding phonological recognition abilities. This imbalance may partly explain why students struggled to identify familiar words during real-time listening despite recognizing them easily in written form.

Environmental and contextual factors also contributed to comprehension difficulties. Poor audio quality, classroom noise, overcrowding, and limited technological resources frequently interfered with concentration and comprehension. Although such factors may appear secondary compared to cognitive or linguistic variables, they nevertheless increase processing difficulty by placing additional demands on learners' attentional resources. These findings therefore illustrate how institutional and material conditions may intensify existing listening comprehension challenges in resource-constrained educational settings.

Overall, the findings suggest that listening comprehension difficulties among Moroccan high school students should not be interpreted as isolated learner deficiencies. Rather, they reflect the interaction between learner-related limitations and broader pedagogical conditions shaping listening instruction within the Moroccan EFL context. The results particularly highlight the consequences of insufficient strategy instruction, limited authentic listening exposure, and assessment-oriented classroom practices that prioritize correct answers over strategic listening development.

Importantly, the findings also suggest that improving listening comprehension requires more than simply increasing exposure to spoken English. While exposure remains essential, learners additionally require explicit support in developing cognitive, metacognitive, and affective listening competencies. Without such support, students are likely to remain dependent on inefficient processing strategies that perpetuate comprehension difficulties and listening anxiety.

The present study therefore reinforces the growing consensus within listening pedagogy that effective listening instruction must move beyond product-oriented testing models toward process-oriented approaches emphasizing strategy development, guided practice, and learner autonomy. In contexts such as Moroccan public secondary education, where authentic listening exposure may remain limited outside the classroom, the teacher's role in scaffolding strategic listening behavior becomes particularly crucial.

VI. CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the listening comprehension difficulties experienced by Moroccan high school students in EFL classrooms and revealed that these difficulties extend far beyond isolated linguistic deficiencies. The findings demonstrated that learners' listening problems emerge from the interaction between cognitive processing limitations, insufficient strategic competence, affective barriers, speaker-related variables, and unfavorable classroom conditions. More specifically, students exhibited substantial dependence on bottom-up processing strategies, limited metacognitive awareness, difficulties with inferencing and prediction, high levels of listening anxiety, and inadequate exposure to authentic spoken English. Moreover, incorporating extensive listening practices may help learners gradually improve listening fluency, processing automaticity, and confidence through sustained exposure to meaningful auditory input (Chang & Millett, 2014).

One of the most important findings of the study concerns learners' overreliance on word-by-word decoding during listening activities. Rather than approaching listening as an active meaning-construction process, many students appeared to perceive successful comprehension as dependent on understanding every lexical item. This processing pattern frequently resulted in cognitive overload, concentration breakdown, and frustration whenever unfamiliar vocabulary or rapid speech was encountered. The findings therefore suggest that many learners lack the strategic flexibility necessary for efficient listening comprehension.

The study additionally highlighted the important role of affective variables in shaping listening performance. Anxiety, fear of failure, and low confidence emerged as significant barriers that frequently interfered with learners' concentration and willingness to persist during difficult listening tasks. Such findings reinforce the view that listening comprehension is not solely a cognitive activity but also an emotionally mediated process requiring supportive and low-anxiety instructional environments.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings underscore the urgent need to reconsider how listening is approached in Moroccan EFL classrooms. Listening instruction should move beyond traditional comprehension-testing practices toward more process-oriented approaches emphasizing explicit strategy instruction, metacognitive awareness, schema activation, inferencing skills, and exposure to authentic spoken input. Learners need to be taught not only what to listen to, but also how to listen effectively.

The study also highlights the importance of contextual realities affecting listening instruction within Moroccan

public secondary education. Large classrooms, limited technological resources, inadequate audio equipment, and restricted exposure to English outside school may significantly constrain learners' opportunities to develop listening proficiency. Consequently, improving listening comprehension requires not only pedagogical adaptation at the classroom level but also broader institutional support aimed at enhancing the quality of listening instruction and learning environments.

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The findings rely primarily on self-reported questionnaire data and therefore reflect learners' perceptions rather than direct observation of cognitive processing during listening tasks. In addition, the study was limited to a relatively small sample drawn from public high schools in the Kénitra region, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts.

Future research could build upon the present study by incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews, classroom observations, or think-aloud protocols in order to explore learners' listening processes in greater depth. Experimental and intervention-based studies examining the effectiveness of explicit listening strategy instruction in Moroccan EFL classrooms would also constitute an important direction for future investigation.

Ultimately, the findings of this study reinforce the growing recognition that listening comprehension is a strategic, cognitively demanding, and explicitly teachable skill rather than a passive ability that develops automatically through exposure alone. Without systematic pedagogical support, learners are likely to remain dependent on inefficient processing strategies that hinder both comprehension and communicative confidence. Developing effective listeners therefore requires a pedagogical shift from testing listening to teaching listening.

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