

# Investigating Listening Comprehension Challenges in an Omani Higher Education Context

Kodhandaraman Chinnathambi

Preparatory Studies Center, University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Ibra, Oman

Issa Abdullah Said AL-Hinai

Preparatory Studies Center, University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Head Office, Oman

Latha Anandan

Preparatory Studies Center, University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Ibra, Oman

Maia Al-Hajri

Preparatory Studies Center, University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Ibra, Oman

**Abstract**—Listening is one of the challenging skills for students studying English as a foreign or second language. Omani students studying in the preparatory studies center face challenges in listening tests. Therefore, this study investigates the main challenges that level 2 Omani students face in listening tests conducted at a preparatory studies center in a higher educational (HE) institution in Oman, analyzing their mid-term test scores and survey responses. The study aims to identify the section that level 2 Omani students find most difficult in the listening test, the main challenges they face during these tests, and the relationship between students' test performance and their perceived difficulty. The study adopted a quantitative method. Quantitative data were collected from level 2 Mid-term listening test scores (N=459) and a self-prepared survey, which was administered to Level 2 Omani students in a preparatory studies center (N=179) of a HE academic institution. The findings from test scores revealed that students have difficulty answering section 3 (MCQs and completing the sentence). Still, the survey responses presented section 1 (True or False, MCQs, and Answering WH questions) as the most difficult. Additionally, a relationship was found between test scores and perceived difficulty, with higher-scoring groups reporting fewer difficulties than lower-scoring groups. Furthermore, the survey responses revealed several common challenges that students face in the speed of the speech, understanding the speaker's accent, and dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary. The findings underscore the need for targeted instructional strategies to enhance the listening skills and test performance of Level 2 Omani students.

**Index Terms**—EFL learners, listening challenges, listening comprehension, Omani students, test performance

## I. INTRODUCTION

Listening skills are crucial for students to receive the messages from a speaker and to process the speech to understand the context and meaning (Sari et al., 2019). Continuous listening comprehension activities help students to master the art of communicating their messages to others. Through listening, students learn pronunciation of words, pitch, and rhythm. A good knowledge of the nuances of listening will positively affect students. However, students lacking these language inputs fail to produce any meaningful communication. Therefore, it is essential to know why students struggle to acquire listening skills.

Listening comprehension is a challenging skill for all students studying the English language. Especially, students from rural backgrounds face more challenges due to their limited exposure to authentic English (Chinnathambi et al., 2021, 2022, 2023). Although it is a challenge, the level of difficulty in completing the listening tasks varies among students, depending on their proficiency levels, which affects their understanding. They fall into low-proficiency, moderate-proficiency, and high-proficiency students. In general, students in all three proficiency levels face difficulties, though not in the same aspects of listening. Low-proficiency students struggle with unfamiliar words, the pace of speech, and have a limited vocabulary. The moderate-proficiency students face challenges related to the pace of speech and external noises, and the high-proficiency students face difficulties in external voices, unfamiliar accents, and long spoken texts. (Hardiyanto et al., 2021).

In Oman, students find “Listening” a herculean task. Students often have challenges in understanding newer accents, unfamiliar contexts, and unfamiliar words. Research carried out within the context of the study shows that Omani students face challenges when dealing with unfamiliar contexts and words (Chinnathambi et al., 2024a, 2024b, 2025). Additionally, they also encounter difficulty in following the longer speech texts and the speed of the speech. Additionally, they fail to

understand the distractors in the speech texts. The students of the General Foundation program at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Ibra, had a low score compared to other skills in two semesters. The low pass percentage in listening enunciates the fact that listening comprehension is indeed a challenging skill. This research aims to analyze the challenging aspects of listening among Level 2 students in the general foundation program, focusing on the types of listening tasks (section 1 - True or False, MCQs, and Answering WH questions, section 2 – complete the table, section 3 - MCQs and completing the sentence) and common challenges that affect students' performance. In order to find out the challenges, the study examines the Mid-term test scores (objective performance) of level 2 Omani students and explores students' perceptions of their difficulties with listening skills through a survey (subjective perceptions), which contains all three sections that are tested in the mid-term listening test and general challenges as well, to answer the following research questions.

Research Questions:

1. Which listening section, according to the Mid-term test scores, do Level 2 Omani students find most difficult?
2. Which listening section, according to the survey responses, do Level 2 Omani students find most difficult?
3. What are the general challenges that Level 2 Omani students face in listening tests?
4. Are there differences in perceived difficulty among students with different test-score levels?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Learners who are engaged in the study of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) require the possession of advanced listening skills, as these are essential for understanding spoken language, contextual nuances, and engaging in both academic and social interactions. The act of listening is often considered a skill of greater significance than other language skills, primarily because it is utilized more frequently in everyday communication (Kurita, 2012; as cited in Ghahri & Zarei, 2022).

### A. Definition of Listening Skills

Listening skills are defined as the ability to receive and understand verbal messages, discourse features, and underlying intentions (Sari et al., 2019). While this definition is foundational, Field (2011) provided a more thorough framework for understanding the cognitive mechanisms involved in listening. According to this framework, listening consists of three main processes: decoding, which refers to the recognition of sounds, words, and grammatical structures; parsing, which involves the analysis of grammatical structures; and the construction of meaning, which is particularly significant in the context of academic listening. This final component includes meaning enrichment through context, inference, reference, and pragmatic interpretation; and information handling that involves selection, monitoring, integration, and the assembly of argument structure.

Scholars have examined listening skills from various perspectives, resulting in the emergence of multiple classifications. Ur (1984) classified listening based on purpose into two fundamental categories: listening for perception, which emphasizes the accurate recognition of phonetic sounds, their combinations, and the stress and intonation patterns of the target language; and listening for comprehension, which pertains to the nature of comprehension that may occur through either passive or active listening. Furthermore, Anderson and Lynch (1988) classified listening based on the degree of engagement and interaction. Reciprocal listening is one classification where the listener actively engages with the speaker through listening activities. In contrast, non-reciprocal listening, also known as one-way listening, is a passive activity where the listener receives information without any interaction, such as when listening to news broadcasts or academic lectures.

### B. Listening Strategies

EFL learners employ various strategies to enhance their listening competencies. According to Altuwairesh (2016), learners utilize metacognitive strategies to facilitate language acquisition by planning listening purposes and selecting appropriate learning strategies, monitoring their understanding, and finally evaluating their overall comprehension and strategy use. In other words, language learners employ metacognitive strategies to develop effective listening techniques, actively assess their listening process, and reflect on their outcomes through the target listening activities. By employing these strategies, students can familiarize themselves with specific methodologies and understand the appropriate contexts and timing for their implementation (Daskalovska et al., 2023; Nguyen, 2020).

The second category encompasses cognitive strategies that language learners employ to acquire knowledge or skills. This category pertains to the mental processes involved in comprehending, processing, and retaining new information for subsequent retrieval, whether it resides in short-term or long-term memory (Altuwairesh, 2016; Richard, 2008). Vandergrift (1997) underscores a third category of listening strategies, which is socio-affective strategies that enable language learners to engage effectively with their peers and seek clarification from their teachers. When language learners comprehend these strategies, discern their appropriate application, and learn to evaluate their effectiveness, they transform into strategic listeners (Alutaybi & Alsowat, 2020).

In 2008, Chulim undertook a scholarly investigation examining how students from five universities in Mexico implemented listening strategies. The results revealed that the predominant strategy employed was concentrating on specific information, whereas notetaking and leveraging prior knowledge techniques were utilized the least. Furthermore,

the study did not uncover any significant disparities in the use of listening strategies among the universities. Moreover, research conducted by Mohseny and Raeisi (2009) investigated the relationship between the language proficiency of Iranian EFL learners and their use of listening strategies. The statistical findings indicated a notable positive correlation between proficiency levels and the employment of listening strategies, with cognitive strategies being the most commonly utilized by students.

### *C. Listening Assessment*

Assessment in the EFL classroom offers a valuable measure of listening abilities for both teachers and learners. It also assists in the development of curriculum and learning objectives, and identifies the needs of learners (Nemtchinova, 2020). In addition, it is important to note that the types of assessments place varied cognitive loads on learners. Rost (2011) points out that formats such as discrete-item, task-based, and integrative assessments demand different cognitive loads, ranging from basic comprehension to higher-order skills. Among all the various forms of listening assessments, Multiple-Choice Questions (MCQs) remain the predominantly used response format, as noted by Kang et al. (2019). A frequently encountered variation of the MCQ format is one that follows the approach of "question preview" or "item preview". This approach involves allowing test takers to preview questions ahead of the listening portion (Yeager & Meyer, 2022). Empirical evidence suggests that MCQs are perceived as easier compared to other assessment formats (In'nami & Koizumi, 2009), and they are also favored by students (Cheng, 2004). However, there are concerns that MCQs and other similar question types, which require quick answers, may hinder the deeper understanding of language input (Field, 2012; Rukthong, 2021).

Listening assessments do not differ solely by item types and conversation types. In fact, listening tests might follow different approaches and instructions. One approach is called While-Listening Performance (WLP), which necessitates that participants provide responses while listening, with no additional time provided for question preview. In this approach, proficient readers might still manage to skim through the questions. On the other hand, in Post-Listening Performance (PLP) tests, participants can only provide their responses after the listening segment has ended (Wagner, 2013).

In this vein, Yanagawa and Green (2008) found that test-taking strategies used by students depend on whether they have the option to preview questions. Those who were permitted to preview had to carefully manage their approach to avoid distraction. Likewise, Aryadoust (2019) conducted a study on a listening test that allowed for double playback, revealing differing levels of gaze, where participants' eyes linger on specific areas of interest, such as a word, and fixation, which refers to moments when the eyes remain focused on an object. These behaviors were noted throughout different phases of the test. It was found that high-performing students seem to strategically determine when to focus their attention to avoid overwhelming their cognitive capacity. Hence, the scores in listening tests might not accurately reflect a student's actual listening skills, raising concerns about cognitive validity.

### *D. Listening Difficulties*

While it is evident that listening skills are instrumental in facilitating vocabulary acquisition and enhancing overall language proficiency (Barker, 1971; Purdy, 1997), EFL students often encounter many challenges with comprehending spoken language. These difficulties mainly result from limited exposure to authentic spoken language beyond the confines of the classroom, inadequate time allocated for listening exercises in the classroom, and the lack of suitable listening exercises (Rababa et al., 2023; Ghahri & Zarei, 2022).

Stephens (2011) distinguished between lower-level and higher-level listening difficulties that language learners face. Lower-level difficulties include basic comprehension problems, resulting from limited depth and breadth of vocabulary, fast speech rate, and external factors, such as background noise or poor audio quality, which increase the difficulty of decoding and comprehending language. Conversely, higher-level challenges include difficulties in comprehending extended spoken texts and unfamiliarity with diverse language accents.

From a different perspective, Siege et al. (2025) have identified a range of obstacles that learners face in listening comprehension. One category of these challenges is content-related factors, such as difficulties arising from a lack of prior knowledge, inconsistency between existing knowledge and newly introduced material, as well as the complexity of discipline-related concepts. Sociocultural factors also influence this process, particularly the impact of listener expectations and the nuances of human interaction and discourse, which can impede the effective comprehension of spoken language.

Cognitive variables further contribute to the challenges associated with listening comprehension, such as devoting excessive time to questioning or analyzing the input, which may negatively affect the understanding of the information heard. In addition, insufficient practice of notetaking can impair information retention. Affective factors, such as disinterest, anxiety, fatigue, and diminished motivation, can also undermine listening proficiency. Lastly, multimedia-related elements, such as the availability of supportive visual aids like slide presentations, nonverbal cues including body language, and gestures, significantly influence learners' ability to comprehend spoken content (Siege et al., 2025).

Focusing on empirical evidence, Hardiyanto et al. (2021) investigated the difficulties six university students with varying levels of language proficiency encountered in developing listening skills. The study revealed that limited vocabulary, rapid speech, and unfamiliar vocabulary were problems for low-achieving students, while moderate-level students struggled with fast-paced speech and background noise. Furthermore, high-proficiency students also struggled with background noise, lengthy texts, and diverse accents.

Another investigation conducted by Arroyani (2021) identified listening challenges encountered by a group of pharmacy students studying English as a foreign language, employing a qualitative methodological framework that incorporated questionnaires and interviews. According to the results, students experienced a moderate level of difficulty during the decoding phase, particularly when identifying sounds and interpreting accents and intonations. Students also struggled to distinguish between lexically similar phonemes during the parsing phase. Moreover, the challenges encountered in the construction phase encompassed difficulties in following the progression of speech, which affected students' comprehension and their capacity to apply the information that they had received orally in an appropriate manner.

The review highlights the research studies that have investigated listening skills, strategies, assessment formats, and difficulties in various contexts. However, no research has specifically connected learners' perceived difficulties in listening test sections with their actual performance in listening test sections. In addition, there remains a lack of focus on how factors such as speech speed, unfamiliar vocabulary, and the speaker's accent affect the performance of students, especially in the Omani higher education context. Therefore, this study aims to fill the research gaps by focusing on listening test scores across sections, perceived difficulty ratings across sections based on survey responses, perceived common difficulties in listening tests, and the correlation between perceived difficulty and actual listening performance.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Research Hypotheses

In order to answer the four research questions, four null hypotheses were formulated and tested.

1. There is no statistically significant difference in Mid-term test scores across Sections 1, 2, and 3.
2. There is no statistically significant difference in perceived difficulty ratings in the survey across Sections 1, 2, and 3.
3. There is no statistically significant difference in students' perceived difficulty among the listening challenges of speech speed, unfamiliar vocabulary, and speaker accent.
4. There are no significant differences among the test-score groups with regards to perceived difficulty.

#### B. Participants

The study adopted a quantitative method. The data were collected in two ways. First, mid-term test scores of 450 level 2 Omani students, enrolled in the foundation program of a preparatory studies center (PSC), were collected from the administration. Next, a self-prepared questionnaire was distributed to level 2 Omani students, adopting a convenience sampling method. About 175 students answered a questionnaire regarding their challenges during the listening tests. All 450 level 2 Omani students took the same standardized listening test and are from the same region, studying at the preparatory studies center of the same university.

#### C. Instruments

The Mid-term listening test is a standardized test administered across the 13 branches of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences. The test is designed to assess various aspects of listening comprehension among level 2 Omani students in the foundation program of the Preparatory Studies Center. Listening comprehension consisted of 3 sections: section 1 (True or False, MCQs, and Answering WH questions) is a dialogue between two people with 10 questions, section 2 (Complete the table) is a conversation among three people with 5 questions, and section 3 (MCQs and completing the sentence) is a monologue with 10 questions. The self-prepared questionnaire had four sections. The three sections exactly reflected the task types in sections 1, 2, and 3 of the midterm test, and section 4 included general questions regarding listening comprehension difficulties.

#### D. Data Collection Procedures

After the mid-term test, the listening marks of 450 students were collected, and 179 students answered the questionnaire voluntarily. The Shapiro-Wilk Normality test for test scores was conducted. Following that, the Friedman Test and the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test were done to find out the differences across the sections (1, 2, and 3) of the listening test and survey responses. One-way ANOVA was carried out for four test score groups across sections. In addition, box plots for all three sections are presented to strengthen the validity of the findings.

### IV. RESULTS

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no statistically significant difference in Mid-term test scores across Sections 1, 2, and 3.

TABLE 1  
RESULTS OF THE SHAPIRO-WILK NORMALITY TEST FOR TEST SCORES

Test Scores	Statistic	df	Sig.
Section 1	0.959	430	<0.001**
Section 2	0.912	430	<0.001**
Section 3	0.912	430	<0.001**
a Lilliefors Significance Correction			

In order to check whether the data is normally distributed, the Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted. The table above shows that the data from all three sections are statistically significant at less than 0.05%. This reveals that the data is not normally distributed. Hence, the Friedman Test was conducted to find out whether there are significant differences between the sections.

TABLE 2  
COMPARISON OF TEST SCORES ACROSS SECTIONS

Comparison	Median (section 1)	Median (section 2)	Median (section 3)	p-value (Friedman Test)	p-value (Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test)
Section 1 vs Section 2	6.00	3.00	-	<0.001**	<0.001**
Section 1 vs Section 3	6.00	-	2.00	<0.001**	<0.001**
Section 2 vs Section 3	-	3.00	2.00	<0.001**	<0.001**

The table above displays the Friedman test results. It shows that the exam scores of all three sections have a p-value of less than 0.01%. This indicates that there is a strong statistically significant difference between the scores of the three sections. This suggests that there is a difference in at least one of the pairs. In order to check which pair has a difference, a post-hoc pairwise comparison was performed using a Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test. The p-value of all three sections was less than 0.01%. To justify the multiple comparisons, a Bonferroni correction was performed manually. Considering the three pairwise comparisons, the significance level alpha is adjusted to  $\alpha_{\text{adjusted}} = 0.05/3 = 0.0167$ . Despite applying this correction, the corrected p-value was 0.001, which is below the adjusted significance alpha. This confirms that the difference in the pairwise comparison is statistically significant.

Furthermore, the median score clearly depicts that section 3 was the most difficult section in the exam. Although section 1 and section 3 have the same number of questions, students have scored better in section 1, with a median score of 6, compared to section 3, with a median score of 2. However, the median score of section 2 is 3, suggesting that it was less difficult than section 3 but more difficult than section 1.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no statistically significant difference in perceived difficulty ratings in the survey across Sections 1, 2, and 3.

TABLE 3  
RESULTS OF SHAPIRO-WILK NORMALITY TEST FOR SURVEY RESPONSES

	Statistic	df	Sig.
Section 1	0.950	179	<0.001**
Section 2	0.875	179	<0.001**
Section 3	0.942	179	<0.001**
a Lilliefors Significance Correction			

To check whether the data is normally distributed, the Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted. The table above shows that the data from all three sections are statistically significant at less than 0.05%. This reveals that the data is not normally distributed. Hence, the Friedman Test was conducted to find out whether there are significant differences between the sections.

TABLE 4  
COMPARISON OF SURVEY RESPONSES ACROSS SECTIONS

Comparison	Median (section 1)	Median (section 2)	Median (section 3)	p-value (Friedman Test)	p-value (Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test)
Section 1 vs Section 2	7.00	2.00	-	<0.001**	<0.001**
Section 1 vs Section 3	7.00	-	4.50	<0.001**	<0.001**
Section 2 vs Section 3	-	2.00	4.50	<0.001**	<0.001**

The table above displays the Friedman test results. The results show that the students' responses regarding the difficulty level of all three sections have a p-value of less than 0.01%. This indicates that there is a strong, statistically significant difference between the perceptions of students regarding the difficulty levels of the three sections. This suggests that there is a difference in at least one of the pairs. In order to check which pair has a difference, a post-hoc pairwise comparison was performed using a Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test. The p-value of all three sections was less than 0.01%. To justify the multiple comparisons, a Bonferroni correction was performed manually. Considering the three pairwise comparisons, the significance level alpha is adjusted to  $\alpha_{\text{adjusted}} = 0.05/3 = 0.0167$ . Despite applying this correction, the corrected p-value was 0.001, which is below the adjusted significance alpha. This confirms that the difference in the pairwise comparison is statistically significant. Furthermore, the median score clearly depicts that students found section 1 as the most difficult section in the exam, followed by section 3, but they found section 2 as the least difficult.

Null Hypotheses 3: There are no significant differences among the test-score groups with regards to perceived difficulty.

TABLE 5  
ONE-WAY ANOVA RESULTS FOR FOUR TEST SCORE GROUPS ACROSS SECTIONS

Sections	1-7 Score	8-12 score	13-17 score	18-25 score	F Value	P Value
1	2.26 (0.99)	2.48 (0.82)	2.97 (0.69)	3.12 (0.72)	8.867	0.001**
2	1.74 (0.81)	2.09 (0.96)	2.48 (0.94)	2.23 (1.31)	3.412	0.019*
3	2.24 (1.02)	2.41 (0.92)	2.86 (0.78)	3.25 (0.91)	8.812	0.001**

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to see whether the perceived difficulty of Section 1, Section 2, and Section 3 differed across four groups based on the test scores: 1-7, 8-12, 13-17, and 18-25. The table shows that the students who scored between 18-25 and 13-17 in the overall test performed better in all three sections. On the other hand, the students who scored 8-12 and 1-7 in the overall test performed worse in all three sections. Also, it satisfies the statistical significance with a p-value of 0.01% and 0.05%. Tukey Post Hoc HSD test was conducted to examine which groups perceived more difficulty in which section. Overall, it showed that students in the 1-7 and 8-12 groups reported a highly significant difficulty in all three sections than the 13-17 and 18-25 group students. The Tukey test showed a statistical significance with a p-value of 0.05%. Specifically, the 1-7 group found Sections 1, 2, and 3 more difficult than the 13-17 (p = 0.05) and 18-25 (p = 0.05) groups, followed by the 8-12 group (p = 0.05). However, there were no significant differences between 1-7 and 8-12 in all three sections (p = 0.721, 0.530, and 0.869) and 13-17 and 18-25 (p = 0.819, 0.232, and 0.208).

Null Hypothesis 4: There is no significant difference in students' perceived difficulty among the listening challenges of speech speed, unfamiliar vocabulary, and speaker accent.

Perceived Impact of Speaker Speed: Around 93.85% of students found that the speed of the speaker's speech affected their ability to complete the task. Among the 93.85%, about 45% of students said that it affected them extremely and around 32% affected them very much. Only 6.15% said that the speed did not affect them. This suggests that the speed of the speaker's speech significantly affected the students' ability to grasp the listening and answer the questions.

Perceived Impact of Speaker Accent: Around 92% of students found the accent of the speaker's speech affecting their ability to understand and answer the questions. Among the 92%, about 54% of students said that it moderately and slightly affected their understanding, followed by about 37% reporting it to be very much and extremely affecting their understanding. Only 7.82% said that the speaker's accent did not affect them. This suggests that the accent of the speaker considerably affected the students' ability to understand the listening and answer the questions.

Perceived Impact of Unfamiliar Vocabulary: Around 95% of students found unfamiliar vocabulary affected their ability to understand the listening passage and answer the questions. Among the 95%, about 55% of students said that it moderately and slightly affected their understanding, followed by about 40% reporting it to be very much and extremely affecting their understanding. Only 4.47% said that the speaker's accent did not affect them. This suggests that unfamiliar vocabulary had a significant impact on the students' ability to comprehend the listening passage and answer the questions.

Confidence Level of Students in Test Taking: Around 26% of students were confident in their ability to understand and answer the listening questions. However, about 39% of students said that they were not confident. Also, around 34.08% said that they were neither confident nor unconfident. This suggests that about 73% of students showed a lack of confidence in understanding the listening exam passages.

The findings show that most of the students reported that they faced challenges while dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary, speakers' accents, and speech speeds. As a result, many reported a low level of confidence. Therefore, the hypothesis is accepted, suggesting no major difference in perceived difficulty among the four factors.

## V. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate the challenges that level 2 Omani students face in listening tests by analyzing their performance in the mid-term test, self-reported perceptions of their difficulty, the relationship between test scores and survey responses, and common challenges in listening comprehension.

### A. The Most Difficult Section in Listening, as per Test Scores

The mid-term test scores from 450 students were analyzed using the Friedman test. The test results revealed a statistically significant difference (p < 0.01%) in the perceived difficulty of section 1 (True or False, MCQs, and Answering WH questions), section 2 (complete the table), and section 3 (multiple-choice questions and sentence completion) of the mid-term listening test. This is again confirmed by the Post-hoc Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test (p-values below 0.01%), which showed all three pairwise comparisons as significant, even after the application of Bonferroni correction (p-value 0.001). According to the Friedman test results, section 3, monologue, was the most difficult for students with the lowest average scores. Section 2 was moderately difficult, and section 1, a dialogue between two speakers, had the highest average scores. In addition, the median scores also provide insight into the nature of these differences. Section 3, the most challenging for students, had a median score of 2, section 1, less difficult, had a median score of 6, and section 2, moderately difficult, had a median score of 3. These findings underscore that the difficulty level varies according to the types of tasks. It is evident that the question format and cognitive load impact the level 2 Omani students' listening performance.

The findings underscore that the length and complexity of the monologue, along with cognitive demand, may have posed challenges to level 2 Omani students. Level 2 Omani students might have found instructions to be complex, the question format difficult to predict, or the content more challenging. These results align with the study findings of Field (2011) that higher cognitive demands, like in monologues, can challenge learners and Rost (2011) that different assessment formats of listening tests impose varying cognitive demands on the test takers.

#### *B. The Most Difficult Section as per Survey Responses*

According to the Friedman test results, there is a statistically significant difference in the level 2 Omani students' perceived difficulty levels across the three sections in the mid-term listening test. The P value, which is less than 0.01% confirms that students do not perceive the three sections equally in term of difficulty. This aligns with the idea that each listening task requires varying levels of cognitive demands. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons using the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank yielded P values below 0.01% highlighting significant differences between the sections. This result was the same even after applying Bonferroni correction: the corrected p-value of 0.001 remained well below this threshold.

The results of the survey responses, answered by 179 level 2 Omani students, revealed that section 1 (true/false, MCQs, and WH questions) as the most difficult, Section 3 (MCQs and sentence completion) was moderately difficult, and section 2 (Complete the Table) was perceived as the easiest. While supporting this ranking of difficulty, the median scores also indicate how the difficulty level varies with the task types in each section. This result contrasts with the findings of the test score analysis. This contrast suggests that level 2 Omani students may find inferencing and interpreting viewpoints in dialogues more cognitively demanding. Therefore, irrespective of their good performance, they find section 3 as difficult. This gap between actual performance (Objective) and perceived difficulty (Subjective) suggests the possibility of misjudgment or a requirement in the development of metacognitive awareness among Level 2 Omani students, which affects their ability to identify which tasks are actually difficult. This finding aligns with Altuwaresh's (2016) assertion that EFL learners are unable to monitor their comprehension accurately due to a lack of metacognitive strategies. This lack of strategy may have affected their ability to judge which task type is really difficult for them. Therefore, learners should be given tailored interventions on how to use these strategies to accurately identify their challenges, which can help improve their listening proficiency and self-monitoring skills.

#### *C. Perceived Difficulty Across Score Groups*

The test results of one-way ANOVA showed that students' difficulty level across Sections 1, 2, and 3 varied significantly across listening performance groups (score ranges: 1–7, 8–12, 13–17, and 18–25). Students in higher scoring groups (13–17 and 18–25) reported fewer difficulties compared to students in lower scoring groups (1–7 and 8–12), who reported more difficulties in all sections. The differences between high-scoring groups and low-scoring groups were statistically significant at both the 0.01% and 0.05% levels. This confirms a strong relationship between performance and perceived difficulty in the listening test. Furthermore, the Tukey HSD post-hoc analysis also showed that students in the 1-7 group had more difficulty in all sections of the mid-term listening test, compared to those in the 13-17 and 18-25 groups ( $p = 0.05$ ). Students in the 8-12 group are also showing higher perceived difficulty levels.

It is evident from the findings that students who belong to high-scoring groups perceive listening tasks as less difficult, while students who belong to low-scoring groups perceive listening tasks as very difficult, regardless of section. This difference may be due to their listening proficiency, familiarity, application of test-taking strategies, and the task types. These findings support the results of Mohseny and Raesi's (2009) that high-performing students use strategies more effectively than low-performing students and the findings of Aryadoust (2019) that high-performing students avoid cognitive overload by regulating their attention during listening tasks. Hence, tailored interventions for students in 1-12 score range are recommended with a focus on listening strategies, vocabulary development, and exposure to various listening formats.

#### *D. Reported Listening Challenges and Their Degree of Impact*

In addition to examining students' difficulties with types of tasks in the listening test, the survey also explored common listening challenges, including speech speed, unfamiliar vocabulary, and speaker accent. The study also examined the degree to which these challenges affected the level 2 Omani students' listening performance. Around 93% of students found that the speed of the speaker's speech affected their ability to complete the task. This suggests that the speed of the speaker's speech significantly affected the students' ability to grasp the listening content and answer the questions, which confirms the study results of Hardiyanto et al. (2021) and Stephens (2011) that fast-paced speech is the most commonly cited difficulty for EFL learners. Similarly, around 92% of students found the accent of the speaker's speech affecting their ability to understand and answer the questions. This suggests that the speaker's accent considerably affected the students' ability to understand the listening and answer the questions. The study findings are in line with Arroyani (2021), who reported that unfamiliar accents pose significant challenges to comprehension for Omani learners. Regarding vocabulary, around 95% of students found unfamiliar vocabulary to be affecting their ability to understand the listening passage and answer the questions. This suggests that unfamiliar vocabulary greatly affected the students' ability to understand the listening passage and answer the questions. These findings support the study findings of Sari et al. (2019), which indicate that vocabulary comprehension is crucial for successful listening, and those of Siegel et al. (2025), which suggest that unfamiliar vocabulary impacts content-related comprehension in listening. Along these lines, about 73% of

students showed a lack of confidence in understanding the listening exam passages. These findings align with Siegel et al. (2025), who found that anxiety and confidence are major barriers to listening comprehension. Similarly, the study findings of Alutaybi and Alsowat (2020) highlight that learners who lack socio-affective strategies may experience greater difficulty in managing these internal difficulties. These findings confirm that external factors like the design of the test, speaker's speech speed, and speaker's accent, and internal learner factors like knowledge level of vocabulary and confidence are associated with students' difficulties in a listening test.

#### E. Summary

These findings show that section 3 is the most difficult as per the mid-term test scores, while section 1 is the hardest as per the survey results, indicating that there is a gap between objective performance and perceived difficulty. In addition to the types of tasks, other factors could contribute to the challenges in the listening test. They are test design, speech speed, accent, unfamiliar vocabulary, and the confidence level of students. Therefore, students should be exposed to a variety of English accents, strategy-based listening instruction, and activities that can build confidence in a classroom environment. By doing so, it is possible to improve students' listening proficiency, confidence, and accuracy in self-assessment as well.

### VI. CONCLUSION

The study aimed to find out the challenges faced by level 2 Omani students in the listening test by analyzing their mid-term test scores and self-reported survey responses. The findings revealed a gap between their actual performance and their perceived level of difficulty. The test scores indicated that section 3 was the most difficult, but students' perceived difficulties showed section 1 as the most difficult. This gap could be due to misjudgment or a lack of metacognitive awareness. Hence, there is a need to align students' perceptions and their performance. In addition, internal factors such as the students' knowledge level of vocabulary and confidence level, as well as external factors such as speech speed, the speaker's accent, and the test design, influenced the listening difficulties of level 2 Omani students. Furthermore, the strong relationship between lower-scoring groups and higher perceived difficulties highlights the role of listening proficiency and awareness of task types in shaping the experiences of students. Therefore, targeted interventions are essential to enhance their overall performance.

The study underscores the necessity to bridge the gap between perceived difficulties of the students and their actual performance in listening tests. Therefore, teachers should provide tailored pedagogical interventions for level 2 Omani students, focusing on vocabulary development, confidence building, a range of English accents, practice with different listening task types, developing metacognitive awareness, and tests with balanced cognitive load. This will help reduce the listening difficulties of the level 2 Omani students to a greater extent and improve their test performance.

While this study provides several valuable insights, it also has limitations. The study was conducted in one higher educational institution only and employed only a quantitative method. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized. In addition, the perceived difficulty was based on survey responses, which may be influenced by individual biases. Furthermore, the listening performance groups were based on a single mid-term test. This single test may not precisely reflect overall listening ability. Therefore, further research is recommended using qualitative methods, a larger sample size, and involving varied higher educational institutions.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research project that led to these results was funded by the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation, Sultanate of Oman (Internal Research Grants 2025 Program, UTAS-Ibra).

### REFERENCES

- [1] Altuwairesh, N. (2016). Metacognitive listening strategies used by Saudi University L2 successful learners. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 3(4), 36–43.
- [2] Alutaybi, M., & Alsowat, H. (2020). The effectiveness of using self-questioning strategy in developing strategic listening and self-regulation skills. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 11(8), 129-141. <https://doi.org/10.7176/JEP/11-8-17>
- [3] Anderson, A., & Lynch, T. (1988). *Listening*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [4] Arroyyani, R. (2021). Mapping students' listening problems and strategies. *Leksika: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra dan Pengajarannya*, 15(1), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.30595/lks.v15i1.9309>
- [5] Aryadoust, V. (2019). Dynamics of item reading and answer changing in two hearings in a computerized while-listening performance test: An eye-tracking study. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2019.1574267>
- [6] Barker, L. (1971). *Listening Behavior*. Englewood. Cliffs, New York: Prentice-Hall.
- [7] Cheng, H. (2004). A comparison of multiple-choice and open-ended response formats for the assessment of listening proficiency in English. *Foreign Language Annals*, 27(4), 544–553. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2004.tb02421.x>
- [8] Chinnathambi, K., Anandan, L., & Ayari, C. M. Y. (2022). Online teaching and online assessment: A critical study. *ECS Transactions*, 107(1), 4099–4106. <https://doi.org/10.1149/10701.4099ecst>
- [9] Chinnathambi, K., Anandan, L., & Dalangbayan, N. (2024a). Omani Student's Awareness and Application of Reading Strategies in the IELTS-Based Reading Exams. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 15(3), 737–745.

- [10] Chinnathambi, K., Anandan, L., & Tago, N. D. (2025). Enhancing Academic Performance of Omani Students in the IELTS-Based Reading Exams: Influence of Reading Strategy Interventions. *World Journal of English Language*, 15(4), 153–153. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v14n5p348>
- [11] Chinnathambi, K., Anandan, M. L., & Bharathi, B. T. (2021). Teachers' perception of online teaching during Covid-19: A study at UTAS-Ibra, Oman. *Journal of University of Shanghai for Science and Technology*, 23(6), 91–107. <https://doi.org/10.51201/JUSST/21/05234>
- [12] Chinnathambi, K., Bani Orabah, S. S., Rani, S. S., & Anandan, L. (2023). Omani students' satisfaction with independent learning tools during Covid-19. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ), Special Issue on Communication and Language in Virtual Spaces, January 2023*, 363–373. <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/comm1.25>
- [13] Chinnathambi, K., Domalon, D., & Ayari, C. (2024b). Omani students' familiarity with IELTS-based reading exam format and strategies: A qualitative phenomenological study. *World Journal of English Language*, 14(5), 348–358. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v14n5p348>
- [14] Chulim, F. (2008). The Use of Listening Learning Strategies by Lengua Inglesa students in Five Mexican Universities: Preliminary Results. *Memorias dellV Foro Nacional de Estudios en Lenguas*, 469, 479. Retrieved from [http://fel.uqroo.mx/adminfile/files/memorias/Articulos\\_Mem\\_FONAEL\\_IV/Dzay\\_Chulim\\_Floricely.pdf](http://fel.uqroo.mx/adminfile/files/memorias/Articulos_Mem_FONAEL_IV/Dzay_Chulim_Floricely.pdf)
- [15] Daskalovska, N., Hadzi-Nikolova, A., & Jankova Alagjozovska, N. (2023). The Use of Metacognitive Listening Strategies by English Language Learners. *European Journal of English Language Teaching*, 8(1), 19–33. <https://doi.org/10.46827/ejel.v8i1.4648>
- [16] Field, J. (2012). The cognitive validity of the lecture-based question in the IELTS Listening paper. In L. Taylor & C. J. Weir (Eds.), *IELTS Collected Papers 2: Research in Reading and Listening Assessment* (pp. 391–453). Cambridge University Press.
- [17] Field, J. (2011). Into the mind of the academic listener. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 10(2), 102–112. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2011.04.002>
- [18] Ghahri, S., & Zarei, A. A. (2022). The effect of prelistening activity types on listening comprehension and listening anxiety. *Journal of Modern Research in English Language Studies*, 9(4), 93–118. <https://doi.org/10.30479/jmrels.2022.16910.2030>
- [19] Hardiyanto, A., Tanjung, M., & Suharjo, S. (2021). Listening comprehension difficulties; a case study of EFL students in listening class. *ETERNAL (English, Teaching, Learning, and Research Journal)*, 7(1), 168–179. <https://doi.org/10.24252/Eternal.V7i1.2021.A12>
- [20] In'nami, Y., & Koizumi, R. (2009). A meta-analysis of test format effects on reading and listening test performance: Focus on multiple-choice and open-ended formats. *Language Testing*, 26(2), 219–244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265532208101006>
- [21] Kang, T., Arvizu, M., Chaipuapei, P., & Lesnov, R. (2019). Reviews of academic English listening tests for non-native speakers. *International Journal of Listening*, 33(1), 1–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2016.1185210>
- [22] Mohseny, A., & Raeisi, N. (2009). The Relationship between Language Proficiency of EFL Students and Their Strategy Use in Listening Comprehension. *TEFLL*, 1(4), 111–132.
- [23] Nemtchinova, E. (2020). *Teaching Listening* (Revised ed.). ELT Development Series. TESOL Press.
- [24] Nguyen, H. D. N. (2020). Understanding EFL students' use of listening strategies in watching English captioned movies. *Vietnam Journal of Education*, 4(2), 37–46. <https://doi.org/10.52296/vje.2020.18>
- [25] Purdy, M. (1997). What is listening. In M. Purdy & D. Borisoff (Eds.), *Listening in everyday life: A personal and professional approach* (2nd ed., pp. 1–20). University Press of America.
- [26] Rababah, L. M., Al-Khawaldeh, N. N., & Rababah, M. A. (2023). Mobile-Assisted Listening Instructions with Jordanian Audio Materials: A Pathway to EFL Proficiency. *International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies*, 17(21). <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijim.v17i21.42789>
- [27] Richard, J. C. (2008). *Teaching Listening and Speaking from Theory to Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [28] Rost, M. (2011). *Teaching and researching listening* (2nd ed.). Harlow, England: Longman.
- [29] Rukthong, A. (2021). MC listening questions vs. integrated listening-to-summarize tasks: What listening abilities do they assess? *System*, 97, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2020.102439>
- [30] Sari, R., Evianty, R., & Amran, M. (2019). Listening skills for learning German using blended learning models. *Budapest International Research and Critics in Linguistics and Education (BirLE) Journal*, 2(4), 616–621. <https://doi.org/10.33258/birle.v2i4.659>
- [31] Siegel, J., Kuteeva, M., & Siegel, A. (2025). Making sense of non-comprehension issues while listening: A data-based coding scheme. *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, 4(1), 100181. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rmal.2025.100181>
- [32] Stephens, M. (2011). The primacy of extensive listening. *ELT journal*, 65(3), 311–313. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccq042>
- [33] Ur, P. (1984). *Teaching Listening Comprehension*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [34] Vandergrift, L. (1997). The comprehension strategies of second language (French) listeners: A descriptive study. *Foreign language annals*, 30(3), 387–409. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.1997.tb02362.x>
- [35] Wagner, E. (2013). An investigation of how the channel of input and access to test questions affect L2 listening test performance. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 10(2), 178–195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15434303.2013.769552>
- [36] Yanagawa, K., & Green, A. (2008). To show or not to show: The effects of item stems and answer options on performance on a multiple-choice listening comprehension test. *System*, 36(1), 107–122. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2007.12.003>
- [37] Yeager, R., & Meyer, Z. (2022). Question preview in English for academic purposes listening assessment: The effect of stem preview on difficulty, item type, and discrimination. *International Journal of Listening*, 36(3), 299–324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2022.2029705>

**Kodhandaraman Chinnathambi** is a Lecturer in English at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Ibra, Oman. He received his PhD in Canadian Literature from the University of Madras, India. He is a member of the Board of Directors of TESOL Oman. Additionally, he serves as the Editor of the Oman Journal of ELT. His area of interest includes ELT, Theory, and Literature.

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-1289-9290

**Issa Al Hinai** is the Director of Preparatory Studies Centre at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Oman. Previously Dr. Al Hinai held a number of prestigious positions within the Technological Education Sector. He holds a PhD in Education as well as a MSc in Educational Research from the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom, while additionally earning an MA from the University of Leeds, UK. ORCID iD: 0000 0002 5285 8928

**Latha Anandan** is a Lecturer in English at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Ibra, Oman. She received her M.A. and M.Phil. from the University of Madras and CELTA from the British Council, Oman. Her area of interest includes ELT, Literature, and Feminism. ORCID iD: 0000-0003-3384-6654

**Maia Al Hajri**, M.Ed. is a Lecturer in English Language Teaching at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences–Ibra, Oman, and currently serves as Head of the Quality Assurance Section. She holds an M.Ed. in Curriculum and Teaching Methods of English Language from Sultan Qaboos University. Her research interests include ELT, language assessment, blended learning, and educational policy. She has published on Content and Language Integrated Learning and blended learning, and has presented her work at national and international conferences, contributing to scholarly discussions on English language education and higher education. ORCID iD: 0000-0003-0864-7741