

Why Are Students Failing Listening? Investigating Reasons for the Low Performance of Omani General Foundation Program Students in English Listening Exams

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Abstract—This research paper investigates the reasons behind the low performance of students in the listening component of English examinations within the General Foundation Program (GFP) at an Omani public university. Recognizing a consistent trend of weak listening outcomes across levels and branches, the study aims to identify the exam sections and question types that pose the greatest challenges to learners. Using data from the university's largest branch, the study employs Microsoft Office Excel for performance analysis and item analysis to determine the most problematic questions. The listening examinations, which are standardized across all branches, are designed to align with students' proficiency levels and include multiple-choice, true or false, short-answer, and note-completion tasks. The findings indicate that students experience particular difficulty with cloze and note-completion tasks due to the demands of precise listening, linguistic decoding, and accurate spelling or transcription of words and numbers. The study also highlights inherent challenges of listening comprehension, including real-time processing, exposure to varied accents, differences in speech rate, and the difficulty of converting auditory input into written responses. These findings are relevant not only to the context examined in this study but also to other educational settings where listening skills are taught and assessed. The study underscores the need for targeted pedagogical interventions to improve listening proficiency and assessment performance, thereby supporting students' overall English competence and academic success in programs where English is the medium of instruction.

Index Terms—listening comprehension, EFL learners, language assessment, foundation programs, English listening

I. INTRODUCTION

In the Sultanate of Oman, the General Foundation Program (GFP) serves as a preparatory or bridging program for students before they enter a degree program. In other words, the GFP functions as a bridge between secondary and higher education, and only upon successful completion may students progress directly into their chosen specializations. The GFP is required for students who have not yet achieved the necessary level of proficiency in the four core areas—English, Mathematics, Computing, and General Study Skills—to pursue their studies in higher education. According to the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA), the entity responsible for quality assurance and accreditation in the Sultanate, ‘the GFP is a compulsory entrance qualification for Omani degree programs’ and ‘is designed to prepare students for their post-secondary and higher education studies’ (OAS, p. 6). The OAS further states that the GFP aims to help students ‘attain the prescribed student learning outcomes in at least four areas: English, Mathematics, Computing and General Study Skills’ (OAS, p. 4). As far as the English component is concerned, the aim of the program is to enhance students’ academic English proficiency, particularly in programs where English is the medium of instruction. Students are expected to achieve a level equivalent to IELTS Band 5 or higher upon completion of the English program to qualify for entry into their degree programs.

This Omani Public University (OPU) is a branch-based Higher Education Institution with 11 branches strategically dispersed throughout the Sultanate of Oman. It is the largest university in the country. The GFP is managed by the Preparatory Studies Centre (PSC), which oversees development, delivery, and review of the program across all branches. Each branch has its own PSC, which is responsible for implementing, monitoring, and reviewing the GFP locally, while all 11 centers report directly to the main PSC at the university headquarters.

All Preparatory Studies Centres (PSCs) across the branches follow a common GFP structure. Teachers in English, Mathematics, and Computing implement the same syllabi, course outlines, assessment system, and teaching materials. In the GFP English Program, which is the focus of this study, there were four levels of study at the time of data collection. Upon taking a placement test, students were placed into one of four levels: Level 1 (CEFR A1), Level 2 (CEFR A2), Level 3 (CEFR B1), or Level 4 (CEFR B2, lower range). Students who achieved an overall IELTS score of 5.0 through an official certificate were exempt from the English program. Across all levels, the four language skills—Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking—were given equal importance in terms of teaching hours, materials, and assessment. Although

the program has since been restructured into three General English courses, namely General English 1 (CEFR A2), General English 2 (CEFR B1), and General English 3 (CEFR B2, lower range), the Listening examinations and their assessment procedures have remained unchanged.

As part of the OPU GFP English assessment system, students across all branches sit the same Midterm Examination (MTE) and Final Examination (FE). The MTE, which constitutes 30% of the continuous assessment, evaluates three skills—Reading, Writing, and Listening—with 10% allocated to each skill. The FE, which accounts for 50% of the overall course grade, assesses all four skills equally (12.5% each). While the MTE mirrors the exam style of the FE, it assesses only the learning outcomes taught up to the point of the midterm, whereas the FE is comprehensive and assesses any learning outcome covered during the semester.

Following the implementation of the common GFP English program, it has been consistently observed that students across all branches perform less well on Listening exams across all levels. This study was therefore undertaken to investigate the possible reasons behind this trend. Specifically, the study examined the three sections of the Listening exams and identified which section posed the greatest difficulty for students. It also explored the most challenging question types.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

English is recognized as a global lingua franca and is spoken by millions of people worldwide. According to Statista, based on data reported for 2022, approximately 200 million people speak English as a native language, with over one billion using it as a second or foreign language (Statista, 2023). People learn English for many reasons, including its role in facilitating communication, supporting education and career advancement, and providing access to information and cultural resources.

In Oman, English is the only official foreign language and is often considered a lingua franca as well (Al-Issa, 2014). It is taught as a mandatory subject throughout the formal education system, beginning in Grade 1 with basic skills such as vocabulary, simple sentence structures, and basic communication. English remains compulsory through intermediate and secondary education, following a structured curriculum set by the Ministry of Education. This curriculum emphasizes the development of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, as well as grammar and vocabulary. Public schools use the same prescribed English language textbooks aligned with the Ministry's curriculum, and instruction commonly incorporates a mix of traditional teaching methods, interactive activities, group work, and language games.

Language acquisition refers to the process by which individuals acquire the ability to understand and use language. Children naturally acquire their mother tongue through exposure and interaction, and researchers have attributed this process to a combination of innate biological factors, environmental exposure, social interaction, and cognitive development (Herschensohn & Young-Scholten, 2013). In contrast, second language (L2) acquisition does not typically occur in the same way and often requires more time. A variety of factors influence the language acquisition journey of ESL learners, including age, previous language experience, exposure to the target language, and the learning environment (Gass & Schachter, 1989). Moreover, L2 learners do not necessarily master the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—uniformly. Differences in learning styles, preferences, and strengths contribute to varied levels of difficulty across skills. The learning environment and instructional methods also play significant roles in shaping learners' experiences (Herschensohn & Young-Scholten, 2013).

An important question arises: Is there a relationship between language acquisition and structured learning? Research suggests that structured learning can greatly benefit foreign language acquisition. A well-designed curriculum offers learners a systematic framework to develop their skills (Ibbotson, 2022; Krashen, 1982). However, the effectiveness of a common English curriculum depends on several factors, including curriculum design, instructional quality, learner characteristics, and the broader learning environment. Although standardized curricula provide a consistent structure, individual differences and contextual factors inevitably influence outcomes. Learners perceive the difficulty of English language skills differently; what one learner finds challenging may not be difficult for another. Nevertheless, a substantial body of research highlights listening as one of the most challenging skills for L2 learners (Buck, 2001; Vandergrift, 2007; Graham, 2006).

Listening poses significant difficulties due to intrinsic features of spoken language. Unlike reading, listening requires real-time processing, leaving no opportunity to review or reflect (Buck, 2001). Variability in accents, pronunciation, and speaking speeds adds to the complexity, as learners must adjust to linguistic nuances and dialectal differences (Vandergrift, 2007). Recent theoretical work further emphasizes the cognitive and real-time processing demands that distinguish listening from other language skills (Field, 2025). Spoken English also contains colloquial expressions, idioms, and reduced forms that are not commonly found in written language, further complicating comprehension (Graham, 2006). Background noise and overlapping speech in natural settings can hinder understanding. Collectively, these factors make listening one of the most demanding skills for L2 learners, requiring strong linguistic knowledge, decoding ability, and inferencing skills.

Since this study focuses on the listening performance of Omani students in OPU GFP Listening examinations, it is important to explore challenges commonly faced by Arabic learners of English. Hasan (2000) identifies pronunciation as a major difficulty due to substantial differences between English and Arabic phonological systems. English consonant clusters and vowel contrasts pose notable challenges. Grammar also presents difficulties, given the complexity and

irregularity of English structures compared with the more systematic nature of Arabic grammar. Vocabulary acquisition, too, is demanding due to the substantial lexical differences between the two languages. Hasan's research highlights pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary as interconnected challenges that collectively shape the Arabic learner's linguistic experience.

Arabic L2 learners also encounter difficulties in the IELTS Listening Module. Phonological disparities between English and Arabic create challenges in distinguishing and reproducing English sounds (Al-Shehri, 2017). Grammatical differences between the two languages lead to difficulties interpreting complex English sentences (Elsheikh, 2002; Zughoul, 2002). Limited vocabulary further hinders comprehension (Al-Obaidi, 2019). These combined factors contribute to the challenges Arabic speakers face in achieving proficiency in IELTS Listening.

Students also struggle with specific question types in listening assessments. Research consistently identifies cloze exercises as the most challenging. These tasks require test takers to fill in blanks in a paraphrased passage based on an audio input. The difficulty stems from the need for precise listening, accurate spelling, and the ability to recognize paraphrased content. Studies by Buck (2001) and Goh (2000) highlight the cognitive load associated with these tasks, which require simultaneous listening, processing, and writing. Field (2008) further notes that cloze tasks demand understanding of context and prediction of linguistic structures, increasing the cognitive burden on learners. Recent listening assessment and SLA-oriented research confirms that gap-fill and cloze-type tasks remain among the most cognitively demanding listening formats for EFL learners due to their transcription, spelling, and processing demands (Aryadoust et al., 2021; Aryadoust et al., 2025).

Other question types also pose challenges. Multiple-choice questions (MCQs), which often test details such as dates, times, and names, can overload learners with dense information. Roediger and Marsh (2005) argue that MCQs increase cognitive load by requiring evaluation of several options simultaneously, while Bridgeman and Rock (1993) note that they may emphasize recognition over comprehension. Recent research further demonstrates that multiple-choice formats in listening assessments can influence learner performance depending on question design and distractor characteristics, particularly when lexical or numerical overlap increases cognitive demands (O'Grady, 2021; Ockey, 2025).

Sentence completion tasks require vocabulary knowledge, grammatical awareness, and inferencing skills (Frase, 1968; Brown & Hudson, 1998). Their open-ended nature can induce anxiety. Short-answer questions demand accurate spelling, specific information recall, and effective note-taking abilities, which are difficult for many L2 learners (Kiewra, 1989). Contemporary research on academic listening continues to show that note-taking ability plays a critical role in listening comprehension and assessment performance (Siegel & Wang, 2025).

Effective listening requires a wide range of skills and strategies. Learners must engage actively, employ bottom-up and top-down processing, use predictive strategies, apply varied listening techniques, manage vocabulary and grammar demands, develop note-taking skills, interpret contextual clues, understand different accents, and reflect regularly on their performance (Field, 2008; Vandergrift, 2007; Graham, 2006). These combined demands illustrate why listening is one of the most complex skills to acquire in a second language.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the possible reasons for the low achievement of OPU GFP students in their listening exams?
2. Which exam section is the most problematic to GFP students?
3. What type of questions do students struggle with the most and why?

B. Participants

The study examined the performance of OPU General Foundation Program (GFP) students across the four proficiency levels offered at the time of data collection. Listening examination results from four semesters, Fall and Spring of AY 2021–2022 and Fall and Spring of AY 2022–2023, were analyzed to identify patterns and trends in students' performance over time. Although the GFP English program has since been restructured into three General English courses (GE1, GE2, and GE3), the Listening examinations and assessment procedures remained unchanged. Data were obtained from the largest branch of OPU, which enrolls the highest number of GFP students and therefore provides the most comprehensive and analyzable dataset.

C. Instruments

The main instrument used in this study was the standardized Final Examination (FE) Listening paper, administered at four GFP levels. Each Listening exam consisted of 25 questions divided into three sections, which varied in the number of speakers, the length of the listening scripts, the task types, and the cognitive demands placed on test takers. The examinations were designed according to level-specific testing specifications that defined:

- the learning outcomes assessed in each section
- the number of speakers involved
- the length of the listening texts
- the topics / themes covered

- whether the text was a monologue or a conversation
- the test duration, including pause time
- the task types included (e.g., multiple choice, true/false, note completion, short answer questions)
- the number of times the recordings were played
- the sources of the scripts
- the text difficulty aligned with CEFR levels (A1, A2, B1, B2)

All Listening examinations were administered uniformly across OPU branches and were centrally marked using an answer key and a double-marking process to ensure consistency and fairness. Table 1 presents a comparison of the Listening examinations across Levels 1–4.

TABLE 1
A COMPARISON BETWEEN LEVELS 1-4 LISTENING EXAMINATIONS

Level	Section 1			Section 2		Section 3		
	Dialogue between 2 people			Conversation between 3 people		Monologue		
	Total Questions: L1–L2 = 10 L3–L4 = 9			Total Questions: L1–L2 = 5 L3–L4 = 6		Total Questions: All levels = 10		
	Task types			Task types		Task types		
One	True / False 3	MCQ* 4	SAQ** 3	Table / Form completion 5		True / False 4	MCQ 4	Sentence Completion 2
Two	True / False 3	MCQ 4	SAQ 3	Table / Form completion 5		MCQ 5		Sentence Completion/ Note Completion 5
Three	True / False 3	MCQ 3	SAQ 3	Table completion 6		True / False 3	SAQ 2	Note completion 5
Four	MCQ 3	SAQ 3	True / False 3	Table completion 6		True / False 3	SAQ 2	Note completion 5

Note. *MCQ: Multiple Choice Question; **SAQ: Short-answer Question

In all levels, the Listening exam consisted of a question paper and an answer sheet. The recordings were played twice. While listening, students wrote their answers on the question paper and were then given six minutes at the end of the exam to transfer their responses to the answer sheet. For items requiring written responses such as names, nationalities, words, prices, and numbers, students were required to provide grammatically correct and correctly spelled answers. Less familiar proper names, as well as some country and city names, were spelled out in the recordings.

Table 2 below shows the number and proportion of questions requiring written responses at each level. The proportion of written-response items increases across the levels, with 10 questions (40%) in Level 1, 13 questions (52%) in Level 2, and 16 questions (64%) in Levels 3 and 4.

TABLE 2
QUESTIONS REQUIRING WRITTEN RESPONSES

Level	Section 1	Section 2	Section 3		Total
One	SAQ 3	Table / Form completion 5	Sentence Completion 2		10
Two	SAQ 3	Table / Form completion 5	Sentence/ Note Completion 5		13
Three	SAQ 3	Table completion 6	SAQ 2	Note completion 5	16
Four	SAQ 3	Table completion 6	SAQ 2	Note completion 5	16

D. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was carried out in two phases, each using a specific analytical approach to examine students' performance in the Listening examinations.

Phase One: Section-Level Performance Analysis

Final Examination (FE) Listening results from four semesters, Fall and Spring of AY 2021–2022 and Fall and Spring of AY 2022–2023, were collected and entered into an Excel-based analytical tool. For each level, the tool generated:

- the total number of correct answers per section
- patterns of section-level difficulty
- comparisons across semesters and academic years

This phase aimed to identify which section of the Listening exam consistently produced the lowest performance across Levels 1 to 4.

Phase Two: Item-Level Analysis

In the second phase, item-by-item analysis was carried out using sampled Listening Exam papers from Spring AY 2022–2023. A random sampling procedure was used in which half of the groups at each level were selected for analysis.

Two structured forms were used during this process:

- Teacher Form, used for recording every correct answer for each student response
- Supervisor Form, used to verify the accuracy and completeness of the teachers' entries

The analysis was conducted by four teams, with each team assigned to one level of the Listening exam. Each team worked under the guidance of a supervisor. The analysis took place in a designated computer lab where teachers worked in pairs; one teacher checked each question paper and the other entered the corresponding correct responses into the form. The form automatically calculated the total number of correct answers for every item.

At the end of each session, teachers submitted their completed forms to the supervisor, who checked the entries using the Supervisor Form and then compiled and forwarded the verified datasets to the researcher for further analysis. This phase aimed to identify the most difficult questions and the specific sources of difficulty, including challenges related to spelling, recognition of paraphrased language, numerical transcription, inference, and idiomatic expressions.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the findings of the study based on the two analytical phases described in the Methodology:

Phase One: Section-Level Performance Analysis across four semesters

Phase Two: Item-Level Analysis of Listening Exam questions for Spring AY 2022–2023

Together, these phases provide a detailed understanding of the sections, tasks, and question types that posed the greatest challenges to GFP students.

A. Findings From Phase One: Section-Level Analysis

Across the four semesters analyzed (Fall and Spring of AY 2021–2022 and Fall and Spring of AY 2022–2023), clear and consistent patterns emerged across Levels 1 to 4. The overall section-level performance for each level is presented in Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6. These tables show:

- the percentage of correct answers in each section
- the comparative difficulty of Sections 1, 2, and 3
- changes in performance across semesters and academic years
- the section that consistently produced the lowest performance for each level

TABLE 3
ANALYSIS OF LEVEL 1 FE LISTENING RESULTS FOR AY 2021- 2022 & AY 2022 -2023

Semester	No. of SS	SEC 1		SEC 2		SEC 3		Total Pass #	Total Pass %
		Correct Answer in #	Correct Answer in %	Correct Answer in #	Correct Answer in %	Correct Answer in #	Correct Answer in %		
F21-22	235	188	80.0	77	32.8	208	88.5	168	71.5
S21-22	490	382	78.0	99	20.2	424	86.5	304	62.0
F22-23	64	58	90.6	23	35.9	43	67.2	42	65.6
S22-23	94	74	78.7	19	20.2	73	77.7	56	59.6

Note. F = Fall semester; S = Spring semester; SS = number of students; SEC = section.

It can be clearly seen that Section 2 in Level 1 was the section in which most students perform badly. It is also observable that the results in the Fall semesters were considerably better than those in the Spring.

TABLE 4
ANALYSIS OF LEVEL 2 FE LISTENING RESULTS FOR AY 2021- 2022 & AY 2022 -2023

Semester	No. of SS	SEC 1		SEC 2		SEC 3		Total Pass #	Total Pass %
		Correct Answer in #	Correct Answer in %	Correct Answer in #	Correct Answer in %	Correct Answer in #	Correct Answer in %		
F21-22	325	278	85.5	64	19.7	248	76.3	205	63.1
S21-22	652	480	73.6	142	21.8	480	73.6	337	51.7
F22-23	539	344	63.8	185	34.3	146	27.1	169	31.4
S22-23	357	247	69.2	171	47.9	166	46.5	175	49.0

Note. Abbreviations are the same as in Table 3.

In Level 2, Section 2 had the lowest number of correct answers in both Fall and Spring for AY 2021–2022. However, Section 3 in Fall and Spring AY 2022-2023 was the most problematic. Having examined the question papers, there appear to be two possible reasons for this discrepancy. Firstly, the exam specifications for section 3 requires either sentence completion or note completion. In the 21-22 exams, the question type for section 3 was sentence completion, whereas for 22-23, it was note completion. This suggests that sentence completion is maybe a much easier task than note completion. However, another possibility is that the sentence completion task required only the writing down of places, numbers and weights whereas the note completion required words to complete ideas which were close together.

TABLE 5
ANALYSIS OF LEVEL 3 FE LISTENING RESULTS FOR AY 2021- 2022 & AY 2022 -2023

Semester	No. of SS	SEC 1		SEC 2		SEC 3		Total Pass #	Total Pass %
		Correct Answer in #	Correct Answer in %	Correct Answer in #	Correct Answer in %	Correct Answer in #	Correct Answer in %		
F21-22	586	245	41.8	209	35.7	196	33.4	203	34.6
S21-22	631	539	85.4	554	87.8	319	50.6	484	76.7
F22-23	674	650	96.4	664	98.5	484	71.8	645	95.7
S22-23	612	539	88.1	574	93.8	230	37.6	497	81.2

Note. Abbreviations are the same as in Table 3.

For Level 3, Section 3 was consistently the most difficult section across all semesters. Despite improvement in some semesters, Section 3 still produced the lowest performance overall due to the increased cognitive load of tasks such as note completion and short-answer questions.

TABLE 6
ANALYSIS OF LEVEL 4 FE LISTENING RESULTS FOR AY 2021- 2022 & AY 2022 -2023

Semester	No. of SS	SEC 1		SEC 2		SEC 3		Total Pass #	Total Pass %
		Correct Answer in #	Correct Answer in %	Correct Answer in #	Correct Answer in %	Correct Answer in #	Correct Answer in %		
F21-22	707	546	77.2	602	85.1	311	44.0	449	63.5
S21-22	646	552	85.4	631	97.7	446	69.0	557	86.2
F22-23	596	573	96.1	579	97.1	418	70.1	560	94.0
S22-23	677	607	89.7	603	89.1	200	29.5	472	69.7

Note. Abbreviations are the same as in Table 3.

For Level 4, the results show that Section 3 was consistently the most challenging section across all semesters, with correct-answer percentages dropping as low as 29.5% in Spring 2022–2023. In contrast, students performed well in Sections 1 and 2, which mainly consist of recognition-based tasks such as MCQs and T/F items. This indicates that Level 4 students, like those in the earlier levels, struggle most with written-response tasks requiring accurate spelling, numerical transcription, and recognition of paraphrased content.

B. Findings From Phase Two: Item-Level Analysis

The results of the item-level analysis are presented in Tables 7–10, which summarise performance on every question in the Spring AY 2022–2023 Listening Final Examinations. These include: Table 7: Item Analysis of Level 1 Listening Exam, Table 8: Item Analysis of Level 2 Listening Exam, Table 9: Item Analysis of Level 3 Listening Exam, and Table 10: Item Analysis of Level 4 Listening Exam. Collectively, these tables highlight the specific questions and task types that were most challenging for students at each level, and the key findings are discussed in the subsequent sections.

TABLE 7
ITEM ANALYSIS OF LEVEL 1 LISTENING EXAM

Level 1 Listening FE Analysis (Level of Difficulty)																										
Group	No of Students/ Group	Section One										Section Two					Section Three									
		TF 11.1 %			MCQ 14.8%				SAQ 11.1%			Table/ Form Completion 25.9%					TF 14.8				MCQ 14.8%				SC 7.4%	
		Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 5	Q 6	Q 7	Q 8	Q 9	Q 10	Q 11	Q 12	Q 13	Q 14	Q 15	Q 16	Q 17	Q 18	Q 19	Q 20	Q 21	Q 22	Q 23	Q 24	Q 25
1	21	15	21	16	10	15	14	8	11	2	12	18	5	10	4	2	15	11	19	21	6	10	4	20	10	1
2	19	13	18	15	12	15	18	3	12	3	8	16	8	10	2	2	13	13	17	16	8	13	1	19	7	3
# of correct answers		28	39	31	22	30	32	11	23	5	20	34	13	20	6	4	28	24	36	37	14	23	5	39	17	4
%/Q		70	97.5	77.5	55	75	80	27.5	57.5	12.5	50	85	32.5	50	15	10	70	60	90	92.5	35	57.5	12.5	97.5	42.5	10
% /Type		81.7			59.4				40.0			38.5					78.1				50.6				26.3	
%/Section		60.3										38.5					51.7									
Total No. of Students		40		MCQ= Multiple Choice Question										SAQ=Short Answer Question					TF=True/False				T/FC=Table/Form Completion			
		SC= Sentence Completion																								

The most difficult section appeared to be section 2 and the questions in which the test takers performed most badly were 15, 14 and 12 where the correct-answer percentages were 10%, 15% and 32.5%, respectively. Test takers were required to write a price (Q15), a nationality (Q14) and a spelled-out name (Q12). The question in which test takers performed best was (Q11) where they had to write a day of the week. It is apparent from this that test takers have difficulty with comprehending and then writing down numbers, symbols and abbreviations, prices and spelling correctly even when a word is spelled out.

Moreover, in section 1 where there were short answer questions, students performed either badly or barely succeeded when they had to write answers requiring time plus an abbreviation and a word (Q9), even when the required word was their own nationality ‘Omani’ (Q10).

In section 3, the task which again caused difficulty was one where they had to listen for and write down words with correct spelling in a sentence completion task. The required words were ‘food’ (Q24) and ‘die’ (Q25). Forty-two and a

half percent answered correctly for food while only 10% recognized and or wrote down with correct spelling the word ‘die’. MCQs caused difficulty in two instances; one in which an understanding of both tense and interrogative adverbs was required (Q20) and when a distinction had to be made between adjectives or nouns when these were included as either the correct option or distractors (Q22).

TABLE 8
ITEM ANALYSIS OF LEVEL 2 LISTENING EXAM

Level 2 Listening FE Analysis (Level of Difficulty)																										
Group	No of Students/ Group	Section One										Section Two					Section Three									
		TF 12 %			MCQ 16%				SAQ 12%			Table/ Form Completion 20%					MCQ 20%				NC 20 %					
		Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15	Q16	Q17	Q18	Q19	Q20	Q21	Q22	Q23	Q24	Q25
1	21	12	17	14	5	11	10	13	17	13	16	3	3	18	18	10	19	15	5	14	8	10	0	11	7	20
2	20	17	12	14	10	11	12	11	9	7	11	4	5	16	14	15	15	11	7	15	8	7	0	9	5	17
3	24	21	15	18	15	15	13	16	16	10	15	9	6	21	16	12	18	14	5	16	17	3	2	9	6	19
4	26	16	21	20	15	15	16	14	15	8	13	9	6	22	19	18	24	13	3	18	14	6	0	10	9	21
5	23	16	13	15	9	17	11	15	16	6	12	9	8	21	17	16	20	13	5	16	14	7	0	11	10	20
6	18	13	13	11	8	12	8	14	13	6	12	5	7	16	9	11	12	10	7	10	13	4	0	10	7	16
7	16	12	11	13	5	4	9	8	14	8	6	4	2	11	10	6	10	5	5	13	4	3	0	5	5	16
# of correct answers		107	102	105	67	85	79	91	100	58	85	43	37	125	103	88	118	81	37	102	78	40	2	65	49	129
%/Q		72.8	69.4	71.4	45.6	57.8	53.7	61.9	68	39.5	57.8	29.3	25.2	85	70.1	59.9	80.3	55.1	25.2	69.4	53.1	27.21	1.361	44.22	33.33	87.76
% /Type		71.2			54.8				55.1			53.9					56.6				38.8					
%/Section		60.4										53.9					47.7									
Total No. of Students		147																								
		MCQ= Multiple Choice Question										TF=True/False					T/FC=Table/Form Completion				NC=Note Completion					
		SAQ=Short Answer Question																								

The section in which students did most badly was Section 3 with only 47.7% of students answering correctly. Question 22 was by far the most difficult where only two students out of 147 were able to identify or write with correct spelling ‘opened’. Meanwhile, 40 students wrote ‘January’ as the correct answer for question 21, and 49 students recognized that the correct answer for question 24 was ‘Muscat’. However, 129 students were able to recognize that ‘1’ was the correct answer to Question 25 when this number was given before ‘pm’ and 65 students could write the correct answer to question 23 ‘museum’ when this word had appeared earlier in the note-taking task. Question 18 caused difficulty when there were the names of 3 days were given as options, all of which were related to some activities mentioned in the recording.

The next most difficult section was section 2. In question 11, only 43 students out of 147 could answer when they were required to write a mark expressed as a percentage and only 37 students could write with correct spelling the commonly occurring nationality ‘American’. Only 59.9% of students were able to write down a spelled-out name which included the letters ‘j’ and ‘b’ which can be problematic for native Arabic language native speakers. However, 103 students could recognize and write with correct spelling ‘London’, even though it was not spelled out, and the vast majority of students could write down a number which was not linked with a symbol. In section 1 question 9, students could not recognize that the required answer was ‘English’ when some inference was required. With regard to the multiple-choice questions, the one that caused the most difficulty was question 4, where only 45.6 % of students got the correct answer when they had to select a number when other numbers were given related to other ideas in the listening script/ recording.

TABLE 9
ITEM ANALYSIS OF LEVEL 3 LISTENING EXAM

Level 3 Listening FE Analysis (Level of Difficulty)																										
Group	No of Students/ Group	Section One									Section Two						Section Three									
		TF 12 %			MCQ 12%			SAQ 12%			Table Completion 24%						TF 12%			SAQ 8%		NC 20%				
		Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 5	Q 6	Q 7	Q 8	Q 9	Q 10	Q 11	Q 12	Q 13	Q 14	Q 15	Q 16	Q 17	Q 18	Q 19	Q 20	Q 21	Q 22	Q 23	Q 24	Q 25
1	19	16	15	10	16	18	17	18	9	13	19	15	17	17	14	16	12	13	7	2	17	4	16	0	9	11
2	18	14	12	8	10	15	16	11	9	12	18	15	18	18	9	14	8	10	8	2	14	3	9	0	3	10
3	25	19	18	12	19	22	21	19	14	19	20	17	21	20	9	20	13	17	8	5	19	7	15	4	12	17
4	14	9	10	5	11	10	11	7	10	13	10	12	13	3	12	10	11	6	1	13	1	6	1	1	1	9
5	17	12	13	8	11	16	16	12	7	14	17	15	17	12	5	12	6	7	13	0	16	5	6	0	3	8
6	16	11	12	7	12	14	15	15	4	15	15	13	15	14	7	13	11	14	6	4	12	4	13	3	3	14
7	23	15	21	14	15	22	22	19	13	18	22	18	20	22	11	21	16	17	8	6	22	9	16	3	3	20
8	25	20	21	15	17	20	22	18	18	22	21	18	23	22	16	20	19	21	13	7	23	9	16	3	4	17
9	24	14	15	6	15	18	18	18	12	17	18	15	18	19	7	15	14	14	2	3	16	8	10	2	3	16
10	21	13	12	7	17	18	18	18	9	14	17	11	19	19	10	14	13	11	9	1	13	5	7	1	4	11
11	22	18	20	12	19	21	20	22	13	17	22	16	20	22	11	21	13	16	10	4	18	12	18	3	9	17
12	24	19	19	16	20	22	24	23	16	21	23	17	19	23	14	19	20	19	13	8	23	8	18	7	13	18
13	26	17	22	14	25	26	25	24	19	23	26	20	25	23	15	26	19	21	9	7	25	12	21	6	10	23
14	18	11	14	7	14	17	17	16	7	16	17	12	18	18	10	14	13	11	9	4	16	5	12	1	0	16
# of correct answers		208	224	141	221	259	262	244	157	231	268	212	262	262	141	237	187	202	121	54	247	92	183	34	77	207
%/Q		71.2	76.7	48.3	75.7	88.7	89.7	83.6	53.8	79.1	91.8	72.6	89.7	89.7	48.3	81.2	64	69.2	41.4	18.5	84.6	31.5	62.7	11.6	26.37	70.9
% /Type		65.4			84.7			72.1			78.9						58.2			51.5			40.6			
%/Section		74.1									78.9						50.1									
Total No. of Students		292		MCQ= Multiple Choice Question									SAQ=Short Answer Question						TF=True/False			TC=Table Completion				
		NC=Note Completion																								

Section 3 was where students performed the worst and the task type which was the most difficult was note completion. The questions which most students failed to answer correctly were Q23, Q24 and Q21. In Q23, only 34 students out of 292 wrote the correct answer which was the word ‘companies’. This is very probably because of incorrect spelling. With regard to Q24, test takers had to write an answer which needed a number and a currency symbol ‘£25,000’. In OPU examinations, currency symbols are required to be placed on the left as is the practice in standard international English. In Q21, only 31.5% of students got the correct answer which was ‘students’. Unlike in other instances, this was unlikely to be a spelling error on the part of the test takers because the required word ‘students’ appears in the text which has to be completed. A probable reason for this error was that the notes text is a paraphrase of the listening script (i.e. students needed to understand that *to fail* is *not succeed*).

As regards the Short Answer Questions in section 3, there was one question which created a lot of failures. This was Q19 in which test takers had to write ‘television’ as the answer to the question ‘where did (someone) work...?’. It is possible that test takers were listening for the name of the place rather than a workplace, or that they provided the answer ‘TV’ which would not have been accepted by markers as the OPU testing specifications state that test takers must write the exact words they hear. It could also be possible that students wrote the word with incorrect spelling. In question 18, only 41.4% of students answered the T/F question correctly. A likely reason is because an understanding of the idiom ‘dropped-out’ was needed.

In section 2, the only cause for concern as regards failure was question 14 which was only answered correctly by 48.3% of students. This could be because the required answer was a percentage where the percentage sign was required with a number. There were no distractors in the script when this category was mentioned and the most likely reason for failure was that test takers have not learned that the percentage symbol is inextricably linked to the number.

In section 1, Q3, which was T/F question, had the most failures. The most probable reason for this could be because inference was needed to comprehend and answer correctly.

TABLE 10
ITEM ANALYSIS OF LEVEL 4 LISTENING EXAM

Level 4 Listening FE Analysis (Level of Difficulty)																										
Group	No of Students / Group	Section One									Section Two						Section Three									
		MCQ 12 %			SAQ 12%			TF 12 %			Table Completion 24%						TF 12 %		SAQ 8%		NC 20%					
		Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 5	Q 6	Q 7	Q 8	Q 9	Q 10	Q 11	Q 12	Q 13	Q 14	Q 15	Q 16	Q 17	Q 18	Q 19	Q 20	Q 21	Q 22	Q 23	Q 24	Q 25
1	19	18	17	16	9	8	14	17	14	17	14	17	14	9	10	9	11	14	8	3	1	2	8	0	15	11
2	25	20	23	21	4	7	15	17	15	20	15	21	12	16	12	14	10	20	5	10	6	1	6	1	16	14
3	20	20	19	15	12	9	17	12	10	18	13	19	11	13	10	14	7	12	6	2	7	0	6	1	13	14
4	12	12	9	12	4	4	11	10	8	12	9	12	7	11	5	10	7	9	6	2	3	2	5	1	5	4
5	18	18	17	15	10	8	12	17	14	17	15	16	14	15	13	13	10	13	12	10	7	3	9	2	12	26
6	20	16	12	18	4	4	12	12	6	16	12	17	6	13	8	14	13	13	5	6	8	0	3	0	10	7
7	21	20	20	18	13	16	14	16	15	21	12	21	14	17	14	15	12	16	14	2	10	1	7	3	17	11
8	23	21	19	20	5	16	18	20	18	23	14	23	14	21	16	20	6	19	8	7	3	5	9	0	11	13
9	25	24	21	21	12	11	18	21	11	19	18	23	17	19	13	19	10	19	10	7	10	3	4	0	17	9
10	24	20	17	19	7	8	14	14	11	21	13	19	11	16	8	15	7	16	3	6	4	1	7	0	16	11
11	19	15	14	12	7	7	13	13	6	11	5	15	10	10	7	12	5	11	5	6	7	1	6	1	7	5
12	23	22	17	21	8	12	17	20	15	20	11	21	13	15	12	11	11	21	8	6	5	2	8	0	16	4
13	22	22	13	19	11	13	19	17	11	20	10	21	16	19	10	13	14	17	10	3	8	1	5	1	16	16
14	23	23	19	19	12	7	16	19	17	21	10	22	21	19	6	15	6	14	5	8	6	1	5	0	15	10
15	25	23	15	20	11	10	16	20	14	21	14	21	11	18	13	20	13	14	11	6	4	0	6	2	15	8
16	25	23	23	21	7	12	17	18	12	20	14	21	19	19	11	15	8	9	5	5	5	2	8	0	15	10
17	20	20	16	20	13	11	18	20	20	20	13	19	17	10	13	18	18	17	14	11	13	3	9	5	14	15
# of correct answers		337	291	307	149	163	261	283	217	317	212	328	227	260	181	247	168	254	135	100	107	28	111	17	230	188
%/Q		92.6	79.9	84.3	40.9	44.8	71.7	77.7	59.6	87.1	58.2	90.1	62.4	71.4	49.7	67.9	46.2	69.8	37.1	27.5	29.4	7.69	30.5	4.67	63.2	51.6
% /Type		85.6			52.5			74.8			66.6						51.0		28.4		31.5					
%/Section		71.0									66.6						37.0									
Total No. of Students		364		MCQ= Multiple Choice Question									SAQ=Short Answer Question						TF=True / False		TC=Table Completion		NC=Note Completion			

Section 3 was by far the most difficult section in this exam. The most difficult question type was Short Answer Questions (28.4% of correct answers) and this was followed by the Note Completion task (31.5% of correct answers).

In the SAQ, Q19 required the writing of the word ‘Brazil’/ ‘Brasil’ which was referred to in the script as a developing country and a not a developed country. With regard to Q20, only 29.4% of students were able to answer this question which required the writing of the number ‘79.26 million’. This suggests that students have not learned how to write numbers correctly.

The next most difficult task type of section 3 was note completion. In terms of apparent difficulty as indicated by failure rate, the hard questions were questions 23, 21, and 22 where the success rates were 4.67%, 7.69% and 30.5%. In terms of questions 21 and 23, the failure appeared to be the result of spelling error or inability to comprehend when paraphrasing occurs. Q22 had a high rate of failures possibly because the passive voice was used in the note text or that the test takers have still not mastered the correct writing of the phonemes /j/ and /b/ in order to spell the word ‘job’.

True/ False question type came third in terms of difficulty where the test takers performed badly in Q18 (37.1%) and Q16 (46.2%). Q16 was problematic possibly because test takers did not comprehend that the term ‘source of income’ which the question used is the same as the listening script’s use of the expression ‘to make money’. Common idioms appear to be problematic. Similarly, the reason for students doing badly in Q18 is that ‘to rely on (somebody)’ is synonymous with ‘to leave it to (someone)’.

In section 2, the most difficult question was Q14 which required the test takers to write down the commonly occurring nationality ‘Italian’ when it was not spelt out in the script.

Section 1 has two questions which caused difficulty, Q4 (40.9% correct answers) and Q5 (44.8% correct answers). Q4 required a measurement of distance (6,208 km) and Q5 required the writing down of a given percentage (74%).

V. CONCLUSION

A. Summary of Findings

The findings of this study clearly indicate that test takers experience the greatest difficulty in listening exam sections that require written responses. While True/False and Multiple-Choice items provide answer options that reduce cognitive load, Short-Answer Questions, Note Completion tasks, and Table Completion tasks require students to independently identify, process, and accurately transcribe information. This requirement significantly increases the likelihood of errors, even when students successfully comprehend the listening text. Difficulties were most evident in spelling, writing numbers and symbols accurately, and recognizing paraphrased or implied meanings, including idiomatic expressions.

These challenges suggest that students' listening comprehension ability is often undermined by weaknesses in essential writing-related micro-skills.

B. Implications

The results carry important implications for the teaching and assessment of listening in the GFP and similar EFL contexts. First, the strong link between written accuracy and overall listening performance demonstrates the need for explicit instruction in spelling, number transcription, and writing conventions. Second, the findings show that students require more focused support in understanding paraphrasing and implied meaning, as these features are commonly used in listening assessments aligned with CEFR standards. Third, the results reinforce the importance of integrating listening and writing instruction, rather than treating them as isolated skills. Ensuring that learners are regularly exposed to varied accents, paraphrased content, idiomatic expressions, and tasks that require precise written responses can better prepare them for listening examinations that demand both comprehension and accurate transcription.

C. Recommendations for Future Research

Further research is recommended to explore the following areas identified through this study:

i. Focus and Attention During Listening Tasks:

Investigate classroom techniques and training methods that enhance learners' sustained attention during listening activities.

ii. Note-Completion Strategies:

Examine effective teaching approaches that help learners produce accurate written responses in note-completion tasks, with a particular focus on recurring errors.

iii. Understanding and Teaching Paraphrasing:

Explore students' ability to understand paraphrased information in listening contexts and evaluate instructional techniques that strengthen comprehension of rephrased or implied meaning.

iv. Use of Practice Listening Exams:

Assess the impact of practice exams as a preparatory tool for improving confidence, familiarity, and performance in high-stakes listening assessments.

v. Effectiveness of Spelling Instruction:

Investigate how different methods of teaching spelling and writing conventions influence learners' ability to produce accurate written responses during listening tasks.

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