

## English Education| Full Research Article

# Listening Comprehension Anxiety: Factors and Suggestive Strategies for Solutions

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### Abstract

Listening comprehension anxiety (LCA) is a challenge for some English major university students in Afghanistan. Due to LCA, some of these learners have problems understanding a listening record though their English level is advanced. Hence, the present study aimed to explore the factors causing LCA for these learners and the strategies they use as solutions to reduce their listening anxiety. In the current study, there were eight participants five males and three females who were chosen through a purposive sampling technique from the English Department of Education Faculty at Badghis Institute of Higher Education (BIHE). The study employed a qualitative research design where semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from the participants. After collecting the data, they were transcribed, analyzed, and eight significant themes emerged. The themes included the participants' LCA factors and strategies they used to reduce their anxiety in a listening activity. Teachers and learners could use the findings from this study worldwide to enhance students' listening comprehension and reduce their LCA.

**Keywords:** listening anxiety, listening anxiety factors and strategies, EFL learners, Afghanistan higher education

## Introduction

Listening is receiving, comprehending, and analyzing the message conveyed by a spoken talk (Susilowati, 2019). Listening plays an essential role in learning the English language. That is why this skill is one of the compulsory courses in the English Language and Literature Departments at universities, particularly in the context of Afghanistan, where it is taught integratively with speaking as a single course named "Listening and Speaking." Students majoring in English language and literature at the universities in Afghanistan, particularly those in the English

Department of Education Faculties, are required to take the "Listening and Speaking" course for eight semesters of their Bachelor's degree. That is, the "Listening and Speaking" course is included in the curriculum of the English Department from the first semester to the last semester and carries four credits per week (Curriculum of English Language and Literature, 2020) which implies the importance of listening skill in the English Departments at Education Faculties. Although this course has been taken into significant account in the curricula of the English Language and Literature Departments at the Education Faculties in the Afghan EFL context, students still struggle with listening comprehension anxiety (LCA).

LCA is the fear of misunderstanding, incapacity, or inability to react psychologically to other people's communications (Wheless, 1975). According to Adnan et al. (2020), LCA "blocks the students from achieving the best comprehension they can get in listening" (p. 201). Adnan et al. emphasized that students with higher LCA have lower listening comprehension. Susilowati (2019) also highlighted that anxiety usually presents a challenge for non-native students while they study four English language skills, including listening. He added that anxiety could act as a mental block, reducing students' encouragement to have comprehensive input in their learning process. Likewise, Susilowati (2019) noted that anxiety could diminish students' self-worth and self-confidence, contributing to lower learners' performances and achievements.

Therefore, due to LCA, some English major students have problems comprehending a listening record. For example, Adnan et al. (2020) conducted a study on 30 English major students at the University of Negeri Padang in Indonesia to find out the relationship between listening anxiety and listening comprehension. The result of the study revealed that there is a negative correlation between listening anxiety and listening comprehension indicating that students with higher listening anxiety have lower listening comprehension. Similarly, the study by Golchi (2012) on Iranian EFL students in Iran showed that listening anxiety lowers the learners' listening comprehension. When it comes to the Afghan EFL context, the same thing is true. Based on the researcher's experience of teaching listening and speaking skills to Afghan English majors in different universities, particularly at the Education faculties, it was noticed that most of these learners struggle with LCA, where they have difficulty in listening comprehension. As a result, these learners get low scores in their listening exams in university and standard exams such as TOEFL and IELTS. On the other hand, going through the literature, no research has been conducted in the context of Afghanistan to address this issue, particularly concerning English major students in higher education. As a result, considering the negative effect of LCA on the English majors' listening comprehension, it is a serious issue to be taken into account by the teachers or curriculum developers in the English Departments of higher education. Hence, the current study aimed to explore the factors causing LCA for Afghan English major students and the strategies they use as solutions to reduce their listening anxiety at the English Department at Badghis Institute of Higher Education.

As it is the first research regarding LCA in the context of Afghanistan, it could be a compelling study to inform the policymakers, curriculum developers, and EFL listening teachers regarding the LCA problem. As a result, this study may persuade them to bring some reforms in the "Listening & Speaking" course by developing a more effective syllabus or curriculum for the listening course to improve the students' listening comprehension and reduce their LCA. Furthermore, other researchers may be encouraged to conduct further investigations regarding

the LCA and make it more widespread, which could help attract the attention of the authorities to take action in this regard.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the factors of LCA for the Afghan English majors at BIHE?
2. What are some strategies they use as possible solutions to reduce their LCA?

## **Literature Review**

LCA could adversely affect EFL students' listening comprehension, decreasing their comprehension while listening to a foreign language speaker. As a result, it induced researchers to go through this problem and look for the factors causing LCA. For example, Nurkhamidah (2020) conducted a study investigating the factors causing listening anxiety in generation Z. He used a qualitative method to collect data from 20 participants in the English Department. The findings revealed internal factors (i.e., vocabulary, accent, speaking speed, and focus) and external factors (i.e., low-quality audio speakers). Prastiyowati (2019) also did a study to determine the causes and extent of listening anxiety. So, data were collected through questionnaires and interviews with 48 participants. The result revealed a moderate level of anxiety, and the factors causing listening anxiety were due to students' background knowledge. Furthermore, Otair and Aziz (2017) conducted research at Majmaah University, Saudi Arabia, to discover the listening anxiety factors. A semi-structured interview was used as an instrument to collect data from two participants. The findings revealed that factors causing listening anxiety for the participants were the challenging nature of listening comprehension, the classroom environment, and the students' limited English competency. Moreover, Tahsildar and Yusoff's (2014) investigation of listening anxiety in 83 participants at a Malaysian university revealed weak background knowledge, listening passages, and a lack of using listening techniques as the primary sources of listening anxiety elements. In addition, Serraj (2015) investigated the factors for listening comprehension anxiety. He employed a semi-structured interview to collect data from fifteen participants. The findings revealed individual factors (i.e., nervousness, emotionality, employing ineffective tactics, and lack of practice), input factors (i.e., lack of processing time, absence of visual aids, nature of speech, and degree of difficulty), and environmental factors (i.e., teachers, students, and the classroom environment) causing listening comprehension anxiety. In addition, Guswita and Sugirin (2021) did a study to discover the listening anxiety factors in the English classroom. The main factors of listening anxiety found were new vocabulary, pronunciation, fast speech, and shortage of time in doing the listening tasks.

### **Possible Solutions**

Regarding possible solutions to the mentioned LCA factors, some studies were conducted to find out strategies to reduce listening anxiety. For example, Oteir and Al-Otaibi (2020) conducted a study in Saudi Arabia which aimed to find out the strategies used by Saudi EFL learners to alleviate their listening anxiety. A qualitative research design was employed to collect data from 15 participants. The findings revealed four strategies: 1) cognitive strategy (i.e., thinking

positively, taking notes, making inferences, and guessing), 2) metacognitive strategy (i.e., self-assessment, peer seeking, and getting ready for listening tasks), 3) affective strategy (i.e., feeling relaxed and at ease when facing with problems), and 4) memory strategy (teaching essential vocabulary, and semantic mapping).

In the same regard, Chang and Read (2006) investigated the effects of four types of listening support: previewing the test questions, repetition of the input, providing background knowledge about the topic, and vocabulary instruction via a classroom-based experiment with 160 students enrolled in a required English listening course at a college in Taiwan. The results showed that the most effective type of support overall was providing information about the topic, followed by the repetition of the input.

Sharif and Ferdous (2012) have also suggested different ways of alleviating LCA. These ways include (1) increasing class time for listening comprehension practices, (2) providing extracurricular opportunities, (3) making an effort to create a comfortable physical environment in the class, (4) using high-quality sound pieces of equipment (i.e., video or audio players), (5) and providing a dedicated space for the listening comprehension tasks.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

A qualitative research design was employed in the current study to explore the factors causing LCA for Afghan English major students and the strategies they use as solutions to reduce their listening anxiety. As this study aimed to collect data based on the participants' viewpoints and experiences regarding the research topic, employing the qualitative research design was found more appropriate. In this regard, Merriam (2009) also highlighted that questions related to viewpoints and experiences could be investigated only through qualitative research design (as cited in Miri & Joya, 2018). On the other hand, Creswell et al. (2000) have pointed out that a qualitative research design gives a holistic picture and detailed views of the informants. Therefore, considering what Merriam (2009) and Creswell et al. (2000) highlighted, the current study was a good fit for the qualitative research design.

### **Participants**

The participants of this study were 8 Afghan English language major students (two females and six males) from the English Department of the Education Faculty at Badghis Institute of Higher Education. A purposive sampling technique was used in selecting the participants to choose ones with rich information and experiences regarding the research topic. The participants' ages ranged between 20 to 23 years old, and their English level was upper-intermediate. They all had the experience of taking listening courses for more than five semesters.

**Table 1**

*The participants' demographic data*

Participants	Gender	Cohort	Age
S1	Female	Senior	About 22
S2	Female	Junior	About 20
S3	Male	Senior	About 23
S4	Male	Senior	About 23
S5	Male	Junior	About 22
S6	Male	Junior	About 22
S7	Male	Junior	About 22
S8	Male	Junior	About 22

### **Context**

Badghis Institute of Higher Education (BIHE) is located in Badghis Province, one of the remote provinces in the western part of Afghanistan. It is one of the affiliated institutes of Herat University. It has four Faculties, including the Faculty of Education, Economics, Agriculture, and Environment. Each Faculty has different departments. This study was conducted on English major students from the English Department of Education Faculty.

### **Data Collection**

The data in the current study were collected through semi-structured interviews, where the researcher asked follow-up questions from the participants to get in-depth and comprehensive data. In a semi-structured interview, the researcher has some themes and possibly key questions to be covered during the interview, followed by follow-up questions. Therefore, the researcher developed a thematic framework for the topics to be covered regarding the research topic. Then they were shared with the research adviser to be checked for the issue of validity and reliability. The adviser discussed the questions and provided some feedback on validity and reliability. After that, the questions were revised and finalized. Then they were piloted on two students to measure the amount of time needed, the clarity of the questions, and the direction the responses pointed toward the research goals. All the interviews were conducted on WhatsApp messenger, where each participant was recorded, and then all the records were transcribed verbatim for later analysis, which is detailed in the following section.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes)" (p.79). Braun and Clarke pointed out six steps for the implementation of thematic analysis. These six steps include "familiarizing yourself with the data, generating initial codes,

searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report." Considering the aforementioned steps highlighted by Braun and Clarke, the data were analyzed accordingly. In the first step, "familiarizing yourself with the data" repeated and active reading of the data was conducted to get familiar with the data. In the second step, "generating initial codes", repeated information related to the research questions was highlighted as codes. In the third step, "searching for themes", similar codes were categorized under particular themes. In the fourth step, "reviewing themes" the codes were reviewed to make sure they were placed within the proper themes. In the fifth step, "naming and defining themes" the themes were finalized and made sure they do not overlap with each other. In the final step, "writing up the report", the findings were reported, interpreted, and discussed according to research questions.

## Results

After analysis of the data, eight themes emerged. Five themes were related to the factors of LCA illustrated in figure (1).

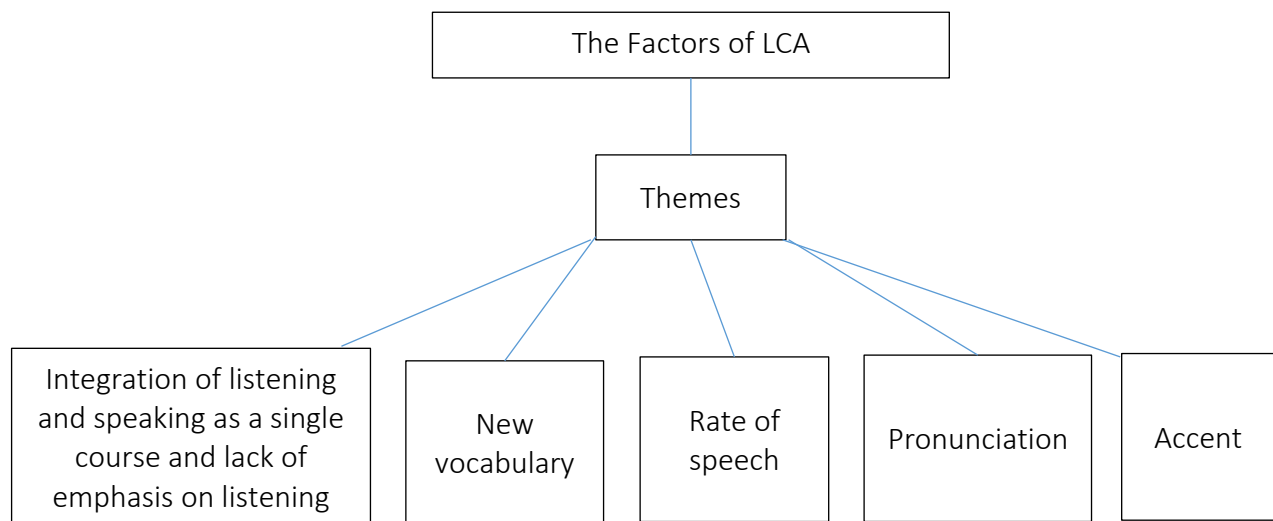


Figure 1. The emerged themes for the factors of LCA

### Factors of Listening Comprehension Anxiety

The five themes related to the factors of LCA, as illustrated in figure [1], are: 1) integration of listening and speaking as a single course and lack of emphasis on listening 2) new vocabulary, 3) pronunciation, 4) speech rate, 5) and accent. These themes are elaborated on in detail as follows.

#### Integration of Listening and Speaking as a Single Course and Lack of Emphasis on Listening

The data analysis presented that listening and speaking skills are not taught as independent courses. Instead, they are integrated into one course, "Listening and Speaking," where the main focus is on speaking, and the listening skill is devalued or less emphasized than the speaking skill.

For example, S1 mentioned, "Our listening course is integrated with that of speaking as one course; they are integrated into the form of one subject as Listening and Speaking. The emphasis is usually on speaking." It seems that listening skill is considered less critical compared with any other course. In this regard, S2 mentioned, "... generally, the listening skill is not as focused as other courses we have." As a result, the lack of emphasis on listening skills has affected students too, where they also consider listening not important. For example, S5 mentioned, "I focus more on speaking than listening, which is why my listening has remained weak."

### **Pronunciation**

Pronunciation was another source of LCA revealed after analysis of the data. Students reported that the words in the listening records are pronounced differently from the way they pronounce, and thus this causes them not to be able to comprehend a listening record. For example, S1 mentioned, "... sometimes, when I listen to native speakers through the listening audios, as much as I concentrate, I cannot comprehend because the words are pronounced in a different way than mine." Similarly, S6 said, "...We needed to listen ten times to a listening record to be able to recognize the words produced by the speaker as the pronunciation was so different."

### **New Vocabulary**

A further source of listening anxiety presented after the analysis of the data was new vocabulary. Most participants pointed out that they face new words while listening to the listening records, which hinders their comprehension and provokes listening anxiety. For example, S1 mentioned, "...sometimes I listen to an audio record several times, but I cannot understand it because most words were new to me. Similarly, S7 said, "...very different words and expressions were used, which made the listening difficult for me to understand." In the same regard, S2 added, "...When the speaker uses some expressions and words which are difficult for us to understand, I cannot comprehend the listening passage."

### **Speech Rate**

Another source of listening comprehension anxiety presented after analysis of the data was the speech rate. Half of the participants pointed out that sometimes they could not comprehend a listening record because the speaker in the listening record speaks very fast. For example, S1 mentioned, "I listened to the listening record several times but could not understand because the speaker spoke very fast." Similarly, S6 pointed out, "...The speaker in the record spoke very fast that it seemed very difficult to me to follow what is being stated."

### **Accent**

The next factor of LCA was the accent. Students claimed that sometimes they could never understand a listening record due to the matter of accent. Sometimes the native English speakers join the sounds of two words while speaking. This creates confusion for the listeners. For example, S3 said:

Sometimes when I listen, I never understand what is said. For example, once I was listening to an audio, the speaker said (wouj you) I could not understand what it meant. I

checked it in the dictionary, but I could not find it in the dictionary either. Finally, I found out that the word (wouj you) is, (would you). Another example is when I filled some blanks. The speaker said (chry); the students looked at each other for the meaning of chry. Then we asked the teacher, and our teacher said that the word try is pronounced (chry) in American English.

Similarly, S6 mentioned, "...for example, sometimes, when I listen to the native speakers, as much as I concentrate, I cannot comprehend because the intonation is very different."

### Strategies for Reducing LCA

As demonstrated in figure 2, the themes related to strategies participants used to overcome their LCA included listening to familiar topics, repetition of input, and pre-teaching/learning of key vocabulary. The aforementioned strategies are detailed as follows.

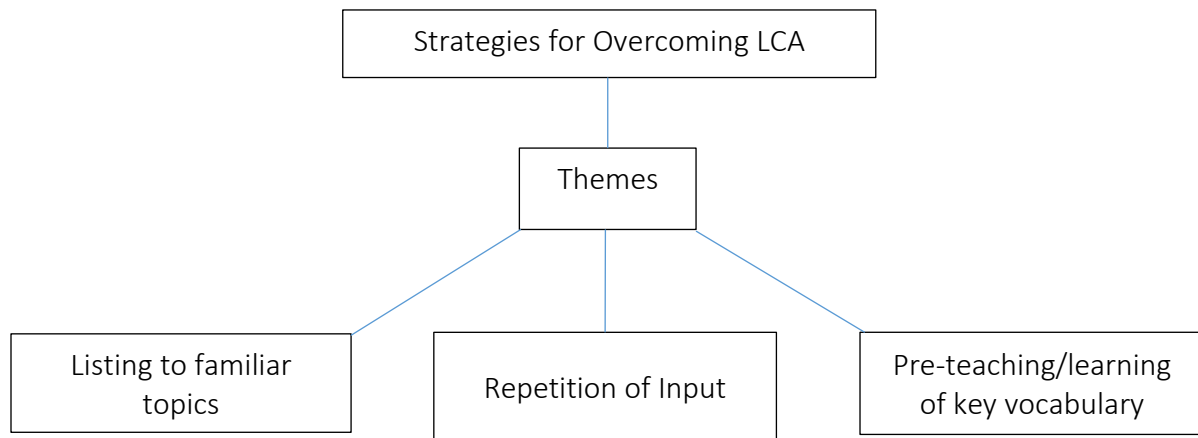


Figure 2. The emerged themes related to strategies for overcoming LCA

### Listening to Familiar Topics

Based on their experiences from their listening course, the participants' common belief was that listening to familiar topics was comprehensible for them. The participants highlighted that they usually feel no anxiety when listening to a listening record about a topic they already have some background information on. For example, S2 stated, "I usually understand the listening audio about Islamic topics." As Afghanistan is an Islamic country, Afghan students typically have some background knowledge about Islamic topics, and that is why they can comprehend listening records related to Islamic issues. Concerning familiar topics, S1 said, "...for example, the listening record I listened to was about peace. I could comprehend what the speaker said. That was because I already had some information about the topic." Listening to familiar topics helps learners to comprehend a listening record, feel anxiety free, and enjoy the lesson. For instance, S3 mentioned, "Usually, I feel relaxed and enjoy listening to the topics. I already have some background information about that. My enjoyment is because I can understand the listening." The topics related to the learners' daily studies in the class are good familiar topics for them as



they already have some background information in that regard. For example, S4 said, "... if I already have some information about the listening topic, it helps me to comprehend better. For example, if the listening records talk about the English topics presented in the class, I can comprehend them better. Likewise, S7 mentioned, "Usually I feel relaxed and understand the topics which I already have some background information about and the ones which are about our daily lessons."

### **Repetition of Input**

Another helpful strategy based on the participants' listening comprehension experiences was input repetition. Almost all the participants shared the same experience that repetition of input, that is, playing the listening record more than once, has been helpful for them to reduce their LCA and improve their listening comprehension. In this regard, S2 said, "I try to listen to a listening passage several times; it helps me to understand the listening audio more comprehensively." Repetition of input can be done differently. It could be done in the class by the listening instructor. For example, S3 said, "... the teacher plays the audio twice or three times. It is helpful. We cannot catch many points for the first time as we feel uncomfortable with the speech rate and accent. But for the second and third time, it becomes easy and comprehensible." The repetition of input can be done at home by students. In this respect, S1 said:

I listen to the same recording several times at home. So, when any task is assigned on that listening record in the class, I can efficiently perform the tasks. Also, our teacher asks us to listen to a listening passage several times at home before coming to class.

### **Pre-teaching/learning of Key Vocabulary**

The last helpful strategy found for reducing LCA was pre-teaching the key vocabulary. Students reported that teaching key vocabularies of a listening record can help their comprehension during the listening task. In this regard, S3 said, "Our teacher pre-teaches the key vocabularies of a listening record before playing the audio record which is helpful while listening, and we can understand the listening record easier." Likewise, S5 mentioned, "pre-learning key vocabularies help me not to be stuck with the new words during the listening task."

## **Discussion**

This study attempted to explore the factors for LCA of Afghan English major students and the strategies they use as solutions to overcome their LCA. Results of the study revealed that the factors causing LCA for Afghan English major students were: 1) the integration of listening and speaking as a single course and lack of emphasis on listening 2) pronunciation, 3) new vocabulary, 4) speech rate, 4) and accent. Also, the strategies they used as solutions to overcome their LCA were: 1) listening to familiar topics, 2) repetition of input, and pre-learning/teaching of key vocabulary.

Regarding the first factor for LCA, the result of the study indicated that listening is integrated with speaking in one course, "Listening and Speaking," where listening is not considered as important as speaking; however, both must be focused equally. In this regard,

Richard and Renandya (2002) also highlighted that listening is often neglected compared with other skills, such as speaking, reading, and writing. As a result, the students' listening abilities remain weak. The second factor for LCA was the matter of pronunciation. The result of the study indicated that English pronunciation is one of the significant factors causing anxiety when students listen to a record, which is in line with the findings by Guswita and Sugirin (2021). The next factor found as the leading cause of LCA was the matter of new vocabulary. The result of the study revealed that new vocabulary could provoke anxiety while listening to a record. In this regard, Young (1992) also argued that new vocabulary causes LCA while listening to an audio record. Also, Tahsildar and Yousuf's (2014) findings revealed that unfamiliar vocabulary in listening texts provokes anxiety. Another major factor of LCA revealed in this study was the speech rate. The study indicated that participants had a problem following the native speaker's speech during the listening task, which was why a native speaker's speech seemed too fast. Similarly, Vogely (1998) has found the same result. In Vogel's research, one of the significant factors of LCA was the speech rate. Kim's findings (as cited in Tahsildar & Yusoff, 2014) also revealed that speech rate delivery is one of the main concerns of foreign language listeners. The last factor of LCA found in this study was related to the accent. The study revealed that students could not comprehend a native speaker in a listening record due to accent, particularly when words are pronounced jointly by a native speaker. The matter of accent is similar to what Nurkhamidah (2020) found in his study, where it was one of LCA's primary factors.

Considering the problem of LCA, this study attempted to find out some strategies as possible solutions for overcoming that. Hence, the first strategy found as a possible solution was listening to familiar topics. The result of the study indicated that listening to familiar topics could help reduce students' LCA. Listening to familiar topics helps students to feel comfortable and anxiety-free. Therefore, to reduce students' listening anxiety and improve their listening comprehension, they should be provided with some listening passages in which they have some basic knowledge or information. According to constructivism, learning occurs when learners incorporate prior knowledge with new knowledge (Hein, 1991). Therefore, providing students with listening topics they already have some prior knowledge in that regard could be an effective strategy to help them overcome their LCA and improve their listening comprehension.

Another strategy found as a possible solution to overcome LCA was the repetition of input. Employing repetition of input strategy to improve students' listening comprehension and reduce their listening anxiety is in line with Rouhi et al. (2014). Rouhi's findings revealed that repeating a listening task could facilitate listening comprehension. Mitchell et al. (2019) also highlighted that the more something is repeated in the input, the more it could be identified and learned. In the same regard, Ellis (2001) highlighted that based on the evidence from general cognitive psychology, the more a stimulus is repeated, the faster and more accurately it is processed. As a result, it could be indicated that input repetition could play a key role in reducing learners' LCA and improving their listening comprehension.

The last strategy found by the current study for reducing LCA was pre-teaching key vocabulary. This strategy could be employed either by the teacher in the class or the students at home. A teacher can teach the key vocabulary of a recording which are new to the students before playing and performing the listening task, or the students themselves can note down the new vocabulary of a recording at home before they go through the listening activities. The study results indicated that this strategy could help students reduce their listening anxiety and improve

their listening comprehension. The effectiveness of this strategy is similar to the findings of Chang and Read (2008).

## **Conclusion**

LCA is a challenge for Afghan EFL learners, particularly for the English majors who are expected to be perfect at listening comprehension as they study this course for eight semesters. On the other hand, there are some particular obstacles avoiding these learners to master listening comprehension. One of the major barriers is LCA. This study found some particular factors causing LCA as well as some strategies to overcome listening anxiety.

One of the significant sources of LCA was the integration of listening and speaking as one course (Listening & Speaking), where listening was reported to be less emphasized or not considered important compared to speaking skills. Hence, it is recommended that the listening course should be taught either as an independent course or its integration with the speaking course should be developed in a balanced way where both skills are equally focused and listening skill is not considered less important compared with the speaking skill.

Another factor found for LCA was the matter of pronunciation. It is advised that the correct pronunciation of the keywords used in the listening record should be taught to the learners before playing the listening record so that they can distinguish the words during the listening activity. However, to solve this problem from the root, it is suggested that EFL teachers take teaching pronunciation into grave account in their teaching in any courses. For example, including some pronunciation activities in some lessons could help learners to improve their pronunciation accuracy. Also, it should be made sure that students learn the correct pronunciation so that later they do not face the pronunciation problem either when listening to a native speaker in a record or real-life interaction.

The third factor found as the main factor of LCA was the matter of new vocabulary. So, as was found by the current study, pre-teaching key vocabularies used in a listening record can help learners comprehend a listening record easier. Therefore, it is recommended to pre-teach the key vocabularies of a listening record before playing the listening audio to facilitate listening comprehension during the listening task.

The two other factors causing listening anxiety were accent and speech rate. The matter of accent and speech rate could be addressed by providing learners with familiar topics, as the participants reported that they could comprehend a listening record with familiar topics regardless of the fast speech rate and accent. This is one of the strategies found by the current study for improving learners' listening comprehension and reducing their listening anxiety. Therefore, providing students with familiar topics could be an effective strategy to enhance their listening comprehension and reduce their listening anxiety. Once learners' listening comprehension is improved, any listening topic could become comprehensible. As listening to familiar topics helps learners to comprehend a listening record, it can also help them get used to the native speakers' speech rate.

The current study includes two particular shortcomings. The first one refers to the limited sample size of the participants. There were eight participants in the present study, which limits the generalizability of the study. Therefore, further studies are required with larger participants to get more generalizable data. The second limitation of the study refers to the context of the

study. In Afghanistan, there are two faculties with English Language and Literature Departments. The first Faculty is the Faculty of Education, and the second is the Faculty of Literature and Humanities. The English Department in the first one covers the Listening and Speaking course throughout the eight semesters of the Bachelor's degree; however, in the later one, the English Department covers the Listening and Speaking course for four semesters where in the fourth semester listening and speaking skill are taught as independent courses. This study collected data from the English majors at the Faculty of Education. Hence, an investigation should also be conducted on the English majors at the Faculty of Literature and Humanities to get more in-depth and generalizable data.

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## About the author

Mohammad Qasim Farooqi is a faculty member at the English Department, Badghis Institute of Higher Education, Afghanistan. He holds a master's degree in TESOL, which he obtained from Kabul Education University, Afghanistan. He has participated in numerous academic, personal and professional development programs within the past few years. His research interests include EFL teaching and learning and technology and education.

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