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Exploring Gender and Language Proficiency Variations in English Listening Comprehension Difficulties (LCDs) Among College EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Learners



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Abstract

This study examines how listening comprehension difficulties (LCDs) vary among college-level learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), with a focus on the roles of gender and language proficiency. Listening comprehension is an essential component of language learning, presenting notable challenges for EFL students. These challenges are influenced by specific learner characteristics, including gender and language proficiency level, which impact both the learning process and comprehension ability. The objective of the study is to understand the interaction between these factors and LCDs, especially in the college student population. The research was conducted at a university in Taiwan, involving 304 students in a survey. The results reveal a subtle but significant influence of both gender and language proficiency level on students' perceptions of LCDs. Although the study did not find gender differences to significantly alter students' perceptions of LCDs overall, it was noted that female students experienced more difficulty in processing listening inputs than their male counterparts. Moreover, students with lower language proficiency levels reported facing more challenges in listening comprehension than those with higher proficiency. Interestingly, more advanced learners indicated slightly more difficulty with contextual aspects of listening. While this study did not find statistically significant differences attributable to gender and English proficiency, it highlights the importance of acknowledging the subtle variations in student perceptions. This understanding allows educators to create suitable instructional strategies to improve listening proficiency across all students, irrespective of their gender or English proficiency level.

Keywords: listening comprehension difficulties (LCDs), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), gender, language proficiency

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Introduction

The journey to acquiring a second language, mainly English as a Foreign Language (EFL), involves navigating the complexities of learning new linguistic patterns and structures. Among the various competencies this process encompasses, listening is an essential skill underpinning the ability to engage in meaningful communication. This skill is important for EFL learners as it directly affects their capacity to interact in real-life situations where English is the medium of exchange (Hien, 2015).

Listening goes beyond the mere act of hearing sounds; it involves intricate cognitive processes where auditory stimuli are decoded, interpreted, and understood in context. It is a skill often taken for granted, yet its role in language learning is undeniable. Within the EFL context, mastering listening is a gateway to improved pronunciation, expanded vocabulary, and the ability to grasp the subtleties of language use. Nevertheless, the path to achieving listening proficiency is filled with obstacles, presenting one of the more formidable challenges for EFL learners. The primary complexity lies in its demand for immediate processing of information. While reading and writing afford the learner time to reflect and revisit the material, listening demands instantaneous comprehension and often a prompt verbal response (Mendelsohn, 2014).

For EFL learners, this can be daunting as they must not only decipher sounds and words in a foreign language but also understand them within a cultural and situational context, all in real time. Moreover, the non-linear nature of spoken language, filled with pauses, intonations, and colloquialisms, adds difficulty to this task (Howard, 1983; O'Malley & Chamot, 1989; Richards, 1985). These challenges significantly influence an EFL student's ability to progress in other language areas, as listening is typically the precursor to speaking fluency and can even impact reading and writing proficiency.

To effectively address these challenges, it is crucial to recognize the factors that contribute to the listening comprehension difficulties (LCDs) EFL learners face. LCDs refer to the obstacles and hurdles that individuals face when trying to understand spoken English language input. These difficulties can manifest in various forms, such as struggling with different accents, processing rapid speech, coping with unfamiliar vocabulary, and grappling with unclear pronunciation (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Learner-specific variables such as gender and language proficiency level are fascinating to educators and researchers. Gender can influence how learners approach language learning, with potential differences in learning styles and preferences affecting the acquisition process (Hidayah & Indriani, 2021; Juniarta et al., 2022). Proficiency level, on the other hand, affects the learner's foundational understanding of the language, influencing their ability to parse and interpret spoken content (Gholami et al., 2016; Huang et al., 2017).

Existing literature has separately explored EFL learners' English LCDs and the role of gender and language proficiency in EFL learning; there is a notable gap in understanding how these factors intersect, particularly in the context of college-level EFL learners. In addition, studies in the past have touched upon the impact of gender and language proficiency on various aspects of EFL learning; there is a gap in comprehensively understanding how these factors interact with LCDs. By exploring gender and language proficiency variations in LCDs, more understanding can be gained, aiding in developing targeted teaching strategies and support systems. Understanding the interplay between these variables and LCDs is essential for developing instructional strategies that meet the needs of all EFL learners. By exploring the unique LCDs experienced by male and female college EFL learners across different proficiency levels, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics in EFL learning contexts. Such insights can inform instructors, curriculum developers, and policymakers in developing targeted interventions to enhance listening comprehension skills and promote equitable learning outcomes among EFL learners.

Literature Review

Multifaceted Difficulties in EFL Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension is key for effective communication and language acquisition in EFL education, yet it poses significant difficulties for many students. These difficulties encompass challenges such as understanding various accents, coping with rapid speech, dealing with vocabulary limitations, maintaining concentration, and processing complex auditory materials. Additional factors exacerbate these issues, including emotional disturbances, reluctance to seek clarification and environmental distractions.

Diora and Rosa (2020) explored the obstacles in listening comprehension faced by 32 students in the Department of English Language and Literature's K-2 Class. They categorized these difficulties into three main groups: complex listening materials, personal issues of listeners, and physical conditions. Factors aggravating these difficulties included peer dependence, hesitation to ask questions, emotional disruptions, fast content delivery, lack of rewards, and focus maintenance issues.

Jyoti's (2020) study investigated the difficulties in listening comprehension faced by English language students at the secondary level in Nepal. It employs a survey methodology involving 120 students from three community schools. The study identifies four sources of listening difficulties: content of the text (e.g., unfamiliar words, idioms), listener-related factors (e.g., lack of concentration, noise), linguistic features (e.g., grammatical complexity, pronunciation), and speaker-related issues (e.g., speech rate, accent).

Hasan's (2000) investigation at Damascus University focused on learners' self-reported listening comprehension difficulties. Students struggled with fast speech, unfamiliar vocabulary, and lengthy texts, leading to information overload and increased anxiety. The research emphasized the need for effective listening strategies, advocating for a focus on meaningful interpretation over word-by-word processing.

Previous studies also investigated the factors leading to LCDs and highlighted the intricate nature of these challenges among EFL students. This underscores the significance of comprehending these difficulties across varying proficiency levels.

Purwanto et al. (2021) conducted a study focusing on the common listening difficulties encountered by EFL students of varying proficiency levels. The study identified challenges like understanding different accents, concentration issues, rapid speech, limited vocabulary, and unclear pronunciation. To overcome these hurdles, both intermediate and upper intermediate students used strategies such as engaging with written texts, improving concentration, predicting information, and identifying essential vocabulary.

The study by Hardiyanto et al. (2021) investigated LCDs among EFL students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Kotabumi. Focusing on three proficiency levels (low, moderate, high), it identified different challenges faced by each group. Low proficiency students struggle with unfamiliar vocabulary, speech speed, and personal vocabulary gaps. Moderate proficiency students find difficulties with speech rate and background noise, while high proficiency students struggle with long spoken texts, varied accents, and ambient noise.

In their study, Ramadhianti and Somba (2021) investigated LCDs among 85 low-proficiency level students from the Basic Listening Class at the University of Indraprasta PGRI. The study found that these students required assistance with fast speech, diverse accents, and lengthy dialogues.

The above studies discussed the difficulties encountered by EFL students in listening comprehension across different contexts and proficiency levels. They vary in specific focus, and discussed strategies, and highlight common challenges such as understanding varied accents, fast speech, and unfamiliar vocabulary and stress the importance of implementing effective listening strategies to overcome these hurdles.

The Role of Gender in EFL Learning

Research has explored the complex interplay between gender and various aspects of learning EFL. These studies reveal that gender significantly influences EFL acquisition, affecting motivation, anxiety, adoption of learning strategies, and participation in digital learning. Typically, female EFL learners display higher motivation and are more likely to use language learning strategies (LLS) than their male counterparts. In contrast, male learners often show more significant involvement in Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) activities, while female learners report higher anxiety during speaking tasks.

Alghamdi et al. (2023) focused on the relationship between gender and motivation in EFL education. Using a modified Motivation and Attitude Questionnaire (MAQ), they surveyed 169 students from two Saudi Arabian secondary schools. The study found that although extrinsic and instrumental factors were primary motivators, female students exhibited higher intrinsic and integrative motivation levels.

Farnia and Mohtasham's (2017) research assessed the impact of gender on anxiety levels during EFL speaking tasks among 175 Iranian learners. Utilizing the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and interviews, they discovered that female students experienced significantly more anxiety, particularly in impromptu speaking exercises.

Hidayah and Indriani (2021) examined the role of individual differences in LLS in online learning environments for Indonesian undergraduate EFL students. A study of 30 Tidar University learners, evenly split by gender, revealed that while all participants positively adopted LLS, male students were less engaged in metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective strategies. Female students more frequently employed metacognitive and cognitive strategies.

Montero-Saiz Aja (2021) investigated gender influences on LLS and productive vocabulary among 51 second-year Spanish EFL learners. Using the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and the Productive Vocabulary Levels Test (PVLTL), the study found that female students used LLS more actively than male students. However, there were no significant gender differences in productive vocabulary levels.

Juniarta et al. (2022) explored gender disparities in IDLE usage among 656 students from an Indonesian university's English Language Education Department. Their quantitative analysis showed a notable difference in IDLE engagement, with male students participating more than female students, indicating distinct gender-based engagement patterns in digital learning.

The studies discussed above examine various aspects of gender differences in EFL education. They demonstrate variations in motivation, anxiety, LLS engagement, vocabulary, and digital learning patterns between male and female EFL learners. While there are differences in motivation, anxiety levels, engagement in LLS, and digital learning patterns between male and female EFL learners, there seem to be no significant disparities in productive vocabulary acquisition.

The Impact of English Proficiency Levels on EFL Learning

Recent research has cast light on various elements of EFL education, emphasizing the role of proficiency levels. These studies reveal that a learner's proficiency in English markedly affects their cognitive methods, willingness to communicate (WTC), involvement in cooperative learning activities, and strategic use of language learning resources.

A study by Avarzamani and Farahian (2017) examined the cognitive styles, flexibility, and self-evaluation experiences of Iranian EFL learners, both successful and less successful. Engaging 60 adult learners, this research employed the Cognitive Process Profile (CPP) to evaluate cognitive traits through simulated problem-solving activities. Findings showed that successful learners typically exhibited analytical, logical, reflective, and learning-oriented cognitive styles, coupled with notable cognitive flexibility. In contrast, less successful learners often displayed a random approach and lower cognitive flexibility.

Gholami's (2016) study investigated the relationship between English language proficiency and the WTC among Iranian female learners aged 15 to 22. After a TOEFL proficiency test and a WTC questionnaire, observations in classroom settings indicated a significant link between higher proficiency levels and increased WTC.

Huang et al.'s (2017) research focused on the effects of prolonged collaborative EFL storytelling activities on student engagement, particularly concerning English proficiency differences. This 17-month study with third-grade Taiwanese students used flow theory and learning strategy assessment to evaluate engagement. It found that proficiency levels significantly impacted engagement, strategy usage, and performance, with higher proficiency students often leading the activities.

Phibanchon and Tangjui's (2017) study at Burapha University, Thailand, explored LLS use and English proficiency among English majors. Comparing students from English and literature and business English tracks, the research revealed that those in the former group, with higher proficiency, used LLS more frequently. A slight yet positive correlation between LLS use and proficiency was noted.

Sukying's (2020) research assessed the use of LLS in English proficiency among first-year Thai university students. The study found a mild positive correlation between LLS use and proficiency, suggesting the impact of individual and contextual variations on LLS application.

Yu's (2022) study delved into the self-directed use of technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) outside class by Taiwanese university students with varying English proficiency levels. Involving 99 students, the study showed no significant difference in TELL use across different proficiency levels, although those with higher proficiency engaged more in productive skill activities.

The studies reviewed above examined various factors related to language learning among EFL learners. These studies demonstrate the complex nature of language learning and its relationship with various factors, including cognitive styles, proficiency levels, engagement, and language learning strategies.

Purpose of the Study

Research in the past has extensively explored the general LCDs encountered by EFL learners across different proficiency levels (Diora & Rosa, 2020; Hardiyanto et al., 2021; Purwanto et al., 2021), yet it has not profoundly probed into how these challenges may differ between male and female learners. Furthermore, studies focusing on the role of gender in EFL learning have predominantly addressed

factors like motivation, anxiety, and the adoption of learning strategies without precisely honing in on LCDs (Alghamdi et al., 2023; Farnia & Mohtasham, 2017). Although studies have shed light on the diverse challenges in EFL LCDs and the impact of gender and language proficiency on EFL learning, a significant gap remains in understanding the interplay between gender and language proficiency, particularly concerning LCDs among college EFL learners. This proposed study aims to bridge this gap by comprehensively examining the combined effect of gender and language proficiency on the LCDs experienced by college-level EFL learners. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the perceptions of college-level EFL learners towards LCDs in general?
2. What are their views on specific aspects of LCDs, including the process, input, listener, task, affect, and context?
3. Are there any differences in their perceptions of LCDs based on gender and their level of English proficiency?

Methodology

The Setting and Participants

This case study took place at a university situated in Western Taiwan. For confidentiality, it was identified here as ‘University K (UK).’ Like many Taiwanese universities, this institution classifies newly enrolled students into three levels of English proficiency: elementary, intermediate, and advanced. This classification is determined based on their performance in either the College Entrance Exam (CEE) or the College Entrance Examination in Specified Subjects (CEESS), spanning from CEFR A1 to CEFR B1 proficiency levels. As part of their first-year requirements, UK students must enroll in English for General Purpose Courses. The Center of Languages and Culture develops the EGP curriculum in the UK to familiarize students with four language skills: reading, speaking, listening, and writing while enhancing their language proficiency, communication skills, and aesthetic appreciation. English Reading and English Listening are the primary focuses of the courses offered.

This study focused on gathering and examining UK students’ opinions about their difficulties in understanding listening material. Out of the 305 surveys collected, one was discarded due to incompleteness, leaving 304 valid responses for analysis. The participants were distributed across academic years as follows: 82 freshmen (27%), 88 sophomores (29%), 76 juniors (25%), and 58 seniors (19%). In terms of gender, there were 125 males (41%) and 179 females (59%). Concerning English proficiency, the respondents were categorized into three levels: 64 (21%) at the elementary level, 137 (45%) at the intermediate level, and 103 (34%) at the advanced level.

Questionnaire

The study utilized a questionnaire titled “The Questionnaire of Beliefs on English Language Listening Comprehension Problems,” adapted from Lotfi (2012), who developed and validated this questionnaire, which consists of 40 statements, to assess learners’ beliefs about LCDs. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to validate the instrument. The analysis revealed a six-factor model underlying the questionnaire, corresponding to significant listening problems identified in literature affecting L2 learners’ listening competence. These factors are process (items 1–12), input (items 13–21), listener (items 22–31), task (items 32–34), affect (items 35–38), and context (items 39–40). Each item exhibited factor loadings contributing to a total variance of 53.84%, distributed across factors as follows: process (15.22%), input (10.69%), listener (10.67%), task (6.74%), affect (5.87%), and context (4.65%). Additionally, the instrument demonstrated a Cronbach’s alpha of .95, indicating

highly acceptable reliability. Therefore, it is reasonable to assert that the questionnaire serves as a valid and reliable measure of EFL learners' beliefs regarding English listening problems (p. 512).

Students were directed to assess each statement using a five-point Likert scale, spanning from "Always or almost always true of me (5)" to "Never or seldom true of me (1)". The questionnaire was administered through Google Surveys, and the survey link was disseminated via email to all undergraduate students in March 2023. This method allowed students to engage in the survey voluntarily and anonymously, thereby safeguarding their privacy and confidentiality. The survey data were collated one month later, after the cessation of further responses.

Data Analysis

The gathered quantitative data from the questionnaire underwent a detailed statistical analysis. This analysis primarily focused on three aspects: the average (Mean), the count (Frequency), and the proportion (Percentage) of each response from the participants. This approach effectively highlighted the collective viewpoints of respondents on each survey statement. The data were classified and examined using two statistical methods: The Independent t-test and the One-way ANOVA to gain further insights.

The Independent t-test was applied to compare the average responses of two distinct groups, presumably male and female students, to determine if their responses differed significantly. This test aimed to explore any notable differences between these groups. Meanwhile, the One-way ANOVA was employed to assess variations among different groups categorized by their levels of English proficiency. This test was instrumental in understanding how varying degrees of English skill affected students' perceptions and experiences regarding LCDs.

Results

College-Level EFL Learners' Perceptions Towards LCDs

The general perceptions of students towards LCDs were assessed by calculating the mean (M), standard deviation (SD), and frequency (F) of responses to all the items. The mean score was 3.14, indicating that, on average, participants held a moderately neutral perception of LCDs (Table 1). The standard deviation ($SD = 0.72$) suggests relatively low variability in responses, with most students falling within a similar range of perception scores.

To examine differences in perceptions of LCDs between male and female learners, an independent t-test was conducted. The results showed that gender did not have a significant effect ($p = 0.89 > 0.05$, $t(302) = 0.14$, $d = 0.6$), although male students ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.50$) expressed slightly higher concern than females ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 0.74$). Additionally, a one-way ANOVA was performed to compare differences in students' perceived difficulties in listening comprehension based on their English proficiency. The results indicated that language proficiency ($p = 0.40 > 0.05$, $F(2, 301) = 0.94$, $\eta^2 = 0.1$) had no significant effects. However, it is worth noting that elementary-level learners ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 0.73$) expressed the greatest concern regarding LCDs.

The results suggest that, on average, participants held a moderately neutral perception of LCDs, implying that, as a group, students neither strongly agreed nor strongly disagreed with statements related to LCDs. The independent t-test results indicated that gender did not significantly impact students' perceptions of LCDs despite male students' slightly higher concern. Similarly, the one-way ANOVA results showed that language proficiency levels had an insignificant effect overall. However, it is noteworthy that elementary-level learners expressed the most concern for LCDs, suggesting that lower proficiency learners may perceive these difficulties as more challenging.

Table 1 Independent *t*-test and ANOVA results of students' perception of LCDs (*N* = 304)

	Groups	N	M	SD				
	All participants	304	3.14	0.70				
t-test	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	p	d^a	
One-way ANOVA	male (M)	125	3.18	0.50	0.14	0.89	0.6	
	female (F)	179	3.13	0.74				
	English proficiency	N	Mean	SD	F	p	η^{2a}	Follow-up comparison (Bonferroni)
	elementary (E)	64	3.43	0.73				
	intermediate (I)	137	3.11	0.72	0.94	0.40	0.1	
	advanced (A)	103	3.00	0.67				

Note. ^ad of 0.2 is small size; 0.5 is medium; 0.8 is large.

College-Level EFL Learners' Views on Specific Aspects of LCDs

Table 2 displays the students' perceptions of various aspects contributing to LCDs, namely: process, input, listener, task, affect, and context. Among these aspects, "context" had the highest average score ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.94$), indicating significant difficulties students faced in understanding new information within the broader context of the listening passages. This challenge is highlighted in the survey results, where most students (71%) reported unclear sounds resulting from poor audio-play (71%, Item 37) and acoustic classroom conditions (65.8%, Item 40) interfered with listening comprehension. This suggests that suboptimal environmental listening conditions likely compound context-related difficulties students already face in accurately interpreting new details in light of the entire listening text.

Following "context," "input" had a mean of 3.62 ($SD = 0.88$), revealing that students' problems understanding and processing essential information when listening to texts containing complex vocabulary and grammar structures, along with speech rates and pronunciation patterns that diverge from standard English norms. Among the various issues related to input, the most prevalent was fast-paced speech (Item 16), affecting a substantial portion of students (60.5%). This suggests that many students needed help comprehending the listening materials that were delivered rapidly. Furthermore, unclear word pronunciation (Item 14), and diverse accents, and unfamiliar accents (Item 18) were also reported as challenges by 52.6% of the students. This underscores the notion that variations in speech patterns and inconsistent articulation hinder the ability of EFL students to interpret the speaker's intended message accurately. Additionally, half of the students encountered difficulties due to unfamiliar stress and intonation patterns in English (Item 17), which hindered their listening comprehension. This indicates that these students needed help deciphering the intended meaning and subtle nuances conveyed through English's stress and intonation patterns.

The "affect" factor ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.83$) was in third place, revealing that emotional and psychological influences such as anxiety, disappointment, and low confidence pose additional barriers to students' listening comprehension. The data revealed that a considerable of the students (44.7%) found it challenging to reduce their anxiety levels before engaging in a listening task (Item 37). This anxiety could be related to their concerns about not being able to understand the content of the upcoming listening comprehension tasks, as reported by a substantial majority of 65.8% (Item 38). This confirmed that the emotional state and self-perceived competence of students interfere with students' ability to process information during listening activities.

Of all the LCDs-related factors, “process” was ranked the last. This low ranking asserted that students face relatively less severe challenges related to their metacognitive awareness and strategic approach during the pre-listening, listening, and post-listening stages. Specifically, a small percentage (10.5%, Item 10) reported difficulty checking their understanding against prior knowledge of the topic. An additional 15.8% noted issues predicting upcoming content based on visuals provided (Item 1). Relatively positive trends emerged regarding students’ ability to make personal connections with new information (21% reported difficulty, Item 3) and identify the purpose of the listening task (21% had trouble, Item 5). This suggests that while there are areas for improvement, EFL learners effectively develop cognitive and metacognitive strategies that enhance their engagement and comprehension in listening activities.

In summary, the results revealed that the “context” factor posed students’ most significant listening comprehension challenges. Most students needed help to situate new details within the broader listening passage context. Inadequate audio quality and poor classroom acoustics exacerbated these context-related difficulties, as reported by most students. The “input” factor also presented substantial barriers, with complex vocabulary, grammar, rapid speech rate, and variable accents hindering students’ ability to process speaker messages accurately. Psychologically, many students conveyed anxiety about listening tasks and low confidence in comprehending content. These trends signify that emotional states and perceived self-efficacy undermine students’ listening proficiency. The “process” aspect was ranked lowest in difficulty, suggesting that students better employ cognitive and metacognitive strategies during listening activities. They showed relatively less difficulty connecting new information with prior knowledge and understanding the purpose of listening tasks.

Table 2 *Students’ perception of the process, input, listener, task, affect and context of the LCDs*

Factors	M	SD	Statements	%
process	2.75	0.77	1. Before listening, it is difficult for me to predict from the visuals what I will hear.	15.8
			2. It is difficult for me to relate what I hear with something from an earlier part of the listening text.	21.1
			3. While listening, I have problems making meaningful personal associations with the new information.	21
			4. During listening, I have difficulty checking whether I correctly understand the meaning of the whole chunks of the listening text.	31.5
			5. I have difficulty with finding out what the main purpose of the listening task I am going to do is.	21
			6. When I listen to texts in English, I experience difficulty with listening for the main idea of the text.	44.7
			7. I find it challenging to focus on the text when I have trouble understanding.	31.6
			8. While listening, I find it difficult to guess the meaning of unknown words by linking them to known words.	26.3
			9. I find it difficult to make a mental summary of information gained through listening.	26.3
			10. While listening, I have difficulty to check my understanding of the text based on what I already know about the topic.	10.5
			11. I find it difficult to use the context to guess those parts of a listening text that I cannot hear clearly.	26.3
			12. After listening, I find it difficult to evaluate the overall accuracy of my comprehension.	36.8

(Continued)

(Continuation)

Factors	M	SD	Statements	%
input	3.62	0.88	13. I find it difficult to understand listening texts in which there are too many unfamiliar words.	47.3
			14. I find it difficult to understand the meaning of words which are not pronounced clearly.	52.6
			15. I find it difficult to understand listening texts which have difficult grammatical structures.	44.8
			16. I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast.	60.5
			17. Unfamiliar stress and intonation patterns of English interfere with my listening comprehension.	50
			18. I find it difficult to understand the listening text when speakers speak with varied accents.	52.6
			19. I find it difficult to understand the listening text when the speaker does not pause long enough.	44.8
			20. I find it difficult to interpret the meaning of a long listening text.	39.5
			21. I have difficulty understanding speakers with unfamiliar accents.	52.6
listener	3.11	0.73	22. When thinking about meaning of unfamiliar words, I neglect the next part of the listening text.	52.6
			23. I am slow to recall the meaning of words that sound familiar.	26.4
			24. I find it difficult to quickly remember words or phrases I have just heard.	23.7
			25. During listening, although some words sound familiar, it is difficult for me to recall their meaning immediately.	39.4
			26. When I hear the new words, I forget the content which was mentioned before.	21.1
			27. I lose the flow of speech because I concentrate very hard on understanding every word or phrase I hear.	26.4
			28. I find it difficult to remember the meaning of a long listening text.	47.4
			29. I find it difficult to really concentrate on listening.	26.3
			30. I have difficulty comprehending the listening text because I don't know which strategy to use while listening.	23.7
			31. I have difficulty understanding a listening text because I cannot understand every single word I hear.	26.4
task	2.78	0.84	32. I find it difficult to do listening tasks, such as filling a grid, for which I need to draw on specific information from the text.	26.4
			33. I find it difficult to do listening tasks for which I need to combine information to make generalization while listening to the text.	21.1
			34. I find it difficult to answer Wh-questions in a listening task.	18.4
affect	3.20	0.83	35. I stop listening when I have problems in understanding a listening text.	15.8
			36. If I don't arrive at a total comprehension of an oral text, I feel disappointed.	39.5
			37. I find it difficult to reduce my anxiety before doing the listening task.	44.7
			38. Before doing listening comprehension tasks, I fear that I cannot understand what I will hear.	65.8
context	3.86	0.94	39. Unclear sounds resulting from a poor-quality audio-player interfere with my listening comprehension.	71
			40. Unclear sounds resulting from poor acoustic conditions of the classroom interfere with my listening comprehension.	65.8

The Differences in College-Level EFL Learners' Perceptions of LCDs Based on Gender and English Proficiency

Students' perceptions of context, input, process, and product difficulties related to listening comprehension were analyzed based on gender using an Independent samples t-test. The results are presented in Table 3. There were no statistically significant differences between males and females for most factors: process, listener, task, and affect ($p > 0.05$). The one exception was the "input" factor ($p = 0.04$, $t(302) = -0.23$) which had a medium effect size ($d = 0.5$). Females had a significantly higher mean score ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.92$) compared to males ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.67$). This suggests that female EFL students may have more trouble processing English listening inputs than their male peers.

Moreover, despite not reaching statistical significance, male students consistently reported higher difficulty levels than females in several factors. These include listener ($M = 2.61$ for males, $F = 2.77$ for females), task ($M = 3.00$ for males, $F = 2.74$ for females), affect ($M = 3.38$ for males, $F = 3.19$ for females), and notably, context ($M = 4.67$ for males, $F = 3.70$ for females). The "context" factor, in particular, displayed a trend towards significance ($p = 0.16$), with males rating the difficulties higher and a moderate effect size ($d = 0.4$). This suggests that there may be a significant gender-based difference in how contextual factors affect listening comprehension challenges. Overall, the analysis highlights gender-based variations in the perception of LCDs among college EFL students. While the "input" factor shows the most notable gender difference, the other factors, particularly the "context" factor, also display noteworthy variations.

One-way ANOVA was utilized to determine if there were significant differences in LCDs among students of different English proficiency levels (elementary, intermediate, and advanced). It was observed that there are no statistically significant differences in students' perception of LCDs among the three English proficiency groups (elementary, intermediate, advanced) for any of the factors: process, input, listener, task, affect, and context (all $p > 0.05$) (Table 4).

Despite the absence of statistically significant differences, specific patterns in the mean scores do emerge. Specifically, the elementary group reported the highest levels of difficulty for most of the

Table 3 Independent t-test results of students' perception on LCDS based on the categories and gender

Factors	Gender	Mean	t	P	d ^a
process	M	2.61	-0.46	0.57	0.2
	F	2.77			
input	M	3.56	-0.23	0.04	0.5
	F	3.63			
listener	M	3.18	-0.25	0.22	0.1
	F	3.10			
task	M	3.00	-0.70	0.85	0.3
	F	2.74			
affect	M	3.38	-0.55	0.13	0.2
	F	3.19			
context	M	4.67	2.47	0.16	0.4
	F	3.70			

Note. ^a d of 0.2 is small size; 0.5 is medium; 0.8 is large.

Table 4 ANOVA results of students' perception on LCDS based on the categories, and English proficiency

Factors	Proficiency	M	F	p	η^2	Factors	Proficiency ^a	M	F	p	η^2
process	E ^a	3.14	2.07	0.14	0.1	task	E	3.17	1.22	0.31	0.6
	I ^b	2.79					I	2.75			
	A ^c	2.46					A	2.59			
	ALL	2.75					ALL	2.78			
input	E	3.94	0.72	0.49	0.3	affect	E	3.34	0.27	0.77	0.1
	I	3.50					I	3.24			
	A	3.57					A	3.08			
	ALL	3.62					ALL	3.20			
listener	E	3.38	0.64	0.54	0.4	context	E	3.69	0.40	0.67	0.2
	I	3.05					I	3.79			
	A	3.03					A	4.04			
	ALL	3.11					ALL	3.86			

Note. ^a elementary; ^b intermediate; ^c advanced.

factors (process, $M = 3.14$; input, $M = 3.94$; listener, $M = 3.38$; task, $M = 3.17$; affect, $M = 3.34$), followed by intermediate (process, $M = 2.19$; input, $M = 3.50$; listener, $M = 3.05$; task, $M = 2.75$; affect, $M = 3.24$) and advanced students (process, $M = 2.46$; input, $M = 3.57$; listener, $M = 3.03$; task, $M = 2.59$; affect, $M = 3.08$). This suggests a trend in which lower proficiency levels are associated with increased perceived difficulties in listening comprehension. This pattern indicates that as EFL learners progress in their language skills, they tend to find certain aspects of listening comprehension, such as processing and understanding input, less challenging. Furthermore, regarding “context” difficulties, advanced students reported slightly higher levels ($M = 4.04$) than intermediate and elementary students. This indicates that more proficient listeners may encounter more significant challenges concerning aspects like poor audio quality and classroom conditions.

The results of this study reveal that while there are no statistically significant differences in students' perception of LCDs across different English proficiency groups, subtle trends indicate how these perceived difficulties evolve as learners progress from elementary to advanced levels.

Discussion

This study explored college EFL students' perceptions of listening comprehension difficulties (LCDs) and how these perceptions vary by gender and English proficiency level. Overall, the participant students held a moderately neutral perception of LCDs. The neutral perception of LCDs contrasts with some earlier studies reporting high levels of concern among students (Diora & Rosa, 2020). The participant students' neutral perception suggests that college-level EFL learners neither strongly agreed nor strongly disagreed with statements related to LCDs, implying a mix of challenges and successes when listening in English, which allows instructors to build student confidence.

Among the categories related to LCDs, “context” emerged as the most formidable factor. This finding highlights that students encountered significant challenges in grasping new information within the broader context of listening passages. These difficulties were further exacerbated by less than ideal environmental listening conditions, encompassing issues such as poor audio quality and classroom

acoustics, which hindered students' comprehension. These findings are consistent with the research of Diiora and Rosa (2020), who identified physical factors, including poor quality tapes or disks, inadequate equipment, absence of pauses, inability to replay content, and external noises, as barriers that students encounter when attempting to comprehend L2 listening.

"Input" was the second most challenging factor, encompassing difficulties related to understanding and processing essential information when listening to complex vocabulary, grammar structures, rapid speech rates, and diverse accents. Fast-paced speech and unclear word pronunciation were prevalent issues. The "affect" factor revealed that emotional and psychological influences, such as anxiety and low confidence, posed additional barriers to listening comprehension. Many students reported experiencing anxiety before engaging in listening tasks, which could be related to concerns about understanding the content of upcoming tasks. Conversely, the "process" factor was ranked the lowest in difficulty, suggesting that students demonstrated competence in employing cognitive and metacognitive strategies during listening activities. While there is room for improvement, students appeared to be relatively proficient in making personal connections with new information and identifying the purpose of listening tasks.

These findings partially align with Jyoti's (2020) study on secondary students' major listening comprehension difficulties. Like the current study, Jyoti found that content issues like unfamiliar vocabulary and idioms posed the most significant challenges. Listener-related difficulties like insufficient concentration on lengthy texts were the next most prevalent. Linguistic features like complex grammar and pronunciation patterns ranked third, followed by speaker challenges involving speech rate and accents. Purwanto et al. (2021) also found input challenges with vocabulary, speed, and accents as significant barriers. The role of anxiety and self-efficacy highlighted in this study also echoes previous findings on the affective obstacles learners face (Hasan, 2000). Thus, while the ranking order differs slightly, the current results reinforce that message content, listener abilities, linguistic variables, and speaker delivery can undermine EFL students' listening comprehension. These insights suggest targeted instruction in vocabulary usage, maintaining focus, using both bottom-up and top-down processing, decoding sounds/structures, accommodating speech patterns, and especially leveraging background knowledge schemata could provide learners with helpful listening comprehension strategies within their zone of proximal development.

This study expands on past work by specifically exploring LCDs among college-level learners and considering the intersection of gender and proficiency. Gender-based differences in this study indicate that females had a significantly higher mean score for the "input" factor, a situation has not been extensively examined before. This suggests that female EFL students may encounter more challenges than males when processing English listening inputs. Furthermore, although not statistically significant, male students consistently reported higher difficulty levels than females in several factors, especially in the "context" aspect. This implies that gender, as a factor, had limited influence on how students perceived LCDs. These findings align with Alghamdi et al.'s (2023) research, which also found that gender did not significantly influence EFL learners' learning motivation. However, it is worth noting that Montero-Saiz Aja (2021) observed a significant influence of gender differences on EFL learners' use of LLS, and Juniarta et al. (2022) also noted significant differences between males and females when performing English Digital Learning activities.

The study's findings suggest that gender may have a limited impact on how students perceive LCDs. However, it remains essential for instructors to remain mindful of potential gender-related differences. Given that female EFL students have been identified as facing significantly greater challenges in the "input" factor, instructors should consider offering them additional support and targeted exercises to enhance their listening skills. Recognizing females' greater input difficulties indicates that targeted

exercises should be incorporated to strengthen their decoding skills. These exercises could involve exposure to various accents, diverse listening contexts, and opportunities for active listening practice.

Furthermore, teachers must cultivate a supportive and inclusive learning environment that encourages both male and female students to remain engaged in their English listening endeavors. This approach not only addresses gender-specific needs but also enhances the overall language-learning experience. Instructors and educational institutions should also actively promote gender equity in language learning, ensuring that both male and female students have equal access to resources, opportunities, and support to excel in EFL courses (Pavlenko, 2004).

In the current study, it was found no statistically significant differences in the perception of LCDs across students with varying levels of English proficiency. However, noticeable trends emerged. Students with lower proficiency levels perceived greater challenges with various aspects of listening comprehension. As students advanced in their proficiency, they found certain listening comprehension aspects less problematic. Interestingly, higher-proficiency students reported slightly greater difficulties with contextual factors, suggesting even competent listeners can struggle with external elements like poor audio quality and classroom conditions. In their study, Hardiyanto et al. (2021) also discovered variability in listening challenges among low, moderate, and high-proficiency students. Those with low proficiency were most challenged by unfamiliar vocabulary, speech rate, and personal vocabulary gaps. Moderately proficient students struggled most with speech rate and background noise. High-proficiency students cited difficulties with long-spoken texts, varied accents, and ambient noise. While some listening barriers may diminish with improvements in English proficiency, environmental and contextual obstacles persist regardless of proficiency level. Therefore, targeted interventions addressing these consistent challenges across proficiency levels should be implemented to enhance EFL listening comprehension.

Furthermore, it was observed that while elementary-level learners ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 0.73$) showed the highest concern regarding LCDs, intermediate-level learners ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.72$) did not exhibit significant differences in their mean and standard deviation. This phenomenon could be attributed to several factors.

Firstly, it is essential to consider the specific LCDs being assessed. While both elementary and intermediate-level learners may encounter similar challenges in their listening comprehension, the perceived severity or impact of these difficulties could vary. Elementary-level learners, who are relatively unfamiliar with the language and may still be developing foundational listening skills, might perceive specific difficulties as more daunting or concerning compared to their intermediate-level counterparts.

On the other hand, intermediate-level learners may have already developed some coping strategies or acquired a certain level of familiarity with common LCDs, resulting in a less pronounced difference in their expressed concerns. Individual differences among learners, such as their prior language learning experiences, cognitive abilities, and personal dispositions, could also contribute to this phenomenon. Some intermediate-level learners may possess more robust coping mechanisms or exhibit greater resilience when faced with listening challenges, thus attenuating the perceived differences between the two proficiency levels.

Furthermore, contextual factors such as the teaching methods employed, the complexity of listening tasks, and the overall learning environment could influence learners' perceptions of LCDs differently across proficiency levels. For instance, if the instructional approach at the intermediate-level emphasizes active engagement with authentic listening materials and provides ample support for skill

development, learners may feel more equipped to manage LCDs, leading to a narrower gap in their expressed concerns compared to elementary-level learners.

Overall, while the mean and standard deviation values suggest a comparable level of concern between elementary and intermediate-level learners regarding LCDs, further investigation into the underlying reasons, including specific challenges faced, individual differences, and instructional contexts, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

Conclusions and Future Research

The journey of acquiring a foreign language, is a complex process that involves mastering various competencies, with listening being a skill essential for meaningful communication. This study has shed light on the challenges that college-level EFL learners face in their listening comprehension and how these challenges are perceived based on gender and English proficiency levels. The current research provides valuable insights into college-level EFL learners' perceptions of LCDs. It highlights the neutral perception of LCDs among students, with limited influence from gender and English proficiency levels. The study also underscores the specific challenges students encounter in the "context" and "input" aspects of listening comprehension and the impact of emotional and psychological factors on their listening proficiency. While this research did not reveal statistically significant differences based on gender and English proficiency, it emphasizes recognizing subtle trends and variations in students' perceptions. By recognizing these differences, educators can develop instructional learner-centered strategies to enhance the listening proficiency of all students, regardless of their gender or English proficiency level.

The findings of the study yield several pedagogical implications for instructors in addressing listening comprehension challenges. Given the significant impact of contextual factors on students' listening difficulties, educators should focus on building students' schema and activating background knowledge before listening activities. Pre-listening discussions and previews of key vocabulary can effectively provide context, enhancing comprehension. To tackle input difficulties, instructors should expose students to various accents and speech rates through multimedia resources, allowing for adequate processing time by pausing after chunks of information. Additionally, teachers should be attentive to potential gender differences, offering extra support to female students in processing inputs, possibly through activities centered on parsing inputs. Lower proficiency learners may require additional scaffolding to develop effective listening strategies, with teachers modeling predictive listening and inference-making. Establishing an encouraging classroom environment that fosters reflection on listening progress can boost students' confidence and alleviate anxiety. Moreover, to minimize environmental distractions, educators should ensure optimal audio quality, seat students near the audio source, and consider using amplification devices in larger classrooms. These strategies aim to enhance students' listening comprehension skills and promote equitable learning outcomes in EFL contexts.

While offering preliminary insights, this study is limited by its design. It was conducted in a Western Taiwanese university, so its findings may not be widely applicable. Future research should extend to various cultural and educational settings for greater relevance. The study's focus on gender and proficiency limits its scope without thoroughly examining other influential factors like age, motivation, learning styles, and previous language experiences. Future studies should investigate these aspects and their effects on English listening comprehension in EFL learners. Delving into how cognitive styles, anxiety levels, and socioeconomic status influence LCDs could yield a more comprehensive understanding. Qualitative methods like interviews and focus groups would offer more profound insight into student experiences. Including teacher perspectives could also shed light on effective strategies to address LCDs.

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