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Prioritizing and Addressing Perceived Listening Challenges of IELTS Test Takers in Bangladesh



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Abstract

Listening comprehension is an essential part of L2 learning. However, listening skills are neither taught nor assessed in the mainstream secondary and higher secondary public exams in Bangladesh. As a result, mainstream higher secondary students do not face a test of their listening skills until they attempt an IELTS test. For this reason, the listening test for the IELTS is challenging for post-higher secondary students. The purpose of this study is to explore the difficulties in the IELTS listening test perceived by Bangladeshi test takers; how test takers are prepared for the test and how experienced test takers report on the preparation for the test. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches have been adopted for this research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six IELTS preparatory-course trainers. In addition, five experienced IELTS test takers were also interviewed who secured a band score of 7.0 or above. All the participants were selected through purposive sampling. As a part of the quantitative research approach, 224 participants from an IELTS preparatory course were surveyed. The findings show that the primary challenge for the test takers is their inability to recognize known words as well as new vocabulary while listening to an audio in the IELTS test. The findings of the study may help IELTS trainers assist potential test takers in dealing with the difficulties of the IELTS listening test.

Keywords: listening; listening practice; IELTS listening; listening strategies; Bangladesh

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Introduction

The development of listening is often given less attention by language teachers in comparison to writing, reading, or speaking (Goh & Vandergrift, 2022). This is particularly true in many parts of the world where a traditional view of language teaching and assessment prevails. In Bangladesh, listening and speaking are neither taught nor tested formally in secondary and higher secondary education (Shurovi, 2014). Policy and practice-related challenges highlight that the government is still indecisive about the inclusion of listening in both Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) exams (Islam et al., 2021). Therefore, there is rarely any scope for the students to face listening tests if they do not take international tests such as IELTS¹, TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), or PTE (Pearson Test of English) to gain access to international study opportunities.

Choosing IELTS as an international test, most of the candidates in Bangladesh attempt to prepare for the test with the assistance of various local coaching and training centres or IELTS preparatory courses offered by the British Council Centres and IDP (International Development Program) centres across the country (Chowdhury, 2009). The preparatory courses are usually three to four months long. As this study focuses on the IELTS candidates from the preparatory courses, the self-prepared IELTS candidates may have different perspectives on listening challenges of the test.

IELTS is deemed, at present, to be one of the most acclaimed ESL tests conducted at hundreds of local centres in more than 130 countries (British Council, 2018). In Bangladesh, more and more people are also preparing to sit for IELTS test every year than other international tests (e.g. TOEFL or PTE) (Kabir, 2018). The IELTS result can open doors for people to study in the USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand, and so on or to obtain a visa to live and work in those places. As a result, the number of IELTS test participants has increased rapidly in Bangladesh. There are at least 18,000 students who take part in IELTS test in Bangladesh (Kabir, 2018). So, to get an overview of listening skill for English language education in Bangladesh in connection with the IELTS listening test, this paper included participants from the trainers of the IELTS preparatory course, the IELTS preparatory students, and the experienced IELTS test takers who took the IELTS test.

Literature Review

Bangladeshi IELTS test takers perform poorly in the IELTS listening test, scoring lower than other three tested skills: reading, writing and speaking (Kaisar & Khanam, 2008). The Bangladeshi higher secondary students are often unable to correctly understand English words when interacting with both native speakers of English and Bangla-speaking teachers lecturing in English (Kabir, 2023). However, another research argues that students understand the English of their Bangla-speaking teachers when the lectures are delivered in English, but at the same time they fail to understand the native English speakers (Zarin, 2013). This is in line with Grant (2014) who claims that listening is often facilitated by familiarity with the accent of the speaker.

L2 Listening Process

The construct of second language listening ability is always complex. In listening comprehension, the meaning is not directly found in the spoken text but is constructed by the listener using linguistic knowledge, the co-text, the context of the situation, and general background or topic-specific knowledge. One of the challenges for L2 listening researchers is to identify listening strategies that seem to be the features of a fluent L2 listener. Field (2008) argues that the use of listening strategies occurs

¹ The International English Language Testing System (ielts.org).

not only to “the use of contextual and co-textual ‘top-down’ information to solve local difficulties of comprehension” (p. 108) but also at various lexical levels, specifically when listeners are unsure about the reliability of what has been understood, leading them to use the most likely word match despite the *context* and the *co-text*. A *context* works as a source of information on which a second language listener can draw. It is a situation, background knowledge, and the topic of the text in which a word or passage appears, and which helps the listener ascertain its meaning. Often, listeners rely on contextual clues to decipher the meaning when they fail to decode the whole spoken text. They may come up with a wrong interpretation of the spoken text. Another major factor is the *co-text*, the surrounding of a set of words in a written expression connected linguistically that influences listening comprehension because of the meaning interpretation of a spoken text. Based on this notion, one can conclude that reliance more on *context* to understand the spoken text can be very costly as the listener will be busy getting the literal meaning of the spoken text than the intended meaning of the speaker (Graham, 2017).

The speaker, the tasks, the situation, and even the listener can all be the causes of listening difficulties (Rost, 2016). The ranking of listening difficulties varies according to the competence level of listeners, differences in listening texts, and listening tasks for comprehension. Renandya and Hu (2018) and Buck (2001) identified listening comprehension challenges perceived to be the most difficult by teachers and students, ranging from textual considerations, such as long and complex sentences, to contextual aspects such as background noise, rate of speech, and speaker’s accent.

Micro and Macro Skills of Listening Comprehension

Over the past decade, listening has gained general acceptance as an area of concern for speech and English language educators. Nonetheless, Caruso, Gadd Colombi, and Tebbit (2017) state that very little research is available to the students on this issue. In a pioneering article, Richards (1983) designed an elaborated taxonomy of aural skills that termed micro-skills – comprised of two types of listening settings. Firstly, micro-skills for conversational listening (such as the ability to retain chunks of a language of different lengths for short periods, the ability to recognise reduced forms of words, and the ability to recognize cohesive devices in spoken discourse), and secondly, micro-skills for academic listening (such as the ability to identify purpose and scope of lecture, ability to infer relationships, its cause, effect, and conclusion, and ability to recognise key lexical items related to a subject or topic). Brown and Lee (2015) have modified Richard’s “original micro-skills into a list of micro and macro skills” (p. 326) and provided a new taxonomy of listening comprehension grouping ten elements for *micro-skills* and seven elements for *macro-skills*. According to Brown and Lee (2015), bottom-up strategies come under *micro-skills* of listening, while top-down strategies are akin to *macro skills* of listening. Richards (2008) suggests that for better comprehension of a spoken script in real-world listening, a combination of both bottom-up and top-down listening strategies is required.

Listening Strategies: Cognitive and Metacognitive Factors

Empirical studies of Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016) and Vandergrift (2013) have identified that there is a positive relationship between listening proficiency and the use of strategy. Phakiti (2016) suggests that there is an agreement that the use of strategy is an important element of consciousness and awareness that takes place within the working memory. However, Field (2008) and Vandergrift (2013) note that the teaching of explicit listening strategies for better listening comprehension or listening benefits remains inconclusive. Bachman and Palmer (1996) argue that metacognition leads to the use of a metacognitive strategy that helps manage other cognitive processes to complete tasks. Separate strategies have been identified for cognition and metacognition to have listening comprehension. Cognitive strategies are those mental activities that help store inputs in working memory or long-term memory for comprehension. The metacognitive strategies are those mental activities that help perform

an executive function to manage cognitive strategies for comprehension (Vandergrift & Goh, 2009). Low-skilled listeners rely more on cognitive strategies while skilled listeners use more meta-cognitive strategies along with the cognitive strategies during listening to a spoken text. In general, skilled L2 listeners combine various strategies in an orchestrated and harmonious manner (Vandergrift & Goh, 2009).

Purpose of the Study

This paper attempts to explain how novice and experienced test takers perceive and prepare for this high-stakes listening test. The study also intends to explore the strategies that can be followed to develop listening comprehension skills. Taking into account these contextual considerations, the present study addresses the following questions:

- RQ 1: How do mainstream secondary students perceive the challenges of listening comprehension of the IELTS test in Bangladesh?
- RQ 2: How can potential IELTS test takers in Bangladesh develop their listening comprehension skills by applying the strategies of listening?

Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach (Almeida, 2018), collecting both quantitative (survey scores) and qualitative (interviews) data to answer the research questions (Tables 1 & 2).

Data Collection

Three groups of participants were recruited through purposive sampling. In the first group of participants, 224 IELTS preparatory course students who graduated from Bangla-medium higher secondary institutions were surveyed. Of 312 preparatory course students who were approached, 224 completed both pre-course and post-course surveys. The purpose of conducting both pre-course and post-course surveys was to identify the listening comprehension issues initially. Furthermore, the surveys helped narrow down on a particular problem related to listening difficulty which could be further addressed and explored by interview data. For example, even after taking the course on IELTS listening test, the participants perceived listening skill more difficult than previously believed (from 65% to 75% as shown in Figure 2). This change of perception is further explored by interview data from the other two participant groups that included experienced IELTS test takers and IELTS trainers.

The surveys were in Bangla and consisted of 13 similar items, with nine additional questions in the pre-course survey questionnaire about demographic details, English listening habits, perceived difficulty in listening, and listening strategies. Questions included a five-point Likert scale, multiple-choice, or in some cases, text-boxes for answers. The content and the format of the questionnaire were based on Buck's (2001) list of listening difficulties, as well as a comprehensive review of L2 listening literature (Huang & Nisbet, 2019) to ensure its construct validity.

The participants of the second group were five successful IELTS test takers. They achieved band scores between 7.0 and 8.5 in the listening component of the test, which is high enough to gain access to higher education abroad. These participants took part in individual semi-structured interviews.

The participants of the third group were six experienced (10-20 years) IELTS trainers from an IDP IELTS centre in Bangladesh. They had been trained by IDP through workshops conducted by the IELTS head trainers from Cambridge ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages).

All the interviews with test takers and trainers were conducted in Bangla by the first author and audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. Participants were assigned pseudonyms. Each interview lasted for approximately 25 to 30 minutes. The data obtained through the semi-structured interviews were transcribed in Bangla using Roman letters and then translated by the first author in English.

Data Analysis

As far as the quantitative phase is concerned, the intention of conducting pre-and post-course surveys was not to validate or to check the effectiveness of the preparatory course but to identify and explore the areas of difficulties (micro and macro skills) that potential IELTS test takers face regarding their listening skill. The statistical analysis of survey data helped narrow down the focus on listening difficulties of the learners which were further interpreted in detail by qualitative data.

As far as the qualitative phase is concerned, thematic analysis (TA) is used to analyse the interview data. This method is based on the semantic approach, and its coding and development of themes reflect

Table 1 *Summary of the surveys to IELTS listening text*

Instrument	Participants	Number of Participants Approached	Number of Participants Joined	A Brief Description of the Participants
Pre-course Survey Questionnaire	IELTS preparatory course students (Bangla medium)	312	224	They were preparing to take IELTS for the first or second time at an IDP centre in Bangladesh. The type of participant group was post-higher secondary students who were willing to go abroad for further studies.
Post-course Survey Questionnaire	IELTS preparatory course students (Bangla medium)	312	224	

Table 2 *Summary of the interview participants*

Pseudonym	Description of the Participants	IELTS Listening Score	Age	Gender
Drinmoi	An experienced IELTS test taker	7.5	21	Male
Hafez	An experienced IELTS test taker	8.0	22	Male
Shiraji	An experienced IELTS test taker	7.0	20	Female
Faruq	An experienced IELTS test taker	7.5	19	Male
Ishmam	An experienced IELTS test taker	8.5	21	Female
Mashrur	The Head of the Centre as well as an IELTS preparatory-course trainer	Trainers are with more than 15 years of experience.	38	Male
Khokon	IELTS preparatory-course trainer		29	Male
Ashek	IELTS preparatory-course trainer		30	Female
Tiplu	IELTS preparatory-course trainer		32	Male
Saif	IELTS preparatory-course trainer		30	Male
Rumel	IELTS preparatory-course trainer		27	Male

the explicit substance of the data. After the data had been transcribed, patterns in the data were discovered using a thorough process of familiarisation with the data, coding, creation, and revision of themes.

Findings

Eighty percent of the survey respondents (Figure 1) indicated that they took the IELTS test for *Education*, while a further 18% indicated *Migration* and the remaining 2% indicated the test for *Employment* purposes. Almost half (48%) of the survey participants had no post-higher secondary education, while 44% of them had various diplomas and certificates and 8% of them had at least undergraduate

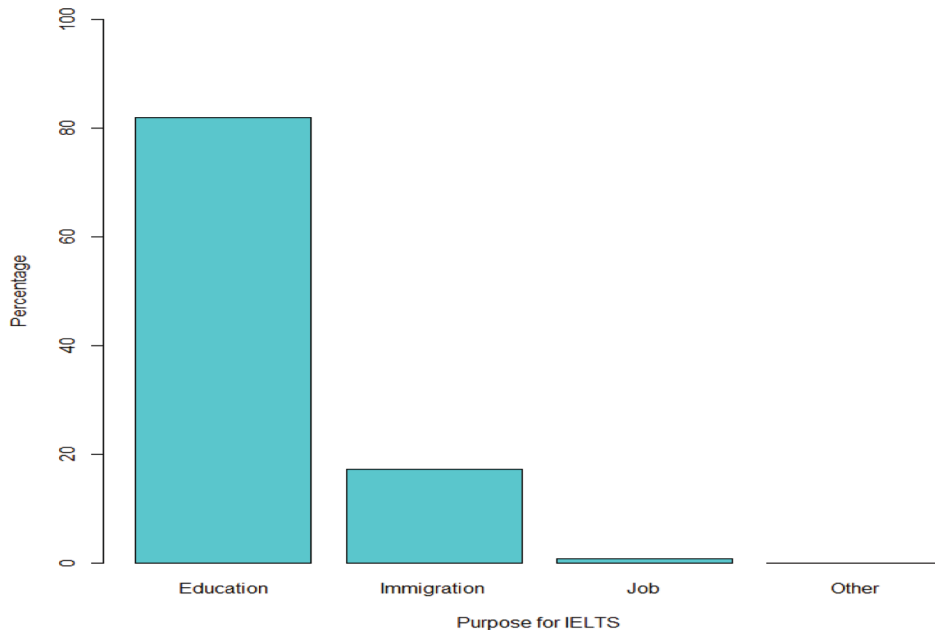


Figure 1 *The purpose of taking the IELTS test.*

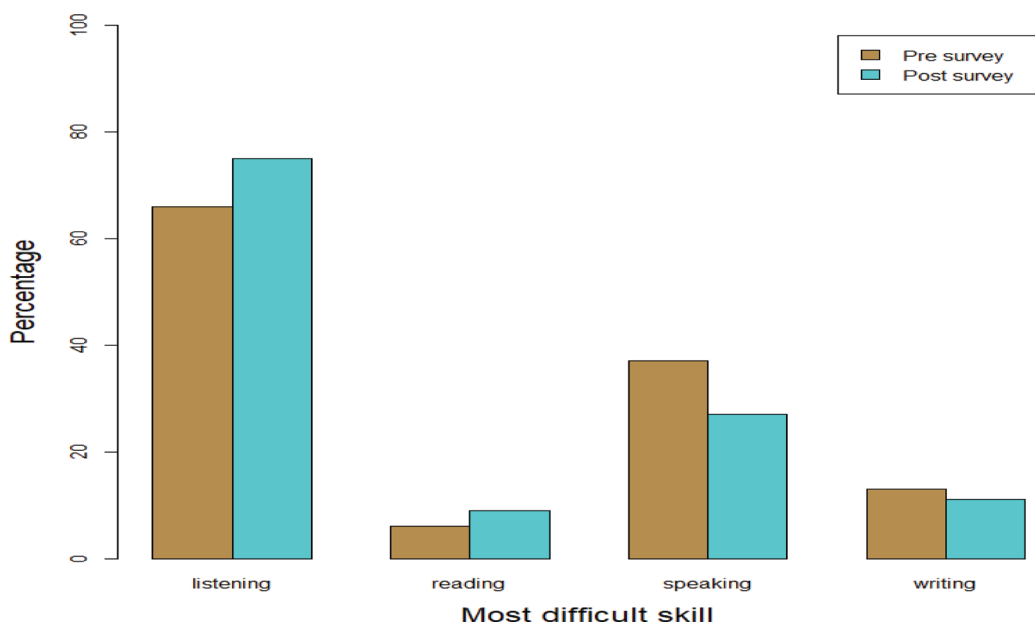


Figure 2 *The participants identified listening as the most difficult skill.*

education. In the pre-course survey, 65% of the respondents indicated that, of four skills, listening was the most difficult part for them, followed by speaking which was indicated by almost 40%. In the post-course survey, 75% of the respondents acknowledged that listening remained difficult while speaking and writing were seen as less difficult by respondents after the preparatory course (Figure 2).

Challenges in the IELTS listening test in terms of contexts and tasks

The IELTS listening test has four sections. These are shown in Table 3.

Table 4 shows the types of tasks that a test taker may find in any part of the test. There may be one to three different tasks per section.

Nearly 60% of the respondents both in pre and post surveys identified section 3 as the most difficult section in the listening test (Figure 3 and 4). Section 3 seemed difficult for them as there were multiple speakers usually in a group dialogue on a specific issue. Preparatory course trainers are, of course, aware of this difficulty and compare the first and third sections, both of which involve more than one

Table 3 *Sections of the listening test (Adapted from Cullen et al., 2014, p. 9)*

Section	Context	Number of Interlocutors
1.	Social (e.g. a general topic with a transactional purpose).	Usually a conversation between two people
2.	Social (e.g. giving information about events in the community).	Usually a monologue
3.	Academic (e.g. student/s and a tutor discussing an academic topic).	Usually a conversation between two or three people
4.	Academic (e.g. a lecture)	A monologue

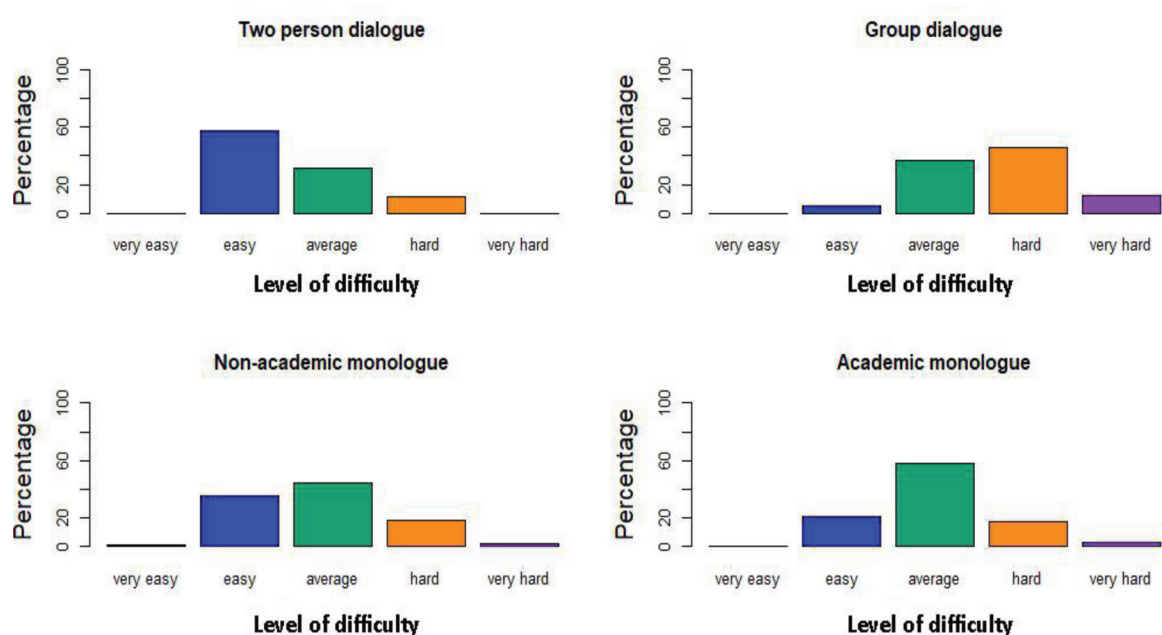


Figure 3 *Shows the percentage of difficulties of different types of listening tasks (pre-course survey).*

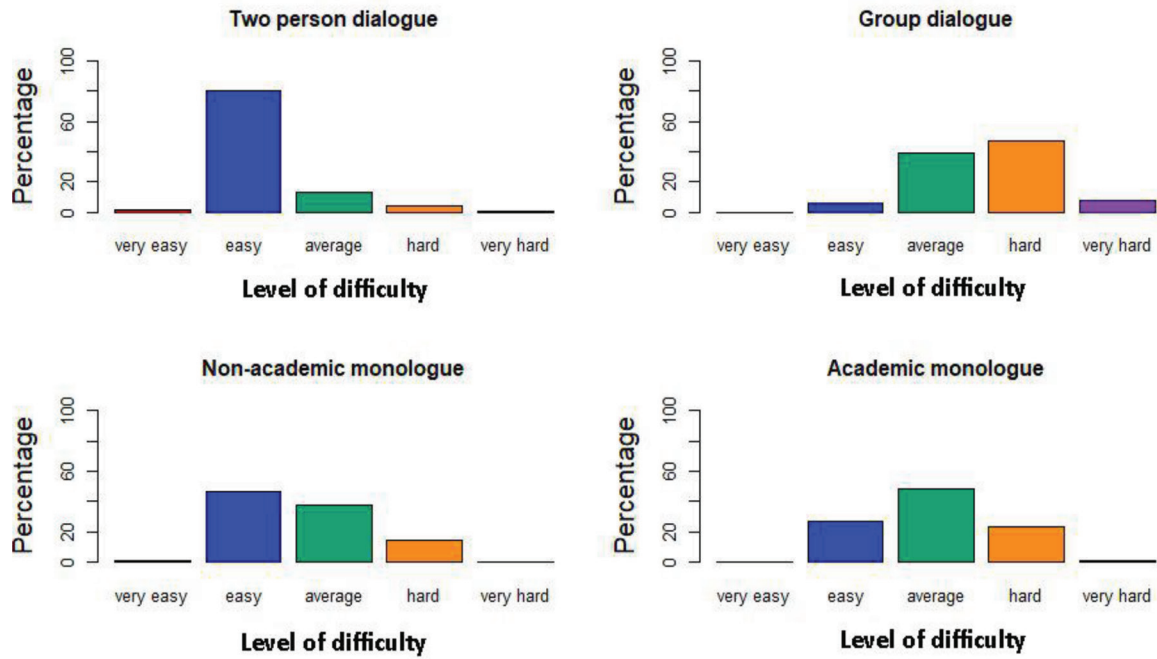


Figure 4 Shows the percentage of difficulties of different types of listening tasks (post-course survey).

Table 4 Types of listening tasks (Adapted from Cullen et al., 2014, p. 9)

Task Type	What Does a Test-Taker have to do?
Notes/summary/table/flow-chart completion	Complete notes/a summary/table/flowchart with a suitable word or words within the word limit given.
Multiple choices	Choose one answer from alternative A–C. Choose two answers from alternative A.
Short-answer questions	Answer questions within the word limit given.
Sentence completion	Complete a sentence with a suitable word or words within the word limit given.
Labelling a diagram, plan, or map	Complete a sentence with a suitable word or words within the word limit given.
Classification	Classify the information given in the question according to three different criteria (A, B or C). These may be dates, names, types, etc.
Matching	Match a list of statements to a list of possible answers in a box (e.g., people, theories, or dates).

speaker. The task types of a listening test can also create difficulty for a variety of reasons related to listening comprehension challenges. The interview data further underpinned the survey data. The following interviewees stated:

Example 1. To answer the questions from a group discussion, a candidate must understand the complete theme. (Saif)

Example 2. A candidate is only required to pick a lead phrase or a keyword to answer in sections 1 and 2. However, section 3 requires a complete comprehension of the group discussion. A candidate has to deal with multiple accents of different people in this section. This is the reason that makes the task more difficult. (Tiplu)

The interviewees indicated that section 3 requires the combined use of *bottom-up* and *top-down* processes of listening, as illustrated by another experienced test-taker. The complex interaction among different components of a task makes it difficult to determine the level of difficulty of any particular listening test item (Vandergrift & Goh, 2009). IELTS tasks require working memory as it influences the performance of the listening comprehension of the test takers (Amir & Mitra, 2017). When an L2 listener with limited language knowledge listens to something, working memory suffers as they must focus consciously on every detail they listened to, suggesting that short-term memory is more important than long-term memory in processing and decoding language (Al-Hammadi, 2012; Ellis, 2008).

Speech rate is an issue in section 4 as well as in section 3. More than 50% of pre and post survey respondents reported that it was difficult for them to follow the academic monologue because of the speed of the text and to sort out implied answers from the spoken text. It is usually a lecture or talk of general academic interest, such as a university talk:

Example 3. An academic monologue is problematic because it is too speedy to decipher the answer. It is fast and that is why I missed the answers. (Post-course survey, Student no. 69).

It is necessary for test takers to do well in the challenging section 4 (often an academic monologue) if they are to achieve high scores. General knowledge and vocabulary are also seen important for this section as illustrated by the comments of experienced test takers. Moreover, sustained attention is also important for doing well in this section as commented by another trainer:

Example 4. There is a long formal monologue in section 4 of the listening test. Students require consistent, long, attentive listening. Many of them lose concentration before the end. So, they fail to answer some of the questions. For example, when the speaker is saying something to answer question number 38, the test-taker is still stuck on answer 35. On top of that, in other sections, they need only to pick the keyword or a phrase to answer. However, in section 4, students need to pick a synonym rather than an exact keyword. (Khokon)

Along with Sections 3 and 4, Section 2 of the IELTS listening test was also difficult for several IELTS test takers. This section often involves labelling a graph or map, which requires other skills, and a different kind of concentration:

Example 5. I found graph or table or map-related questions difficult. A test-taker has to understand the graph, map, or table, fill in the gaps, or choose from a box of possible answers, and listen to the text at the same time. I think this is difficult for the brain to process [...] the answers do not follow the sequence of the questions in the graph, table, or map. (Shiraji)

Example 6. Diagrams or maps create confusion as I have to concentrate on both the listening and the picture. (Post-course survey, Student no. 141).

It is perceived that test takers lack the ability to concurrently process and store input which affects their listening comprehension (Fay & Buchweitz, 2014; Renukadevi, 2014). In the official IELTS guide, Cullen et al. (2014) instructs test takers to “study the map or plan carefully before you listen. Having a clear image in your mind will help you understand what you hear” (p. 25). This kind of pre-listening activity activates the test takers’ schemata to facilitate listening comprehension (Brown & Lee, 2015; Richards, 2015).

Major IELTS listening comprehension difficulties

Survey respondents were asked to indicate how difficult they perceived the four common difficulties of listening, such as *unfamiliar accent*, *speed of speech*, *unknown topic*, and *unknown vocabulary* (Buck, 2001) for their listening comprehension in IELTS listening practice. Figure 5 depicts the difference between percent changes for pre-survey and post-survey which allowed us to analyse important percentage differences of four types of listening difficulties.

Unfamiliar accent

In this research, the unfamiliar accent was found to be an issue for Bangladeshi IELTS test-takers. This finding also aligns with the previous research outcomes (Kaisar & Khanam, 2008; Zarin, 2013). The IELTS practice and test materials usually involve British and Australian accents, while the students are generally familiar with Bangladeshi accent of English. Here are the extracts from the interviews:

Example 7. They feel uneasy initially as most of the time they don't understand the accent of the speakers from the UK or Australia. (Khokon)



Figure 5 Shows the percentage of four types of listening difficulties (pre-course and post-course surveys).

Example 8. The aspects of the English language such as vocabulary, accent, and pronunciation can be developed by listening more and more to the authentic English language. (Himel)

The trainers of IELTS emphasised that the preparatory course students had little opportunity to familiarize themselves with the accents of the UK, US, and Australia. Bangladeshi students are used to listening to and practicing with Bangladeshi-accented audio files available online at their secondary level as a part of their listening practice (National Curriculum and Textbook Board, 2012). Thus, one of the reasons for listening difficulty was their lack of familiarity with the varieties of English they encounter in the IELTS listening test. The listeners may even be unable to recognise words they already know in a speech stream due to the fact that “the pronunciation of words may also differ greatly from the way they appear in print” (Bloomfield et al., 2010, p. 33) as well as the dissimilarity between the unfamiliar pronunciation and the pronunciation expected by the students (Li & Renandya, 2012; Renandya & Hu, 2018).

By using “Listening more and more” Himel suggested that the IELTS trainers had the mind for the students to guide them for repeated listening, answering, and checking answers, rather than teaching the students the process of listening. Existing research also shows that explicit teaching of accent and pronunciation aspects helps bolster listeners’ listening comprehension (Grant, 2014).

On the other hand, two of the top scoring IELTS test takers and a participant in the post-survey reported that accent variation was not a challenge in IELTS listening comprehension for them. They stated:

Example 9. When I hear someone from the US, Germany, India, or Bangladesh, the accent does not make any huge difference to me as long as I listen to them carefully and I am interested in that topic. (Faruq)

Example 10. When you have concentration and familiarity with the topic and interest, no matter whether the accent is of a native or non-native speaker, you can understand IELTS listening. (Hafez)

Example 11. Lack of attention is the main problem for me during the IELTS listening test not the accent variation. (Post-course survey, Student no. 101)

These comments suggested that lack of sustained attention and interest in the topic seemed to be greater problems than unfamiliar accents for advanced learners.

Some researchers, such as Rost and Wilson (2013) and Schmidt (2010) suggested that students’ difficulty in comprehending spoken text might not be because of their lack of ability to process the input, but because of their inattention and low level of noticing. Moreover, previous knowledge of the topic of the spoken text allows listeners to interpret the meaning better and connect new information to their existing knowledge (Bakhtiarvand & Adinevand, 2011; Othman & Vanathas, 2004).

Speed of speech

A substantial number of surveyed students (pre-course was 66% and post-course was 57%) identified the speed of speech as one of the major listening difficulties for their IELTS listening comprehension.

Example 12. The speed of speech is the main problem to overcome my listening problem. (Post-course survey, Student no. 75).

This finding was further underpinned by the statements of the IELTS trainers and the top-scoring IELTS test takers. One of the statements is:

Example 13. The questions in sections 1 and 2 of the listening part are easy. The answers are straightforward. But the answers to the questions in sections 3 and 4 are implied in the spoken text. So, due to the fast speed, students may miss the implied information needed for the answer if they try to follow word for word. (Ashek)

Ashek identifies students' reliance on bottom-up processing, focusing only on words of the spoken text to process grammatical relationships to lexical meaning to form comprehension (Brown & Lee, 2015; Wang & Fan, 2015) rather than the message as a whole. Cullen et al. (2014) confirm that "each section is gradually more difficult" (p. 9). However, the latter two sections provide spoken texts based on academic contexts, while the first two are general texts, raising the question of whether the additional difficulty was due to the speed of speech or the content and context of the spoken text.

Unknown topic

Almost half of the survey respondents (pre-course was 49% and post-course was 41%) identified an *unknown topic* as one of the major listening difficulties for their IELTS listening comprehension. It is illustrated in the following example:

Example 14. If the topic is known, then a lot of information is known that helps me to pick answers. (Pre-course survey, Student no. 208).

One of the trainers explained further:

Example 15. If there was an answer related to the word 'methane,' the students of chemistry would have the advantage to answer correctly. The test takers of other disciplines might not know the context of the word. There would be a possibility that they might also make a mistake in spelling the word. So, familiarity with the topic is a vital issue in listening. A known topic gives an added advantage in IELTS listening. (Tiplu)

Existing research also identified that topic unfamiliarity increases anxiety during the IELTS listening test, which further affects the listening test scores of the test takers (Winke & Lim, 2014). Moreover, Example 15 emphasises background knowledge, an important issue for listening comprehension, as it can be connected to the top-down process of listening that requires the metacognitive awareness of a listener.

Unknown vocabulary

Figure 5 depicts that the highest percentage of surveyed students (pre-course was 70% and post-course was 69%) identified unknown vocabulary as the major cause for their listening difficulties in IELTS listening test. This report was further underpinned by the statements of the IELTS trainers and the top scoring IELTS test takers. Some of the frequently mentioned comments of the survey participants on unknown vocabulary are as follows:

Example 14. Many IELTS students do not have an upper-intermediate level vocabulary range. When they hear an unknown word, they become unsure in the listening test. So,

when they fail to understand a spoken sentence because of an unknown word, it leads them to miss another subsequent sentence. It lowers their score on the listening test. (Tipulu)

Unknown vocabulary was indicated to make listening difficult or exceedingly difficult by 70% of pre-course survey respondents. While the other factors decreased in the post-course survey, unknown vocabulary was still reported to be difficult or exceedingly difficult by 69% of respondents. Some free-text survey answers elaborate on this, e.g.:

Example 15. One of the major reasons for the difficulty in sections 3 and 4 is vocabulary. Knowing the relevant vocabulary in a spoken text gives an advantage. I often found that I had difficulty understanding the whole text because I did not know one or two keywords. Test takers need to know more words. Only then, they can deal with answers that require a synonym. (Drimmoi)

Comprehension difficulty might be related to one or two of the micro-skills of listening comprehension, such as not being able to “distinguish between literal and implied meaning” or “detecting keywords, guessing the meaning of words from context” (Brown & Lee, 2015, p. 327). There might also be a difficulty in the inferential listening required in the later sections of the IELTS listening test, which could be connected to test takers’ lack of top-down approaches to listening.

Listening comprehension strategies

In this section, the strategies used by inexperienced and experienced test takers are considered along with the perspectives of the IELTS trainers.

Extensive listening practice as a strategy

Survey respondents were asked how often they spent time in a series of activities assumed to support the development of listening proficiency: watching English movies or news, listening to English music, speaking in English with family and friends, and reading books or novels in English. In both pre and post-course surveys, most of the participants reported receptive oral forms of practice (viewing movies or news or listening to music in English) rather than speaking or reading. In free-text answers, several respondents mentioned YouTube to watch tutorials, movies and songs. Some mentioned using English subtitles. However, one of the experienced IELTS trainers suggest that this may not be helpful:

Example 16. I think watching English movies with subtitles does not help much as many of the trainers think because the accent and speed of the IELTS listening test are not similar to the English of the movies. (Tiplu)

The accent is important as the IELTS listening texts are read by speakers of British or Australian English. One of the top scoring experienced IELTS test takers emphasised the value of listening to music to become accustomed to rapid speech:

Example 17. Listening to songs really helped me to improve my listening proficiency in English. [...] In comparison to the lyrics, the speed of IELTS listening seemed to be slow and easy to comprehend. (Ishmam)

An experienced test-taker, Shiraji, had another view of the strategy of using English movies with subtitles for IELTS listening preparation. He stated:

Example 18. As a part of IELTS listening preparation, I used to watch a lot of English movies with subtitles. A few weeks later, I watched the movies without subtitles. This really helped me a lot. I developed my listening to understand the different types of accents of American, British, and Australian actors.

Another trainer, Tiplu recommends specific extensive listening practice:

Example 19. We always advise students to listen to BBC English news more. [...] It is because the accent and speed of the IELTS listening test are similar to BBC English news. (Tiplu)

According to his suggestion, BBC English News shares several characteristics with some IELTS listening texts, as regards accent, speed, and genre. However, BBC newsreaders use a standard accent of British English, unlike in IELTS, where the speakers use a wide variety of accents from English-speaking countries (Cullen et al., 2014). IELTS preparatory students might need to practice listening to other varieties of English along with BBC English News (such as listening to widely available web news broadcasts from e.g. Australia or Canada). There is evidence that students elsewhere who listened to audio BBC News improved their listening better than those who listened to video transcripts (Cárdenas-Claros & Campos-Ibaceta, 2018).

However, existing research contradicts these findings as it contends that extensive listening in regular exposure to English language movies or listening to materials on the web or on TV (Renandya & Hu, 2018) is not an effective strategy for listening comprehension improvement (Stephen et al., 2018).

Strategies applied by Novice test takers

Listening comprehension strategies reported by novice test takers were based mostly on bottom-up approaches. For example, one of the novice test takers states:

Guessing keywords and trying to understand everything. (Post-course survey, Student no. 5).

The use of words, “guessing words”, indicates that some of the students focused on selective listening to search for key content words to answer the listening test questions. It seems that low-proficient or ineffective listeners have been found to use only the bottom-up approach to their listening comprehension. Existing research also supports that Novice L2 listeners try to understand everything verbatim in the aural text (Brown & Lee, 2015; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). However, other research suggested that low-proficient listeners constantly used top-down strategies instead of bottom-up strategies to compensate for their poor linguistic knowledge (Tsui & Fullilove, 1998). The preparatory students in this study did not report any use of bottom-up listening strategies. It may be that the trainers focus on training the students for the test rather than teaching them the process of listening.

Strategies suggested by expert trainers

Ashek, one of the IELTS trainers, suggested several strategies to improve listening comprehension:

Example 20. I think a test-taker needs to learn a word with its all possible meanings. There should be a combination of both listening and reading skills. We play the audio.

The students will listen to it. At the same time, they will read the transcript of the spoken text. After that, we, the teachers, will explain the unfamiliar words in context. This is the way how we develop IELTS listening for the students.

Ashek's suggestion indicates that reading along with the transcript of the spoken text while listening strengthens the phono-orthographic association and will help students recognise known words in their spoken form. However, this appears to be a perpetual cycle of listening, answering, and checking answers rather than teaching the process of listening. Similarly, practicing listening with transcripts as mentioned by Ashek may be useful scaffolding and help them learn to associate written and spoken forms, but in the IELTS test situation, they will not, of course, have the support of transcripts.

Drinmoi, another experienced IELTS trainer, suggested improving spelling and handwriting related to IELTS as a part of the preparation for the IELTS listening test. He said:

I want to share something on spelling. It was not enough for me to pick the words for answers. You have to write the word on the answer sheet. So, correct spelling is an issue. Handwriting is another issue for spelling. My trainers told me to write as intelligibly as possible. If the spelling is not intelligible, you will not get marks for the correct answer. So, what I did...I wrote all the answer words in uppercase. It made my spelling more intelligible and helped reduce my spelling mistakes. I scored 7.5 on the listening test.

Drinmoi emphasises correct spelling and clear handwriting of answer-word as a part of the IELTS test preparatory strategy. His statement highlights that only understanding listening comprehension is not enough to do well in the IELTS listening test. So, although the IELTS listening test is the test to measure listening comprehension, it also measures candidates' phono-orthographic abilities. Drinmoi's reference to handwriting further denotes that clear and intelligible handwriting is an issue for many test takers to correctly represent their answer word on the answer sheet. Otherwise, test takers may lose marks although they comprehend the listening questions properly. As IELTS mandates that the test would "reflects real-life use of English" (Cullen et al., 2014, p. 2), it is assumed that the spelling of the answer words for the listening test is not supposed to be archaic but the commonly used words on real-life topics.

Discussion

Bangladeshi preparatory students in this study reported unfamiliar accents, speed of speech, unknown topics and vocabulary issues as the main difficulties, which are similar to the findings of Renandya and Hu (2018) and Stepanovienė (2012) but in a different order of difficulty list they explored (Appendices 1 & 2). These test takers identified inadequate L2 vocabulary knowledge as the main significant barrier to comprehending IELTS listening tasks (Figure 5). Moreover, several participants mentioned that students with a low-proficiency level in English face a problem with unfamiliar words in listening comprehension not only because of their limited vocabulary range but also because of their inability to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words correctly and quickly. Although some of the IELTS preparatory course trainers identified the value of a wide vocabulary, they did not report teaching vocabulary to their students either as word lists or as "phrasal chunks" (Williams, 2017) which could help students learn common collocations and expressions of English as a single unit. Some studies argue for teaching vocabulary before listening (Madani & Kheirzadeh, 2022; Zeeland, 2013) if a lack of vocabulary knowledge is the primary impediment to successful listening comprehension. Vocabulary knowledge is related to spelling, synonyms, grammar, confidence, and stress mitigation.

The participants reported a phoneme-grapheme problem for word recognition in the spoken text, although they might know the words in reading comprehension. The processing of spoken texts is

different from the processing of written texts, involving different sets of micro-skills and macro-skills (Brown & Lee, 2015). In spoken texts, the information is conveyed through sound, which further requires an understanding of the phonetics of the language. Again, often there is a considerable phonological modification of the spoken words (such as assimilation, elision, and vowel reduction) which requires a knowledge of the phonology of the language. Nonetheless, unlike written texts, spoken texts must be processed in real-time and listeners cannot control the speech delivery tempo. So, a listener must be fast and efficient to keep up with the speaker's pace of delivery for good comprehension. Walker (2014) argues that the difference between the pronunciation and the appearance of words is one of the major problems of listening comprehension. The IELTS trainers also talked about the need for vocabulary knowledge for listening comprehension. If students possess a sufficient level of vocabulary knowledge, it helps them in pre-listening activities resulting in better listening comprehension (Madani & Kheirzadeh, 2018).

When the IELTS preparatory students listen to English, they have deficiencies in bottom-up processing that involve mainly word recognition skills, which they attribute to fast speed, accent variation, phoneme-grapheme disconnect, elision, assimilation, and anxiety as well as inadequate L2 vocabulary knowledge in the speech stream. It might be argued that a major cause of these problems is an overemphasis on bottom-up skills and working memory rather than using top-down skills and long-term memory.

After vocabulary size and speed, the third problem related to listening comprehension is accent variation; Bangladeshi preparatory students are not familiar with English accents other than Bangladeshi-English accents. The IELTS preparatory students have little exposure to authentic spoken input other than the Bangla-accented English spoken by the IELTS trainers. The role of varieties of English spoken in the UK, Australia, USA, Canada, and New Zealand has been one of the controversial issues in the teaching of listening (Rost, 2016). Since Bangladeshi preparatory students lack exposure to the accents used in the listening test (Cullen et al., 2014), some trainers suggested the need to use supplementary authentic listening materials featuring these varieties of English for focused practice.

The fourth reason for the difficulty of comprehending the aural texts in the IELTS listening test identified by several participants is *unknown topics*. Richards (2015) argues that topic knowledge is related to listeners' meta-cognitive knowledge. Good background knowledge and schemata lead to better listening proficiency and faster processing of aural texts (Vandergrift & Goh, 2009). The participants also reported that the aural texts with topics unknown to the preparatory students increased anxiety, resulting in weak listening comprehension. Socio-affective strategies can play a positive role in reducing learners' test anxiety and stress to improve their listening comprehension during the test (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

The test itself is devised to offer challenges to test takers at all levels and avoid a ceiling effect. The majority of the participants identified the listening questions related to sections 3 and 4 of the IELTS listening test as presenting task difficulty, while a small group of participants reported that questions related to section 2 were the most difficult for them to answer. Some of the trainers suggested that IELTS preparatory students are required to use not only the bottom-up process but also the top-down process of listening comprehension to deal with the tasks in sections 3 and 4. The participants reported a range of strategies to deal with the difficulties in answering different types of tasks and answering the relevant questions.

Several participants identified a need for an explicit focus on phoneme-grapheme correspondences to overcome listening issues related to accent and spelling. So, the teaching of pronunciation may help preparatory students improve suprasegmental aspects (Grant, 2014). Auditory training (Brown, 2011), including training to distinguish speech features and sound distinctions that do not exist in the L1, may help. When students are taught speech sounds, word stress, reductions, and connected speech, they are

also learning how to decode the speech stream and segment it into recognizable words, which can help them achieve better listening comprehension (Brown, 2011). Otherwise, as Swan and Walter (2017, p. 231) put it, “It is not surprising that training in cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies does not improve understanding when learners do not know, or cannot recognize, the words they are reading or hearing and how they are put together”.

It is evident that students need the synergy of both bottom-up and top-down processes for better listening fluency in the IELTS listening test. From the statements of the participants, it is evident that there is little sign of teaching the bottom-up process of listening and attention to linguistic features that are important for low and average-proficient students. Listeners with lower proficiency in listening benefit from bottom-up-skill instruction as their poor listening fluency is related to their lack of word recognition in spoken texts (Renandya & Hu, 2018), and the focus of listening instruction should be on enhancing students’ bottom-up perception skills (Li & Renandya, 2012). Highly proficient listeners have been found to use more strategies than those with intermediate and low proficiency (Huang & Nisbet, 2019).

If listeners can automatise the bottom-up linguistic processes, that will help free their working memory and provide them with more processing time to apply their metacognitive strategies related to the top-down approach for better listening comprehension (Yeldham, 2018). On the other hand, for students with intermediate or advanced-level listening proficiency, *bottom-up* process instruction might not be beneficial (Wang & Fan, 2015) and more *top-down* process instruction could be better for improving their listening proficiency.

Some of the participants acknowledged that a high score in IELTS listening does not ensure one that s/he is a better listener in real life. Some of the preparatory students further reported that they did not focus on listening in the IELTS preparatory course for language learning but rather to develop their listening skills to sit for the IELTS test and to get the required score on the listening test. Some of the trainers also reported that they engage the preparatory students in a lot of repeated listening by providing the same materials multiple times for listening, teaching the *product of listening* not the *process of listening* (Renandya & Hu, 2018; Richards, 2015). Renandya (2012) argues, however, that repeated listening is beneficial for listeners with a low level of proficiency by directly improving their word recognition skills for aural input and enabling them to focus more on cognitive processes of comprehension and inferencing. On the other hand, listeners with higher language proficiency often develop natural strategies (Stephen et al., 2018), so strategy instruction for listening proficiency should vary depending on the language proficiency of the preparatory students. Several IELTS trainers who participated in this research argued that advanced listeners usually develop their cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective listening strategies to deal with their listening difficulties using both bottom-up and top-down approaches judiciously.

Although this study explores some significant insights into IELTS listening comprehension, it has limitations that could be addressed in future research. The limitation of this study is that it is context specific. Therefore, the listening difficulties may not be similar to IELTS test takers from other ESL countries. So, the generalizability of the findings should be dealt with caution. Thus, it is highly recommended that future studies need to be conducted on other ESL contexts.

Conclusion

Although there is a rich body of international research about the use of listening strategies and processes, there is little research available from the Bangladeshi context. The preparatory test takers in this study had limited options for listening strategy use. In the preparatory course, students are taught some of the cognitive and metacognitive strategies of listening that are related to top-down skills but

not bottom-up skills. Some trainers stated that offering direct instruction on keywords in the listening materials would augment the test-taker's comprehension of the L2 spoken text. They suggested it might be done by teaching difficult lexical terms directly during *pre-listening* activities or by asking students to preview unfamiliar words before class.

Several participants reported the use of top-down strategies for listening instruction. However, a more bottom-up approach to listening instruction could help them improve their linguistic knowledge for listening comprehension, resulting in better decoding skills of spoken text boundaries and increasing their phono-orthographic knowledge. Learners sometimes miss opportunities to apply background knowledge because their focus is entirely on trying to decode and parse the speech stream (Renandya, 2012; Vandergrift & Goh, 2009). Suprasegmental awareness as a part of the listening strategy is important to improve students' bottom-up skills for better listening comprehension.

The four parts of the IELTS listening test require different listening strategies as each part is aimed at assessing different listening comprehension skills. The learners need to have strategies to process spoken language according to their needs in different tasks. The use of listening strategies may not increase listening proficiency (Renandya, 2012). However, Brown (2011) argues that "strategies help organise learning and allow learners to out-perform their current competence, to compensate for things they don't know" (p. 152).

There is no cycle of *pre-while-post* listening practice as an enhancement to the listening comprehension strategy for the IELTS preparatory students, although the experienced test takers reported this kind of strategy. The IELTS preparatory course trainers could teach this and adopt a more holistic approach to IELTS listening instruction. The outcomes of this study may help IELTS test takers to explain how they manage to do relatively well in the IELTS listening tasks against all odds.

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Appendix 1 Factors influencing listening comprehension (Adapted from Stepanoviene, 2012)

Rank	Category	Mean (SD)
1	Rate of delivery	4.42 (0.69)
2	Phonological reduction	4.21 (0.91)
3	Vocabulary	4.15 (0.97)
4	Syntactic reduction	4.06 (1.08)
5	Cross-cultural elements	4.05 (0.86)
6	Sequencing of information	4.04 (0.64)
7	Breaking down speech into words or groups of words	3.43 (0.50)
8	Lack of knowledge of English idioms	3.36 (0.49)
9	Lack of redundancy	3.33 (0.47)
10	Rhythm	3.16 (0.37)

Appendix 2 Top ten items perceived to be the most difficult by teachers and students (Adapted from Renandya and Hu, 2018)

Rank Order	Student Perception (N = 301)		Teacher Perception (N = 30)	
	Variable	Mean	Variable	Mean
1	Complex sentences	3.81	Fast speed	3.83
2	Phonetic variations	3.78	Complex sentences	3.57
3	Missing subsequent information	3.69	Missing subsequent information	3.53
4	Speaker accent	3.68	Long sentences	3.50
5	News broadcast	3.59	News broadcast	3.50
6	Long sentences	3.53	Speaker accent	3.47
7	Background noise	3.47	Background noise	3.47
8	Catching the details	3.42	Word recognition	3.30
9	Fast speed	3.38	New words	3.30
10	New words	3.37	Phonetic variations	3.30