

# Problems in Developing Listening Skills: Voices of Secondary School Teachers

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## ABSTRACT

*This study delves into the challenges faced by secondary school teachers in teaching listening skills, drawing from semi-structured interviews with five educators from Kamrup district, Assam. NVivo Windows-based software was employed for data analysis to generate initial codes and identify prevalent themes. The paper explores various dimensions, including time constraints, inadequate teaching-learning materials, excessive reliance on the mother tongue, inadequate classroom environments, and lack of motivation. The conclusion calls for teachers to act as scaffolders, revamp of assessment criteria away from rote memorization, and integration of listening activities from early stage of learning. Additionally, the study suggests further research to investigate initiatives by elementary school teachers aimed at fostering students' English listening skills.*

**Keywords:** listening, challenges, strategies, secondary schools

## 1. Introduction

Listening is one of the foremost basic language skills pivotal for speaking, reading, and writing. Nunan refers to this skill as the “gasoline” in second language acquisition (2015, p. 34). Unlike hearing, it is an active cognitive process demanding willingness, concentration, perception, memory, and most importantly a desire to comprehend. Thus, teaching this skill is the starting point for teaching any language. Failing to acquire this skill in time can impede language learning, impacting overall proficiency.

Despite its influence on academic success, listening skill is yet to get the attention that it deserves in language acquisition, particularly in government and provincialized schools in Assam. Despite the shift to communicative language teaching, listening skills remain inadequately integrated into classroom instruction. Teachers prioritize completing the syllabus, while students focus on assessment parameters like writing

questions and answers, grammar exercises, etc. Numerous difficulties hinder effective learning, including poor-quality audio, speech rate, insufficient exposure to the target language, excessive use of mother tongue, inadequate learning environment, lack of infrastructure, and overcrowded classrooms. Consequently, students lack not only listening skills, but also struggle with the other language competencies

While existing studies explored students' problems/challenges in developing listening skills in English, teachers' voices, especially in the northeast region of India, remain underrepresented. This discrepancy led the researchers to delve deeper into the specific challenges faced by the teachers in developing listening skills in English among secondary school students in Assam.

## 2. Objectives

(i) To find out the problems faced by the

secondary school teachers in teaching listening skills.

- (ii) To obtain suggestions from the teachers to enhance English listening skills among secondary school students.

### 3. Delimitations

- (i) The study is delimited to five secondary school teachers from Kamrup district, Assam.
- (ii) The study lacks direct classroom observation data.
- (iii) The study focuses on listening skills as a whole and did not specifically explore sub-skills within listening
- (iv) Listening skill as whole was addressed without exploring its connection with other language skills (speaking, reading and writing).

### 3. Review of Related Literature

Haji and Saaed investigated the influence of the physical environment on listening activities. The study involved 18 male and 69 female students from the English department at the College of Basic Education, Iraq. The findings revealed that external and internal noises significantly hindered listening activities. Additionally, the absence of visual aids and poor sound quality of the materials used by teachers also posed challenges. The researchers recommended that teachers prioritize creating noise-free classrooms and address technical issues related to aural teaching aids (2022, 39-51).

Lestari et al. conducted a case study on one of the four English teachers at MAN1 Palembang, Indonesia, to find out the challenges faced by the teachers in teaching listening skills. The

findings of this interview-based study revealed that students lacked in vocabulary which led to problems in listening comprehension. There was a general sense of disinterest among the students to work on the skill, wherein students' background knowledge and psychological factors also played critical roles (2021, 500-517).

Nushi and Orouji's mixed-method study surveyed 208 Iranian EFL teachers, identifying key difficulties in learners' listening skills. Questionnaire responses highlighted issues with unfamiliar topics and audio quality, while interviews pointed to pronunciation, content difficulty, and learner characteristics. Interestingly, the teachers' educational backgrounds showed no significant impact on reported difficulties. Results of the interviews suggested pronunciation, difficult content, and individual characters of the learners are the primary suspects of learners' listening challenges. The study recommended familiarizing learners with speech principles and accent patterns, along with incorporating listening exercises into curricula and exposing learners to diverse accents for improved proficiency (2020, 1-16).

Utomo et al. interviewed five experienced English teachers from Islamic State Junior School, Indonesia, focusing on grades 7-9. They identified time management as the primary challenge in conducting listening activities due to diverse student backgrounds, including those facing learning difficulties. Limited vocabulary hindered comprehension of listening texts, aggravated by rigid adherence to government syllabi. Overcrowded classrooms demotivated both students and teachers. The study proposed a listening module based on four orientations - receptive, constructive, collaborative, and transformative. Emphasizing word meaning and gradual introduction through visual aids can

enhance student understanding (2019, 27-38).

Karademir and Gorgoz's qualitative research involving eight English teachers in Turkey, highlighted challenges in conducting listening activities. Challenges encompassed the classroom environment, limited listening practices, time constraints, student diversity, and knowledge acquisition. Creating distraction-free classrooms emerged as crucial for effective comprehension, while noise-free environments, improved audio aids, moderate speech pace, integrating listening practices in textbooks, addressing individual student differences, and combining visual aids with audio were proposed as effective solution to enhance learner engagement in listening activities. (2019, 118-127).

Mai highlighted challenges faced by EFL teachers in teaching listening skills to non-major English students at Ba Ria-Vung Tau University in Vietnam. The key issues included students' low English proficiency, inadequate teaching methods and strategies, lack of suitable teaching aids, and limited listening competence among teachers. Additional obstacles were identified, such as limited vocabulary, large class sizes, and a mutual lack of interest in teaching and learning listening skills. To improve, the lecturers suggested providing keywords before listening, tailoring tasks to student levels, teaching listening strategies, and using more engaging materials (2019, 24-37).

Alrawashdeh and Al-zayed emphasized lack of teachers' proficiency as a major obstacle in teaching listening skills. Their study, based on questionnaires and informal interviews with seven teachers in Karak schools, Jordan, revealed several barriers to effective listening activities. Challenges included inadequate classroom and lab facilities, distractions, limited listening tools, electricity disruptions, and overcrowded

classrooms. Moreover, prescribed textbooks lacked well-designed listening exercises or guidance in teacher guidebooks for conducting listening activities. Listening was undervalued compared to other language skills. The study recommended teachers stay updated with teaching methods and employ diverse resources like filmstrips, radio announcements, and flashcards to enliven listening activities. Equal emphasis on all language skills and balanced teaching time throughout the week was also advised. (2017, 167-178).

Upon critical assessment, these studies collectively emphasize the significance of teacher proficiency, classroom environment (including distractions and overcrowding), resource limitations (such as inadequate teaching materials and poorly designed textbooks), and pedagogical challenges (like the perceived lack of emphasis on listening within the curriculum). They highlight similar challenges across diverse contexts, emphasizing the recurring nature of these obstacles in secondary education globally. The studies underline the necessity for a holistic approach addressing not just pedagogical strategies but also environmental, curricular, and resource-related factors to effectively enhance listening abilities.

However, these studies exhibit limitations. While they comprehensively identify challenges, the specific solutions proposed may not always consider the diverse contexts and resource constraints within different educational systems.

The reviews presented closely align with the theme of the current study, offering broader context and validation for the specific challenges and themes uncovered in this research. These collective insights reinforce the relevance and universality of the challenges faced by teachers

when developing listening skills among secondary school students.

## 5. Methodology

### 5.1 Participants

The researchers purposively selected five in-service teachers of government high schools in Kamrup district Assam, of which three are from Kamrup (metro) and two from Kamrup (rural).

They teach in grades 9-10, are non-native speakers of English, and have a Master's degree in English subject. All the teachers have a teaching experience of more than 10 years and have been teaching English subject along with other subjects such as history, Assamese, and social science.

The descriptive characteristics of the teachers involved in the study are given in **Table 1**:

**Table 1 Descriptive characteristics of the teachers**

Teacher Code	Teaching Experience	Qualification	Area	Mother Tongue
TA	20	MA (English)	Urban	Assamese
TB	15	MA (English)	Urban	Assamese
TC	10	B.Ed, MA (English)	Rural	Assamese
TD	14	B.Ed, MA (English)	Urban	Assamese
TE	12	B.Ed, MA (English)	Rural	Assamese

### 5.2 Tool

Qualitative data was obtained for the study to identify the challenges encountered by teachers while instructing listening skills to secondary school students in government schools of Assam. Additionally, this study sought suggestions from teachers on enhancing students' listening abilities. Five teachers were interviewed to get a direct insight into the research topic. The data were obtained collected using a semi-structured interview schedule as a research tool, including informal conversations. The questions aimed to reveal diverse perspectives and experiences related to the specific context of Assam. The informal conversations complemented the interviews by allowing further exploration of emerging topics. Before commencing the interviews, the teachers were provided with necessary preliminary information about the study. They were informed that a recorder would be

used to record the conversations and that after the interviews, the voice recordings would be played and presented to them for their review and approval. It was also emphasized that their privacy would be protected and anonymity will be maintained. The interviews with each teacher lasted for about 20-25 minutes.

The participants answered in Assamese which was later translated into English during the transcription process. The researchers carried out a line-by-line transcription of the data obtained through the recording and noted down all the details. The data were analyzed using NVivo Windows-based software to obtain the initial codes. The codes were further utilized to identify themes and emerging insights related to the teachers' views about the difficulties they face when they engage the students in listening tasks. To obtain the word frequency, Word Cloud was created.

To establish the credibility of the findings, the researchers adopted the method of ‘member checking’ (Creswell, 2015, 259). A summary of the findings was shared with the participants to see if they concurred with the emergent perspectives. The participants confirmed that the summary of findings is adequately and accurately represented.

## 6. Major Findings

### Objective 1: To find out the problems faced by the secondary school teachers in teaching listening skills.

The researchers conducted inquiries aimed at understanding the challenges encountered in

cultivating listening skills among students. Across the five participants, several recurring themes emerged, notably “time constraints,” “classroom environment,” “lack of Teaching-Learning Materials (TLM),” “lack of student motivation,” and “overuse of the native language (L1).”

Regarding the hindrances in executing listening activities, teachers frequently cited factors such as “external noises,” “absence of TLM,” “lack of listening skill assessments,” “time limitations,” “pressure to cover syllabus content,” “rigid syllabus structures,” “student disinterest,” and “influence of home environment.” Their detailed responses, aligned with these themes and findings, are presented in **Tables 2 and 3**:

**Table 2 Teachers’ responses (highlighted keywords)**

Research Question & Purpose	Teachers Code	Quotations from Transcripts (Key words are bolded)
Question: What do you find most challenging in teaching listening skills to secondary school students?  Purpose: To understand the challenges faced by the teachers in teaching listening skills.	TD	To be able to carry out listening activities we need <b>time</b> . Our <b>exam-oriented</b> system emphasizes <b>rote learning</b> , leaving limited space for listening activities. The <b>syllabus completion</b> , teaching <b>grammar rules</b> , and drilling <b>Q&amp;A for exams</b> , especially boards, take precedence. <b>English teaching</b> primarily relies on <b>mother tongue at the elementary level</b> , denying students English conversation exposure
	TE	Limited <b>time</b> is the main challenge. With classes restricted to <b>40 minutes</b> and the pressure to <b>cover the syllabus</b> before exams, allocating extra time for listening activities becomes difficult.
Question: How does the classroom environment impact students’ ability to develop their listening skills?	TB	The <b>classroom setup</b> is not very suitable to carry out listening activities in <b>groups or pairs</b> as usually <b>four to five students</b> sit on a pair of desks and benches. When I give them to work on any individual listening activities, <b>rather than listening for details</b> , etc., they are <b>busy copying</b> answers from one another.

<p>Purpose: To find out the teachers' views about the classroom environment towards their effort in developing listening skills.</p>	<p>TC</p>	<p>We do not have the <b>proper infrastructure</b> to carry out the listening activities. I have tried a few listening activities earlier but none of them has produced the desired outcome. In <b>group activities</b>, the class rather turns <b>noisy</b> and it is <b>difficult to manage</b> the class.</p>
<p>Question: What resources or materials do you find lacking for effective listening skill development?</p>	<p>TA</p>	<p>We lack necessary <b>teaching aids</b> like Bluetooth or audio players for <b>listening activities</b>. The school doesn't have specific <b>TLMs</b> for such activities, and I have not created any myself.</p>
<p>Purpose: To find out teachers' opinion about the lack of resources that effect in developing listening skills.</p>	<p>TE</p>	<p>I do not have specific <b>TLMs</b> or school-provided <b>listening aids</b>. Due to students' weak grammar skills, I focus more on teaching <b>grammar concept</b>.</p>
<p>Question: How does student motivation, or lack thereof, affect teaching listening skills?</p> <p>Purpose: Asses the affect in teaching listening skills if the students are not motivated to learn of get proper environment to speak English.</p>	<p>TA</p>	<p>Creating a <b>listening environment</b> is vital at both home and school. Students primarily speak their <b>mother tongue</b> at home and English classes. Using L1 <b>limit exposure to English</b> conversations. Consequently, engaging in listening activities causes <b>anxiety, stress, and a lack of confidence</b> among students.</p>
<p></p>	<p>TD</p>	<p><b>Elementary stages</b> are crucial for developing listening skills to ease comprehension in <b>later grades</b>. But students lack exposure to listening activities both at home and school. <b>Motivating</b> them to enhance their listening skills is tough at this stage. Few students actively participate in listening activities due to <b>confidence issues</b>.</p>
<p></p>	<p>TC</p>	<p>Students are accustomed to learning English through Assamese translation. Listening lacks early attention. Teachers neglect it, causing students to struggle with <b>understanding</b> English conversations and instructions.</p>
<p></p>	<p>TE</p>	<p><b>Overuse of L1</b> while teaching English is the biggest problem, especially at the <b>primary level</b>. Students become so accustomed to this that developing their listening skills in English at the high school stage becomes challenging.</p>

**Table 3 Themes, meta-themes and findings**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Meta Themes</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Time Constraints	Lack of time, no listening activities	Listening activities require time. Within a 35-40-minute assigned class, the teachers find it difficult to conduct listening activities amongst more than 40 students. For any listening activity to be carried out effectively, it requires at least 3-4 classes.
Structured Syllabus	No specific listening tests	The primary focus is on the completion of the syllabus and preparing the students for examinations
Focus on Exam	Exam oriented system	
Overuse of L1	Learning English in Assamese English taught mostly using L1	English classes predominantly follow the Grammar Translation Method, limiting English interactions. This hamper listening skills development. Teachers find it challenging to teach English listening skills when students lack consistent exposure to the language from earlier educational levels, affecting their comprehension of English listening materials.
Lack of Interest in Listening	Inattentiveness, No conversations, cannot follow instructions, not showing interests	Students focus on memorizing rather than actively using English, lacking motivation to engage with the language in or out of class. This absence of motivation significantly hinders their efforts to improve their listening skills.
Classroom Environment	Lack of infrastructure, no proper teaching aids, no listening materials. Noisy classrooms	Effective listening activities need focused listening, independent practice, and collaborative discussions. Ideally, setups like language labs and quiet, flexible classrooms aid these activities. However, the real classrooms are often cramped, noisy, and lack conducive environments, hindering the implementation of these activities.
Home Environment	Conversation in Assamese, no environment of listening English	Most of these students come from low socio-economic backgrounds who lack exposure and motivation to engage with English, contributing to anxiety, stress, and a lack of confidence, all of which significantly disrupt their listening comprehension.

Themes	Meta Themes	Findings
Lack of TLM	No TLM defined	Engaging teaching materials like audio, storytelling, and songs are crucial for motivating students and achieving learning goals, particularly in listening activities. However, this important aspect of teaching is notably absent in most of the government schools.
Lack of Listening Skill Activities	Negligent to learning skill activities	English teaching focuses heavily on grammatical exercises and written Q&A, treating it as more as a subject rather than skill. This neglect results in a lack of emphasis on conducting listening activities during classes.



Figure 1: Word Cloud representing the word frequency

**Objective 2. To obtain suggestions from the teachers on ways to enhance English listening skills among secondary school students.**

The stumbling blocks to develop listening skills among students are many, yet the participants feel that if certain initiatives are taken right from the beginning, the students can improve their listening skills to a great extent. Some of the suggestions shared by them are:

- Adopt approaches that will enable the students to practice listening activities connected to real-life situations.

- Teachers can choose to play simple songs, radio announcements, or read out a news piece in the class. Thereafter, students can answer gap questions, true/false statements, etc. based on what they have heard.
- Dictations are often used as listening activity. To make it more interesting, the teacher can conduct group/paired dictation. The class can be divided into groups of three or four or paired up. The teacher can read out a small passage and ask the students to listen carefully. The students can recall what was read out, and accordingly write down as many words/sentences they can remember.



- The teachers should ensure that they give instructions to the students in English so that students get familiarize with the vocabulary, pronunciation, and sentence structures.
- The effectiveness of audio-visual aids to develop language skills is indisputable. So, teachers can make use of youtube videos, short cartoons, etc.

## 7. Discussions

The present study was conducted to find out the challenges of the teachers in teaching listening skills in English. The unanimity in responses of the teachers to the research problem brings forth some critical issues. For example, completing the course before examinations and rigid timetable, textbook-oriented teaching, lack of TLM usage, and inadequate classroom environment – lead to disinterested learners as well teachers.

The pressure to complete the syllabus before examinations is severe which also leads to reliance on rote learning. The teachers do not feel the need to design any audio aids for listening activities or to carry out the activities in the text. The local language is mostly Assamese there is little need for the students to pay any attention to listening skills. The need to lay the foundations of listening skills in English right from the primary stage is absent. These opinions are consistent with that of earlier studies done by Utomo et al. (2019), Karademir and Gorgoz (2019) and Alrawashdeh and Al-zayed (2017).

Another critical problem highlighted by the participants is the influence of the mother tongue, which comes in the way of effective listening skill development. Since the students come from home environments where there is no opportunity to listen to English conversations. Also, the teachers resort to explanations of the lessons or concepts in Assamese for easy understanding,

leaving no scope for the students to engage in listening comprehension activities. This, further, worsens the situation because students do not feel the need to get familiar with the target language vocabulary, pronunciation, stress, intonation, etc. As a result, they do not get the main idea of the topic.

Motivation is the most important element in the language learning process. But, as shared by all the participants, most of the students do not feel the need to improve their listening skills. This leads to failure in listening comprehension. Also, due to various reasons such as lack of interesting TLM, rigid course content, crowded classroom, poor audio-visual aids, and poor proficiency of the teachers, students are usually demotivated. This results in non-enthusiasm among teachers to pursue listening activities. Similar findings were reported by Nushi and Orouji (2020), Karademir and Gorgoz (2019), Mai (2019) in their respective studies.

## 8. Educational Implications

This study gives us an insight into some of the major issues that teachers encounter while teaching English listening skills to students. All the teachers, explicitly or implicitly, agreed that most of the students are not motivated to work on their listening skills. However, expecting learners to work on their listening skills on their own is not justified. Considering most of these learners come from home environments where parents are not educated, the teacher must act as a scaffolder, providing lessons and TLMs as a supporting framework within which learners get opportunities to work on their listening skills. The teachers need to embrace the subject holistically right from the foundation stage, encouraging self-directed learning in learners right from the elementary stage.

The teachers should find out ways to focus on

the process rather than the product. Focusing on communicative language teaching approaches will enable the students to practice listening activities connected to real-life situations. This can be achieved through teaching the course content through pair and group work. The prescribed English textbooks for all grades have many interesting activities that cover listening skills. The teacher should find ways to conduct them within the limited time they have and the focus of the assessment should shift from rote learning to practical applications of the skill.

One cannot deny that students learn easily through their mother tongue, especially at the elementary stage. However, it is equally important for the teacher to teach English as a second language in interesting ways so that the students develop their communication skills from the very beginning. This conclusion calls for a balanced usage of the mother tongue in teaching English so that it supports students learning rather than interfering in the practice of target language skills.

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