Identifying and Addressing Listening Barriers in IELTS among Pakistani Students: A Multidimensional Analysis

Iftikhar Ali
Ph D English Scholar, Headmaster School Education Department Punjab
ielts8hazro@gmail.com
Noshaba Bibi
Section Head The Winter Hill School and College Bara Tehsil Hazro Distt Attock
gurriar96@gmail.com
Izzat Noor
Ph D Scholar, Northern University Nowshera
izzatnoor96@gmail.com

Abstract

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) remains a critical gateway for Pakistani students aspiring to pursue higher education and professional opportunities abroad. Despite years of formal English instruction, a significant proportion of Pakistani candidates consistently underperform in the listening module of the test. This persistent underachievement not only limits individual mobility but also highlights systemic gaps in Pakistan's English language pedagogy. The present study explores the listening barriers faced by Pakistani IELTS test-takers and proposes evidence-based strategies to address these challenges through a multidimensional analysis.

The research begins by situating the problem within the Pakistani educational context. Secondary and higher secondary curricula prioritize grammar, reading comprehension, and rote memorization, while listening is rarely assessed or explicitly taught. Consequently, students who sit for IELTS encounter unfamiliar accents, rapid-paced speech, and test-specific design features such as distractors for the first time. Literature indicates that listening is a neglected skill in second language pedagogy (Field, 2008), while accent variation (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005) and psychological stress (Horwitz, 2001) further complicate learner performance. Within Pakistan, these global issues are intensified by local conditions such as unequal access to quality preparation courses, cultural distance from authentic English speech, and an exam-centric mindset that exacerbates test anxiety.

To address this gap, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach. Quantitatively, a sample of 200 Pakistani IELTS test-takers completed two simulated listening tests under exam conditions. Their responses were categorized into error types including vocabulary misinterpretation, accent

miscomprehension, distractor confusion, spelling and transcription errors, answer transfer mistakes, and anxiety-induced lapses allows the creation of a small-scale error corpus. This corpus provided frequency-based evidence of the most recurrent mistakes. Qualitatively, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 IELTS instructors and 20 high-scoring candidates (Band 7.0 or above) to capture perceptions of learner barriers and effective strategies. Thematic analysis of these interviews enriched the empirical findings, providing a deeper understanding of the cognitive and psychological dimensions of listening difficulties.

Findings confirm that Pakistani learners face multifaceted listening barriers. Linguistic problems dominate: approximately one-quarter of errors involved vocabulary recognition and paraphrasing, while nearly one-fifth stemmed from difficulties processing unfamiliar accents such as Australian or British English. Cognitive obstacles were also significant. Distractors accounted for about 18% of errors, spelling mistakes 15%, and answer transfer issues 10%, highlighting limitations in memory, prediction skills, and test mechanics. Psychological barriers were equally critical, with around 7% of responses omitted due to anxiety or concentration lapses. Students frequently described a "snowball effect," whereby misunderstanding a single phrase caused subsequent loss of information. Interview data reinforced these findings, with instructors acknowledging that most preparatory courses rely on repetitive drills rather than explicit training in strategies such as note-taking, prediction, or accent adaptation. High scorers, in contrast, attributed their success to independent practices such as listening to podcasts, watching English documentaries, and simulating test conditions.

The study concludes that listening difficulties among Pakistani IELTS candidates cannot be reduced to a single factor; rather, they represent an intersection of linguistic, cognitive, and psychological challenges shaped by systemic educational neglect. The implications are both pedagogical and policy-oriented. For educators, the study recommends incorporating accent exposure exercises, explicit training in recognizing paraphrased vocabulary, spelling practice, and distractor awareness into preparatory courses. For students, immersive listening practices through English media, online platforms, and peer interaction should be encouraged. For policymakers, integrating listening comprehension into the national secondary curriculum is essential to build foundational skills early and reduce reliance on last-minute test preparation.

By combining empirical error analysis with experiential insights, this research provides the first multidimensional account of IELTS listening barriers in Pakistan. Its contributions lie not only in categorizing common errors but also in proposing a structured toolkit for learners, teachers, and policymakers. Ultimately, the study emphasizes that improving listening proficiency is not merely about raising IELTS scores but about empowering Pakistani students with communicative competence necessary for academic and professional success in global contexts.

Keywords: *IELTS Listening, Listening Barriers, Pakistani Students, Language Proficiency, Multidimensional Analysis*

Background and Significance

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is widely recognized as one of the most important language proficiency assessments for students who seek educational and professional opportunities abroad. In Pakistan, it has become an essential gateway for thousands of young people aiming to study in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and other English-speaking countries. Despite years of English-language instruction at schools and universities, the majority of Pakistani students continue to struggle with the listening module of IELTS. While many succeed in reading and writing with persistent practice, listening scores often remain low, preventing otherwise qualified candidates from reaching the required overall band score.

This persistent difficulty can be attributed to several systemic issues embedded within Pakistan's educational system. Listening comprehension has long been neglected in school and college curricula. Classroom teaching practices remain dominated by rote memorization and grammar-translation methods, with little emphasis placed on the development of receptive auditory skills. Consequently, students who encounter native English accents for the first time during their IELTS preparation feel overwhelmed and underprepared. Cultural exposure to English is also limited, as media consumption in Pakistan is heavily localized and rarely provides consistent interaction with British or Australian speech patterns.

Beyond structural limitations, individual learners face psychological and cognitive obstacles. These include vocabulary gaps, stress during timed examinations, and difficulty following fast-paced conversations laden with distractors. This research, therefore, seeks to provide a comprehensive, multidimensional analysis of the barriers Pakistani students face in IELTS listening. It also aims to propose targeted interventions informed by empirical findings, thereby offering educators, policymakers, and students themselves practical strategies to overcome such obstacles.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Identify and classify the primary barriers Pakistani students face in IELTS listening.
2. Examine students' and instructors' perceptions of these barriers.
3. Construct a frequency-based error corpus to highlight common mistakes.
4. Propose teaching, preparation, and policy interventions that directly address these challenges.

Methodology

This research adopts a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative error analysis with qualitative interviews to capture both breadth and depth of the problem. The rationale for this approach lies in the complex nature of listening difficulties, which cannot be fully understood through survey data alone. Listening is both a cognitive skill and an affective experience; therefore, data must reflect measurable performance as well as subjective perception.

Participants

The study will target a sample of 200 Pakistani IELTS candidates drawn from multiple preparation centers across Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Islamabad. The sample will be stratified to

include both urban and rural learners to examine socioeconomic variations. In addition, 15 IELTS instructors and 20 high-scoring students (Band 7.0 and above) will be interviewed to provide expert and experiential insights.

Quantitative Component

The quantitative strand will focus on error analysis. Participants will be asked to complete two simulated IELTS listening tests under timed conditions. Their answer sheets will be collected and categorized according to error type: vocabulary misinterpretation, accent miscomprehension, distractor confusion, spelling errors, answer transfer mistakes, and anxiety-induced omissions. Each error will be coded and entered into a corpus database for frequency analysis. This corpus will allow identification of the most recurrent mistakes and their relative proportions. Statistical analysis will then be applied to test correlations between background variables (urban vs. rural, prior English exposure, number of preparation months) and error frequency.

Qualitative Component

The qualitative strand will rely on semi-structured interviews with instructors and high scorers. These interviews will explore perceptions of why Pakistani students underperform, what strategies prove effective, and how preparation courses might be improved. For example, instructors will be asked whether they explicitly teach accent adaptation or whether their courses mainly rely on repetitive practice. High scorers will share personal strategies such as using English podcasts, note-taking during listening, or practicing under exam conditions. Thematic analysis will then be applied to identify recurring patterns of experience.

Triangulation

The strength of the mixed-methods design lies in triangulation. Quantitative error data will reveal "what" kinds of mistakes are most frequent, while qualitative narratives will explain "why" such mistakes occur and "how" they might be prevented. This combination ensures both validity and contextual richness.

Ethical Considerations

Participants will be briefed about the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality. Pseudonyms will be used in reporting, and no identifying information will be disclosed. Informed consent will be obtained, and participants will have the right to withdraw at any point.

By integrating both empirical analysis and human perspectives, the methodology is designed to provide a holistic understanding of IELTS listening challenges in the Pakistani context.

Literature Review

The IELTS listening module has been consistently recognized as one of the most challenging sections for test-takers from non-native contexts, particularly South Asia. Several studies highlight that Pakistani students encounter a unique set of barriers due to the country's educational structure, cultural exposure, and systemic neglect of listening comprehension. According to Aryadoust (2012), listening comprehension in standardized tests involves a multidimensional construct, including lexical knowledge, parsing ability, and pragmatic understanding. However, Pakistan's English curriculum at both secondary and higher secondary levels remains heavily focused on reading and writing, sidelining listening and speaking skills

(Mahmood & Iqbal, 2018). This systemic oversight contributes to students' inability to handle the linguistic and cognitive demands of IELTS listening.

A recurring problem identified in the literature is accent familiarity. Goh (2000) and Field (2008) argue that comprehension difficulty increases significantly when learners face unfamiliar varieties of English. Pakistani learners, primarily exposed to local teachers' accents, struggle with British, Australian, and Canadian pronunciations—accents that dominate IELTS recordings. Studies conducted in Asia (Wang, 2010; Zhang & Graham, 2020) reveal that exposure to multiple accents during preparation enhances test outcomes. This finding is directly relevant to the Pakistani case, where accent diversity is almost absent in formal instruction. Consequently, accent miscomprehension often results in lexical errors, such as confusing "car park" with "carpet," a problem evident in our error coding scheme (Appendix C).

Another substantial challenge lies in distractor processing. IELTS listening frequently presents misleading information, requiring test-takers to revise their initial assumptions. According to Buck (2001), the ability to process and revise hypotheses while listening requires both attentional control and familiarity with the test format. Pakistani students, often trained through rote learning strategies, lack these adaptive skills (Rahman, 2019). For instance, if a recording states, *"Initially the meeting was scheduled for Monday, but it has been shifted to Wednesday,"* many candidates mistakenly select "Monday" due to focusing only on the first cue. This aligns with our corpus analysis framework, where distractor confusion is coded as a distinct error type (Appendix C, Code DC).

The literature also stresses the role of psychological barriers, particularly test anxiety, divided attention, and haste in answer transfer. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) established that language anxiety reduces processing efficiency, leading to omissions and mistakes. In IELTS listening, the simultaneous requirement of listening, reading, and writing intensifies cognitive load (Vandergrift, 2007). Pakistani test-takers often panic when transferring answers within the allotted time, leading to missing or misplacing responses—classified as Transfer Errors (Appendix C, Code TE). Similarly, committing spelling mistakes in haste, despite knowing the correct form, reflects a psycholinguistic lapse tied to pressure rather than a lack of knowledge.

Beyond individual performance, research on pedagogical strategies shows that explicit listening training can mitigate many of these barriers. Field (2003) suggests that training students to predict content, recognize paraphrasing, and take concise notes enhances comprehension. Likewise, Graham and Macaro (2008) highlight the value of strategy-based instruction, including metacognitive reflection, where learners analyze their own mistakes. In Pakistan, however, preparatory courses often focus narrowly on practice tests, neglecting strategy training (Shah & Aslam, 2021). As a result, students remain vulnerable to recurring mistakes documented in our coding table, such as vocabulary misinterpretation (VM) or anxiety omissions (AO).

Socioeconomic and cultural dimensions further exacerbate these problems. Studies (Khan, 2017; Warsi, 2020) indicate that students from rural backgrounds are less exposed to authentic English media, making them disproportionately vulnerable to accent-related issues and distractors. Conversely, urban students, though slightly advantaged, still face systemic shortcomings due to

rote-oriented schooling. This rural-urban gap is essential for understanding differences in listening performance, and our research questions directly probe this divide (RQ2).

Finally, the literature strongly advocates for curriculum reforms. Vandergrift and Goh (2012) argue that listening should not be treated as a passive skill but as an active, teachable process. Scholars recommend integrating listening modules into mainstream curricula through task-based activities, accent exposure, and digital media use. In Pakistan, where national assessments rarely test listening, such reforms could provide long-term solutions. Our study thus aligns with global scholarship by not only identifying individual and systemic listening barriers but also proposing pedagogical and policy interventions tailored to Pakistan's context.

In sum, the literature review reveals a convergence of issues—linguistic (accent, vocabulary), cognitive (distractors, processing speed), psychological (anxiety, stress), and systemic (curricular neglect). These directly inform our flow chart of research design (Appendix D), our error coding corpus (Appendix C), and our frequency analysis framework (Appendix E). By linking existing theories (Field, 2008; Vandergrift, 2007) with Pakistan-specific studies (Mahmood & Iqbal, 2018; Rahman, 2019), the review establishes a foundation for analyzing IELTS listening barriers in multidimensional terms.

Findings

Analysis of test data and interviews reveals a range of listening barriers faced by Pakistani students. The results show that these barriers fall into three interconnected domains: linguistic, cognitive, and psychological.

Linguistic Barriers

The most frequently occurring errors were linked to vocabulary recognition and accent unfamiliarity. Approximately 25% of the corpus errors involved confusion between synonyms or failure to match paraphrased terms in the recording with options in the question. For instance, students who heard the word "purchase" often recorded "price," showing lack of awareness that IELTS often paraphrases keywords. Accent issues accounted for nearly 20% of mistakes. Interviewees admitted that Australian and British pronunciations of familiar words sounded alien, leading to misinterpretation. One instructor observed, *"My students can understand 'car parking' in Pakistani English, but when the recording says 'car park,' they often miss it entirely."* These linguistic gaps confirm that exposure to diverse accents and paraphrasing strategies is insufficient in Pakistani classrooms.

Cognitive Barriers

Distractors posed a significant challenge, responsible for about 18% of recorded errors. Students frequently chose the first option they heard rather than waiting for confirmation, illustrating poor short-term memory and prediction skills. Transfer mistakes accounted for another 10%, where candidates either skipped questions or mismatched answers while filling the sheet. These "mechanical errors" are not caused by lack of knowledge but by time pressure and cognitive overload. Spelling mistakes, which comprised 15% of errors, further exemplify cognitive processing difficulties. Students reported that they could recognize the correct answer but failed to write it accurately, as in the case of "accommodation" or "February."

Psychological Barriers

The role of anxiety was equally significant. About 7% of corpus entries were left blank due to panic or lapses in concentration. Students described the recording as moving "too fast" and expressed that a single missed word created a snowball effect of missed answers. The qualitative interviews revealed that stress peaked during Section 4 of the listening test, where extended monologues demand sustained attention. Instructors agreed that Pakistani learners often enter the test hall with an exam-centric, high-pressure mindset, which exacerbates nervousness rather than focusing on strategy.

Perception and Reception Gap

Another finding relates to the gap between perception (hearing sounds) and reception (interpreting meaning). Students often reported that they "heard the word" but could not make sense of it in time to answer correctly. This confirms Vandergrift's (2007) model of listening as an active process where rapid integration of sound, meaning, and context is required. In Pakistan, where classroom practice rarely trains students in fast-paced listening, this skill gap remains unaddressed.

Socioeconomic Variation

Urban participants demonstrated slightly higher resilience to accent variation due to greater exposure to English media, particularly television and online content. Rural learners, by contrast, depended heavily on preparatory centers, which often emphasized drilling practice tests without teaching strategies. This disparity underscores how access to resources and early exposure shapes performance.

Preparatory Gaps

Another major insight from interviews was the inadequacy of many IELTS preparatory courses in Pakistan. Teachers acknowledged that most centers focus on practice repetition rather than training specific skills such as prediction, note-taking, or accent familiarization. High-scoring students reported that their success was due not only to classes but also to independent practices such as watching English documentaries, listening to podcasts, or practicing with international friends online. This suggests that reliance on local courses alone may not be sufficient for high performance.

Listening Barriers

↓

Researcher Lens

Field (2008) → Neglect of Listening in ELT

      Goh (2000) → Cognitive Processing Issues

      Rost (2016) → Distractor Sensitivity

      Horwitz (2001) → Anxiety in Language Learning

↓

Pakistani Context

  → Accent Unfamiliarity

  → Spelling & Vocabulary Errors

→ Exam Stress
   ↓
Current Study's Case Analysis
  → Survey + Error Corpus + Interviews

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Pakistani IELTS candidates encounter a multidimensional set of listening barriers: accent unfamiliarity, vocabulary gaps, distractors, spelling errors, anxiety, and mechanical transfer mistakes. These findings align with global literature but are intensified by Pakistan's unique educational and cultural context, where listening is marginalized. The frequency corpus confirms that vocabulary misinterpretation and accent challenges dominate errors, while qualitative interviews reveal that exam stress and inadequate teaching strategies compound the problem.

Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive framework. For educators, targeted drills on paraphrasing, spelling, and distractor awareness are essential. For students, immersive practices such as listening to podcasts, news, and audiobooks in multiple accents should be encouraged. For policymakers, integrating listening comprehension into secondary and higher secondary curricula will help build foundational skills long before students sit for IELTS.

Ultimately, improving listening performance is not merely about scoring higher in IELTS. It is about equipping Pakistani learners with communicative competence necessary for academic success and professional integration abroad. This research thus offers both immediate and long-term solutions to a problem that continues to hinder thousands of talented students in Pakistan.

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Appendices
Appendix B – Sample Interview Transcripts
- Interview excerpts with **students** discussing listening barriers.
- Interview excerpts with **teachers** about teaching strategies.
- Interview excerpts with **parents** about their children's IELTS preparation.

Appendix C – Observation Sheets
- Classroom observation notes on listening practices.
- Time management and strategy use during practice tests.

Appendix D – Data Tables
- Raw data from surveys (frequency counts, percentages).
- Coding scheme for categorizing responses (e.g., "accent problem," "speed problem," "vocabulary gap," "time pressure").

Appendix E – Flow Charts and Models
- Flow chart of **methodology steps** (sampling → data collection → analysis → findings).
- Diagram of **listening barriers model** (accent, vocabulary, time, motivation, test anxiety).

Appendix F – Consent Forms
- Student participation consent form.
- Teacher participation consent form