

Exploring Gender Based Listening Anxieties in Computer-Based IELTS Tests: An In-depth Investigation

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Abstract

The current study investigates diverse listening anxieties experienced by both genders during the computer-based IELTS listening test. Three key anxieties are examined: cognitive and physical stress, pronunciation and accent challenges, and language and vocabulary knowledge issues. A notable difference in responses between genders is observed, with females exhibiting increased anxiety levels when listening and typing simultaneously. In contrast, males face challenges comprehending different accents within the same audio. Both genders express significant apprehension regarding encountering unknown words. Employing a quantitative approach, the study analyses data from 88 participants who have recently appeared in the Computer-Based IELTS exam. Descriptive statistics serve as the primary analytical tool. Results indicate that the transition to screen-based IELTS introduces a few challenges for students accustomed to paper-based testing, exacerbating existing anxieties. The study advocates for integrating realistic practice tests into classroom curricula to alleviate screen-related fears and prepare students for the exam environment. This research sheds light on the nuanced dynamics of listening anxieties in screen-based testing contexts, providing insights for educators and test administrators to enhance student preparation and performance.

Keywords: Anxiety, Cognitive, Accent, Pronunciation, Vocabulary.

Introduction

The Computer-based International English Language Testing System (CBT IELTS) is an example of a screen test established by the British Council and IDP to evaluate the English language skills of those who aspire to work or study in countries where English is the primary language of communication. Along with the paper-based test, Computer-based IELTS has been implemented for students' convenience and flexibility. The computer-based IELTS examination mirrors the paper-based IELTS test in every aspect, encompassing the delivery of instructions and tasks and evaluating response time. Nevertheless, students may encounter distinct discomfort with this novel testing format. The listening component of the IELTS is one of the most challenging sections for many IELTS candidates since it demands extensive practice and accuracy (Zahari & Dhayaalan, 2016). The present study not only explores the factors contributing to anxiety during screen-based listening tests but also examines whether male or female individuals perceive greater levels of anxiety.

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Experiencing language anxiety by non-native speakers is a common phenomenon (Zarei & Rezadoust, 2020); "one-third of all language learners have experienced language anxiety" (Horwitz, 2001, p. 219). Language Anxiety is enhanced due to an individual's nervousness (Alsaleem, 2019). The students think their listening skills are not up to par with their ability to understand what they hear (Han, 2014). Therefore, anxiety hinders listening, distracting learners from focusing on their objectives.

Scholars have predominantly examined speaking, reading, and writing anxieties in second language acquisition (Gumartifa & Syahri, 2021). Nonetheless, there is a need for more research investigating the anxieties and challenges encountered by both genders in screen-based standardized tests. It is imperative to address this aspect, as improving listening skills is fundamental for facilitating speaking, reading, and writing activities (Adnan et al., 2020).

Literature Review

The term 'Listening anxiety' refers to a condition that hinders individuals from achieving the level of comprehension they are capable of during the listening process. An anxious mind tends to exhibit an unanticipated reaction to the listening activity (Adnan et al., 2020). Numerous researches have been carried out to investigate the correlation between anxiety and listening skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms across different contexts, for example, in Iran (Dalman, 2016) and in China (Liu & Xu, 2021; Bao et al., 2017). Others have analyzed the listening anxiety of tertiary students in EFL classrooms as the focus of their research (Agustiana, 2019; Prastiyowati, 2019).

Listening difficulties stem from content complexity, techniques employed, and inadequate guidance (Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020). The test takers face three key challenges in listening comprehension: encountering unfamiliar information leading to confusion, experiencing psychological distress when processing auditory input, and coping with limitations in repertoire (Guswita & Sugirin, 2021; Alzamil, 2021).

In another study, Chinese students faced listening problems of accent, pronunciation, and vocabulary (Liu & Xu, 2021). Similarly, Kao and Kuo (2023) emphasized that students experience emotional distress due to their inability to comprehend the speaker's speech and pronunciation. Moreover, lexical knowledge is important in discussing listening anxiety (Gulec & Durmus, 2015).

It is asserted that boys exhibit high anxiety levels regarding vocabulary, whereas girls excel in other facets of listening comprehension (Feyten et al., 1992; Yusnida et al., 2017). The learners may need help understanding unusual lexical terms, which may be confusing (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Guswita & Sugirin, 2021). According to Solak and Altay (2014), numerous unfamiliar terms within a text correlate with comprehension difficulties.

Gender Related Differences in Language Anxiety

It is asserted that women tend to experience more stress during testing than males, primarily due to factors like parental expectations for academic achievement, peer pressure to excel, or competition with the opposite gender (Núñez-Peña et al., 2016). Campbell (1999) emphasizes the significance of gender disparity across all four language competencies. In an experiment, it was discovered that both males and females exhibited equal levels of listening anxiety before and during the test. Conversely, in terms of reading skills, females experienced lower anxiety levels, approximately 7 per cent, whereas males' anxiety levels increased to 9 per cent.

It is commonly believed that females generally excel in language skills compared to males. However, certain studies have suggested that males may demonstrate superior listening abilities. A survey conducted on Chinese students aged 18-20 revealed that while females outperformed males in overall language proficiency, males exhibited greater proficiency in vocabulary knowledge (Boyle, 1987). However, other experiments involving Spanish and

French students found no correlation between gender and listening anxieties (Bacon, 1992; Feyten, 1991).

Psychological barriers pose significant challenges for both genders (Utomo et al., 2019). When confused, many female students strive to decode the meanings of specific terms (Davey & Wells, 2006). This predisposition to worry can have serious consequences, such as impaired information processing and subpar task performance (Markham & Darke, 1991). When a listener is attentive, there is a risk of overlooking crucial points due to the slowdown in cognitive processes caused by distracting thoughts (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

According to (Anandapong, 2011), listening and understanding English content quickly causes the most stress. This study used questionnaires and interviews to collect data from thirty business graduate students. The findings revealed that both genders experienced anxiety when listening and reading text on the screen, possibly attributed to the restricted duration of listening.

Pakistani pupils' listening ability is influenced by various factors, including scarce English vocabulary knowledge and insufficient daily English language practice, inadequate language learning strategies, and the effects of the students' psychological factors (Serraj, 2015). This study aims to highlight the screen-based listening anxieties experienced by Pakistani test takers, compare the performance of both genders and determine which has excelled over the other.

Considering that listening anxiety among non-native speakers induces fear and nervousness before, during, and after the test, it is claimed that female students display higher levels of anxiety compared to their male counterparts. Therefore, this study aims to 1) investigate specific types of anxieties frequently reported by test takers and 2) explore gender disparities in experiencing listening anxieties through analysis of questionnaire responses for each item.

Study Limitations

This study presents a comprehensive analysis focusing solely on candidates from Pakistan, namely those affiliated with two colleges in Lahore, Pakistan. Therefore, the results may only be generalizable to some contexts. Additionally, the focus of this study is only on the listening anxiety experienced by Pakistani students during the CBT IELTS listening exam, with no consideration given to other standardized tests.

Methodology

Participants

The sample comprised 88 respondents, consisting of 72 males and 16 females. Their native language is Urdu, while English serves as their second language. They attended IELTS listening and speaking preparation courses at two private language institutes, namely 'Hallmark' and 'Dream Management,' in Lahore. Based on the researcher's preliminary findings, these candidates recently undertook a screen-based exam, with a few having prior experience participating in a paper-based IELTS Examination before transitioning to the computer-based test format.

The present study is descriptive and has employed a quantitative approach to examine the challenges encountered by students during the Computer-Based (IELTS) listening examination administration.

Design and Instruments

The study adopted a convenience sampling technique to gather data from a specific population group due to its inherent simplicity, high level of efficiency, and cost-effectiveness. The Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale by Kim's FLLAS (2000), a well-established assessment instrument, is used to measure listening anxiety. The FLLAS comprises 33 items distributed across two sections. However, the researcher has chosen only 14 questions out of

the 33 items to align with the study's requirements. Some other researchers have employed the same scale to measure foreign (Bao et al., 2017) and second language anxiety (Kimura, 2008). The Cronbach alpha, $\alpha = .93$, made this instrument highly internally consistent. These replies have been recorded by providing statistical values, with "1" indicating "Strongly Agree," "2" indicating "Agree," "3" indicating "Neutral," "4" indicating "Disagree," and "5" indicating "Strongly Disagree."

For the test takers 'convenience, the URL of Google Forms was distributed using WhatsApp and Emails to target those who had recently completed the Computer-based IELTS Exam. The participants were instructed to precisely rate their listening skills to enhance clarity and reduce the likelihood of misinterpretations. Furthermore, a preliminary investigation was undertaken to evaluate the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. Consequently, a carefully designed questionnaire was utilized to guarantee accurate and dependable data acquisition.

Results

Participants 'anxieties were measured on the following themes: Cognitive and physical stress, pronunciation and accent problems, and insufficient vocabulary knowledge.

Table 1: Cognitive and physical stress

No. of Items	Male Mean	Male SD	Female Mean	Female SD
I feel poor coordination between listening and reading on the screen	2.25	1.34	3.13	1.46
I become anxious when cannot catch the keyword in English listening	1.9	0.995	2.63	1.088
I feel confused when cannot catch what the speaker means.	1.85	0.85	2.25	1.065
I feel anxious to guess about the parts which are missed while listening to English	1.69	0.94	2	1.09
Long screen time puts strain on the eyes and nerves	3.11	0.9	3.19	0.95
I feel anxious due to the clicking noise of the keyboard	1.9	0.82	2.38	0.95
I feel anxious due to the lack of computer-based listening material	2.18	1.36	2.63	1.54

In the first item regarding poor coordination between listening and reading on the screen, females reported an average score of 3.13 with a standard deviation of 1.46. In contrast, males scored an average of 2.25 with a standard deviation 1.34. In the second item, relating to feeling anxious when unable to catch keywords in English listening, females scored an average of 2.63 with a standard deviation of 1.088. In contrast, males scored an average of 1.9 with a standard deviation of 0.995. For the third item, indicating confusion when unable to understand the speaker's meaning, female listeners reported an average score of 2.25 with a standard deviation of 1.06, while male listeners reported an average of 1.85 with a standard deviation of 0.85. The fourth item pertains to the guesswork of listeners when missing parts of audio while reading on screen, with females scoring an average of 2 and a standard deviation of 1.09 and males scoring an average of 1.69 with a standard deviation of 0.94. In the fifth item concerning the strain caused by long screen time, there is no disparity between the average scores of females and males, which are 3.19 and 3.11, respectively. Regarding the sixth item, which addresses keyboard noise, females reported an average score of 2.38 with a standard deviation of 0.95. In contrast, males reported an average score of 1.9 with a standard deviation of 0.82.

The seventh and final item indicates that test takers' anxiety revolves around the scarcity of extensive screen-based IELTS test material. Females reported an average score of 2.63 with a

standard deviation of 1.54, while males scored an average of 2.18 with a standard deviation of 1.36.

Table 2: Pronunciation, accent, and vocabulary stress

Pronunciation and Accent Problems	Male	Male	Female	Female
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
I find it difficult to understand different accents in the same recording.	3.31	1.296	3.13	1.31
It bothers me to encounter words I can't pronounce while listening to English.	2.89	1.145	3.13	1.204
I get afraid for not understanding everything when the speaker talks quickly.	1.75	0.784	1.43	1.81
I get nervous when I have to listen and type quickly on the screen	1.26	0.671	1.183	1.047
Lack of Vocabulary Knowledge				
I feel worried when I cannot locate the same words on screen, which I hear in the audio.	2.06	0.718	2.16	1.237
I feel nervous and confused when I first listen whole sentence and then try to write as I cannot remember answer at the end.	1.94	0.997	1.64	1.181
During listening, I get stuck on one or two unknown words.	1.36	0.484	1.38	0.5

Within the second theme, the initial item addresses the challenge of understanding various accents and pronunciations. Females reported an average score of 3.13, while males scored 3.31, with a standard deviation of 1.29. The subsequent item discusses difficulty pronouncing words correctly. Females reported a mean score of 3.13 with a standard deviation of 1.20, whereas males reported a mean score of 2.89 with a standard deviation of 1.14. The third item highlights anxiety induced by the rapid pace of speakers, with females scoring an average of 1.18 and a standard deviation of 1.04. In contrast, males scored 1.26 with a standard deviation of 0.67. In contrast, males scored 1.26 with a standard deviation of 0.67.

The fourth item indicates increased anxiety among listeners when simultaneously listening and typing on the screen. Females and males reported average scores of 1.18 and 1.26, respectively. The third theme pertains to vocabulary knowledge. The initial item addresses disparities between words displayed on the screen and those heard in the audio, with no observable difference in scores between males (2.06) and females (2.16). The second item discusses heightened anxiety when listeners attempt to transcribe audio after initial listening, where no significant difference is evident between males and females. The third and ultimate item addresses the need for more vocabulary. Female respondents achieved a score of 1.38, while male respondents attained a score of 1.36.

Table 3: t-test results of the differences between mean scores of male and female

Item	t-test for Equality of Means	
	t-test	p
Cognitive Barriers	-2.691	0.009
Physical Barriers	-2.15	0.034
Pronunciation-related Problems	-0.297	0.767
Accent Problem	-3.29	0.001
Lack of Vocabulary	-2.032	0.045

Within the cognitive barriers theme, a t-test value of -2.691 and p-value of .009 shows that males and females are statistically different. On the other hand, the physical barrier has a t-test

value of -2.150 and a p-value of .034, indicating male-female differentiation in this aspect. Regarding these problems caused by pronunciation, there is no statistical significance between women and men, where the t-test score is -.297 while the p-value is .767. However, on accent problems, the t-test score is -3.290 with a p-value of .001, suggesting a significant difference between men and women. Lastly, vocabulary deficiency has a t-score of -2.032 ($p = 0.045$), making up the major distinction among males and females in this field.

Findings

The study investigated various anxieties experienced by participants during English language listening tests, focusing on cognitive and physical stress, pronunciation and accent challenges, and insufficient vocabulary knowledge. In the cognitive and physical stress domain, females tended to experience greater challenges in coordinating listening and reading on screen, understanding spoken keywords, and deciphering speaker intentions than males. However, both genders reported similar levels of strain from extended screen time. Concerning pronunciation, accent problems, and vocabulary stress, females exhibited slightly greater difficulties in understanding different accents and pronunciations, as well as in transcribing audio and managing vocabulary deficits. While there was no significant gender difference in pronunciation-related problems, accent issues significantly affected females more than males. Notably, vocabulary deficiencies emerged as a significant area of distinction between males and females, indicating a notable discrepancy in vocabulary knowledge.

The findings of this study underscore the nuanced gender differences in the anxieties faced during English language listening tests. Females appeared to encounter more pronounced cognitive and physical stressors, particularly in tasks requiring comprehension and coordination between auditory and visual stimuli. Pronunciation and accent challenges were relatively consistent across genders, except for accent problems, where females exhibited heightened distress. However, vocabulary knowledge emerged as a notable point of differentiation, with females displaying more anxiety and confusion compared to males. These results highlight the importance of tailored interventions and support mechanisms to address the diverse needs and anxieties of test-takers, particularly concerning comprehension, pronunciation, and vocabulary acquisition strategies in English language learning contexts.

Discussion

The present study highlighted various listening anxieties experienced by learners, specifically in IELTS CBT listening. The study also highlighted the gender differences in different aspects of anxieties. The notable differences between men and women regarding cognitive and physical stress have been recorded during on-screen listening tests. As data suggests, females experience more distraction between listening and reading during the screen-based tests than their male counterparts. They may need to be more focused to skip the right answer. This result is consistent with the previous study by (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Female students may benefit from adopting a surface-level listening approach rather than delving into the details of each speaker's sentence. Both males and females collectively claimed that though the screen-based test is convenient, it causes strain on the eyes, and they get tired of constantly looking at the screen.

On the other hand, males confessed they had no issue with the keyboard noise, but females expressed that they felt disturbed by the keyboard noise. Other studies have also discussed that even under perfect speech clarity, background noise can impair the memory of spoken items. Extended screen time is a concern both genders share, leading to discomfort.

Additionally, another form of anxiety arises from missing information. When individuals struggle to comprehend the audio, they may skip sections, which causes anxiety as they cannot

recall the missed content. Both genders expressed dissatisfaction with the unavailability of practice material, especially CBT IELTS. They said that the official websites of the British Council and IDP IELTS do not include listening test options. As a result, these individuals are constrained to utilize alternative websites instead of the platforms indicated earlier to participate in listening exam practice sessions.

Being non-native speakers, they find it difficult to understand various accents in the same audio; this finding is consistent with another study conducted (Sung, 2016). Male listeners exhibit more accent-related stress than female listeners. One major cause of this issue is insufficient listening test practice in schools, complicating comprehension. On the other hand, females demonstrate greater attentiveness to pronounce words correctly, indicating their heightened concern for language precision.

Apart from accent, pupils get petrified to comprehend speech when delivered rapidly. Both genders encounter challenges in understanding fast speech, with females exhibiting heightened levels of anxiety compared to males. This finding is supported by (Hamouda, 2013), who states that the length of the speech is a feature that negatively influences the listener's comprehension.

Lack of vocabulary knowledge is a major challenge for language test takers, greatly affecting listeners' performance. Both males and females mentioned that their insufficient English vocabulary affected their listening skills. Female participants exhibited a superior understanding of synonyms, resulting in fewer difficulties locating answers on the screen than their male counterparts.

Another challenge Pakistani test takers encounter in preparing for the IELTS Computer-based Test (CBT) is the need for more availability of listening materials. The official websites of the British Council and IDP IELTS offer only a limited number of practice tests. Consequently, candidates must seek alternative websites for preparation, where the listening tests may follow a different pattern. This outcome is backed up by the findings of (Wallace, 2022), who discovered that factors such as listening materials, listener cognition, and physical elements contribute to the experience of listening anxiety.

Both genders conveyed their concerns about their inability to type while listening. They experienced distorted attention while listening and typing at the same time. This is supported by a study (Carrell et al., 2002) that sheds light on the difficulties caused by listening to the lecture and writing and organizing the notes. To achieve this, individuals must excel at multitasking. As a result, listeners must employ effective strategies that are crucial for listening and taking notes seamlessly.

Conclusion

The computer-based IELTS Listening Test has become increasingly popular due to its convenience, adaptability, and efficiency as a testing format; however, it brings various factors that contribute to the anxiety experienced by applicants. Both genders exhibit distinct sources of anxiety: Females may feel nervousness stemming from on-screen tests, while males encounter difficulties primarily related to accents. Conversely, they share similar anxieties regarding listening and typing simultaneously and need more practice materials.

Anxiety arises from internal and external factors, and instructors can play a crucial role in alleviating listening apprehension by teaching students how to infer meaning from context, even when encountering unfamiliar words. Test centers can produce content like a real exam to mitigate participant anxiety and adhere closely to the precise format. Well-suited listening materials can effectively dispel learners' fears and anxieties, bolstering their confidence in language acquisition.

Regular participation in daily or weekly listening exercises has been found to improve student's proficiency in listening and speaking, thereby addressing potential challenges related to

encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, accents, or important terms. Educational institutions should integrate documentary sessions into their computer laboratories to familiarize students with international accents. Future research efforts can explore other aspects of the Computer-Based Testing (CBT) IELTS exam, particularly the reading section, which often confounds students due to its screen-based nature. Beyond IELTS, this study could extend to other screen-based tests like Duolingo and PET.

Recommendations

To alleviate anxiety experienced by test-takers during the computer-based IELTS Listening Test, it is recommended that test centers prioritize the development of tailored practice materials closely resembling the actual exam format. Instructors should guide effective strategies for inferring meaning from context and incorporate regular listening exercises to build confidence and proficiency. Additionally, educational institutions should offer exposure to diverse accents through documentary sessions, while future research efforts should explore the impact of computer-based testing on other exam sections. Insights gained can extend to other screen-based language proficiency tests, aiding in developing effective strategies for mitigating anxiety and supporting test-takers in achieving their language learning objectives.

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