

## Listening Comprehension for “Business English” Students: Obstacles, Needs, and Strategies

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### ABSTRACT

This study is carried out with business English freshmen at the faculty of Economics in Meknes, Morocco, with the aim of exploring their needs as regards listening. To this end, a questionnaire was administered to 153 first-year “business English” students. The study reveals that listening still remains a neglected skill in the Moroccan formal learning context. As a result, students face many difficulties to get the proper meaning of the listening input. Accordingly, the paper puts forward some teaching strategies and stresses the importance of authentic materials that would help boost students’ listening skills. It also underscores the importance of the listening skill during academic learning as well as in professional career, especially in relation to international business. Ultimately, an intercultural listening course is highly recommended to help students communicate with English-speaking people from different cultures.

## Introduction

Listening is “one of the most fundamental of the four skills in language learning” as pointed out by Hershenhorn (1979: 65). A study carried out by Adler et al (2001) indicates that adults commit an average of 45% of their communicating time to listening, followed by speaking (30%), reading (16%), and writing (9%). However, listening, unlike other skills, is not granted much attention, and teaching it stands as a most challenging task for any English teacher, especially for an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) practitioner. The difficulty of instructing such a skill derives from the fact that no clear-cut rules helping students attain comprehension are available; furthermore, students need more time to sharpen their listening competences. The predicament of ESP practitioners unfurls more than ever when they should satisfy learners’ needs in restricted time, as ESP is “a quick and economical use of the English language” (Coffey 1985: 79). For this reason, learners should be given “only the bits of the English they need” (Basturkmen 2006: 18).

This paper centers around listening since it occupies more time than other skills whether in or out of class. This explains why many researchers have investigated the development of the listening skill and stressed its importance. Some of them (Meskill 1996, Nunan 1997, Picard and Velautham 2016) have shed light on how to enhance students’ listening abilities; others (Hershenhorn 1979, Mendelsohn 1995, Rost, 2002, Graham 2017) have focused on teaching strategies for listening. Notwithstanding, much of such intensive research has centered on EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners; little research has been devoted to ESP students whose learning is functional and time-bound. This study is a needs analysis of first-year students who study business English at Moulay Ismail University, Faculty of Economics in Meknes. It probes the difficulties students face while listening and explores their specific listening needs. It investigates some methods deployed in teaching listening to ESP students in general, and to business learners in particular. It also delineates a few strategies that will help boost the listening skills of ESP students and adapt their acquired competences to a myriad of specific situations. Towards a comprehensive understanding of dynamics of teaching listening skills, this study aims to answer three main questions:

- 1- What are the obstacles that hinder business students’ listening comprehension?

- 2- What are their needs as regards listening?
- 3- What strategies can contribute to make the teaching and comprehension of the listening input easier?

Starting from the analysis of a questionnaire administered to first-year business English students, the present paper is an attempt to develop how students' listening abilities can be functional not only in the classroom but also in the real world.

## Literature Review

Listening has traditionally been viewed as a passive, receptive skill since listeners are thought of not as producers of language but just receivers. It has been given less importance to the extent that it is described as the most forgotten, neglected, and poorly taught skill (Wilkinson and Atkinson 1965, Celce-Murcia & McIntosh 1979, Mendelsohn 1995, Stanton 2009). It has also been labeled "the step child language learning", overlooked by other skills, namely reading, writing, and speaking (Whiteson 1974: 47) and "the Cinderella Skill", disregarded by its elder sister referring to speaking (Nunan 1997: 47).

Listening is not an important part in course books since it is widely believed that it naturally and unconsciously develops within the language learning process. In this context, it is necessary to distinguish between hearing and listening. Albeit they both, as stated by Rost (2002: 8), "involve sound perception, the difference in terms reflects a degree of intention". While hearing is a physical ability occurring unconsciously, listening is a mental activity entailing hearing mindfully and intently. It involves decoding and comprehension as reflected in Steinberg's (2007: 8) definition: "the ability of one individual perceiving another via sense, aural organs, assigning a meaning to the message and comprehending it". It is a complex process that involves not only receiving words that are being said but also paying a close attention to a speaker's accent, grammar, and vocabulary to understand their message. It is, therefore, not a passive skill, but a receptive and active skill that involves much more than simple reception of words. It is an active skill that is very important for effective communication (Thomlison 1984, Nunan 1997, Stanton 2009).

Listening is very important in language learning because it is a most widely used language skill (Hershenhorn 1979, Rost 1994, Ferris 1998, Rost 2002). It is used as a primary medium of learning at all stages of education. Without proper listening skills, learners never learn to communicate effectively and understand spontaneous native speakers. Effective listening is the main stock-in-trade required particularly by business students;

Dudley-Evans and St. John (2000: 106) assert that in business, listening "goes beyond understanding the words and the key points; it is a skill and an art". It is crucially needed in successful business meetings and presentations since it requires more than decoding information and understanding speakers' intent; it includes sensing their emotion contained within the message as well. All in all, it is necessary for communication because "we cannot communicate face-to-face unless speaking and listening are developed in tandem" (Anderson and Lynch 1988: 3).

There are two types of listening: extensive and intensive. Extensive listening usually takes place outside the classroom as it focuses on **longer activities**. It "is concerned with the freer, more general listening to natural English, not necessarily under the teacher's direct guidance" (Broughton et al 1980 p.72). Nevertheless, intensive listening is much more controlled and gives most attention to pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, rather than general meaning. In ESP, both types are very crucial since they help students focus on individual parts and overall meaning of professionally-oriented materials to develop their field of interest.

## Methodology

### Respondents

The research was carried out in Meknes at Moulay Ismail University, Faculty of Economics. The subjects of the study were first-year economics learners with little background in learning English. They were 153 students belonging to four groups and were all non-native speakers studying business English. The following table gives detailed information about the participants' group size, age, gender, and nationality.

Group	Group Size	Age	Gender		Nationality				
			Males	Females	Moroccans	Foreigners			
						Senegal	Niger	Nigeria	Sudan

1	39	18-23	18	21	35	2	1	0	1
2	41	18-21	23	18	33	3	3	2	0
3	35	18-25	16	19	32	1	0	2	0
4	38	17-22	14	24	35	2	1	0	0
Total	153	17-25	17	82	135	8	5	4	1

**Table 1: Respondents’ group size, age, gender, and nationality Questionnaire**

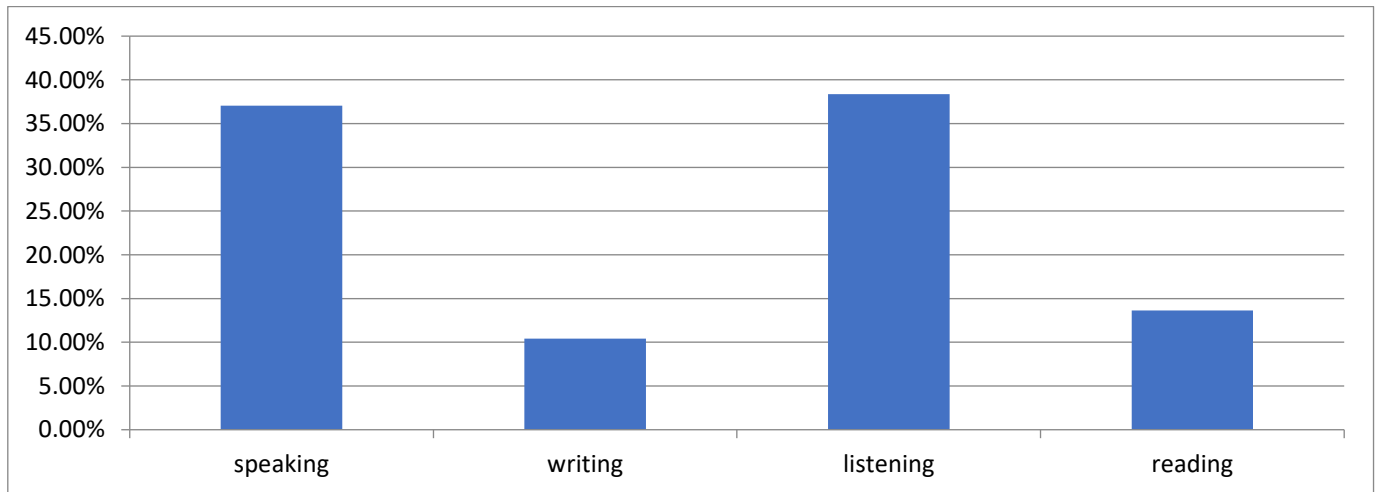
In this study, a questionnaire was administered to elicit as much information as possible from the respondents with respect to their perception of and experience in acquiring listening skills. It also reveals the students’ difficulties and needs of the listening skills. It comprises 10 questions. These include four questions about background information of the participants’, ranging from multiple choice, four-point likert scale, and open-ended questions. The research instrument used in this study was put forward to elicit quantitative and qualitative data. The results were reported via a table, a pie chart, and five bar graphs.

**Data Analysis and Discussion**

Analysis of the data is divided into three parts. Firstly, it reveals students’ perception of listening skills and their prior experience studying listening. Secondly, it demonstrates their listening difficulties. Finally, it probes their listening needs.

**Students’ Interest and Prior Listening Experience**

The following bar chart presents the target students’ perceptions with respect to the four language skills. The respondents were asked to rank the skills from the most important to the least important.

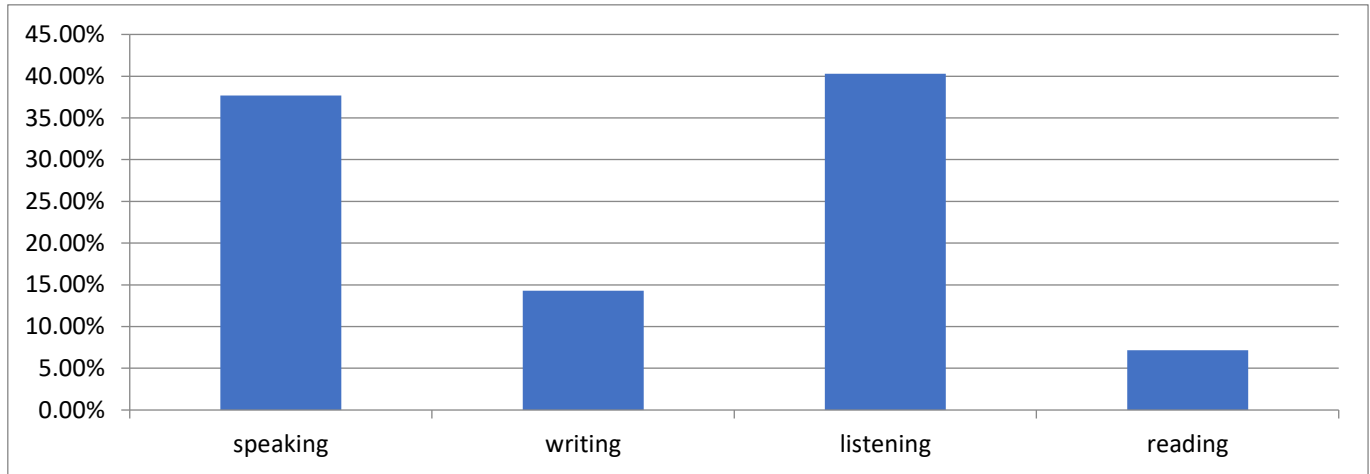


**Bar chart 1: Students’ interest in language skills**

Among the study skills, the skill which was the most important for the participants was listening (38.35%),

followed by speaking (37.05%), which approximately got the same rate of interest. Reading was ranked third ((13.65%), and writing ranked last (10.4%).

Being neglected in language curricula, listening remained the sought-after skill by students since more emphasis was placed on the remaining skills, especially reading and writing. This is more stressed when investigating the most challenging skill for students.

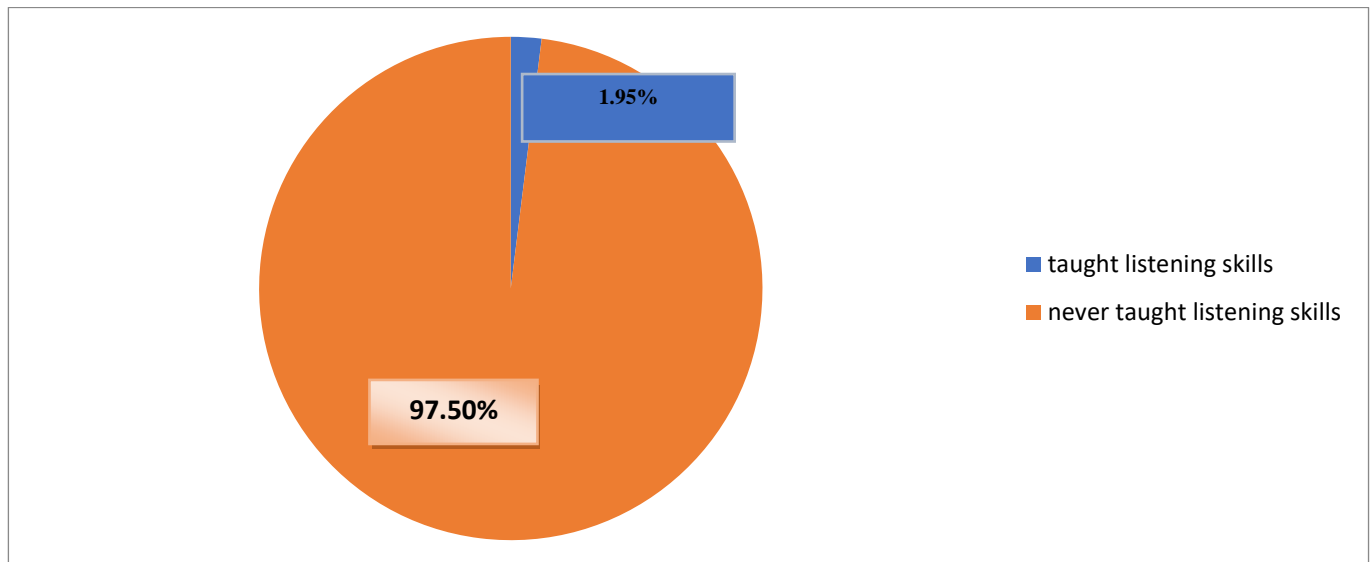


**Bar chart 2: Students' inadequacy in language skills**

Concerning the skills causing more insecurity in the process of learning, the majority of students opted for the listening skill (40.3%) and then the speaking skill (37.7%). Yet, only 14.3% and 7.15% of the students opted for writing and reading respectively.

It is noteworthy that listening and speaking are interrelated; without being able to listen to and understand what has been said, it is impossible to take a meaningful part in most conversations. Listening and speaking skills are the target students' predominant needs.

The following pie chart indicates the listening learning experience of the students under study when they were middle and/or high school students.



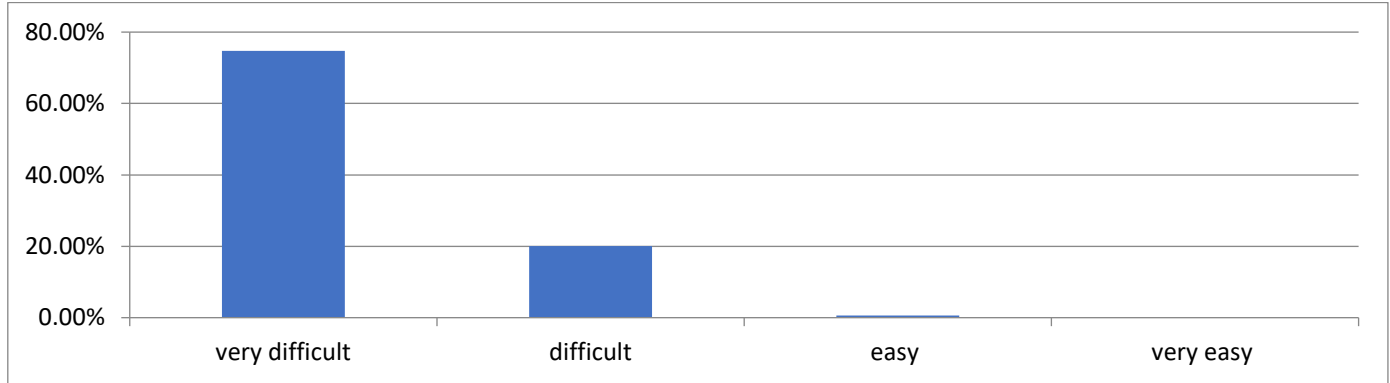
**Pie chart 1: Students' experience in studying listening skills**

97.50% of the participants admitted that they had never been taught listening skills, and only 1.95% of the participants claimed that they had studied listening skills.

The findings show that listening is seldom taught or not taught at all formally. This fact reflects why students have trouble with the listening skill.

**Students' Difficulties in Listening Skills**

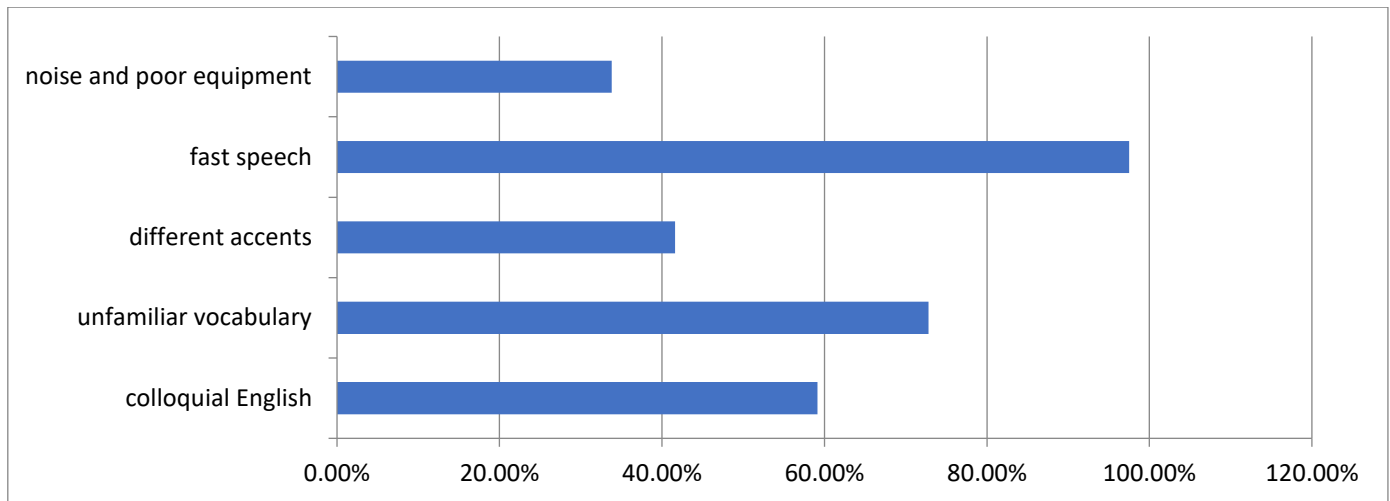
Students were also asked about the extent to which they found the listening skill difficult. They were given a four-point likert scale to indicate the degree of difficulty they face in listening as shown in the following table chart:



**Bar chart 3: Difficulty of the listening skill**

74.75% of the participants showed a high degree of difficulty as they considered listening a "very difficult" skill, 24.05% perceived it as "difficult", and only 0.65% viewed it "easy". However, none claimed it to be "very easy".

This might be related to the fact that most students, as they acknowledged, had never studied listening skills when they were middle and high school students. Consequently, they faced many problems in listening comprehension. The participants were also given a list of difficulties and were asked about each difficulty, as illustrated in the following chart.



**Bar chart 4: Difficulties faced by students in listening**

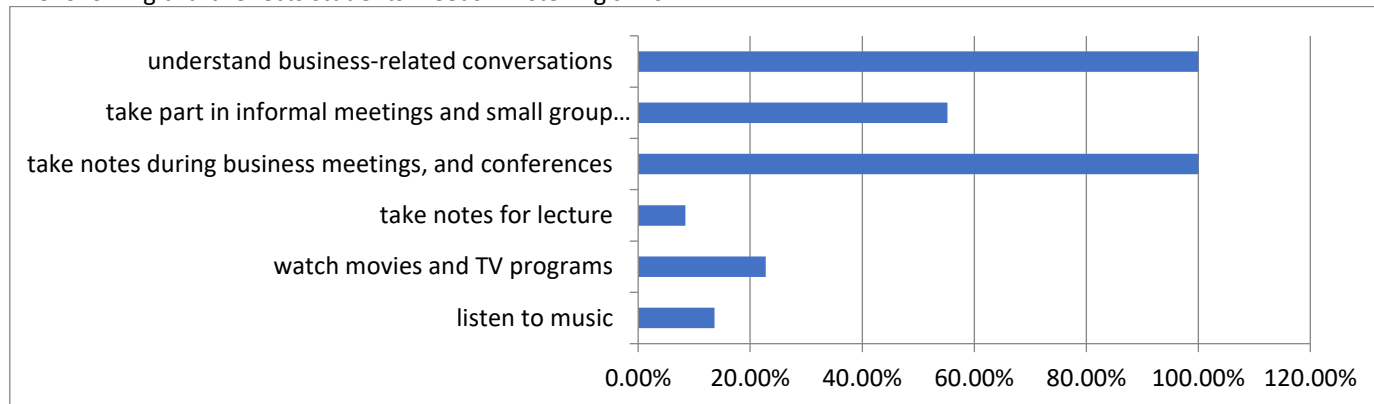
The highest score was identified with the difficulty: "fast speech" (97.5%), then followed by "unfamiliar vocabulary" (72.8%), "colloquial English" (59.15%), "different accents" (41.6%), and finally "noise and poor equipment" (33.8%).

This shows that students were exposed to simplified, formal English with a slow stream of listening. As a result, they had little control over the pace of delivery. Unfamiliar words were also another source of difficulty as listening comprehension correlates with lexical competency. Many students held colloquial English and different accents as barriers to listening comprehension since they did not have exposure to enough different styles and varieties of English, therefore, different

accents. Most of the students' problems were primarily linked to listening materials since they found out that their listening skills were inadequate, especially when they listened to or communicated with native speakers. The physical setting related to noise and poor equipment, though ranked last in percentage, was also stated as an impediment for listening comprehension. Language laboratories still stand as the best place to study listening.

### Students' Listening Needs

The following chart reflects students' needs in listening skills



Bar chart 5: Students' needs in listening

The chart clearly shows that students are highly interested in understanding conversations, meetings, and conferences related to business, because they collectively consider them as top-priorities. They also expressed an interest in understanding informal meetings and small group discussions (55.25%). The participants also showed their need for the appropriate listening skill for media, watching movies and TV programs, (22.75%) as well as listening to music lyrics (13.65%). Yet, few participants (8.45%) claimed that they needed listening skills to take notes for lectures.

The results obtained show that the participants were more interested in topics and activities pertinent to their field of specialization. They were also keen on colloquial English that they are likely exposed to in songs, radio/TV news and documentaries, as well as films. Authentic materials were, hence, of paramount importance since via constant exposure to authentic listening input, students would enhance their listening skills.

### Teaching Listening Skills

Though considered a hard task, teaching listening skills becomes less challenging after investigating the target students' potential, their lacunae as well as their needs. The listening materials and the teaching strategies were chosen in consonance with their field of specialization to meet their specific needs. Each group had 15 hours to study business English. These were spread over 10 weeks with an average of ninety minutes for each session. Based on the respondents' needs, 7.5 hours were devoted to the teaching of listening in alternation with a different skill to avoid students' demotivation. This section outlines some strategies for teaching listening to business English students.

### Listening Materials

Topics related to business were opted for to stimulate students' interest. They represented authentic materials to enable students to understand English as spoken by its native speakers, with diverse accents, various paralinguistic features and different patterns of redundancies, colloquialisms, and hesitations not heard in class. To enhance students' listening skills, intensive and extensive materials were adopted. Hence, in addition to in-class activities, homework assignments were included.

### Remedial Processes for Teaching Listening

Teaching listening entails focusing on processes rather than getting correct output. Listening can profitably be taught as a process, using top-down and bottom-up processing.

Pre-listening, listening, and post-listening are the three basic stages of a listening activity. Pre-listening makes students become more motivated and prepared for the listening activities. At this stage, the selected text for listening is set in its context for listeners as it is taken from its natural environment to a classroom. Contextualizing the topic makes students more familiar with the text, hence, active listeners. At the listening stage, students are required to focus on the audio material and try to understand it. Finally, post-listening takes students beyond the listening task and provides impulse for more discussion.

At the pre-listening stage, the respondents were set tasks designed to help them energize their prior and current knowledge about the topic. They were motivated to brainstorm as many words and phrases as they could about the topic, recall what they already know, and predict the possible expressions they may encounter. Next, during the listening phase, the respondents were encouraged to write down new information they listened to and see if any words and phrases predicted earlier were mentioned in the text. Finally, at post-listening, students compared what they had understood with their classmates and discussed those parts causing confusion and disagreement. Then, a discussion was led by the teacher to confirm comprehension.

To improve students' listening skills, both top-down and bottom-up processes were adopted. In top-down processing, listening for meaning is the primary objective for students. Business students were given exercises to put them in a real-world listening situation where they must use their prior knowledge

and experience to generate meaning. They relied on the context, topic, speakers, and situation to report the gist of the information and identify the main points. Since top-down processing is based on prediction and guess, students oftentimes did not agree on one answer; as a result, a class discussion ensued. Unlike top-down processing, bottom-up processing focuses on listening for details; it helps students to recognize lexical and pronunciation features for understanding the text. It was used to deal with unfamiliar vocabulary, to distinguish different paralinguistic patterns, and to expand students' language repertoire.

Actually, to become more effective listeners in real-life situations, students were encouraged to combine top-down and bottom-up processes. By adopting the interactive approach, they listened to audio material using top-down strategies to comprehend the text and next shifted to bottom-up strategies when encountering unfamiliar words. In so doing, they were trained to extract as much information as they could from their first listening of the text since real discourse can hardly be replayed.

## **Conclusion**

Listening is the first skill in terms of acquisition, the first in terms of use, and unfortunately the fourth in terms of teaching. Sometimes it is not taught at all. Accordingly, it is considered a neglected skill. Students need to be taught what to listen for and how to, and they require substantial practice with varying content, diverse accents, and sundry paralinguistic features. It is vital, therefore, that listening is granted a central role in language curricula and that teachers concentrate on developing students' skills to a significant level. Listening should likewise be considered an active skill taught as a process using both top-down and bottom-up strategies. It stands a receptive skill that needs to be granted due attention not only by the course designer or teacher but also by educational institutions, via providing classrooms with proper materials for developing a variety of listening skills.

Listening skills remain crucially important for business students not only during their academic learning, but also in their professional career, especially if linked to international business. In the face of the likelihood of communicating with people from different cultures, students are required to be equipped with suitable listening strategies to be attuned with speakers of different ethnic, social, and economic groups. Consequently, an inter-cultural listening course is equally recommended to introduce business students to different listening strategies and habits varying across cultures to develop proper skills that build and maintain positive, sturdy relationships with people from different backgrounds.

## **About the Author**

Sekkal Khadija is an associate professor at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Sais-Fes, Morocco. In 2007, she held a PhD on gender construction through proverbs and folktales in Tazrwalt, South of Morocco. She taught at Ibn Tofail University, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Kenitra, Morocco, from 2007 to 2017. Her research interests include, among others, gender, Amazigh oral culture, and applied linguistics.

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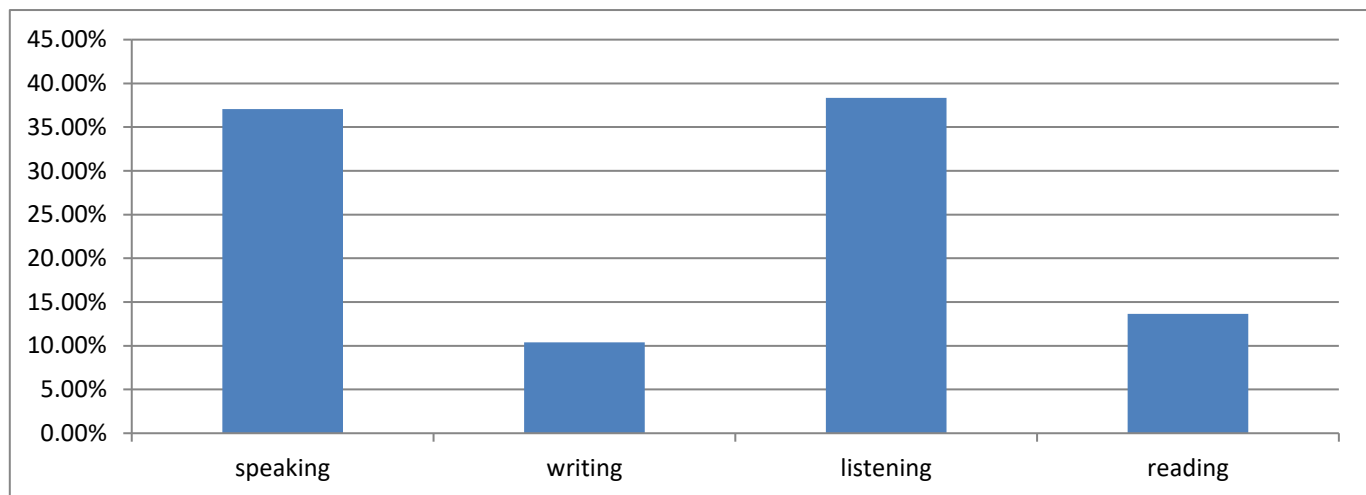
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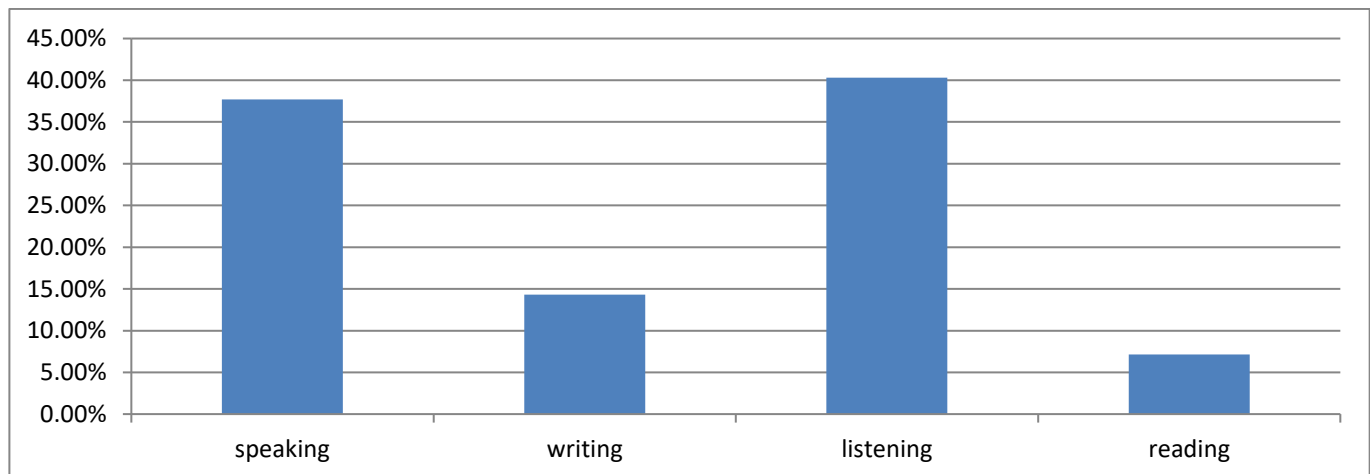
**Tables and Figures**

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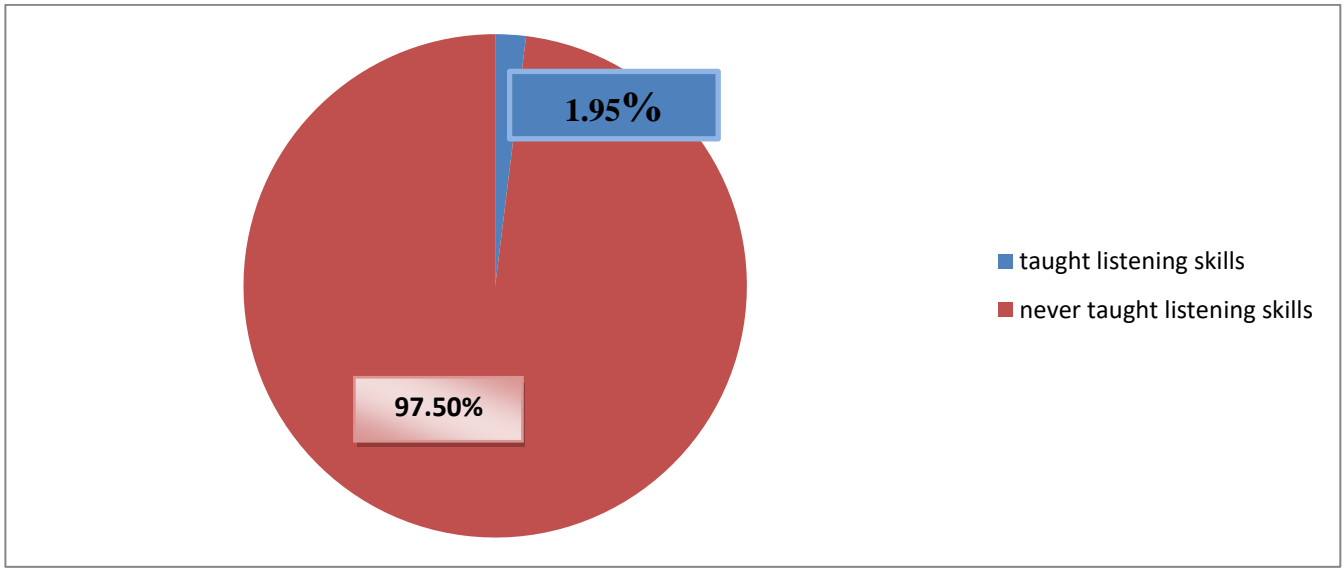
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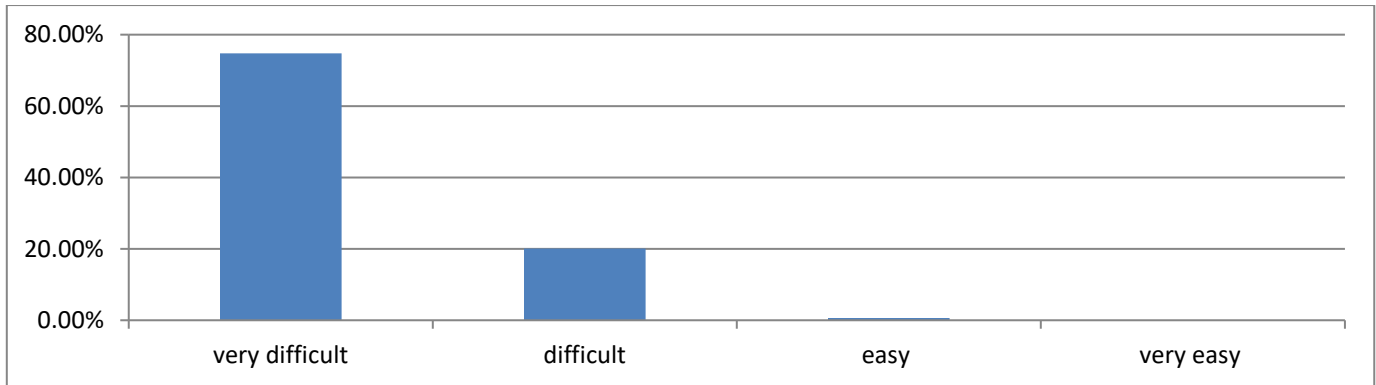
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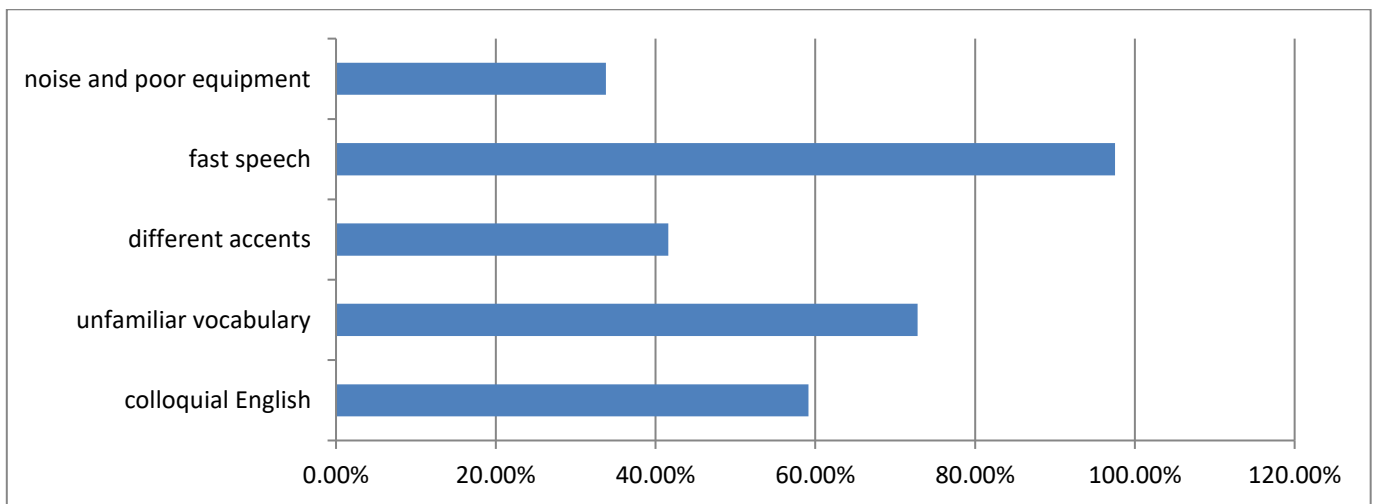
**Bar chart 2: Students' inadequacy in language skills**



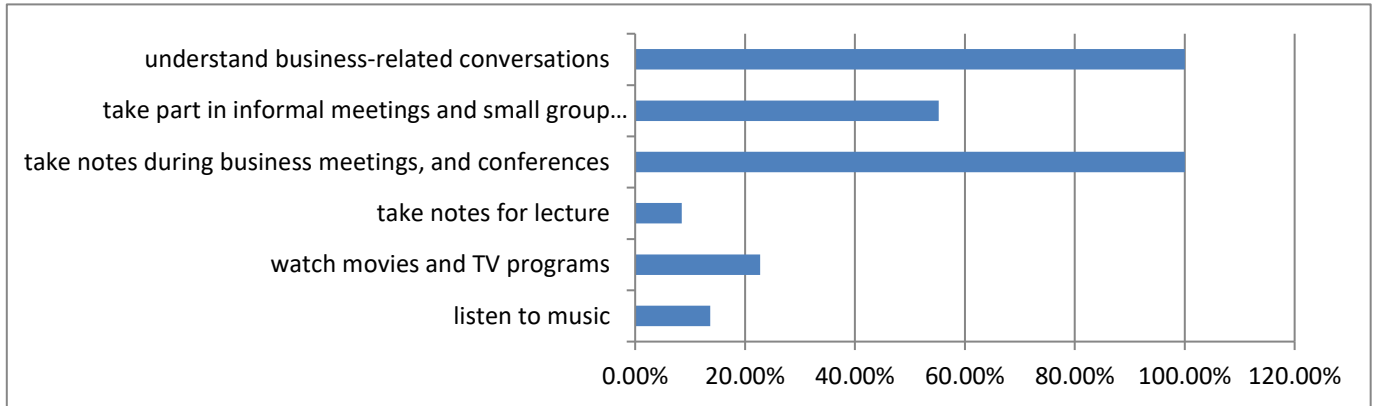
Pie chart 1: Students' experience in studying listening skills



Bar chart 3: Difficulty of the listening skill



Bar chart 4: Difficulties faced by students in listening



**Bar chart 5: Students' needs in listening**