

## Teacher Cognition about Sources of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Listening Anxiety: A Qualitative Study

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**ABSTRACT.** The anxiety that accompanies English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) listening comprehension is difficult to detect and access. Such anxiety will prevent the students from actively and strategically participating in the listening process. This qualitative study aims to explore teachers' cognitions about the sources of students' anxiety during their EFL listening in the classroom in a Chinese tertiary context. The participants' cognitions were elicited through in-depth pre-observation interviews, consecutive classroom observations for one semester, and stimulated recall interviews after each classroom observation. The study found that 16 sources organized into four categories contributed to EFL listening anxiety, among which students' unfamiliarity with cultural backgrounds and topics in the category of input played a prominent role. Pedagogical implications for reducing EFL listening anxiety are also discussed.

**Keywords:** English as a Foreign Language; teacher cognition;  
foreign language listening anxiety (FLLA)

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## Introduction

In the field of foreign language teaching and learning, listening has been taken as a core concept in the language acquisition process (Asher, 1969; James, 1982) and one of the most frequently used language skills in the classroom. Listening is an inseparable part of learning as it serves as a primary channel for learning (Field, 2008; Goh, 2019). However, listening is a term difficult to define because it is a “transient and invisible process that cannot be observed directly” (Rost, 2011: 1). From simply defined as “the activity of paying attention to and trying to get meaning from something we hear” (Underwood, 1989: 1) to a fairly complex “active and dynamic process of attending, perceiving, interpreting, remembering, and responding to the expressed (verbal and nonverbal) needs, concerns, and information offered by other human beings” (Purdy, 1997: 8), listening is reasonably conceived as “a bundle of related processes – recognitions of the sounds uttered by the speaker, perception of intonation patterns showing information focus, interpretation of the relevance of what is being said to the current topic and so on” (Mendelsohn & Lynch, 2013: 190).

Within the context of mainland China, as English learning is a heavily examination-oriented system in both high schools and universities, the teaching of English emphasizes the students’ memorization of the prescribed content such as grammar and vocabulary (Yu, 2006), and the students’ ability to listen and speak English is rarely fairly assessed, if at all. College students, especially English majors, in their early university years find themselves experiencing anxiety in the EFL listening course, as it is a skill that teachers have not been concerned with and developed. Vivid evidence of the students’ anxiety includes their being quiet in class, avoiding eye contact with the teacher, crouching in the last row, and freezing up when called to answer questions, etc. (Tsui, 1996). As an important and compulsory course listed in the curriculum for English majors in Chinese universities, EFL listening is deemed a very, if not the most, difficult language skill, while the present situation of teaching EFL listening in the classroom is far from satisfactory. Both teachers and students of EFL listening courses are not satisfied with the learning outcome when they compare it against the effort they have made in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, it is high time that the tension arising from EFL listening classes be addressed and the significance of research on EFL listening anxiety be highlighted so that research findings will help us illuminate the challenges teachers and students face.

Exploring teacher cognition about the sources of EFL listening anxiety has its special significance. Teachers are regarded as thinking beings rather than teaching machines or technicians of teaching, and teaching is thus viewed as the realization of teachers’ thought processes. Teachers’ personal perceptions about teaching and learning are assumed to guide their decision-making during classroom teaching and thus shape their teaching practice. The present study is expected to provide pedagogical advice for teachers’ future classroom teaching of EFL listening, which may eventually improve students’ language proficiency and overall learning out-

comes in the course. The present study digs deep into how the EFL listening teachers identify and perceive the sources of EFL listening anxiety, which is pivotal for their efficient classroom teaching for enhancing student learning.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 EFL Listening Anxiety**

EFL listening is viewed as “a process of constructing meaning based on multi-dimensional relationships between the learner and all of the internal and external influences and the intrinsic and extrinsic elements involved in that learner’s reality” (Vogely, 1995: 43). The effective learning of EFL listening is affected by many factors, and the influence of anxiety is one of such factors. Dörnyei & Skehan (2003) found that individual difference variables such as aptitude, motivation, emotion, and learning strategies are influential factors in foreign language learning. Among these variables, anxiety seems to bear an extremely important influence (Arnold, 1999; Gregersen, 2005; Horwitz, 2010; Oxford, 1999). Developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) taps into general foreign language anxiety in terms of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The FLCAS has been widely applied by researchers and teachers alike to obtain information from students about their anxiety in foreign language learning (Horwitz, 2010; Zhang, 2001). Listening anxiety as a situation-specific language learning affect has also been investigated. It was first established by Elkhafaifi (2005) as a situation where learners experience fear and nervousness in a foreign language when they are expected to understand what is said to be part of the learning process. Empirical research has also been conducted. For example, Kimura (2008) investigated foreign language listening anxiety among 452 Japanese learners of English and found three factors of anxiety: Emotionality, worry, and anticipatory fear. The conclusion is that anxiety in EFL listening is specific to its situation.

A better understanding of situation-specific anxiety can be achieved through a comparison among the three main categories of anxiety: Trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety. People with trait anxiety have a continual tendency to feel anxious under a variety of situations (Spielberger, 1983), while situation-specific anxiety focuses on one single anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Trait anxiety is generally stable over time and does not have strong fluctuation; situation-specific anxiety has the possibility of being affected by negative emotions (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989, 1991). Different from trait anxiety and situation-specific anxiety which refer to the tendency to be anxious, state anxiety embodies such actual feelings of anxiety as nervousness, discomfort, and uneasiness at a particular point in time (Spielberger, 1983). Situation-specific anxiety cannot be separable from state anxiety as they are both happening in a certain situation and state anxiety can develop into situation-specific anxiety. For example, a student experiences anxiety in EFL listening as a result of poor performance in the class-

room (state anxiety). If experiencing anxiety repeatedly, the student tends to form a solid anxiety in such situations. In other words, the student's state anxiety develops into situation-specific anxiety.

EFL listening anxiety can be specific to various situations where EFL listening is performed, such as EFL listening tests, bidirectional conversations, and unidirectional listening. EFL listening tests are a typical situation where students experience anxiety under the influence of many factors such as the fear of failure. In bidirectional conversations, students' anxiety varies on the basis of their prediction of what to be said. The unidirectional listening in EFL is central to the discussion of this paper, as it is the main form of EFL listening for English majors in Chinese universities. In the unidirectional listening, the listener "has no chance to interrupt the speaker and asks for repetition or clarification" (Graham et al., 2014: 45). Examples of unidirectional listening of EFL listening include listening to English radio broadcast, an English passage, or an English dialogue.

The causal relationship between anxiety in unidirectional EFL listening and EFL listening performance has not been well explored empirically and researchers have not reached consensus. Sparks et al. (1991; 1996; 2000) hold that anxiety in foreign language learning is the consequence of low performance and further speculate that foreign language anxiety is a consequence of cognitive deficits rather than a cause of poor performance. MacIntyre (1995b) and Horwitz (2000) argue that anxiety can be a source of diminished performance among foreign language learners, maintaining that foreign language anxiety can interfere with encoding, storage, and retrieval processes, all of which contribute to low performance. Zhang (2001) found that language anxiety, when experienced by language learners, can be damaging to the learning process, which is consistent with the finding that language anxiety directly undermines motivation and brings about a negative influence on the foreign language under study (Gardner et al., 1987) and that high anxiety interferes with thinking processes and cognitive behaviors, making learning less effective (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). The majority of recent studies also illustrate researchers' revived interest in this field. Garcia-Pastor & Miller (2019) discussed the needs of learners who stutter in EFL learning in relation to their levels of anxiety. The anxiety of the learners was measured using the FLCAS and the Specific Language Skill Anxiety Scale (SLSAS). They found anxiety as a hindrance in students' learning EFL language skills. Wang and Cha (2019) investigated 78 English majors from a Chinese university and examined the differences between, and the effects of FLLA factors on, listening performance in low and high-proficient EFL listeners. The results showed that the listening-anxiety factor was a predictor of poor performance in listening comprehension. Therefore, EFL listening comprehension anxiety becomes an issue which needs to be addressed in the classroom (Vogely, 1998). Listening anxiety occurs when students feel they are faced with a task that is too difficult or unfamiliar to them (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). A recent study by Borekci & Yavuz (2017) has confirmed again such a finding, when the

two researchers explored foreign language listening anxiety among Turkish EFL learners.

Regarding the sources of EFL listening anxiety, only a few relevant studies on foreign language listening anxiety are reported in the literature. Vogely (1998) found that learners must be able to actively and strategically participate in the listening process within a low-anxiety classroom environment. He found that the sources of listening comprehension anxiety reported by the students are associated with four main factors: 1) characteristics of input, such as nature of the speech, level of difficulty, lack of clarity, lack of visual support, and lack of repetition; 2) process-related aspects of listening comprehension, such as inappropriate strategies, lack of processing time, cannot study listening comprehension, and cannot check answers; 3) instructional factors, such as lack of listening comprehension practice, the test thing, uncomfortable environment; and 4) personal attributes of teacher and learner, such as fear of failure/nervousness, and instructor's personality. Students also provided correspondent suggestions. Kim (2002) measured the listening anxiety of 253 EFL learners with the Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) and the FLCAS, and examined the relationship between listening anxiety and learner background factors. The results indicted that EFL learners do experience anxiety in response to listening comprehension and that the two main factors leading to their anxiety are tension and worry over English listening and lack of self-confidence in listening. Hang (2006) conducted a similar study on listening comprehension anxiety based on students reporting sources and presented five categories of sources of listening anxiety, namely, characteristics of listening comprehension, characteristics of the listening materials, characteristics of the tasks, social sources of listening anxiety, and foreign language proficiency and listening level. In Chang's (2008) study of college students' EFL listening anxiety in a classroom context in Taiwan, participants showed moderately high intensity of anxiety in listening to spoken English. The three major sources of listening anxiety included: 1) low confidence in comprehending spoken English, 2) having to take English listening courses as a requirement, and 3) worrying about test difficulty.

## 2.2 Teacher Cognition

Within the field of teacher education, teacher cognition is used as a broad term which encompasses *teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and self-perceptions*. Defined as "the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers know, believe and think" (Borg, 2003: 81), teacher cognition has been shown to exert great influence on teachers' teaching practice (Barnard & Burns, 2012; Meijer et al., 1999).

Regarding how to perceive and understand teachers' classroom performance as well as why and how they make their instructional decisions actively, there emerges a growing body of research on teacher cognition, namely, teachers' beliefs, knowledge, theories, assumptions, and attitudes towards every aspect in their work (e.g., Basturkmen, 2012; Borg, 2003; Borg, 2011; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Ellis, 2019). This research has been expanding greatly within a wide range of language teacher

education settings: In both preservice and inservice contexts, at various levels (from kindergarten to adult education), and regarding many subjects (e.g., English and mathematics) and specific aspects of subjects (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, writing, reading, etc. in English learning).

Abundant literature on second language (L2) teacher cognition covers different curricular areas, such as the teaching of L2 grammar, L2 writing, L2 reading, L2 speaking, L2 vocabulary, and L2 pronunciation. The most recent teacher cognition studies include the teaching of L2 grammar (Sata & Oyanedel, 2019), writing (Ngo, 2018), speaking (Webster, 2019), and pronunciation (Couper, 2019). Although in recent years the research on L2 teacher cognition has expanded rapidly, there is paucity of research on teacher cognition in the field of L2 listening except for a few studies. For example, Gao & Liu (2013) investigated Chinese college English teachers' beliefs about listening instruction and the relationship between teacher beliefs and practices through a questionnaire survey of 325 teachers and a case study of four teachers. Their findings showed that although Chinese college English teachers under investigation have good understanding of the importance of teaching listening and the right focuses on the listening materials such as the background knowledge and local details, mismatches occur between their beliefs and teaching practices. Graham et al. (2014) looked into teachers' stated beliefs and stated practices of 115 foreign language teachers in England regarding listening pedagogy through a questionnaire, lesson observation, post-lesson teacher interviews, and textbook analysis to examine whether such beliefs and practices supported the literature on listening, whether the stated beliefs and stated practices converged, and what factors underpinned them. The results of the study showed that: 1) It is noticeable in teachers' comments that teachers tend to lay more emphasis on completing the task than on instructions of effective listening (p. 49); 2) in their instructional practices, teachers tend to advise students on the best way to listen but not put them into practice in their actual classroom teaching; 3) the task demands were clarified through ensuring that students understood clearly the requirements of the task and how to carried them out; 4) teachers emphasized more the doing or completion of listening tasks; 5) effective listening was described as the listener's ability to identify concrete details and individual items of vocabulary; 6) general instead of personal details found little reflection in respondents' answers; 7) as for such pre-listening activities as prediction, most learners understood them to be revising key words in the listening materials; 8) there is a mismatch between teachers' stated practice and their actual instructions in that they ignored the use of metacognitive strategies, students' exploration of knowledge by themselves, and post-listening activities like discussion. Karimi & Nazari's (2017) study on Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs about listening and their beliefs-driven instructional practices in teaching listening comprehension through a questionnaire and classroom observation showed variations in teachers' beliefs-practices. The results of their study indicated that there was no significant relationship between teachers' beliefs about listening instruction and their listening instructional practices, and that time was the

major obstacle for teachers to actualize their listening beliefs. Given the research gap briefly highlighted above, this study was set up to answer the following research questions.

- 1) Do teachers recognize the effect of anxiety on EFL listening in classroom teaching?
- 2) What is the teacher cognition about sources of EFL listening anxiety?

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study has adopted a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. Qualitative research is not easy to define due to its “multifaceted nature” (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995: 26). Yilmaz (2013: 312) synthesized previous studies on the definition of qualitative research and provided a comprehensive definition in which qualitative research is described as “an emergent, inductive, interpretative and naturalistic approach to the study of people, cases, phenomena, social situations and processes in their natural setting in order to reveal in descriptive terms the meanings that people attach to their experiences of the world.” In terms of data collection, qualitative research is more concerned with the process, context, interpretation, and understanding via inductive reasoning (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2017). Observations, interviews, and document analysis are the major methods that have been used to this end. In analyzing and interpreting data, qualitative researchers identify patterns, themes or categories in the data by organizing them into a more abstract form of information (Peters & Tesar, 2017).

The case study was adopted as the best option in this study for investigating teacher cognition about students’ foreign language listening anxiety, because it is a method that allowed the researchers to obtain deeper insights into the phenomenon under study. It is concerned with a holistic context instead of a specific variable, with a process instead of a product, and with explanatory or exploratory findings instead of confirmatory studies with any pre-assumed hypothesis (Yin, 1994).

#### **3.2 Sampling and Participants**

Sampling in qualitative research can be best achieved by purposive sampling to identify participants who can offer varied and rich understanding of a case. Taking into consideration the issues of feasibility, iteration, and saturation, this study, through purposive sampling, selected five Chinese EFL listening teachers from a major university in northern China based on their differences in many aspects, such as age, gender, educational background, teaching years and teaching experiences. All of these factors were understood to have an impact on their cognitions. Apart from the principle of voluntariness, the participating teachers were chosen according to the following criteria as displayed in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1** Sampling Criteria

Criteria	Reason(s)
They must have been teaching EFL listening to English majors for at least one semester.	They can systematically arrange and share their cognitions about their classroom pedagogical instructions with the first author.
They represent a range of EFL listening teachers' characteristics.	They are teachers of different ages, different educational backgrounds, different work experiences, and different teaching styles.

In order to protect the participants from being negatively affected in any sense, a pseudonym was chosen for each of them. The demographic information about the five participating teachers is summarized in Table 3.2.

**Table 3.2** Participating teachers' demographic information

Name	Amy	Daisy	Ella	Hannah	Alfred
Age	44	44	37	38	39
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male
Qualifications	BA	MA	MA	MA	MA
Years of teaching EFL	20+	20+	13	14	15
Years of teaching EFL listening	20+	0.5	7	1	15

### 3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected in the Semester One that ran from September 2015 to January 2016. Data collection consisted of two major phases. In Phase One (the first week of the semester), the first author conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with the five university EFL listening teachers, which provided a holistic view on the participating teachers' cognitions about the sources of EFL listening anxiety. In Phase Two (the 2<sup>nd</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> week of the semester), classroom observations and post-observation interviews were held in an integrated way. The purpose of Phase Two was to observe and record the teachers' teaching behavior in teaching EFL listening and probe further into their mental lives that might shape their pedagogical decision-making when EFL listening anxiety occurred among students. Post-observation interviews sought explanations from the participating teachers about their classroom instructions.

The data in this research were collected through two main instruments: Interviews and observation. The interviews included pre-observation interviews and post-observation interviews. The pre-observation interviews were in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews which took approximately one hour for each participating teacher. The post-observation interviews were the stimulated recall interviews about the teachers' account of their instructional practices in the classroom. The observation of teachers' EFL listening instructional practices happened during the teaching process in the classroom, audio-recorded for later data transcription and analysis.



### **3.4 Data Analysis**

All the data were transcribed verbatim. They were then analyzed under a framework guided by three stages of data processing: Data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2014). The condensation of data in the present qualitative study, through the integration of the main methods and stages of qualitative data analysis elaborated in the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2014; Strauss, 1987), was conducted by the first author in three steps: Transcription, coding, and analysis. These steps were closely interrelated and they paved the way for each other, making it possible for the analysis to move cyclically among these steps.

One key issue in transcribing the data, which is worth mentioning, was the translation of the transcripts. As “language differences may have consequences, because concepts in one language may be understood differently in another language” (Van Nes et al., 2010: 313), what to translate and when to translate was a difficult choice. Translation was not done during transcribing the interview data because the original language used by the participating teachers could better convey their meanings and be understood by the first author for comprehension and analysis. This decision is well justified in Sechrest et al.’s (1972) statement that much information can be lost in the course of translation because of the lack of equivalent vocabulary, syntax, idioms, and concepts between the source language and the target language.

Based on Braun & Clarke’s (2006) six phases of thematic analysis, the first author developed a six-step data analysis model. The six-step model includes getting familiar with the data, writing summaries within cases, constantly comparing and contrasting across cases, generating initial codes, searching, reviewing, and naming themes, and producing the report. In order to confirm the validity of themes and categories, two PhD candidates working on relevant research topics in The University of Auckland were invited to analyze a small part of the data. These themes and categories were reviewed and verified by the two co-authors of this paper.

## **4. Teacher Cognition about Sources of EFL Listening Anxiety**

The findings of this study indicate that the teachers agree that the difficulty students experience in EFL listening comprehension results in anxiety, and EFL listening anxiety is regarded as a primary reason that prevents students from reaching the expected performance level in learning EFL listening typically measured through tests in the classroom. The categories of sources of listening comprehension anxiety developed by Vogely (1998) were adopted to analyze teacher cognition about sources of EFL listening anxiety, which is shown in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1** Teacher cognition about the sources of EFL listening anxiety

Category	Sources of anxiety	Participant
Input	Unfamiliar cultural background	Amy, Ella, Hannah, Alfred
	Unfamiliar topic	Amy, Daisy, Ella, Hannah, Alfred
	Syntax	Amy, Daisy, Ella, Hannah, Alfred
	Vocabulary	Amy, Daisy, Ella, Hannah, Alfred
	Lack of visualizing ability	Alfred
	Genre	Hannah
Process	Fast speech rate	Amy, Daisy, Hannah, Ella
	Lack of EFL listening strategies	Daisy, Ella, Alfred
	Failure to check answers	Daisy
	Poor short-term memory	Daisy
Instructional factors	Lack of EFL listening practice	Alfred
	Uncomfortable EFL listening environment	Daisy, Ella
	Task types	Hannah
Personal factors	Nervousness of students when doing EFL listening	Amy
	Students' incorrect pronunciation	Amy, Daisy, Ella, Hannah, Alfred
	Instructor's teaching styles	Amy, Daisy

The 16 sources of EFL listening anxiety in the four categories of input, process, instructional factors, and personal factors reported by the participating teachers are elaborated on in the following sections.

#### 4.1 Sources of EFL Listening Anxiety Related to Input Features

The category of input features takes a primary part in the sources of EFL listening anxiety reported by the participating teachers. The sources of EFL listening anxiety in this category can be further sorted into three main subcategories: Background information about the foreign language culture and the topic of the listening activity, linguistic factors, including syntax and vocabulary, and the speech rate of the recordings.

The participating teachers agreed that unfamiliarity with background information about the culture and topic involved in the EFL listening material caused EFL listening anxiety. Amy's views are representative of the other participants.

*The cultural background is the first thing to know about (for students). A piece of listening material will be beyond comprehension without knowing the cultural background.* (Amy, female, 44, 20+ years' teaching experience in EFL listening)

Amy also provided an example which illustrates the importance of familiarity with background information on the topic.

*The listening material will be too difficult if it is not familiar (to you), isn't it? ... Let's say the material is about a western custom: If you know about this western custom, it will be easy for you to comprehend; if you know nothing about it, it will be too difficult for you.* (Amy, female, 44, 20+ years' teaching experience in EFL listening)

Daisy's suggestion of the importance of topic familiarity was agreed with by other participating teachers:

*Maybe students are not familiar with the topic of the listening material. It can be about something very technical, such as topics concerning biology or engineering that students of liberal arts haven't learnt, which results in the loss in students' listening efficiency. Contrary to an ancient Chinese idiom that goes "every subject has its own experts," everyone has blind spots in his or her learning.* (Daisy, female, 44, 0.5 years' teaching experience in EFL listening)

The second subcategory of linguistic factors, which includes syntax and vocabulary, is an important source of EFL listening anxiety. Difficulty with syntax, especially long and complex sentences, was identified by all the participants as an important source of this anxiety type. When sentences are too long, students lose their focus on meaning, and as listening is a linear and transient process, they cannot go back and check the parts where their comprehension was hindered, if the listening task was a test. The complexity of English sentences also makes them difficult as they are very different in structure from Chinese ones, as Amy said in this interview extract:

*English sentence structure is different from that of Chinese sentences. A very simple example is about the sequence of sentence constituents: English sentences put the important information first, while Chinese sentences have a lot of attributive modifiers at the front and put the most important information at the end.* (Amy, female, 44, 20+ years' teaching experience in EFL listening)

As well as differences in the sequence of sentence constituents, English sentences are especially difficult with complex grammatical features such as parenthesis and ellipses. Compound sentences consisting of a main clause and subordinate clauses are also difficult for students during EFL listening.

The second linguistic factor that produces listening anxiety is vocabulary. Daisy thinks this is the most important factor which hinders students from in-depth EFL listening comprehension. Hannah also found that vocabulary is one of the biggest barriers to listening, and the weakest point of her students. They emphasized that vocabulary blocks students from efficient EFL listening comprehension in two ways: For those students who are beginners and do not have a strong command of vocabulary (as in Hannah's and Alfred's case), some everyday English words may prevent them from proper reception of information; for students who do have a large vocabulary, unfamiliar technical terms and slang can be a problem. Technical terms are included in the technical topics of the EFL listening materials. They

account for the difficulty of EFL listening materials on technical topics. Slang words are another aspect of vocabulary in the EFL listening course which causes students' comprehension problems.

Examples can be found in the participants' interview data:

*As for students in Year One in our college, their command of vocabulary is small. They need more time to memorize or to get familiar with the words. In my class I find that their main difficulty in comprehending listening is their limited vocabulary.* (Alfred, male, 39, 15 years' teaching experience in EFL listening)

*Vocabulary is a factor. They (students) sometimes may get stuck in a key word which they don't understand, and the word appears many times: This definitely has a negative influence on their listening efficiency.* (Amy, female, 44, 20+ years' teaching experience in EFL listening)

*Another source of EFL listening anxiety in vocabulary is slangs. In slangs, every word is familiar (to students), and the sentence patterns involved are also simple. However, students just don't understand the meanings conveyed (in the slangs). The meaning of a slang is not the simple combination of the meanings of the words contained in the slang.* (Ella, female, 37, 7 years' teaching experience in EFL listening)

The third subcategory within input sources of listening anxiety is the speech rate of the speakers in the recordings. Four out of five participants mentioned that the fast speech rate was frequently a factor which accounted for anxiety in EFL listening. When the speech rate is fast, the message delivery to the students becomes slower and less efficient.

Apart from the three main subcategories presented above, some other input-related factors, such as lack of visualizing ability and genre of the listening materials, were also mentioned in the interview data. In Alfred's opinion, the ability to visualize during listening is an indicator of a good listener.

*There is a saying concerning EFL reading, "An efficient reader can visualize what he reads." I think it is also true of a good listener. An efficient listener can visualize what he or she is listening to. He or she also able to visualize what they have heard.* (Alfred, male, 39, 15 years' teaching experience in EFL listening)

The genre of the listening materials can be a cause of EFL listening anxiety, especially news reports because of their fast speech rate, up-to-date content and structure peculiar to the genre germane to news reports. Some textbooks have included TV news reports as teaching materials to be used in the EFL listening classroom, but seldom have the textbook writers addressed the challenge that such materials pose to EFL learners. What is comforting is that Bell (2003) explored the criteria for selecting TV news, which should have pedagogical implications for the

selection of EFL listening materials, which can help learners alleviate their levels of anxiety.

#### **4.2 Sources of EFL Listening Anxiety Related to Process Features**

Participating teachers mentioned three subcategories of process-related sources of EFL listening anxiety: The lack of EFL listening strategies, failure to check answers, and poor short-term memory. The first subcategory is the lack of EFL listening strategies in students and of EFL listening anxiety:

*There is a misunderstanding about EFL listening comprehension among students. They think that the comprehension of listening materials means understanding or translating every word of the materials. Actually it is not the case. They instead need strategies as important for EFL listening. For example, some students do not know how to take notes during the listening process; as a result, they lose much information, which prevent them from good understanding of the material. (Daisy, female, 44, 0.5 years' teaching experience in EFL listening)*

Students instead should be focusing on the message conveyed in the listening material. A misunderstanding of the process of EFL listening raises anxiety levels in the listening activity, and frustrates students through their preoccupation that they may miss the key point, or find that the topic is not what they expect. As a result, students of EFL listening always feel uncertain about the sentences they are listening to, which lowers their confidence, and thus reduces the time to engage with the following sentences.

The second subcategory is failure to check answers during the listening process. Unlike EFL reading, during which students can confirm the information and message by re-reading when they feel uncertain about some part of the material, unidirectional EFL listening is a linear and transient process during which students can only move forward and may lose the sound information they had just heard. Failure to check answers increases EFL listening anxiety for students during their listening process. Alfred talked about this topic:

*Students look like lost at the time during listening process when they try to confirm some information but cannot. Listening is a linear process and cannot be reversed; you cannot listen back to the point that confuses you as you can in reading. (Alfred, male, 39, 15 years' teaching experience in EFL listening)*

The third subcategory is students' poor short-term memory. Short-term memory gets its name because the knowledge that gets attention and moves on for further processing will be maintained in human mind for no more than 20 seconds (Karpov, 2014). The main function for short-term memory is not to store or maintain knowledge but to process it in depth (to think it over and over again). The processing of knowledge in short-term memory will determine if certain knowledge is to be

remembered, or not, and the way in which the knowledge is to be remembered. Daisy mentioned the effect of short-term memory on listening outcomes:

*Short-term memory is important. As short-term memory affects reading, it also affects listening. A student will definitely have high listening scores if he or she has good short-term memory.* (Daisy, female, 44, 0.5 years' teaching experience in EFL listening)

#### **4.3 Sources of EFL Listening Anxiety Related to Instructional Factors**

Three subcategories mentioned by the participating teachers fall into sources of EFL listening anxiety related to instructional factors: The lack of listening practice, uncomfortable environment, and task types. The first is the lack of listening practice. Alfred and Hannah emphasized this factor in their talk:

*I think the primary reason for students' anxiety in EFL listening is the lack of listening practice. The amount of input is important.* (Alfred, male, 39, 15 years' teaching experience in EFL listening)

*Without a large amount of time immersed in EFL listening practice, I think it is super unrealistic for students to achieve anything in this course.* (Hannah, female, 38, 1 year's teaching experience in EFL listening)

Alfred further explained that the insufficient class hours is a contributing factor to this source.

*Limited help is offered through the EFL listening lessons to the improvement of students' listening ability due to the insufficient class hours. Let's say there are 48 or 64 periods of EFL listening in one semester, which occupies only a small portion of all the class hours in the whole semester. Even if you use every class hour 100% efficiently, the overall time (spent on EFL listening practice) cannot reach the ideal level.* (Alfred, male, 39, 15 years' teaching experience in EFL listening)

The second subcategory is an uncomfortable or distracting environment for listening. Anything that happens in or outside the classroom, may distract students, or make them feel uncomfortable, thus negatively influencing their EFL listening performance. Daisy's view was consistent with other participants:

*The environment of EFL listening, such as the noise outside the classroom, influences students' performance in listening practice. Therefore if there is noise outside the classroom in my class, I will have the door and windows closed to prevent those noises from distracting students away from attentive listening.* (Daisy, female, 44, 0.5 years' teaching experience in EFL listening)

The third subcategory is task types. Some studies have found that task types have an influence on EFL listening performance (e.g., Brindley & Slatyer, 2002; Chang

& Read, 2006; Hu, 2006; Huang, 1998). According to the teachers, the task types mainly adopted in EFL listening classes include dictation, multiple choices, gap-fillings, and answering open-ended questions. The difficulty level of EFL listening practice related to task types is not fixed, but is subject to individual students' listening experience and their strength and weakness in listening. Although there are individual differences in students, it is generally accepted that, in terms of the requirements of task types and the information provided, the hierarchy of tasks from easy to difficult is multiple choice, gap-filling, dictation, and answering questions.

Teachers' remarks on task types as a source of students' anxiety in EFL listening were consistent with Lund's (1990) findings. Lund (1990) established a taxonomy for teaching second language listening tasks, in which he classified listening tasks into two main categories: Listener function and listener response. In his taxonomy, listener function has six subcategories: Identification, orientation, main idea comprehension, detail comprehension, full comprehension, and replication; while listener response contains nine subcategories: Doing, choosing, transferring, answering, condensing, extending, duplicating, modeling, and conversing. The classification of the four common task types in EFL listening, according to Lund's framework of listener function and listener response, are illustrated in Table 5.4 below. For conciseness the following abbreviation are used: MC – multiple choices; GF – gap-filling; DT – dictation; and AQ – answering open-ended questions.

**Table 5.4** Classification of EFL listening task types  
in terms of listener function and listener response

Function	Identification	Orientation	Main idea comprehension	Detail comprehension	Full comprehension	Replication
Response						
Doing						
Choosing		MC	MC	MC	MC	
Transferring	GF	MC; GF	MC	MC; GF	MC	
Answering		MC; AQ	MC; AQ	MC; AQ	MC; AQ	
Condensing	GF	GF; AQ	AQ	GF; AQ	AQ	
Extending		AQ	AQ	AQ	AQ	
Duplicating	GF; DT	GF		GF		DT
Modeling						
Conversing		MC; AQ	MC; AQ	MC; AQ	MC; AQ	

In multiple choice tasks, which is a traditional type of EFL listening tasks, students are asked to choose one answer from four options provided below the question. It is the easiest type of EFL listening task in form because it provides all the information needed to answer the question; what students need to do is to tell the correct one from the four options. In this task type, the listener functions involved are orientation, main idea comprehension, detail comprehension, and full comprehension; the listener responses involved are choosing, transferring, and answering.

Gap-filling ranks as the second easiest on the list because information, which assists students with listening comprehension process and working out the answers, is provided in the question. In this task type, the listener functions involved are identification, orientation, and detail comprehension; the listener responses involved are transferring, condensing and duplicating.

Dictation is difficult because no written information is provided and students need to replicate the original text accurately including every punctuation mark. In this task type, the listener functions involved are identification and replication; the listener response involved is duplicating.

The most difficult task type is answering questions in which no information is provided and students are asked to use their logical reasoning and language skills to answer the questions in organized sentences. Students need to first organize their thinking and then to organize their words, which involves a number of strategies and skills. In this task type, the listener functions involved are orientation, main idea comprehension, comprehension of details, and full comprehension; the listener responses involved are answering, condensing, extending, and conversing.

#### **4.4 Sources of EFL Listening Anxiety Related to Personal Factors**

Three subcategories under the source of difficulty related to personal factors are nervousness of students when doing EFL listening, students' incorrect pronunciation, and instructors' teaching styles. Among the three subcategories, students' incorrect pronunciation was highlighted by teachers.

*Some students incorrectly pronounce certain words and regard the wrong pronunciation as correct, which results in their poor EFL listening ability. (Ella, female, 37, 7 years' teaching experience in EFL listening)*

When elaborating on the subcategory of instructors' teaching styles, Alfred emphasized that teachers' harsh remark and correction of students' mistakes may raise students' EFL listening anxiety levels. He commented on this negative effect by verbalizing:

*Students are afraid of making mistakes during EFL listening class especially when they are called to provide their answers. They tend to feel hurt or at least uncomfortable as a result of losing face in front of the whole class when they are criticized or discouraged by the teacher. (Alfred, male, 39, 15 years' teaching experience in EFL listening)*

The sources of EFL listening anxiety related to personal factors are principally connected with pronunciation and students' fright of losing face in front of the whole class. As the students are not native speakers of English, they are not confident of their pronunciation even when they get the correct answer. Therefore they are often apt to hide themselves when the teacher calls their names.



## 5. Discussion and Interpretation

In view of the research questions stated above, teachers have identifiable cognitions about the sources of EFL listening anxiety. The interview data showed that they realized that EFL listening is not an easy task for students due to its complex nature which involves much more than passively absorbing information. Instead, EFL listening is an active and dynamic process between the listening material and the listener. This is consistent with Purdy's (1997: 7) definition of listening as an "active and dynamic process of attending, perceiving, interpreting, remembering, and responding to the expressed needs, concerns, and information offered by other human beings" and other definitions of listening (e.g., Mendelsohn & Lynch, 2013; Rost, 2011; Underwood, 1989).

Teachers recognized the negative effect of anxiety on EFL listening during classroom teaching, which is in keeping with the findings of most of the foreign language anxiety literature and studies on anxiety in the different language skills such as listening (Zhang, 2013). The anxiety in EFL listening is a result of listening to spoken materials without the possibility of reacting or interacting with the speaker, as pointed out in Graham et al.'s (2014) study.

Concerning our second research question, the interview and observation data in this study suggest that the participating teachers were aware of the sources of EFL listening anxiety. The sources mentioned by the teachers were diverse. Teachers emphasized background information about cultures and topics, linguistic factors such as vocabulary, and the speech rate of the speakers in the recordings as major sources of EFL listening anxiety related to input features. This finding aligns with those reported in Hang (2006), who found that characteristics of listening materials, especially the topic of the material and the difficulty of vocabulary, is a major source of listening anxiety. Vogely's (1998) research had similar findings about listening comprehension anxiety, which was termed "nature of the speech" as one input-related source of listening anxiety.

Lack of practice, lack of listening strategies, and failure to check answers were mentioned by participating teachers as major sources of EFL listening anxiety (see Vogely, 1998). Instructors' teaching styles mentioned by the participating teachers as a source of anxiety echo Hang's (2006) research as well, where "inappropriate teacher behavior in class" was found to be a social source of listening anxiety. Young's (1991) finding also points to the phenomenon that teachers' harsh manner of correcting students' errors is often anxiety-provoking. The participating teachers mentioned genre and task types as sources of EFL listening anxiety. Similar results were found in Chang's (2008) study on sources of EFL listening anxiety. Scarcella & Oxford (1992) also found that students have listening anxiety when they feel they are faced with a too difficult or unfamiliar task. Teachers' cognitions about students' incorrect pronunciation, and the linguistic factor of syntax, namely, long and difficult sentences, as sources of EFL listening anxiety finds little correspondence in the relevant literature. This is really some interestingly meaningful

finding that adds new empirical evidence to the research on the sources of EFL listening anxiety.

## **6. Conclusions**

This qualitative study was set up to investigate teachers' cognitions about the sources of EFL listening anxiety. It was found that 16 sources organized into four categories contributed to their EFL listening anxiety, among which students' unfamiliarity with cultural backgrounds and topics in the category of input played a prominent role. Such research on teacher cognition about the sources of EFL listening anxiety and the findings have theoretical implications for research on EFL listening anxiety and on teacher cognition. It modestly expands the knowledge about EFL listening anxiety by focusing on what teachers think and believe, instead of what only focusing on what students think. More meaningfully, the study was carried out qualitatively in order to counterbalance the dominant trend in foreign language anxiety research that is predominantly quantitative in methodology. This study also provides new empirical evidence for the research on teacher cognition about EFL listening anxiety because the findings related to teachers' cognitions about students' incorrect pronunciation, and the linguistic factors of syntax as sources of EFL listening anxiety are new to the field of teacher cognition research. The findings from the present research might also have pedagogical implications for teachers of EFL listening. Being aware of the sources of EFL listening anxiety appears to be a necessary first step before teachers adapt their teaching of EFL listening in various stages to alleviate students' anxiety and facilitate their students' learning outcomes, typically shown in their students' development of language proficiency.

Despite its significance, our study is not exempt from limitations. A two-stage qualitative research design was adopted to explore five teachers' cognitions about the sources of EFL listening anxiety over a 16-week academic semester. Although the study was well-planned and carefully carried out, two limitations need to be taken into consideration: The small sample size and the lack of data from students. Firstly, whereas a sample of five teachers from one Chinese university is appropriate for qualitative research, a larger sample size from different universities or provinces would ensure greater representativeness and generalizability of the results. Secondly, data from students' perspectives, such as their classroom learning of EFL listening and their cognitions about the sources of EFL listening anxiety as complementary evidence, may have allowed for a more holistic study.

Future research might consider increasing the number of the participants and broadening the contexts from which they were chosen for greater generalization. The possible differences among teachers in aspects such as birthplaces, educational backgrounds, working experiences, and professional development can lead to differences in their cognitions about EFL listening anxiety. Secondly, it is advisable for future research to include data on students' classroom learning and their cognitions about the sources of EFL listening anxiety to be collected through interviews and/or

other data collection instruments (e.g., the Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale, Kim, 2002). The evidence from students' perspective would provide feedback to teachers and enhance their cognitions about EFL listening, especially listening anxiety.

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### **Author Contributions**

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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