

Enhancing Upper Primary Students' Listening Comprehension Skills through Structured Listening Activities

Paing Khant Zaw¹, I Made Sujana², Lalu Thohir³

¹EDUSN Digital International School, Myanmar

^{2,3}English Education Program, University of Mataram, West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia.

Received : 8 August 2026

Revised : 29 September 2026

Accepted : 29 September 2026

Published: 30 September 2026

Corresponding Author

Author Name: Paing Khant Zaw

Email: pyzawer@gmail.com

DOI: 10.29303/jeef.v6i3.1108

© 2025 The Authors. This open access article is distributed under a (CC-BY License)



Abstract: This classroom action research investigated how structured listening activities improve the listening comprehension of Year 4 English as a Second Language (ESL) students at an international school. Twenty students took part in two cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, in which lessons followed a pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening sequence. Data were collected through listening comprehension tests, an observation checklist, teacher field notes, and a student questionnaire, and were analyzed descriptively and with the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The class mean increased from 5.75 on the pre-test to 6.55 after Cycle 1 and 7.75 after Cycle 2, and the proportion of students reaching the mastery score of 7.0 rose from 25% to 80%. Pre-listening vocabulary and sentence preparation, segmented audio with focused tasks, guided sentence completion, and peer answer checking increased the students' attention, participation, and independence, while their reliance on teacher confirmation and repeated playback decreased. The findings suggest that structured listening activities are an effective approach for improving the listening comprehension of upper primary ESL learners.

Keywords: classroom action research, listening comprehension, structured listening activities, primary ESL learners, listening instruction

INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension, as the main means of receiving input from the real world, is one of the first skills to be learned in ESL. Listening also supports the development of other language skills: listening and speaking performance are closely related (Abu-Snoubar, 2017), and listening comprehension underpins reading comprehension (Hogan et al., 2014). Listening is an active skill in the classroom that requires students to demonstrate sophisticated cognitive skills to comprehend the teacher's instructions and to participate in the classroom session effectively. Students rely on their auditory memory to understand the teacher during the lesson (Tyagi, 2013). Beyond the physical ability to hear sounds, listening also requires cognitive skills such as the ability to pay attention to specific auditory information and to recall the information heard (Assaf, 2015; Bloomfield et al., 2010).

In upper-primary English curricula (roughly Grades 4–6), expectations for listening comprehension shift from basic understanding toward more complex, academic, and functional uses of spoken language. Specifically, according to the Cambridge Primary English Curriculum Framework (syllabus code 0058; Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2020), Stage 4 learners are expected to actively engage with a broad range of spoken text types. Under the Showing Understanding sub-strand, this research specifically focuses on students' ability to follow the main points of spoken texts and process spoken English accurately during classroom listening tasks. These competencies are fundamental to listening comprehension and are the primary skills targeted through structured listening activities. However, many

contemporary language courses still place a disproportionate prominence on reading and writing, inadvertently treating listening as a secondary or supplementary skill (Bello, 2018). As a result, learners are often given few structured opportunities to develop the listening skills that the curriculum expects.

A preliminary non-participant observation of a Year 4 English class at an international school in the 2025 academic year ($n = 20$) revealed a marked gap between these curricular expectations and the students' performance. Most learners had difficulty understanding spoken texts, lost attention during oral input, and often failed to process and carry out two-step and three-step spoken instructions. Their participation in post-listening activities, such as answering comprehension questions, was also low. An informal ten-item diagnostic listening test administered with an assistant teacher confirmed the problem: the class average was 50%, and only five students scored above 70%.

These difficulties reflect cognitive and linguistic problems that are widely discussed in second language listening research. Limited vocabulary prevents learners from recognizing words in speech, even words they know in written form, and the absence of clear word boundaries in connected speech makes it difficult to segment the stream of sounds into words (Darti & Asmawati, 2017; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Goh, 2000). In addition, learners tend to decode every word instead of using top-down strategies such as predicting the content and listening for general meaning, which quickly overloads working memory and interferes with comprehension (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

Research suggests that such problems can be reduced when listening lessons are structured and supported. Providing background knowledge and repeating the input improve EFL learners' listening performance (Chang & Read, 2006); metacognitive instruction helps young learners plan, monitor, and evaluate their listening (Goh & Taib, 2006); and explicit teaching of listening strategies has developed the listening comprehension of 9- to 11-year-old students (Colognesi & Zito, 2025). These forms of support can be organized within the familiar pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening lesson sequence (Field, 2008). However, classroom-based evidence on how such a sequence works with upper primary ESL learners in international school settings remains limited. This study therefore addressed the following research question: How does the implementation of structured listening activities support upper primary students in improving their listening comprehension performance?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed classroom action research (CAR), a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting through which teachers investigate and improve their own practice (Mertler, 2024). The cycles were to be repeated until the criteria of success were met, and two cycles were conducted. The study took place in a Year 4 class at an international school in Mandalay, Myanmar, during the 2025 academic year. The participants were the 20 students of the class, who were selected purposively because their listening assessment results averaged about 50% and they frequently lost focus during listening tasks. The lessons were planned and documented in collaboration with the classroom teacher, and classroom processes were recorded through non-participant observation.

Each cycle consisted of four stages. In the planning stage, structured listening materials suitable for Year 4 learners were prepared, including guided listening tasks, listening games, and visual materials, together with the research instruments. In the acting stage, the lessons followed a three-phase sequence: pre-listening (vocabulary preview with visual support and prediction), while-listening (guided listening tasks completed during repeated playback), and post-listening (answer checking, peer discussion, and a group summary). In the observing stage, the students' engagement, participation, and listening behaviors were recorded. In the reflecting stage, the strengths and weaknesses of the cycle were identified, and the lessons were revised for the next cycle if the criteria of success had not been met.

Four instruments were used to allow triangulation. A listening comprehension test, scored out of 10, was administered as a pre-test and after each cycle. Part A consisted of multiple-choice questions on specific information (e.g., names, numbers, and places) in short dialogues, and Part B consisted of action-based tasks, such as sequencing events and short-answer questions, that required the students to follow spoken information. An observation checklist recorded attention to instructions, participation, task completion, and responsiveness during the lessons. Teacher field notes, written immediately after each lesson, documented student engagement, classroom interaction, difficulties, successful

strategies, and follow-up actions. Finally, a short questionnaire administered at the end of the intervention elicited the students' perceptions of the difficulty of the activities, their enjoyment, and the factors that supported or hindered their comprehension.

The qualitative data from the observations, field notes, and open-ended questionnaire items were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. In data reduction, descriptive codes were first assigned to segments of the data (e.g., visual stimulus attention and replay dependency) and then grouped through pattern coding into four themes: student engagement, listening comprehension development, confidence and independent listening, and listening barriers. The reduced data were displayed in a matrix comparing the baseline, Cycle 1, and Cycle 2 at each stage of the lesson (Table 2). The test results were analyzed descriptively using the class mean and the percentage of students reaching the mastery score.

The percentage improvement was calculated using the following formula:

$$\text{Percentage Improvement} = \frac{(\text{Post-test Mean}) - (\text{Pre-test Mean})}{(\text{Pre-test Mean})} \times 100\%$$

The quantitative and qualitative findings were triangulated by examining whether changes in the test scores were consistent with the observed changes in engagement and listening behavior. The intervention was considered successful when (a) the students reached the minimum competency level (MCL) of 70%, that is, a score of at least 7.0 out of 10; (b) the observation data and field notes showed increased engagement during listening activities; and (c) the qualitative data showed consistent positive changes in listening behaviors across the cycles.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Baseline Findings

The pre-test ($n = 20$) showed a class mean of 5.75 out of 10 (57.5%), with scores ranging from 4 to 9, and only five students (25%) reached the mastery score of 7.0. Classroom observation identified three main sources of difficulty. First, the students had low vocabulary retention: they could recognize words in printed word lists but failed to recognize the same words in speech and then stopped listening to the rest of the text. Second, they had difficulty processing connected speech, as they could not identify words spoken fluently with few pauses and therefore could not interpret the gist. Third, they tried to decode every unknown word instead of guessing from context and often needed individual clarification from the teacher to complete the tasks. These results indicated that the students needed guided support at each stage of the listening lesson, together with explicit vocabulary support, to reduce the cognitive demands of unscaffolded listening.

Cycle 1

In Cycle 1, the lessons used a listening text about a zoo visit. Before listening, new vocabulary related to the text was introduced with flashcards and pictures, and the students predicted and noted down words and sentences they expected to hear. While listening, they completed a guided listening

form and could listen to the text again when needed. After listening, they checked their answers, taught one another, and summarized the lesson in groups. The class mean increased from 5.75 to 6.55, an improvement of 13.91% (Table 1).

The observation data showed that visual supports focused the students' attention during pre-listening and helped most of them predict that the text was about a zoo visit. However, participation in the prediction activities was uneven, as only four or five confident students contributed actively. Attention was high when the audio started but declined during longer sections. Eleven students answered all the multiple-choice questions correctly, and most students identified the main idea of the text, but many missed specific details such as numbers and descriptions. Many students asked for the audio to be replayed, often because they had missed the first words, and many waited for teacher confirmation or compared answers with peers before responding. Unfamiliar vocabulary, the natural speech rate, and long audio sections remained the main barriers, and open-ended written answers were difficult because the students had to process the audio while producing complete sentences. These problems became the focus of Cycle 2.

Cycle 2

Cycle 2 kept the three-phase framework but introduced targeted refinements, using a listening text entitled "Family Park Outing." In pre-listening, vocabulary about family members, park activities, the weather, and objects and places in the park was practiced in simple sentences, so that the students predicted possible events rather than isolated words. In while-listening, the audio was divided into shorter segments and paused at natural breaks, and the tasks moved from multiple-choice questions on specific details to sequencing events (e.g., riding bicycles, having a picnic, taking photographs, and sitting near the pond) and guided sentence completion (e.g., "The weather was ____."), which replaced the open-ended questions. In post-listening, the students compared and justified their answers in pairs before receiving teacher feedback.

As shown in Table 1, the class mean rose to 7.75, and 16 of the 20 students (80%) reached the mastery score, compared with five students (25%) on the pre-test. Four students remained below the benchmark and needed individual support, particularly with longer recordings, key details, and independent strategy use.

The observation data showed clear changes in the students' listening behavior. Visual story previews combined with sentence prompts produced immediate class-wide focus, and participation in predictions spread across the class instead of being limited to the students at the front. The segmented audio helped the students stay on task throughout the activity, blank answers on the worksheets disappeared, and the students captured both main actions and specific details. Replay requests declined and were used strategically to check specific details. Output hesitation and peer copying decreased, and the students checked one another's answers and justified them with evidence from the audio instead of waiting for teacher confirmation. Pre-taught vocabulary and paused delivery also reduced the strain caused by unfamiliar words and the natural speech rate.

The questionnaire results supported these observations. Most students (90%, $n = 18$) felt that the worksheet questions were reasonable to answer, and 60% ($n = 12$) felt that the audio speed and difficulty were appropriate. Seventy percent ($n = 14$) reported that the pre-listening preparation made the audio easier to understand, and the same proportion reported that they understood most of the text. Sixty-five percent ($n = 13$) felt confident while completing the tasks, and 55% ($n = 11$) needed only a little help from others. However, only half of the students (50%, $n = 10$) rated their active participation positively, which suggests that the structured tasks improved individual task processing more than the students' willingness to speak in front of the class.

Table 2 summarizes the development of the students' listening behaviors across the research stages in the form of a data display matrix (Miles et al., 2014).

Table 2. Development of students' listening behaviors across the research stages

Phase / Focus Area	Baseline Phase (Diagnostic Notes)	Cycle 1 Findings (Coded Observations & Field Notes)	Cycle 2 Findings (Coded Observations & Field Notes)
Pre-Listening Stage	Minimal schema activation; hesitation during introductory discussions; focus limited to isolated printed words without audio context.	• Visual Stimulus Attention: Students focused on flashcards. • Selective Participation: Front-row learners dominated predictions ($n = 6$). • Teacher Role: Direct instructor leading schema setup.	• Widespread Immediate Focus: Class-wide focus without verbal reminders ($n = 23$). • Widespread Active Prediction: Broad participation in sentence predictions ($n = 14$). • Teacher Role: Facilitator guiding student-led predictions.
While-Listening Stage	Heavy reliance on word-by-word decoding; frequent task abandonment when encountering unfamiliar words or connected speech.	• Selective Attention: Focused on key words for basic multiple-choice items. • Task Persistence: Maintained focus initially; attention dropped mid-task ($n = 14$). • Teacher Scaffolding: Paused playback to assist sequencing.	• Strategic Keyword Processing: Focused on key details efficiently. • Autonomous Auditory Trust: Persistent task execution across all sections ($n = 24$). • Teacher Scaffolding: Minimal mid-task intervention needed.
Post-Listening Stage	High dependency on immediate	• Recognition Accuracy: High accuracy on	• Guided Completion: Smooth

Phase / Focus Area	Baseline Phase (Diagnostic Notes)	Cycle 1 Findings (Coded Observations & Field Notes)	Cycle 2 Findings (Coded Observations & Field Notes)
	teacher confirmation; difficulty producing independent written responses.	multiple-choice items. • Writing Friction: High hesitation during open-ended short answers (n = 13). • Peer Interactions: Initial peer checking during answer reviews (n = 15).	execution of sentence frames. • Peer Answer Verification: Active peer review using green pens (n = 22). • Rationale-Based Defense: Students justified answers using text evidence (n = 14).

Discussion

The findings show that structured listening activities improved the listening comprehension of the Year 4 students. The class mean rose steadily across the two cycles, and the proportion of students reaching the mastery score increased from 25% to 80%. The baseline difficulties, namely low vocabulary retention, problems with connected speech, and word-by-word decoding, match the problems described in listening research (Darti & Asmawati, 2017; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Goh, 2000), and learners themselves often attribute listening failure to the speed of delivery and to difficulties in recognizing words (Graham, 2006). The improvement therefore appears to be related to how each phase of the lesson addressed these specific difficulties.

In the pre-listening phase, vocabulary previews with visual support and sentence-level predictions gave the students topic knowledge and linguistic expectations before they heard the text. Chang and Read (2006) found that providing background knowledge was the most effective form of listening support for EFL learners, and the present findings suggest that similar support helps young learners use top-down processing instead of decoding every word (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). The move from isolated words to sentence frames in Cycle 2 also gave less confident students a safer way to contribute, which broadened participation.

In the while-listening phase, the shorter audio segments and focused tasks appear to have reduced the processing load on the students' working memory. Cognitive load theory holds that learning suffers when the demands of a task exceed working memory capacity (Clark & Kimmons, 2023), and replacing open-ended answers with guided sentence completion removed a writing demand that was unrelated to listening comprehension, so that the tasks reflected what the students had understood rather than their ability to write complete sentences. Repeated listening also changed in function: in Cycle 1 the students asked for replays because they had missed the beginning of the text, whereas in Cycle 2 they used replays to check specific details. This shift is consistent with Field's (2008) argument that listening

instruction should develop the processes learners use while listening rather than only test the product of listening.

In the post-listening phase, peer checking and the justification of answers shifted part of the responsibility for evaluation from the teacher to the students. This finding is consistent with research highlighting the role of metacognitive awareness in listening comprehension (Al-Khresheh & Alruwaili, 2024) and showing that metacognitive and strategy-based instruction develops learners' listening comprehension and awareness (Bermillo & Aradilla, 2022), including among young learners (Colognesi & Zito, 2025; Goh & Taib, 2006). Nevertheless, four students did not reach the mastery score, and only half of the students rated their participation positively. Some learners therefore need more individualized support, and improved comprehension does not automatically lead to greater willingness to speak in class. Because the study involved one class over two cycles without a comparison group, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of improvement in this context rather than as proof of general effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

This classroom action research found that structured listening activities improved the listening comprehension of Year 4 ESL students at an international school. Across two cycles, the class mean increased from 5.75 to 6.55 and then to 7.75, and the proportion of students reaching the mastery score of 7.0 rose from 25% to 80%. Each phase of the lesson contributed to this improvement: pre-listening vocabulary and sentence preparation activated background knowledge and reduced word-by-word decoding; segmented audio and focused multiple-choice, sequencing, and guided sentence-completion tasks sustained attention and reduced cognitive load; and post-listening peer checking reduced the students' dependence on teacher confirmation and encouraged self-monitoring. Teachers of upper primary ESL learners are therefore encouraged to plan listening lessons around these three phases, to pre-teach key vocabulary in context, to divide long recordings into shorter segments, and to use guided response formats that separate listening from writing. However, the study involved a single class of 20 students over two cycles, and four students did not reach the mastery score. Future research should involve more classes, include a comparison group, and examine how structured listening activities can be adapted for learners who need additional support.

REFERENCES

- Abu-Snoubar, T. K. (2017). On the relationship between listening and speaking grades of Al-Balqa Applied University English as a foreign language students. *International Education Studies*, 10(12), 130–139. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v10n12p130>
- Al-Khresheh, M. H., & Alruwaili, S. F. (2024). Metacognition in listening comprehension: Analyzing strategies and gender differences among Saudi EFL university students. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10(1), Article

2291954.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2023.2291954>
- Assaf, A. H. (2015). *The difficulties encountered by EFL learners in listening comprehension as perceived by ELC students at the Arab American University-Jenin* [Master's thesis, Arab American University-Jenin].
- Bello, A. A. (2018). Curriculum implementation: Strategies for mounting listening skills among junior secondary school students. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 2(1), 63–77.
- Bermillo, J., & Aradilla, F. J. (2022). Developing students' listening comprehension and metacognitive awareness through metacognitive process-based listening instruction. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, 4(1), 84–93.
<https://doi.org/10.32996/jeltal.2022.4.1.8>
- Bloomfield, A., Wayland, S. C., Riehle, C. N., Blodgett, A., Linck, J., & Ross, S. (2010). *What makes listening difficult? Factors affecting second language listening comprehension*. University of Maryland Center for Advanced Study of Language.
- Cambridge Assessment International Education. (2020). *Cambridge Primary English curriculum framework (0058)*.
- Chang, A. C.-S., & Read, J. (2006). The effects of listening support on the listening performance of EFL learners. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(2), 375–397.
- Clark, C., & Kimmons, R. (2023). Cognitive load theory. In *EdTechnica: The open encyclopedia of educational technology*. EdTech Books.
<https://doi.org/10.59668/371.12980>
- Colognesi, S., & Zito, A. (2025). Developing listening comprehension through listening strategies: A case study with 9- to 11-year-old students. *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature*, 25, 1–24.
<https://doi.org/10.21248/l1esll.2025.25.1.925>
- Darti, & Asmawati. (2017). Analyzing students' difficulties toward listening comprehension. *ETERNAL (English, Teaching, Learning, and Research Journal)*, 3(2), 206–220. <https://doi.org/10.24252/eternal.v3i2.4071>
- Field, J. (2008). *Listening in the language classroom*. Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511575945>
- Gilakjani, A. P., & Sabouri, N. B. (2016). Learners' listening comprehension difficulties in English language learning: A literature review. *English Language Teaching*, 9(6), 123–133.
<https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v9n6p123>
- Goh, C. C. M. (2000). A cognitive perspective on language learners' listening comprehension problems. *System*, 28(1), 55–75.
- Goh, C. C. M., & Taib, Y. (2006). Metacognitive instruction in listening for young learners. *ELT Journal*, 60(3), 222–232. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccl002>
- Graham, S. (2006). Listening comprehension: The learners' perspective. *System*, 34(2), 165–182.
- Hogan, T. P., Adlof, S. M., & Alonzo, C. N. (2014). On the importance of listening comprehension. *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 16(3), 199–207. <https://doi.org/10.3109/17549507.2014.904441>
- Mertler, C. A. (2024). *Action research: Improving schools and empowering educators* (7th ed.). SAGE.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
- Tyagi, B. (2013). Listening: An important skill and its various aspects. *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 12, 1–8.
- Vandergrift, L., & Goh, C. C. M. (2012). *Teaching and learning second language listening: Metacognition in action*. Routledge.