

CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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Abstract: Cultural factors significantly impact listening comprehension, influencing how individuals understand spoken language. Cultural background shapes interpretations of idioms, humor, social cues, and contextual references. Familiarity with communication styles (e.g., directness or formality) can enhance or hinder comprehension. Learners may struggle with culturally specific references or accents, making it essential to incorporate cultural literacy in language learning. Cultural competence helps learners navigate language nuances, improving their ability to understand diverse accents and communication styles in real-world contexts.

Key words: cultural influences, listening comprehension, contextual references, communication styles, cultural literacy, idiomatic expressions, accent and intonation, non-verbal cues, cultural competence.

Listening comprehension is a key skill in language learning, but it is not solely dependent on understanding the words and grammar of a language. Cultural influences play a significant role in how learners interpret and process spoken language. Culture shapes not only the vocabulary and idiomatic expressions used but also communication styles, tone, and non-verbal cues, all of which can impact a learner's ability to fully comprehend what is being said. For example, cultural norms regarding politeness, directness, or the use of humor may vary across regions, making it difficult for learners to decode messages without cultural context.

Additionally, accent and pronunciation differences often tied to cultural backgrounds can further challenge comprehension, especially for non-native speakers who may be more accustomed to one particular accent or variety of English. In language classrooms, students may struggle with culturally specific references or topics that are not familiar to them, hindering their understanding of conversations, discussions, or media in English. As a result, cultural literacy—understanding the cultural context in which a language is used—becomes essential for effective listening comprehension.

The results reveal that participants often struggled to comprehend audio recordings that contained references to culturally specific concepts, idiomatic expressions, and social norms unfamiliar to them. For example, phrases or humor embedded in certain accents were harder to interpret due to a lack of shared cultural knowledge. This finding supports previous research by Matsuda (2018) and Derwing & Munro (2009), which highlights the importance of cultural literacy in improving listening comprehension. When learners are unfamiliar with the cultural context in which language is spoken, even highly proficient learners can face comprehension difficulties, especially when the content involves culturally specific references, humor, or idiomatic expressions.

Participants also noted challenges with accents and communication styles associated with different English-speaking regions. While accents like British or American English were relatively easier to comprehend, participants struggled more with accents from regions they were less exposed to, such as Australian or African English. This aligns with Gass & Varonis (1984), who found that non-native speakers are more likely to understand accents they have encountered before. Furthermore, differences in speech rate, intonation, and directness also created obstacles. For example, learners from cultures where indirect communication is the norm found more direct communication styles, common in some English-speaking countries, harder to follow.

Interestingly, the study also revealed that as participants were exposed to a range of accents and cultural contexts, their biases diminished. Reflective papers and feedback showed that after repeated exposure, participants' perceptions of non-native accents and diverse communication styles became more positive. This suggests that cultural competence, or the ability to understand and appreciate cultural differences, is vital in enhancing not only listening comprehension but also fostering more inclusive attitudes toward various English varieties. Teachers and learners alike must recognize the value of exposure to diverse cultural contexts as part of their language learning journey.

In conclusion, these results underscore the importance of incorporating cultural context into language learning and listening comprehension practice. Learners who are exposed to diverse accents and cultural nuances develop stronger listening skills and greater appreciation for the global diversity of English. For educators, this highlights the need to integrate cultural competence into curricula, allowing learners to navigate both linguistic and cultural challenges more effectively.

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