

## Exploring Students' Cognitive Experiences in Reading and Listening: A Phenomenological Study

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**Abstract:** Reading and listening comprehension are essential skills in language learning that involve complex cognitive processes such as attention, working memory, inference-making, monitoring, and meaning construction. This phenomenological study aims to explore the cognitive experiences of final-year students in the English Education program during reading and listening activities. Through semi-structured interviews and written reflections, this study reveals students' awareness of the cognitive processes they undergo, cognitive challenges such as limited working memory and unfamiliar vocabulary, as well as cognitive and metacognitive strategies used to overcome these difficulties. Additionally, emotional experiences accompanying the cognitive processes, including frustration and satisfaction, were analyzed. The findings highlight the close relationship between cognitive and emotional aspects in language comprehension and suggest important implications for developing more effective and responsive reading and listening instruction. Further research with larger participant samples and diverse methodologies is recommended to enrich the findings.

**Keywords:** Phenomenology, cognitive experiences, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, metacognitive strategies

## INTRODUCTION

Reading and listening comprehension are central components of language learning and academic literacy, requiring students to engage in complex cognitive processes such as attention, working memory, inference-making, monitoring, and meaning construction. Although extensive research has examined reading and listening performance, far fewer studies have focused on how students subjectively experience these cognitive processes as they interact with texts or spoken input. Understanding these internal experiences is essential because students' perceptions of cognitive difficulty, mental effort, and comprehension strategies significantly shape their engagement and learning outcomes.

A phenomenological approach provides a meaningful way to explore these lived cognitive experiences. Originating from Husserl's philosophy, phenomenology focuses on uncovering lived experiences and their essential meanings (Husserl, 1931). In qualitative research, it emphasizes rich descriptions of participants' experiences and the suspension of researcher biases through bracketing or epoché (Moustakas, 1994). Consequently, educational researchers often adopt this approach to examine learners' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral experiences (van Manen, 1990). Importantly, phenomenology enables access to deeply personal insights that cannot be captured through traditional quantitative methods.

Moreover, reading comprehension involves multiple cognitive components, including decoding, lexical access, working memory, background knowledge integration, and higher-level inferencing (Kintsch, 1998; Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Cognitive models such as the Construction–Integration model explain how readers construct mental representations of texts through continuous processing (Kintsch, 1988). Research

also highlights that monitoring comprehension, evaluating textual coherence, and managing cognitive load are critical factors for successful reading (Cain & Oakhill, 2007). Similarly, listening comprehension requires real-time processing of auditory input involving attention, auditory memory, prediction, and meaning construction (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Unlike reading, listening offers no visual reference, making cognitive load and working memory capacity especially influential. Studies have shown that effective listeners regulate their comprehension by monitoring understanding, utilizing background knowledge, and applying metacognitive strategies (Field, 2008). Common cognitive constraints include speech rate, unfamiliar vocabulary, and memory overload (Goh, 2000).

Furthermore, learners' subjective cognitive experiences—such as mental effort, confusion, attention fluctuation, and strategy use—play a crucial role in comprehension (Flavell, 1979). These cognitive experiences influence motivation, persistence, and perceptions of difficulty (Pintrich, 2002). Several qualitative studies have also examined learners' internal cognitive states during reading or listening, demonstrating that students often struggle with processing speed, maintaining attention, and integrating new information (e.g., Teng, 2021; Graham, 2017). Phenomenology is particularly suited to authentically express these subjective and internal experiences.

Lastly, prior phenomenological research in language education has explored learners' anxiety (Young, 1999), metacognitive experiences (Vandergrift, 2005), and reading engagement (Peck, 2018). These investigations show how phenomenology provides access to the lived emotional and cognitive dimensions of language learning. Thus, applying phenomenology to reading and listening enables researchers to capture learners' mental challenges, sense-making processes, and reflective experiences that traditional methods might overlook.

Therefore, this study employs a phenomenological design to explore university students' cognitive experiences in reading and listening, aiming to reveal how they perceive their cognitive processes, the difficulties they encounter, and how they navigate comprehension challenges. The insights gained are expected to enrich theoretical understanding of cognitive experiences in language learning and inform the design of more effective reading and listening instructions.

## RESEARCHMETHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design, which was chosen to uncover the subjective experiences of final-year students from the English Education Study Program regarding their cognitive processes during English reading and listening activities. In order to obtain relevant and rich data, participants were selected based on their active involvement in intensive reading and listening tasks, thereby ensuring they could provide detailed accounts of their cognitive experiences.

For data collection, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted, lasting approximately 20 to 30 minutes per participant. This duration was deliberately selected to maintain focus and productivity without causing fatigue. The interviews aimed to elicit comprehensive narratives about the participants' thought processes, challenges, and cognitive strategies when engaging with reading and listening materials. These interviews were arranged flexibly, being conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on logistical convenience.

In addition to the interviews, participants were asked to write brief reflections upon completing the reading and listening tasks. This approach was intended to complement the interview data by capturing more spontaneous and personal perspectives regarding their experiences, difficulties, and strategies employed to overcome cognitive challenges.

Subsequently, data analysis was performed using phenomenological methods, which involved thorough and repeated readings of interview transcripts and written reflections. This process aimed to identify key cognitive themes and interpret the underlying meanings based on participants' lived experiences. To safeguard the authenticity of the descriptions and minimize researcher bias, bracketing was applied throughout the analysis following the guidelines proposed by Moustakas (1994).

Furthermore, to enhance the validity of the findings, triangulation was implemented by integrating information from both interviews and written reflections. Ethical considerations were rigorously observed during the research process, including obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring the

confidentiality of their identities and data, as well as providing participants the freedom to express their experiences fully and without coercion.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on data obtained from in-depth interviews and written reflections, several main findings related to the cognitive experiences of final-year English Education students during reading and listening activities were identified. Most participants reported awareness of the cognitive processes they engaged in, such as maintaining attention, making inferences, and monitoring comprehension during reading and listening. They emphasized the importance of staying focused, especially when dealing with spoken material, which is temporary in nature.

However, students also reported facing significant cognitive challenges, including limited working memory capacity, unfamiliar vocabulary, fast speech rate in listening tasks, and difficulties integrating information from complex and dense texts. These challenges commonly appeared among most participants and align with findings from Cain and Oakhill (2007) and Goh (2000), who indicated that cognitive load significantly affects language comprehension effectiveness. These barriers present real challenges that must be addressed in instructional design, particularly by adjusting material difficulty levels and enriching students' vocabulary knowledge.

Moreover, participants described various cognitive and metacognitive strategies employed to overcome comprehension difficulties, including making predictions based on context, rereading texts, replaying audio segments, and self-questioning to check understanding. These strategies demonstrate active regulation of learning, reinforcing the assertions of Pintrich (2002) and Vandergrift (2005) regarding the importance of self-regulation in language learning. Nevertheless, the expression of these strategies may be limited by participants' reflective abilities and the data collection methods used. Therefore, complementary methods such as direct observation of the learning process are recommended for future studies.

In addition to cognitive aspects, the findings revealed emotional and subjective experiences accompanying these processes. Participants expressed feelings of frustration when difficulties arose and satisfaction when they managed to understand the material. This emotional dimension strengthens Flavell's (1979) concept of the close relationship between cognition and affect in learning processes, indicating that language learning is not solely a cognitive endeavor but also requires emotional support to keep students motivated and persistent in facing challenges.

Despite these valuable insights, this study has several limitations, including a narrow participant scope restricted to one program and the subjective and reflective nature of the data. These factors call for careful generalization of the findings. To address these limitations, future research is advised to broaden participant diversity, implement data triangulation including observation and quantitative data, and adopt longitudinal approaches.

Overall, this study contributes valuable insights into students' cognitive and emotional experiences in English language learning. It reinforces existing cognitive and metacognitive theories while highlighting the significance of addressing emotional and individual needs in language teaching approaches.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that university students' cognitive experiences during English reading and listening involve active awareness of mental processes, utilization of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and engagement of emotional factors that influence learning motivation. The cognitive obstacles they face are key challenges that should be accommodated in instructional design. Therefore, developing teaching methods that consider both cognitive and emotional aspects is essential. Future research with broader scope and varied methodologies is highly recommended to enrich and validate these findings.

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