



## Research Article

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# Mastering the Art of Active Listening in Italian Language: Overcoming Challenges with Effective Solutions

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## Abstract

*The study investigates the development of listening skills in foreign language classrooms, emphasizing its importance as a core competency that naturally aligns with other language skills like comprehension and production. The motivation behind this research is the often overlooked focus on listening in teaching practices, where educators may mistakenly assume it will develop automatically through classroom activities such as lectures or reading exercises. This assumption can result in gaps in language acquisition due to the unique challenges posed by learning a foreign language. The research not only explores listening skills but also examines other key aspects of foreign language education, including student motivation, instructional materials, learning obstacles, and student interests. Conducted in Albanian schools as part of a project by the Faculty of Human Science at the University of Vlora and the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the University of Tirana, the study gathered data through questionnaires. The findings were then analyzed to propose potential solutions to the issues identified.*

**Keywords:** *teaching, listening, student, authentic materials, italian as foreign language, questionnaires*

## 1. Introduction

Language is fundamentally a means of communication, essential for both transmitting and receiving messages. Effective communication, especially in a foreign language, relies heavily on comprehension, which necessitates the development of key skills like listening. Listening involves perceiving spoken language, deciphering speech, and breaking it down into meaningful parts. Scientifically, language acquisition begins with mastering four core skills, starting with oral production. Lado emphasizes that acquiring any foreign language should prioritize oral skills, with listening and comprehension forming the foundation for other language skills, such as speaking and

writing. Listening is one of the four basic skills in foreign language teaching and learning. It is considered primary due to its critical role in understanding and producing language. Listening involves understanding, interpreting, and crafting suitable responses to sustain communication in any context. However, listening is influenced by various factors, including personality, age, cultural background, cognitive styles, and types of personal intelligence, such as verbal-linguistic intelligence. Individual listening techniques and strategies also play a significant role in skill development. The medium through which the message is transmitted is crucial in the listening process. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing involve not just receiving and transmitting verbal messages but also adapting to the conditions and relationships between the speaker and listener, depending on the communication channel. This dynamic affects planning, processing, and linguistic choices. In daily life, listening is an involuntary activity used in countless situations. Studies show that listening is the most critical skill for language learning and the most frequently used in everyday life. Nunan notes that listening accounts for 50% of the activities a student engages in while learning a foreign language. Despite its importance, listening often does not receive the systematic attention given to writing, reading, or speaking in foreign language education. Hamouda confirms that listening remains one of the most neglected skills in foreign language classes. Early language teaching methods often ignored listening skills, focusing instead on grammar-translation methods prevalent in teaching dead languages like Latin or Old Greek. This neglect can be attributed to several factors, including:

- Lack of realistic knowledge of language skills;
- Lack of proper technology;
- Lack of materials specifically designed to develop listening skills;
- Lack of studies on effective language teaching methods;
- Dependence on traditional language learning methods that emphasized teacher speech;
- Absence of neuro-psycho-physiological studies on language acquisition;
- Lack of linguistic or psychological theories to guide teaching.

As teaching methods improved, a deeper understanding of language skills emerged, but it took time for educators to recognize the importance of listening. Research shows that listening in foreign languages is still often considered secondary to speech production and is viewed as a passive skill focused on articulation. It wasn't until the early 1970s that research began to highlight the importance of developing listening skills in second language acquisition. Before then, efforts were primarily directed toward listening in one's first language and reading in both languages, with little focus on listening in a second language. In language teaching, listening is a crucial skill that positively impacts the psychological well-being of individuals. Developing listening skills not only aids in understanding interlocutors but also promotes active participation in communication. This active engagement facilitates the effective exchange of messages, aiding in social integration and community involvement for individuals seeking to integrate into a new society. Listening is a more sophisticated mental process than hearing. For those not naturally inclined to be auditory learners, developing this skill is essential, particularly when learning foreign languages. This raises the question of how to effectively cultivate listening skills in foreign language classes. Language teachers must employ strategies that enhance students' listening abilities, ensuring they can achieve high levels of comprehension and intelligibility. This proficiency is crucial for future interactions with native speakers, preventing communication barriers arising from misunderstandings, biases, stereotypes, and cultural misinterpretations. Listening, as a receptive skill, is closely tied to understanding, which is a complex process involving more than just recognizing the target language and culture. Comprehension is a mental operation that requires active processing during both the reception and storage of information. Therefore, it is necessary to educate students on cognitive techniques through modeling to improve their understanding. Language teachers must focus on developing students' listening skills to a level where they can effectively interact with native speakers, avoiding miscommunication and culture shock that can lead to misunderstandings and communication breakdowns. By fostering these skills, students can better understand and integrate into the target language culture, ensuring smoother and more accurate exchanges of information.

## 2. Method

To address the challenges often faced by foreign language professors and to better understand the issues related to teaching and acquiring listening skills, a project was initiated. This project was developed by the Department of Italian Language at the Faculty of Foreign Languages in Tirana and the Italian Language Section of the Faculty of Human Sciences at the University of Vlora, Albania, and was implemented during the 2022-2023 academic year. The project team comprised five lecturers, forty students, and one PhD student. The primary objective was to assess the development of listening skills in both nine-year schools and high schools, with a particular emphasis on the practices of foreign language teachers, especially those teaching Italian. By collecting relevant data, the project aimed to evaluate the current situation, identify potential problems, and provide recommendations and solutions based on the findings.

## 3. Project Phases

- A. The project was divided into several phases for its implementation:
- **First Phase:** This phase involved reviewing foundational literature to establish a base of information, which would be used to develop research hypotheses. It also included drafting the project outline, creating questionnaires, and analyzing the initial questionnaire data.
  - **Second Phase:** During this phase, questionnaires were designed for the following target groups:
    - Students in the pre-university system
    - Teachers in the pre-university system
- B. **Questionnaire Structure:** The questionnaires were divided into several sections, including:
- **General Information:** Age, class, gender, background, and language of study
  - **Interest in Languages:** Questions about students' interest in the languages they know and specifically in Italian language
  - **Multiple Choice and Open-Ended Questions:** Questions closely related to the study's objectives, including opportunities for respondents to express personal opinions on specific areas
- C. **Structure of questions:**
- **Third Phase:** This phase involved the finalization of the questionnaires, which included 30 questions. The last section, composed of 29 points, asked for personal opinions and used a 6-point Likert scale (1 - Disagree, 2 - Very little, 3 - Little, 4 - Sufficient but with reservations, 5 - Agree but not 100%, 6 - Totally agree). The questions were of various types, including:
    - Multiple-choice questions (a, b, c, d, etc.)
    - Likert scale questions
    - Open questions
    - Closed questions
  - **Fourth Phase:** The questionnaires were distributed in schools where MSc students from the "Italian Language Teacher for Higher Secondary Education" Program, Year II, conducted their teaching practice. This phase lasted three months.
  - **Fifth Phase:** The final phase involved collecting the completed questionnaires and analyzing the results. The project was conducted in 16 schools across various districts in Albania, involving 24 schools, 23 Italian language teachers, and 4,301 students from high schools and secondary schools.

The distribution and completion of the questionnaires were manually carried out by each student

and teacher over a period of three months. To ensure engagement and accuracy in completing the questionnaires, a preliminary explanation was provided, covering the following points:

- The purpose of the questionnaire
- Assurance of anonymity
- Instructions on how to complete each section
- Expectations for the results and their intended use
- The importance of providing thorough and honest responses
- The anticipated long-term benefits derived from the results

Project staff were present in each classroom and school to oversee the distribution, completion, and collection of the questionnaires, ensuring accuracy and minimizing potential issues. In the penultimate phase, the research was supported by CleanScore, a project funded by the Albanian-American Development Foundation and implemented across Albania's higher education system. CleanScore facilitates scientific research by utilizing technology for test correction, in accordance with Standard III.3, Criteria 5 and 6 of Government Act No. 824, dated December 24, 2021. This act pertains to the adoption of the Higher Education Quality Code, which emphasizes transparent procedures for assessing learning outcomes to enhance curricula and assist in the accreditation of University programs by ASCAL. The CleanScore system employed Remarc Software to compile and present results as percentages of responses for each section and question.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

##### 4.1 Questionnaires addressed to students

It is not possible to present all the results in this paper due to their extensive volume, therefore, we will concentrate on the most significant findings that align with the study's objectives. As noted earlier, the first section of the questionnaires was designed to provide a clear overview of the participants. According to the results obtained shown in Chart 1 below.

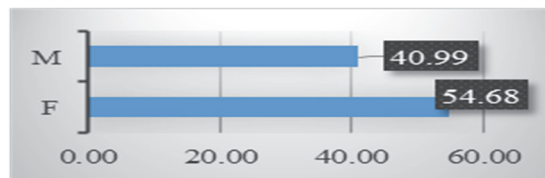


Chart 1:

The female percentage of 54.68% is higher than the male 40.99%. This is because the female gender rates higher than the male one in the respective populations too. Regarding the typology of the school according to the results, the largest percentage of participants are students of general high schools, as shown in Chart 2, where the number of participants is 47.01%. This is actually justified by the fact that students conduct their teaching practice mainly in general high schools, linguistic-oriented high schools or united high schools.



Chart 2:

The figures of Chart 3 regarding language skills as ordered in the following question:  
Which of these skills do you find most challenging?  
a) Listening b) Reading c) Speaking d) Writing

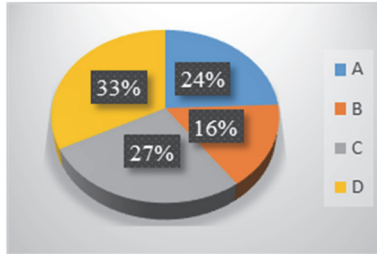


Chart 3:

Indicate that the greatest difficulties are related to the ability to write in Italian (33%), next speak (27%), then listening skills (24%), while reading (16%) ranks as the least difficult.

Various questions arise with regard to this result:

- What kind of listening event do students talk about where they feel they have easy understanding?
- Who do they refer to in listening: authentic audio materials, teacher, friend, an Italophony?
- How much do they understand from what they hear?

The ease with which our students manage listening tasks can be attributed to the familiarity Albanians have with Italian culture. This familiarity is rooted in several factors such as the presence of italians living and working in Albania, the widespread availability of italian TV channels, and the influence of Italian culture, including fashion and cuisine. Additionally, the large number of albanian immigrants in Italy and the significant number of albanian students pursuing higher education at italian Universities further contribute to this familiarity. Given these factors, it is crucial to assess the extent to which students can fully understand auditory materials in communicative contexts that are appropriate for their age and proficiency level. This assessment will help in tailoring listening tasks to their needs and enhancing their overall language skills. However, Question 4 presents a result that contradicts our previous reasoning, particularly concerning authentic audio materials. *Do you have difficulty understanding authentic audio materials? Yes/ No*

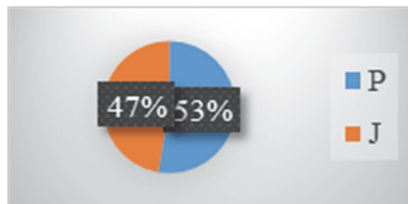


Chart 4:

The result of 53% indicates that challenges do indeed exist, albeit with slight variations in percentages. It demonstrates that just over half of the students encounter difficulties with listening materials specifically designed to develop this skill. These materials differ significantly from everyday classroom conversations with teachers or classmates, particularly in aspects such as rhythm, tone, speed, background noises, and the natural flow of communication among native speakers in real-life settings.

Following the question on what their most difficulties are and where:

- (a) the distinction of sounds; (b) the distinction of words from one another; (c) the meaning of the word; (b) the meaning of the sentences; (a) the distinction of context; g) proverbs; (f) words with connotations h) speech containing metaphors

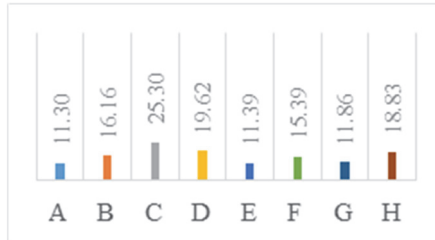


Chart 5:

Based on the findings of Chart 5, significant challenges are observed primarily in understanding individual words (19.62%), followed by comprehending the meaning of sentences (16.16%), and distinguishing between different words (15.08%). These results reveal a significant deficiency in both lexical comprehension and overall understanding of Italian texts, which should be addressed at the appropriate grade level to enhance students' ability to comprehend audio materials. Improving these skills requires the integration of authentic audio materials into teaching practices and the use of specific exercises designed to aid text comprehension through auditory inputs. Effective activities include exploring the context preceding the text, gaining a general understanding of the audio content, and focusing on detailed comprehension by listening to selected sections. Additionally, a variety of techniques can be employed to support these efforts, such as combination exercises, progressive elimination, problem-solving tasks, cloze exercises, gap-fill activities, songs, closed questions, Likert scales, true/false assessments, multiple-choice questions, error identification exercises, table completion tasks, open-ended questions, note-taking, summarizing, paraphrasing, translation exercises, story-based listening practices, and dictations. Together, these methodologies help improve students' listening skills and promote proficiency in Italian language acquisition.

The data in Chart 6 provide a clearer understanding of the origins of the students' problems.

What do you typically listen to during a foreign language class?

- a) the teacher; b) Audio of reading text c) Youtube text listening (songs, interviews, fairy tales, stories, etc.; d) Audio accompanying videos we see in the classroom (films, documentaries, interviews, curiosities); Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

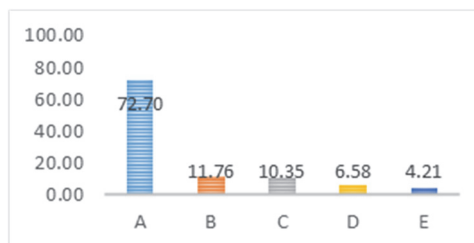


Chart 6:

It is evident that a significant majority (72.70%) of class time is spent listening to the teacher, highlighting a critical issue. Teachers often rely primarily on their own voice rather than using

authentic audio materials. This approach is insufficient for developing listening proficiency in a foreign language. Caleb Gategno's insights from 1963, which led to the development of the Silent Way method, underscore the importance of reducing teacher talk time and increasing student engagement. To improve listening skills and support language learning effectively, teachers need to incorporate a diverse range of listening materials, moving beyond reliance on their own voice.

#### 4.2 Questionnaires addressed to teachers

In the teacher questionnaires, notable observations arise regarding their perspectives on language skills:

Do you believe that to all four language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing, should be given equal attention?

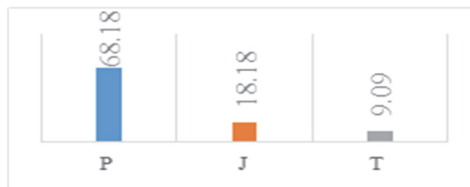


Chart 7:

In Chart 7, 68.18% of respondents correctly recognize that all language skills are equally important in their teaching processes. However, the 18.18% who disagree, along with the additional 9.09% who prioritize other skills, raise concerns. Additionally, the data suggests that grammar is perceived as significantly more important than other aspects of language teaching. Considering that most participants have 10 to 15 years of teaching experience, indicating they graduated approximately 15 to 20 years ago, it is evident that these educators were trained during a period when traditional, classical teaching methods were dominant. This historical context helps explain why a minority of teachers continue to place a primary focus on grammar.

Regarding the results appearing in Chart 8 referred to the following question:

*How much do you appreciate the students' listening and speaking abilities while teaching Italian?*  
Very B) Little C) Enough D) Equal to All Other Skills

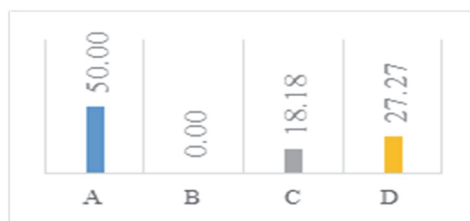


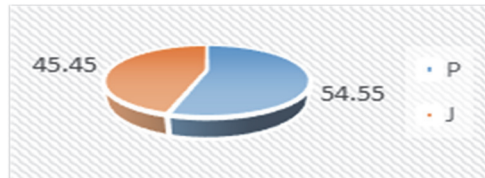
Chart 8:

Interestingly, 50% of teachers express a strong appreciation for listening materials. However, this contrasts with student reports, which indicate that teachers use their own voice to dominate classroom listening far more than other materials. This discrepancy suggests that teachers may not fully disclose the extent and manner in which they utilize listening materials. Given these circumstances, data from student questionnaires is likely more realistic and accurate. This is due to the larger number of student respondents and the possibility that teachers may present their

teaching methods in a more favorable light, potentially downplaying certain aspects of their practices. Consequently, student feedback offers a clearer view of actual classroom dynamics and the effectiveness of listening materials in language learning environments.

The following is Chart 9, related to the question:

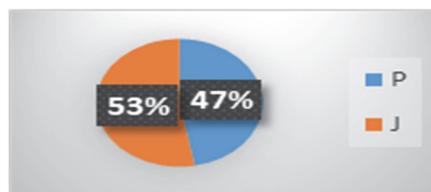
*Do you believe that Italian pre-college and college teachers require specialized training to effectively use authentic materials?*



**Chart 9:**

Surprisingly, more than half of the teachers believe they do not need additional training to use authentic materials for enhancing listening skills. This could be because they view themselves as already well-trained and knowledgeable in this area. Alternatively, some teachers may not recognize the ongoing need for professional development, despite the fact that teaching practices are continuously evolving. In reality, effective teaching requires continuous professional growth, especially as new materials and methodologies are introduced. Continuous training helps teachers stay current with evolving language trends and methodologies, ensuring they can effectively integrate new resources into their teaching practices and improve student learning outcomes. In terms of a reflection on the objectives achieved by the students themselves and how they self-assess their achievements, in Chart 16:

Do you use self-assessment forms for your students to evaluate their performance on specific classroom activities?



**Chart 16:**

It appears that 47% of teachers do not use authentic materials, suggesting a lack of awareness about the benefits these materials offer for specific activities or complete instructional units. This oversight not only impedes student progress by leaving gaps in their learning but also highlights the need for future interventions to address these deficiencies. Immediate action could prevent these issues from escalating. These findings reveal a gap between teachers' practices and both their own and their students' perceptions. This discrepancy points to potential weaknesses in teaching methodologies or techniques used for skill development, as well as a lack of continuous feedback from students. Addressing these gaps and implementing effective feedback mechanisms are essential for improving teaching practices and ensuring that students receive comprehensive and effective language instruction.



## 5. Conclusions

Based on the findings discussed, our hypothesis regarding the challenges in developing listening skills has been confirmed by the research and data collected. The primary issues identified include difficulties with comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, limited availability and use of listening materials by teachers, and the perception that such materials may be ineffective or time-consuming. Additional contributing factors are limited access to technological resources, a lack of variety in materials, and the use of uninspiring content that fails to engage students. It is crucial for teachers to recognize that listening skills are closely linked with understanding and speaking abilities. Therefore, equal emphasis must be placed on their development alongside other linguistic skills. This can be achieved through the continuous and strategic use of diverse, carefully selected materials tailored to students' proficiency levels and learning objectives, in line with the descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Effective classroom management during listening activities is essential to address common challenges such as lack of motivation, disinterest, noise, and distractions. Teachers should select listening texts appropriate to their students' proficiency levels, ensuring that each text does not exceed five minutes, and prepare structured follow-up activities to reinforce learning. Utilizing a variety of techniques, as highlighted in our analysis of Chart 5, is crucial, as consistent practice is key to achieving proficiency in listening skills. Furthermore, providing authentic listening opportunities through real communication with native speakers, beyond merely using audio materials, can significantly enhance students' cognitive engagement and motivation to participate actively in meaningful conversations. Educational institutions should foster partnerships with foreign counterparts, facilitate student visits to countries where the target language is spoken, occasionally host foreign lecturers, and support ongoing teacher training through workshops and teaching exchanges. These efforts aim to improve educators' knowledge of the latest pedagogical approaches, thereby enhancing teaching quality and student performance.

## 6. Acknowledgements

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