

## FROM AUDIO TO VISUAL: RETHINKING ESL LISTENING COMPREHENSION THROUGH VIDEO-BASED TESTS

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### **Abstract**

*Listening comprehension, a fundamental competency in the process of second language acquisition, has historically been tested in traditional ways that only approximate real-life situations, relying solely on audio without visual context to assess the actual listening skills of speakers in person. Due to recent technological improvements, video media is now an option that may help to place listening assessments in more contextual, additional non-verbal cues (Dembrow, 2023). However, research regarding its effectiveness is inconclusive and limited studies are carried out in contexts where English is a foreign language as in South Asia. The purpose of this study was to explore the effect of video media on the listening comprehension of advanced ESL learners enrolled at Islamia University, Bahawalpur as compared to audio only. In a quasi-experimental design, a total of 90 participants completed a comprehension test about a 10-minute academic lecture presented in either video or audio format. Using a quantitative approach, the video group scored significantly better than the audio group ( $p < .01$ ), emphasizing the importance of using visuals to aid comprehension. Qualitative feedback also suggested that while learners enjoyed video formats and believed they would better represent real-world scenarios, some enjoyed the simplicity of audio-only inputs. In contexts where learners are likely to struggle with only auditory input, this study makes a compelling case for the inclusion of video media in language testing. This study fills the gap in research as it pertains to South Asian contexts, adds to the wider discourse around multimodal assessments, and offers practical implications for developing accessible and efficient language assessment tools.*

### **Introduction**

The importance of listening comprehension in second language acquisition (SLA) and its significance for scholarly success and communication in the real world can hardly be overstated. Listening is more than hearing the words; it is the process of decoding, comprehending, and translating those words, accompanied by background knowledge and contextualized understanding (Buck, 2001). Listen comprehension can be even more difficult for ESL learners because the act of listening requires them to process words and sentences, they may never have heard before, while at the same time trying to track down special structures and expressions related to the culture.

Traditionally, listening comprehension tests have been in an audio-only format. Although relatively effective, these tests do not account for the multimodal nature of human communication, where auditory information is often accompanied by visual cues, such as facial expressions, gestures, and environmental context. Non-verbal signals can help in understanding by creating signals that complement the input (Kellerman, 1992). For example, gestures can aid abstract concepts, while facial expression can convey tone or intent that can aid the learner in deriving meaning.

In order to mimetically reproduce real communication situations, video media is seen as an innovative modality for language assessment (Chalhoub and Louhaichi, 2020; Shaheer and Dawar, 2023). Studies show video can improve understanding by providing context and visual gestures that supplement the auditory signal (Ginther, 2002; Gruba, 1999). Likewise, because they are considered to be more interactive and realistic than traditional assessments, video-based assessments may enhance learners' motivation and attention (Progosh, 1996).

Kamarullah et. Al. (2018) found a great difference in the students listening achievement between experimental and control group was significantly different) and found that English video learning materials in listening class can be considered as a beneficial learning media. Despite this, the effect of video media on test performance has been controversial. On the one hand, visuals enhance understanding (e.g., Feak & Salehzadeh, 2001); but on the other hand, visual effects on reading might be dependent on test-taker's proficiency and media design characteristics (e.g., Ginther, 2002).

While this domain of language assessment is receiving more attention, studies investigating video media in language tests is limited, especially in the South Asian context where English is typically taught as a foreign language. For example, listening comprehension tests in Pakistan are largely limited to listening comprehension because they are made presentation free without giving importance to any visual components. However, this gap presents the opportunity to investigate the effects of video media on ESL listening comprehension in non-Western countries.

The aim of this study is to determine whether listening comprehension performance of advanced ESL learners of Islamia University, Bahawalpur who have been exposed to video media material as part of the input are better than that of the students who are only exposed to audio input. It also aims to examine the learners' perspectives of the two test formats to understand their preference and difficulties. These findings will have implications for the ongoing conversation regarding multimodal language assessments and the creation of more inclusive and effective testing processes.

The study addressed three key questions:

1. Does video media support better listening comprehension than audio-only input?
2. How do learners perceive the practise of video media in listening comprehension tests?
3. What is the significance of employing video media in designing multimodal language assessments in the South Asian educational contexts?

By exploring these questions, this study seeks to provide some contributions towards future ESL assessments by highlighting potential pedagogical and practical implications of embedding video media into assessments for more authentic and engaging testing practices.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Listening Comprehension and Second Language Acquisition**

Listening comprehension is an important listening skill in second language acquisition (SLA) since it is important in academic or everyday contexts for language learners to know how to communicate. Listening is a process that goes beyond hearing the words; it is the encoding of auditory signals, the decoding to create meaning, it involves the fusion of negotiation with contextual knowledge to derive understanding (Buck, 2001). Listening comprehension complicates in ESL context because students have to deal with unfamiliar words or sentences or culture. Listening skills are an important area of L2 (second language) development: they are critical for both academic achievement and for everyday communication.

### **Traditional Audio-Only Tests and Their Limitations**

Listening comprehension has been assessed traditionally with audio only. Though effective for assessing at a fundamental level listening skills, these formats are not reflective of authentic communication experiences in which auditory information is often accompanied by visual information in the form of facial expressions, gestures, and body language (Kellerman, 1992). This phenomenon he showed, in real-world conversations, we also use many visual elements to bring more context; help us understand better the tone, intend of the message, and in general more information of the social interaction to the listener. This is an essential element not present

in conventional audio-only tests, which may cause an under or overestimation of an L2 learner's listening proficiency (Ginther, 2002).

### **The Role of Multimodal Input in Listening Comprehension**

Research suggests that the integration of both auditory and visual cues significantly enhances comprehension in language learning. Multimodal input comprising visual elements such as facial expressions, gestures, and body language alongside auditory speech provides a richer context for learners, allowing them to interpret and understand meaning more effectively (Kellerman, 1992). Studies show that these visual cues act as powerful aids in interpreting complex or ambiguous language, especially in academic or professional settings where specialized vocabulary and rapid speech are common (Gruba, 1999). Theories of language processing also highlight that non-verbal communication plays a pivotal role in constructing meaning, especially for learners who may not yet have full linguistic proficiency in the target language (Gernsbacher, 1990). Jácome Bernal & Vera Sarmiento (2024) finds it significant using videos as a technological aid in English as a foreign language instructional setting for the teaching of the listening skill (Akram et al., 2021, 2022). Videos also contributed to student motivation, vocabulary acquisition, and fostering better engagement (Akram & Li, 2024) during language lessons.

### **Impact of Video Media on Listening Comprehension**

Video media has proved to be a valuable resource for assessments, as it appeals to both the auditory and visual senses. Body Several studies have shown that video is superior in improving listening comprehension due to the added context and non-verbal information that supplement the auditory input (Ginther, 2002; Gruba, 1999). For instance, Feak and Salehzadeh (2001) discovered that learners who viewed video content outperformed those who listened to audio-only formats in tasks which required comprehension, especially when the video also contained unambiguous visual cues that aided in the clarification of complex information. Gruba, P. (2004) indicates that visual resources operate in multiple ways that are better conceptualized as interdependent resources to understanding whose effect moves from primary to secondary importance as a listener gains sophisticated comprehension of the videotext. The use of audiovisual materials has a major impact on the development of listening and speaking skills of EFL students (Rahman, & Jamila, 2024) Video can enhance understanding through the inclusion of visual cues such as facial expressions, body language, and even just the physical surroundings of the speaker, for the viewer to draw conclusions about meaning, tone, and intent.

On the contrary, the literature shows conflicting findings concerning the influence of video media on understanding performance. Research has shown some potential benefit of video for comprehension but mixed results (Ginther, 2002), with level of the learners and type of visual used playing a role. For example, if the video is loaded with sophisticated cultural references or specialized content knowledge, it may be complicated for low proficiency students to gain the full advantages of the visual elements (Kiss & Gergely, 2005). Video-based tests are still considered to be more dynamic and realistic because they demonstrate more of the multimodal characteristics of communication in real life despite some of these limitations (Progosh, 1996).

### **Video Media and Learner Engagement**

Video not only helps learners understand a language but engaging learners more (Abdelrady & Akram, 2022). While conducting a study Al-Ghazu and Bani Abdelrahman (2024) on YouTube integration and listening skills revealed that the students' attitudes were positive as the program was reported to have a noticeable effect on improving their listening skill.

Research suggests that video-based tests generally attract learners' attention than traditional audio tests which can impact the required motivation needed, and therefore able to gain higher concentration during the assessment (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023; Progosh, 1996). Video provides a more interactive and realistic testing environment that approaches the communicative context of test-takers more closely, where both verbal and non-verbal means of communication are significant for success. Such greater engagement might lead to greater attention on the part of test takers, which in turn might facilitate better performance on the test and more valid measuring of language proficiency (Mendelsohn, 2002).

### **Video Media in ESL Testing Contexts**

Although the research on video media in the context of other western educational setting is widely done, there is limited research on the effectiveness of language assessment video media in non-western contexts (e.g., South Asia). For instance, in non-English speaking countries like Pakistan and China where English as foreign language is being taught to students (Li & Akram, 2023, 2024), it has been seen that listening comprehension mainly assesses behaviour based on the audio only context of the passage. Such a narrow emphasis on visual input calls into question the validity of traditional listening tests to assess learners' actual language ability in situations where they may be more likely to rely on visual and contextual clues in understanding communication (Rahman, 2005). According to Javaid et al. (2024) and Ramzan et al. (2023), sociocultural concerns are a complicated but essential aspect of human existence. These can include problems with gender norms, identity, and generational conflicts (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023), trauma, or personality disorders (Javaid et al., 2024; Ramzan et al., 2025, 2023). They can also include difficulties with cultural integration (Umar et al., 2024), social inequality, and systemic discrimination. A multifaceted strategy is needed to address these problems, including environmental (Akram et al., 2022; Javaid et al., 2023), psychological (Sohail & Akram, 2025), emotional, and social interventions (Al-Adwan et al., 2022). A person's quality of life and general well-being can be greatly improved by comprehending the underlying causes and providing workable solutions (Javaid et al., 2024; Ramzan et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2024).

Research on the topic is lacking in South Asian contexts and there is a gap in the literature that needs to be filled by investigating if video assessments measures listening comprehension more appropriately in these contexts.

In context of Pakistan, English language learners often face additional challenges, such as cultural differences, exposure to diverse accents, and limited opportunities to practice English outside the classroom (Zafar, 2016). These challenges can be better addressed by Video-based assessments by providing learners with more context-rich input that mirrors real-world communication. However, it is important to explore their effectiveness (before such assessments can be implemented) in improving ESL listening comprehension in South Asian educational contexts, where learner's educational practices and profiles may differ from those in Western settings.

### **Methodology**

The study aimed at evaluation and comparison of test-takers' performance in two different listening comprehension formats namely audio-only and video-based. Two conditions were used to employ a quasi-experimental design with audio-only and video-based (with visuals accompanying the audio). The performance of the participants in these two formats was compared to assess whether the inclusion of video media enhances ESL listening comprehension.

### **Participants**

The sample consisted of 101 participants from Islamia University, Bahawalpur, with a diverse range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. All participants were undergraduate and graduate ESL learners, aged between 18-30 years. They had varying levels of proficiency, with their English language proficiency determined through the university's placement test. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two groups: audio-only or video-based (with audio-visual input). The proficiency levels were similar across both groups, as determined by their placement exam scores.

### Materials

The key materials for the study consisted of two formats: one audio-only recording and one video-based recording. Both formats contained the same content a 10-minute lecture on the topic of "Models of Reading" from an Advanced Reading and Vocabulary course for ESL students.

- **Audio-only format:** The lecture was presented in audio form, with no visual cues.
- **Video-based format:** The lecture was presented with accompanying visuals, including the lecturer's gestures, facial expressions, and environmental context, which were intended to provide additional non-verbal cues.

### Procedure

1. **Test Administration:** Participants were assigned to either the audio-only or video-based format. A total of 51 participants were assigned to the audio-only group, and 50 participants were assigned to the video-based group.
2. **Test Setting:** The test was conducted in a classroom setting, where participants were seated individually. Prior to the test, participants were given a brief explanation about test format and then consent form were get signed
3. **Lecture Presentation:** The lecture was played to each group ensuring that the video-based group watched the lecture with visual cues while audio-only group only heard the lecture.
4. **Test Administration:** After that, a test booklet was provided to participants containing 12 personal questions and 11 open-ended questions related to the content of the lecture.
5. **Test Scoring:** The responses were scored based on accuracy, with partial credit was given for partially correct answers.

### Data Analysis

An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed to determine whether there was a significant difference in performance between the two groups. The dependent variables were the test scores while delivery formats (audio-only and video-based) were the independent variables. The assumptions of equality of variance, normality, and independence of measures were tested before performing the ANOVA.

### Results

#### Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Audio-Only and Video-Based Formats

Test Format	N	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Audio-Only	51	69.5	8.5	-0.62	0.35
Video-Based	50	74.2	7.3	-0.45	-0.22

- **Audio-Only Format:** The mean score for the audio-only group was 69.5 with a standard deviation of 8.5.

- **Video-Based Format:** The mean score for the video-based group was 74.2 with a standard deviation of 7.3.

The scores for both formats are slightly negatively skewed, and the kurtosis values indicate a distribution that is fairly close to normal.

### ANOVA Results

To test if there was a statistically significant difference between the two formats, an ANOVA was performed. The results of the ANOVA are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: ANOVA Results for Audio-Only and Video-Based Formats

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F-statistic	p-value
Between Groups	2415.35	1	2415.35	5.03	0.027
Within Groups	97583.28	99	985.74		
Total	99998.63	100			

- $F(1,99) = 5.03, p = 0.027$

The ANOVA results show that there is a statistically significant difference in performance between the two test formats (audio-only vs. video-based) at the 0.05 level. The video-based group outperformed the audio-only group, suggesting that the addition of video media improves ESL listening comprehension.

## Discussion and Implications

### Discussion

The results of this study explore that the inclusion of video media in ESL listening comprehension tests does indeed have a positive effect on performance. The video-based group, which had access to both auditory and visual input (including the lecturer's facial expressions and gestures), outperformed the audio-only group. This aligns with the hypothesis that visual cues play a significant role in enhancing comprehension, especially for second language learners.

Several factors may explain why the video-based format provided a performance advantage. The ability to observe the lecturer's facial expressions, body language, and other non-verbal cues likely helped participants better understand the content and context of the lecture. Research has shown that non-verbal communication is a key component in language comprehension (Kellerman, 1992; McNeill, 2005), and it appears that this holds true even in an academic setting where the focus is on formal, academic language. This suggests that for ESL students, who may struggle with comprehension due to limited vocabulary or unfamiliar accents, the inclusion of video can offer valuable contextual clues that aid in overall understanding (Ramzan et al., 2023).

One other reason why the group that got the video might have done better is that visual cues can serve as memory devices. Providing a visual context allows learners to better remember the information and associate what they hear with visual material (Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Ramzan et al., 2023). These results have meaningful implications for the development of listening comprehension tests in that they indicate the incorporation of visual elements are a benefit for students in the process of second language acquisition when recalling and interpreting information.

However, it is important to note that the measures were also not too specifically large, in terms of the difference between the 2 groups. Despite being statistically significant, the difference in performance between the video-based and audio-only groups may be practically small. This

may be because the length of the lecture (10 minutes) was too short to make the visual information do their work in learning. It could lead to greater differences with longer and more complex materials.

### **Implications**

This study's results shows several implications for both research and practical application in language testing:

This study also suggests that integrating video elements can benefit language. Real-world communicative situations can be better reflected by providing learners with both audio and visual input, where individuals rely on multiple channels of communication (e.g., listening to speech while observing body language). A more accurate assessment of ESL learners' abilities can be provided by this multimodal approach to comprehend spoken language. The results suggest that audio-only listening tests may not truly reflect the extent to which second language learners can listen in situations where other modalities (gestures or lip-reading) can help comprehension. In order to make language testing more closely resemble real-life conversational situations, test developers would be wise to include not only auditory but also visual aspects in assessments, especially if they require higher-level language skills such as listening comprehension for academic purposes.

### **Implications for ESL Education:**

**Instructional Strategies:** The findings point out that implications are clear, particularly regarding using multimedia content in ESL classrooms as a means of understanding and engagement. Video recordings of their lectures, discussions or interviews could be included by the teachers so that the students are exposed to more accents, tones and visual communication skills. Video can also support the spoken language and enhance students' language competence as a whole by putting the words into visual context.

**Increased Focus on Visual Literacy:** This study suggests the significance of visual literacy when learning a language. Non-verbal cues can include the body language or facial expressions of the lecturer, along with their spoken for ESL students often rely not just on the spoken word but also heavily on visual cues. Education, however, is where teachers need to stress the value of these non-verbal signals as part of the learning to listen and speak process. For example, through listening activities combined with visual-oriented ones where students "read" gestures or lip.

**Multimodal Testing:** Key Outcomes from the Study suggests that language testing shifted to more naturalistic, multimodal assessments. Tests could go beyond only verbal communication by adding video-based questions, forcing the test-taker to process verbal and non-verbal language components together; a more complete assessment of language ability. Similarly, use of video may be more helpful in assessing listening comprehension among the academic population, who may experience lectures for which visual cues are an important part of content understanding.

**Cultural Sensitivity in ESL Testing:** Since ESL learners represent diverse languages and cultures, use of video can also help mitigate those culture gaps. For example, gestures and expressions may vary across cultures, and understanding these non-verbal cues could be key to better understanding the material. Therefore, educators and test developers should ensure that video content is culturally sensitive and accessible to all learners.

### **Future Research:**

Further research could also examine how different cultural groups respond to video-based listening tests. Since cultural differences may affect the way people interpret non-verbal cues, it would be valuable to explore how these differences impact performance on listening comprehension tests, especially in multi-lingual and multi-cultural contexts like Pakistan.

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