Mapping the Listening Test of the Jiangsu Senior High School Entrance Examination onto the CSE

GUAN Yuanyuan[a],*; SUN Xinyi[a]

[a] School of Foreign Languages, Yancheng Teachers University, Yancheng, China.
*Corresponding author.

Abstract

As the first comprehensive English proficiency scale for English learners in China, China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSE) aims to provide a transparent and consistent set of standards of English proficiency to enhance the communication between English teaching, learning and testing. It plays a significant role in promoting the cohesion of various learning stages and improving quality of examinations. This study examines the consistency between listening tests of the senior high school entrance examination (Zhongkao) in Jiangsu Province, China and the CSE Listening Scale with an aim to understand whether the educational outcomes are reflective of the nationally recognized proficiency standards and provide insights to inspire more effective cultivation of the English listening ability.

Through the analysis of sample listening papers and scripts from 2019 to 2023 by using the CSE Listening Scale descriptors as the main framework, the findings showed that Jiangsu Zongkao listening tests had a high consistency with the CSE Listening Scale in terms of diverse text types, familiar topics, appropriate proportion of new words and reasonable range of subskills tested. Discrepancy was also identified in the speech rate of the sampled tests, which was much higher than the requirements of CSE. Suggestions were made for junior high school English listening teaching and assessment.

First, teachers should develop better understanding of the CSE Listening Scale and integrate it in everyday practice. Second, teachers should provide ample resources and support to expose students to different listening input. Last, teachers should also focus on cultivating students' independent learning ability and diversifying their listening learning strategies in their daily life.

Key words: Listening comprehension; CSE Listening Scale; Senior high school entrance examination

1. INTRODUCTION

The advent of China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSE) in 2018 marked a significant milestone, establishing the first unified English proficiency standard tailored for Chinese English learners. This framework is intended to play a positive role in promoting the cohesion of various learning phases and improving the quality of examinations. It is instrumental in bridging the gap between educational curricula and the assessment system and fostering a seamless progression of content across different educational levels (Liu & Wu, 2019). Central to this endeavor is its capacity to guide teaching methodologies and, more specifically, to shape the construct of English language assessments, particularly in the critical area of listening comprehension.

Listening plays a primary and indispensable role in language acquisition and verbal communication. It has been given prominence in a variety of standardized language tests, both nationally and internationally,

including the National Matriculation English Test (Gaokao), IELTS, and TOEFL. Likewise, listening ability is measured in the English test of High School Entrance Examination or Zhongkao, which is a high-stakes assessment to gauge students' English achievement after nine to twelves years of formal English learning and inform about senior high school admission (Lin, 2024). Thus, it is crucial to align the Zhongkao listening tests with the CSE to empower accurate evaluation of learners' listening proficiency and provide a sustainable trajectory of ability development so as to enhance pedagogy. Moreover, it will enhance the scientification and standardisation of the Zhongkao listening test, contributing to its overall quality.

Linking language tests with language standards such CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) and ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) has been a common practice in many countries as it contributes to the overall validity and reliability of the tests, promotes the international recognition of the tests and and facilitates the alignment of domestic assessments with international benchmarks (He, 2019). Similar research has been conducted in China to connect the CSE with senior high school reading test (e.g., Sun, Chen, & Xu, 2024), school-based listening and writing tests (e.g., He, Ruan, & Min, 2021; Min & Jiang, 2020). However, limited research has been conducted on the relationship between the English listening tests and the CSE at the compulsory education sector. Therefore, this study will examine the consistency between the Zhongkao listening test in Jiangsu Province, China and the CSE Listening Scale with an aim to understand whether the educational outcomes are reflective of the nationally recognized proficiency standards and provide insights that enable both teachers and students for more effective cultivation of the English listening ability.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definition of listening comprehension ability

Listening has been under-researched due to its intangible and complex nature. Despite the conventional view of listening as a passive language skill, listening has been recognised as a meaningful interactive activity for overall understanding of speeches (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Rubin (1994) regards listening as an active process in which listeners select and interpret information from auditory and visual clues in order to define what is going on and what the speakers are trying to express. Therefore, it should be clarified that hearing is only one part of listening.

Scholars in China make similar observations of listening comprehension ability. According to CSE (Liu &

Wu, 2019), listening comprehension is a comprehensive cognitive ability composed of cognitive processings such as recognition and extraction, generalization and analysis, criticism and evaluation, which are present in listening activities.

To sum up, listening comprehension ability is an interactive skill that involves an array of cognitive processes, and linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge. Listening is more than hearing sounds and obtaining information, but a behavioral act that needs responding accordingly. Listening comprehension ability requires knowing about listening and doing or engaging in appropriate listening behaviors.

2.2 Content validity of listening tests

Content validity refers to the extent to which language test content are relevant to and representative of the elements and factors that are involved in language communication, namely content relevance and content coverage (Bachman, 1990). Listening comprehension is mainly influenced by two categories of factors: the listening text and the listener (Buck, 2001). The text factors involve phonological features, speech rate, vocabulary, syntax, text type and length, and redundancy in the spoken input while the listener factors mainly include background knowledge, memory, attention, listening purpose and emotion.

Multiple studies have investigated how different speech rates impact the intelligibility of speech for non-native listeners. Fast speech rate generally poses greater challenge in comprehension because increase in speed exerts greater cognitive load on listeners, leading to a breakdown in their comprehension (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Rost, 2005). This effect is more pronounced for heavily accented speakers, indicating that a moderate speaking rate is crucial for understanding heavily accented speech. However, there is no consensus on the specific number of words per minute (wpm) that are universally comprehensible for non-native speakers of English. According to Derwing and Munro (2001), Mandarin-speaking listeners prefer the same 'ideal' rate for both Mandarin-accented and native English speech, while other English as a second language (ESL) learners prefer a slightly slower rate than native English speech but faster than the natural rate of Mandarin speakers. Griffiths (1990) finds that for lower-intermediate non-native speakers, speech rates faster than 200 wpm may exceed their processing capacity and lead to decreased comprehension. It is worth noting that the optimal speech rate for comprehension can vary depending on the listener's language proficiency level and familiarity with the language. The CSE Listening Scale requires junior high school students to understand slow listening materials at a rate of around 80-100 words per minute given their English proficiency.

The relationship between L2 listening comprehension and vocabulary knowledge is multifaceted and complex. Both the size and the depth of vocabulary knowledge play significant roles in listening comprehension. Empirical evidence have demonstrated that vocabulary knowledge is often the strongest predictor of listening comprehension, surpassing other factors such as working memory capacity and metacognitive awareness (Vandergrift & Baker, 2015; Wallace & Lee, 2020). This impact may vary among listeners with different language proficiency levels, with some studies indicating that lower-proficiency listeners tend to be critically influenced by their vocabulary capacity (Matthews, 2018). In addition, research has examined how lexical frequency may influence listening comprehension. Cheng and Deng (2018) suggest unknown words density is negatively correlated with listening comprehension, therefore a threshold of approximately 3% of unknown lexical coverage is acceptable for adequate listening comprehension. Similarly, Stæhr (2009) commend that a lexical coverage of 98% is needed for understanding the listening texts in a test .

Genre or text type refers to the category of oral or written texts that share specific form, structure, content and communicative purposes (Swales, 1990). They can significantly impact listening comprehension, as different spoken genres (e.g., daily conversations, interviews, news, lecture, etc.) fulfil distinct communicative functions and require diverse cognitive processes and linguistic and contextual knowledge from the listener to fully understand the content. Researchers generally agree that narrative texts, with their familiar structures, lexico-grammatical features and contextualised content, tend to be easier to comprehend than expository texts, which are often more abstract and require greater inferential processing (Kim & Petscher, 2020; Diakidoy, 2014; Diakidoy, Stylianou, Karefillidou & Papageorgiou, 2005). When it comes to the dialogic and monologic text types, Papageorgiou, Stevens, and Goodwin (2012) hold that dialogues are largely easier to understand than monologues in that dialogues involve much negotiation, multiple perspectives and discourse markers, which are conducive to comprehension. Chen and Chen (2021) demonstrate that listeners competent in the lecture type tend to perform better in listening tests. In similar fashion, news is comparatively harder, which may also be related to students' unfamiliarity with its literate nature (Shohamy & Inbar, 1991).

Listening comprehension has also been regarded as comprising of many small actions, which are cognitive processes that take place in the listener while comprehending speeches. If a learner wants to develop his/her listening ability he or she has to master a set of distinctive listening subskills or micro-skills. From a pedagogical perspective an identified list of listening subskills might inform teachers which subskill to focus on in order to help learners to advance to the next level. Proponents of the componential view of listening comprehension have developed various taxonomies of subskills based on theoretical hypotheses (e.g., Munby, 1978; Richard, 1983) or empirical studies (e.g., Buck, Tatsuoka, Kostin, & Phelps, 1997; Goh & Aryadoust, 2015; Lee & Sawaki, 2009) and the number of subskills outlined range from dozens to over 250. Nevertheless, it can be generally divided into three primary subskills: listening for specific information, listening for main idea, and making inference. The difficulty of these subskills are hierarchically ordered, with lower-level skills like identifying specific information being easier than higher-level skills like inferencing and summarizing. This hierarchy varies with text type, but generally, lower-level subskills are mastered before higher-order ones.

Regarding listener factors, Deng and Yang (2004) maintain that background knowledge, language knowledge, motivation and learning strategies are the four most important factors affecting listening comprehension. Listeners' comprehension is enhanced when they have prior knowledge and are familiar with the topics covered in the listening input (Chiang & Dunkel, 1992; Chiang & Read, 2006). Douglas (2000) also believes that listening comprehension should consider the relationship between the content and the listener's relevant background knowledge and it is easier for listeners to understand listening materials on general topics than those on professional topics. In other words, familiar topics and topics related to daily life are simpler than professional ones.

2.3 The CSE Listening Scales

According to the CSE Listening Scale (2018), listening comprehension is a comprehensive cognitive competence consisting of identification, extraction, summarisation, analysis, critique and assessment of speeches. Therefore, it focuses on cognitive ability, listening strategy, linguistic knowledge, and performance in typical listening activities (He & Chen, 2017), which include six main spoken genres: oral description, oral narration, oral exposition, oral instruction, oral argumentation and oral interaction. Accordingly, the CSE Listening Scales are composed of an overall scale and six sub-scales which describe the overall and the genre-specific requirements to understanding the spoken input. Nine levels of listening comprehension ability are included in each scale, of which level 1 and 2 are for primary school, level 3 for junior high school, level 4 for senior high school, level 5 and 6 for university, level 7 for English major, and levels 8 and 9 for advanced English talents. The requirements for junior high school students at level 3 are as presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Requirements for CSE-3

Overall oral expression ability	• Can understand short speech (e.g. talks, discussions, announcements) delivered with standard pronunciation at a slow but natural speed (approximately 80-100 words/min); obtain key information with the help of stress, intonation, background knowledge and contextual information; • Can identify themes and obtain main ideas when listening to radio or when watching film and TV programmes on familiar topics and at a low but natural speed.
Oral description	• Can follow simple oral descriptions of familiar countries or regions and obtain geographical location. • Can follow simple descriptions of animals when delivered at a slow but natural speed and obtain information about physical features.
Oral narration	• Can understand simple stories or narratives delivered slowly but naturally and identify logical relationships among characters and events. • Can follow accounts of personal experience when delivered with standard pronunciation and at a slow but natural speed; and obtain specific information such as time, place, and relationships among characters. • Can follow radio programmes on familiar topics when delivered slowly but naturally and identify the themes.
Oral exposition	• Can understand information about daily life (e.g. health and diet, safety knowledge); and grasp the main idea, provided speech is articulated clearly and delivered with standard pronunciation at a slow but natural speed. • Can follow information about scenic spots in simple language when delivered at a slow but natural speed; and obtain specific information (e.g. historical, geographical). • Can understand information about familiar products in simple language and identify key information, provided speech is articulated clearly and delivered at a slow but natural speed.
Oral instruction	• Can understand notices or multi-step instructions delivered at a slow but natural speed and grasp key points. • Can understand broadcasts in public places (e.g. airports, stations) when delivered with standard pronunciation at a slow but natural speed; and obtain key information. • Can follow explanations in simple language on the procedures for simple activities (e.g. handicrafts) when articulated clearly and delivered slowly.
Oral argumentation	• Can obtain key information from speeches or talks articulated clearly and delivered with standard pronunciation at a slow but natural speed. • Can understand short argumentation on familiar topics that is delivered in simple language at a slow but natural speed; and grasp the main idea.
Oral interaction	• Can understand simple conversations in study and work and identify speakers' intentions. • Can understand short conversations while shopping and obtain specific information (e.g. prices, sizes). • Can follow formal conversations conducted at a slow but natural speed and identify topic progression and transition.

Compared with the increasing research on the CSE of other English skills, studies of the CSE Listening Scale has been scarce and have centred on the development and validation of the scale, and alignment to other frameworks or public examinations. For example, based on analyses of students' self-assessment data with three Item Response Theory models, Min, He and Luo (2018) have found good discrimination and medium difficulty parameter estimates of the CSE Listening Scale. More specifically, Zhang and Zhao (2017) have shown that the CSE-4 and CSE-5 descriptors were generally favoured by university students in terms of their quality and effectiveness in evaluating their listening ability despite the drawbacks in logic, clarity, semantic structure and difficulty indicators of some descriptors. He and Chen (2017) have utilised Modifed Angoff Method and Contrasting Groups Method to align an in-house university English proficiency test with the CSE Listening Scale and revealed its listening subtest was aligned with CSE-5. Peng and Liu (2021) has compared the CSE levels with the CEFR and suggested that CSE-3 corresponds mainly to CEFR A2 and B1.

It can be seen that current research on the application of CSE in examinations mainly focus on the tertiary level, while those in the basic education settings are relatively limited. As an initiative to guide and regulate English language teaching and assessment practices (He & Chen, 2017), a better understanding of its application in English tests at the secondary level will provide empirical evidence to the validity of the CSE Listening Scale and help standardise the quality and effectiveness of English education and assessment.

3. METHODOLOGY

In light of the research gaps identified above, this study aims to investigate the listening tests of Jiangsu Zhongkao and map its content against the CSE Listening Scale to draw implications for listening assessment and instruction at the junior high school level. Thus, the following research questions were formulated:

• What are the characteristics of the listening materials and questions of Jiangsu Zhongkao listening tests in the recent five years, i.e., 2019 to 2023?

• To what extent do the 2019-2023 listening tests of Jiangsu Zhongkao reflect the requirements of the CSE Listening Scale?

• What measures can teachers take to improve students' listening comprehension ability by aligning with both the CSE Listening Scale and the requirements of Zhongkao?

3.1 Data collection

In order to realize the informatization of English teaching and testing and improve the reliability and efficiency of English listening and speaking tests of Jiangsu Zhongkao, Jiangsu Province has put automated examination into effect since 2009, realizing the automation of the whole process of examination and assessment. In order to ensure the smooth progress of the automated English listening and speaking test, relevant experts write Junior High School Automated English Test Specifications (JHSAETS) as the basis for the automatic English listening and speaking test according to the document of the provincial Department of Education and the requirements of Curriculum Standards for compulsory education. However, due to the restricted accessibility of the item bank used for the annual tests, it was assumed that the sample papers in the JHSAETS were representative of the listening tests of Zhongkao and the research on these sample papers would also provide sufficient evidence to content validity of the the listening tests of Zhongkao.

The present study examined the sample papers in the JHSAETS from 2019 to 2023. Each test consisted of four papers, totaling to 20 papers in the past five years. There were 20 multiple-choice questions in each paper. The students should read the four choices of A, B, C and D, and choose the best answer to each question after listening. Each of the first ten questions was based on one dialogue while the 11th and the 12th questions were based on one dialogue. Therefore, there are totally 11 dialogues where two speakers communicate on different topics. The remaining eight questions were presented in two monologues, with 3 and 5 questions for each.

3.2 Data analysis

This study compared the listening comprehension scripts (excluding the examination directions) of JHSAETS sample papers with the CSE Listening Scale. Based on the literature and the crucial factors emphasised in the CSE Listening Scale, this study focused on five factors: text type, topic, vocabulary, speech rate and expected listening comprehension skills. The analyses of text types, topics and listening comprehension skills were based on the requirements set out in the CSE Listening Scale, while the calculation of vocabulary and speech rate is as follows.

The vocabulary was analysed by comparing the words of the listening materials with the vocabulary list of the curriculum. Words that appeared in the listening materials but were not in the vocabulary list of the curriculum were treated as unknown words. In order to more accurately analyze the proportion of new words in Jiangsu Zhongkao listening comprehension tests, proper nouns such as personal names and places were excluded from the statistical process.

In a bid to measure speech rate, counting the number of words per minute of the listening materials is the most common and the most convenient method. The formula is followed for calculation: the average speech rate (wpm) of the 20 listening tests is equal to the total number of words (w) divided by the total time (m) required to listen to the material.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Text type

According to the text type classification of the CSE Listening Scale, texts can generally be divided into six different genres: oral description, oral narration, oral exposition, oral instruction, oral argumentation and oral interaction.

The 11 dialogues for each year are all oral interaction. Two speakers communicate on a certain topic through dialogues. There is some key information in the dialogues, so most of the questions revolve around extracting the key information.

The results of the two monologues are displayed in Figure 1. Most of the monologues in the Jiangsu Zhongkao listening tests are oral narration, accounting for 68.75%. The other four text types are not involved much, which is not consistent with the requirement of diversified text types in the CSE. Oral instruction is the least involved, because it is mostly related to experimental procedures and operating steps, which is slightly challenging for junior high school students. The listening materials of the five years all involve oral narration and exposition, suggesting that both teachers and students should pay more attention to the two text types. In recent years, the proportion of narration is gradually decreasing, from a peak of 87.5% to 50%, while other text types are increasingly examined. In other words, junior high school students should be prepared for all text types rather than the single narrative type.
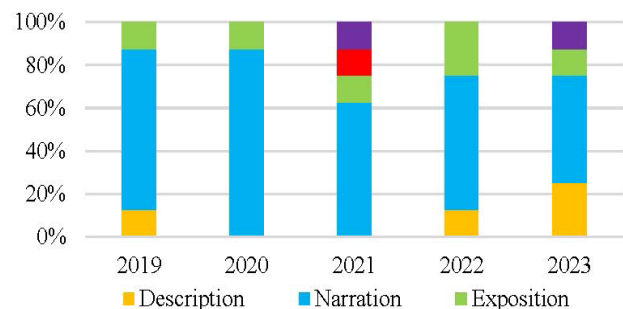

Figure 1
Distribution of text types in monologues

4.2 Topic

CSE stipulates that the topics of listening comprehension tests are complex and diverse. Listeners' degrees of familiarity with different topics vary. Both the CSE and the JHSAETS require that junior high school students should be able to understand familiar topics which are close to the students' daily life. The CSE has 20 topics for dialogues and 14 topics for monologues, while the JHSAETS has a total of 24 topics deriving from the Curriculum Standards (2008, 2022). Our comparison and analysis revealed that a number of overlapping topics

though the JHSAETS list seems more comprehensive. Detailed analyses of the dialogues and monologues were conducted in accordance with both the CSE and the JHSAETS.

Figure 2 presents the annual topic coverage and distribution from 2019 to 2023. It was found that a total of 23 topics were involved in dialogues, 18 of which were covered by CSE, and the other five were from the the JHSAETS. They were weather, family, friends and people around, feelings and emotions, daily routines and famous people.
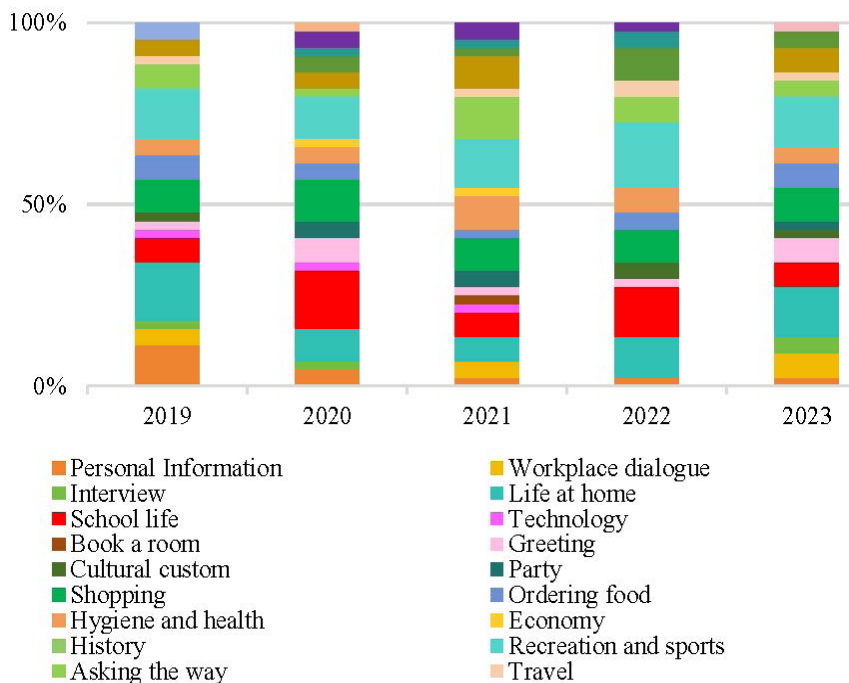

Figure 2
Distribution of topics in dialogues

These topics are consistent with the CSE Listening Scale and Curriculum Standards. The most frequent ones were entertainment and sports activities, family life and school life, which are closely related to students' real-life experiences and intelligible to most students. However, while aknowledging the authenticity and intelligibility of such topics, it should note that the coverage of the topics was relatively superficial and culturally homogeneous. A wider range of topics will help to broaden students' horizons and enrich their knowledge. Hence, the topics should not only focus on the topics related to students' life, but also be designed to cover more academic and complex fields.

Figure 3 shows that the monologue covered a total of 12 topics, 10 of which were covered by CSE, and the other two topics were found in the JHSAETS, namely, family members and safety. The monologue topics concern both everyday life and academic themes such as technology and cultural customs. Entertainment and sports activities are the most popular topics, including

mystery rooms, art shows and concerts. These topics are not only very familiar to students, but also very lively and interesting. Every junior high school student takes part in these activities in their daily life. Tourism came in second, including visiting history museums and theme parks. These topics are relatively common and somehow appealing, which is conducive to a comprehensive and objective test of students' true listening level. There was no trace of such topics as fairy tales, transportation, economics, politics, and history or geography in the five-year tests. These are mostly professional and technical topics and are not included in the level 3 requirements of the CSE Listening Scale.

In general, the topic setting of the monologues of Jiangsu Zhongkao is consistent with the requirements of the CSE Listening Scale. Therefore, students should keep a watchful eye on familiar topics in daily life and put what they have learned into practice to improve their listening ability.
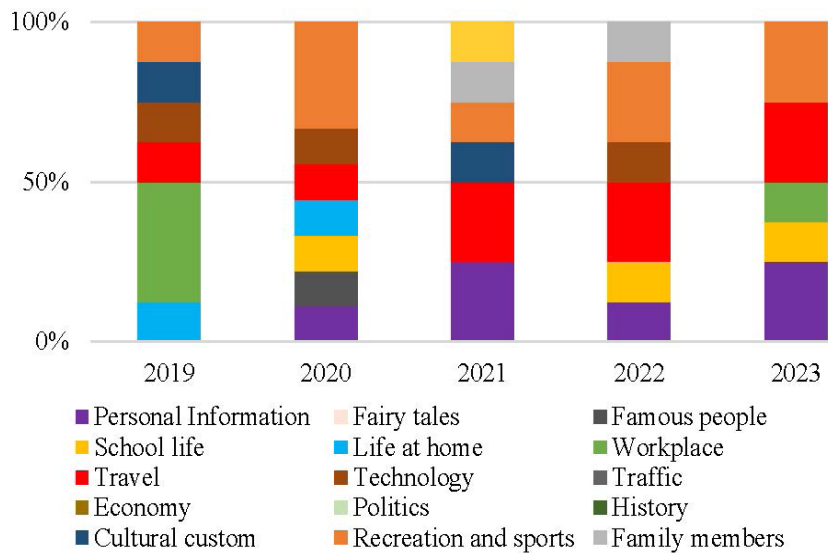
Figure 3
Distribution of topics in monologues

4.3 Vocabulary

The CSE Listening Scale requires junior high school students to understand common and simple vocabulary. The Curriculum Standards requires students to overcome the barrier of new words and understand the general idea with the help of the listening context. By comparing the 1600 words listed the New Curriculum Standards (2022) for compulsory education and the listening materials, new words were indeed identified.

As suggested in Chen and Deng (2018) and Stæhr (2009) that two or three percent of new words were acceptable. According to the Curriculum Standards (2022), students need to understand 3% of new words. Our findings show that the percentages of unknown words in 2019-2023 Jiangsu Zhongkao listening comprehension tests ranged from 0.94% to 1.93% with an average of 1.34% (as shown in Table 2), falling under the 2-3% benchmark for adequate listening comprehension suggested by previous studies.

Table 2
The number and proportion of new words

Year	Vocabulary		
	New words	Total words	Proportion of new words %
2023	38	1969	1.93
2022	28	2017	1.39
2021	20	2080	0.96
2020	29	1962	1.48
2019	19	2015	0.94
Total	134	10043	1.34

It is reasonable to include some new words in listening materials as they can provide valuable insights into learners' vocabulary knowledge and listening skills.

In the first place, communicative language teaching encourages students to be exposed to authentic materials and advocates teachers' use of authentic language materials. Therefore, when choosing listening materials, it is acceptable and inevitable to include a certain number of new words in the materials. Moreover, the last monologue had the highest proportion of new words. In other words, the setting of last five questions helps to effectively distinguish the students from high to low levels, which is useful for test discrimination and improves the overall validity of the test. However, a balance must be struck to avoid overwhelming learners and negatively impacting their performance.

4.4 Speech rate

The CSE Listening Scale requires junior high school students to understand slow listening materials at a rate of about 80-100 words per minute. It can be seen from Table 3 that the average speech rate of the sample papers from 2019-2023 was 138 wpm, which is far higher than the requirements of 80-100 wpm of the CSE Listening Scale for junior high school students. The average speech rates of the dialogues and monologues were similar and comparatively fast. It is not consistent with the requirements of the CSE Listening Scale for junior high school students.

It was also found that there was a gradual rise in the number of the average speech rate of Jiangsu Zhongkao listening comprehension tests from 2019 to 2023. A possible explanation for this might be that with the improvement of listening teaching quality and students' listening ability, the requirements for students' listening comprehension have also been developed accordingly. The speech of the listening recordings in the tests is raised to comply with the requirements of the CSE Listening Scale.

Table 3
The average speech rates

Year	Speech rate				
	Dialogues 1-10	Dialogue 11	Monologue 1	Monologue 2	Average
2023	124	119	142	147	133
2022	140	143	141	142	142
2021	135	133	147	145	140
2020	149	149	140	141	145
2019	135	137	132	113	129
Average	137	136	140	138	138

4.5 Listening subskills

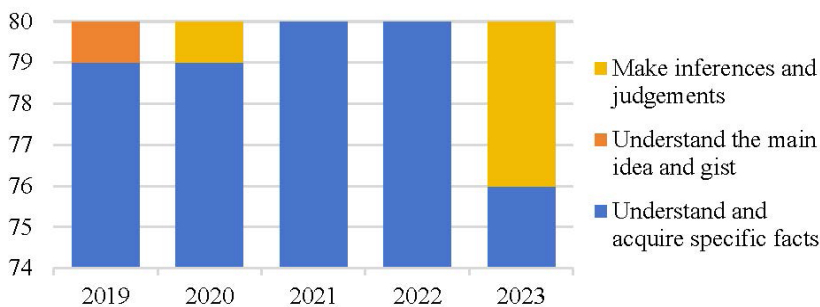The CSE Listening Scale puts forward different subskill requirements for beginner, intermediate and advanced English learners. Junior high school students, or beginning English learners, need to understand and acquire specific facts, intermediate English learners need to understand the main idea and gist, and advanced English learners need to make inferences and judgements in addition to those skills requited at the lower levels.

In this regard, the overall finding is, out of the 400 multiple choice questions, only one question tested understanding the main idea and gist, five making inferences and judgements, and the remaining 394 understanding and acquiring specific facts, accounting for 98.5%. Figure 4 shows the distribution of expected listening comprehension skills in the JHSAETS sample papers over the past five years. Understanding main idea and gist was only tested in 2019 while making inferences and judgements was tested in 2020 and 2023. Neither of them was tested in 2021 and 2022.

Figure 4
Distribution of listening skills

These listening tests mostly met the requirements of the CSE Listening Scale for junior high school students. The skill to understand and acquire specific facts was the most basic skill that junior high school students should master, and also the basis of understanding the whole text. The higher-order questions all appeared in the last three questions of the dialogues, which not only ensures the comprehensive examination of skills at different levels, but also follows a pattern of increasing difficulty to challenge test-takers gradually. This progression allows for a fair assessment of abilities across different levels of complexity. This inclusion of questions tapping into different listening subskills reflects the requirements of the CSE Listening Scale, and helps students consciously adjust their listening skills according to different questions in the examination process. However, relative scacity of higher-order questions deserves attention because they are crucial parts of the communicative activities and useful for developing students' analytical and problem-solving skills. A purposive examination of these subskills in Zhongkao can help students better complete the transition from junior high school to senior high school.

5. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the representation of different factors in the of Jiangsu Zhongkao listening comprehension tests from 2019 to 2023 based on the CSE Listening Scale. The findings revealed that the coverages of text type, topic, vocabulary and subskills were, by and large, consistent with the requirements of the CSE Listening Scale except speech rate. All the six text types were covered, but the distribution was not balanced, and most listening materials focused on oral interaction and oral narrative. The topics were mainly focused on students' familiar school life, family life, entertainment and sports activities. The proportion of unknown words was reasonable. The most tested skill was the ability to understand and acquire specific facts, followed by the ability to make inferences and judgements and understand the main idea and gist. However, speech rates of the listening tests were far higher than that specified in the CSE. Overall, diverse text types, familiar topics, appropriate proportion of new words and reasonable skills were represented in the five-year Jiangsu Zhongkao listening tests.

5.1 Implications

Over the years Chinese English educators have been concerned about improving the listening comprehension ability of junior high school students. The present study analysing the sample papers in the JHSAETS from 2019 to 2023 can provide constructive suggestions for junior high school English teachers in listening instruction and assessment.

To effectively enhance English listening instruction in junior high schools, it is imperative for teachers to have a profound understanding of the CSE Listening Scale and implement it in their daily teaching practices. This study has suggested the Jiangsu Zhongkao listening comprehension tests are well-aligned with the CSE Listening Scale, and by integrating this scale with textbook content, teachers can identify commonalities and tailor their instruction accordingly. Teachers are encouraged to establish a teaching philosophy that links the CSE Listening Scale to the curriculum and teaching objectives, and refine individual teaching methods, thereby increasing the effectiveness and relevance of instruction.

Furthermore, teachers should provide ample resources and support to expose students to different listening input. Apart from the fundamental sound recognition and detail comprehension practices, teachers can utilise an extensive range of spoken texts with distinctive lexico-grammatical features and communicative purposes to increase students' familiarity with various text types. A particular area revealed from this study is the fast speech rate in Zhongkao listening tests. To achieve high marks in Zhongkao, students must be exposed to authentic and fast speeches, which necessitates particular attention to these aspects in teaching. Teachers should not only possess sufficient phonetic knowledge and pronunciation skills themselves but also constantly improve students' knowledge and skills in connected speeches throughout their English lessons.

Teachers should also focus on cultivating students' independent learning ability and diversifying their listening learning strategies in their daily life. Analysis of Zhongkao listening comprehension texts reveals that they cover a broad range of topics and skills, most of which are closely related to students' everyday experiences. This suggests that English teaching should not be confined to the school environment but be expanded to more out-of-school activities. Meanwhile, the improvement of listening skills is not an overnight achievement but rather a gradual process that accumulates over an extended period. Therefore, it is necessary to broaden the range of listening methods in teaching, such as encouraging students to adopt purposeful and continual listening practices. Teachers should help students to diagnose their listening problems and adopt effective and individualised strategies to enhance listening ability.

5.2 Limitations of the study

This study is limited in these aspects. Due to restrictive availability of the actual listening test papers, this study used the sample papers in the JHSAETS for analyses, which may not amply represent the picture of the actual tests and thus undermine the generalisability of the findings. Another issue that was not addressed in this study is that students' actual performance in Zhongkao were not collected, which may affect the validity of the research to some extent. When it comes to measuring new words, this study only assessed vocabulary breadth by using the words listed in the Curriculum Standards as the reference; however, students may infer the meaning of unknown words with morphological knowledge.

5.3 Suggestions for further research

Findings of this study provide the following insights for future research. First of all, in the future research on the connection of Jiangsu Zhongkao listening comprehension tests and the CSE Listening Scale, actual performance of students in Zhongkao should be evaluated to provide solid evidence to test construct. Besides, given the requirements of digitalised and multimodal language education and assessment, further research is needed to understand how technologies can be integrated in the Zhongkao listening tests to assess students' listening ability in a more authentic and interactive way. Future research might also explore the connection between the speaking, reading and writing sections of the Jiangsu Zhongkao tests and the CSE so that the tests can be adjusted to fully reflect the requirements set out in the language standards and up-to-date language teaching trend. More information on the consistency among listening tests, teaching materials and the CSE would help to establish the cohesion and consistency of teaching and assessment.

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