

Mapping the Message and Filling the Gaps: Using Mind Mapping and Cloze Listening to Support Arabic Listening Comprehension

Hassan Jaber Hassan

Instructor, Arabic School, Undergraduate Education

Students in intensive Arabic programs often report that they understand isolated words in authentic audio but struggle to identify the speaker's main message or hear important details. These difficulties reflect the complexity of listening, which requires learners to process spoken language at both global and detailed levels. This reflective classroom article examines two instructional techniques used to support Arabic listening comprehension: mind mapping and cloze listening. Mind mapping helped learners identify main ideas, organize relationships among ideas visually, and approach authentic audio through top-down processing. Cloze listening helped learners focus on specific words, phrases, forms, and discourse markers through bottom-up processing. Together, these techniques provided complementary forms of scaffolding: mind mapping supported global comprehension and confidence, while cloze listening strengthened accurate decoding of connected speech. Drawing on classroom observations and relevant second language listening research, the article argues that effective listening instruction should move beyond comprehension checks and explicitly teach students how to listen. The article concludes with practical recommendations for using mind mapping and cloze listening flexibly in Arabic classrooms and other second language listening classes.

Keywords: *Listening Comprehension, Arabic, Mind Mapping, Cloze Listening, Top-Down Processing, Bottom-Up Processing, Listening Strategies*

INTRODUCTION

"I understand some words, but I cannot get the main idea." "I know the topic, but I missed the details." "Arabic speakers connect everything together."

As an Arabic instructor who previously worked as a Student Learning Specialist, I have heard comments like these during and after listening lessons with some regularity. These comments are not excuses. Rather, they are useful windows into what students experience when listening to authentic Arabic. They often reveal not a lack of effort, but a mismatch between the speed and density of the input and the strategies students are using to process it.

Listening can be especially demanding for learners in intensive language programs, and this challenge is particularly noticeable in Arabic. Students must process authentic spoken language, often at natural speed, while also managing rich morphology, verb conjugation, dialectal or register variation, and the acoustic realities of connected speech. Assimilation, reduction, and blended pronunciation can make word boundaries less obvious. A learner may know a word in print yet fail to recognize it when the same word is attached to a prefix, followed by a suffix, or absorbed into a stream of neighboring sounds. For example, learners may know the phrase *في البيت* (*fī al-bayt*, “in the house”) in print but hear it as the connected unit *fīl-bayt* and fail to recognize the boundary between the preposition and the definite article. Learners may also hear *لم يوافقوا على الاقتراح* (*lam yuwāfiqū ‘alā al-iqtirāḥ*, “They did not agree to the proposal”) but miss the short negative particle *لم* (*lam*). Without recognizing this particle, learners may incorrectly understand that the individuals agreed to the proposal, reversing the intended meaning. They may also miss the plural marker *وا* in *يوافقوا*, which indicates that the subject is plural.

Vocal prosody adds another Arabic-specific challenge. Boulaares (2026) found that fast, weakly segmented speech was a major barrier for advanced Arabic L2 learners. The study also found that atypical or flattened intonation could weaken the discourse cues that listeners use to divide speech into meaningful units and predict what may follow. These findings reinforce the need to help learners first recognize meaningful chunks and then attend closely to the linguistic details within those chunks.

In this setting, instruction cannot merely ask whether students understood the recording. It must also help students understand how to listen. Research on second language listening distinguishes between top-down processing, in which listeners use context, prior knowledge, prediction, and discourse expectations to construct meaning, and bottom-up processing, in which listeners decode sounds, words, phrases, and grammatical structures from the speech stream (Goh & Vandergrift, 2018; Vandergrift, 2004). Effective listening depends on both. In classroom terms, learners need to understand the forest and the trees.

This instructor reflection describes my use of two practical techniques in an Arabic class: mind mapping and cloze listening activities. Mind mapping helped students capture the global idea of an audio passage through a visual, top-down process. Cloze listening activities helped students attend to details from the same or similar passages through a focused, bottom-up process. Together, these techniques functioned as subskills that supported the larger skill of listening. More importantly, they gave struggling students a way to approach listening without feeling that they had already failed after missing the first unfamiliar word.

The Listening Problems I Kept Seeing

During one listening lesson, I played an authentic Arabic audio passage about a regional social issue. The students had already previewed the general topic and had learned several key vocabulary items. After the first listening, I asked a familiar question: “What is the speaker trying to communicate?”

A few students could provide isolated words. One student identified the topic but could not explain the point of the passage. Another student caught a number and a place name but missed why either mattered. Several students were not simply confused by vocabulary; they were overwhelmed by the task itself. They were trying to hear every word and, because they could not, they lost confidence in their ability to understand anything.

This moment was instructive. The difficulty was not only linguistic; it was strategic. Some students listened as if comprehension meant producing an exact transcript in their minds. Others listened only for familiar content words and ignored relationships among ideas. Still others became so focused on the sound stream that they stopped asking what the speaker was doing with the language.

Vandergrift (2004) argues that learners must “learn to listen” so that they can later “listen to learn.” In other words, listening lessons should not function only as comprehension checks. They should develop the processes and strategies that make comprehension possible. Goh and Vandergrift (2021) similarly emphasize a learner-oriented approach to listening instruction that helps students understand and manage the cognitive demands of listening. These ideas resonated strongly with what I saw in my classroom.

USING MIND MAPPING TO REACH THE GLOBAL IDEA

One response to this problem was to use mind mapping. At first, some students were hesitant. A few seemed to think that drawing lines and circles in a military language classroom was too informal or perhaps too elementary. To reduce this hesitation, I modeled the process on the smartboard. I placed the topic in the center, wrote two or three branches as I listened, and showed students that the purpose was not artistic quality. The purpose was thinking made visible.

After modeling the technique, I encouraged students to draw, doodle, write key words, and connect related ideas with lines in their notebooks or on the smartboard. In practice, I used the following brief procedure:

1. Before listening, I introduced the topic, activated relevant background knowledge, and placed the central concept on the smartboard.
2. Before playing the passage, students predicted two or three possible subtopics or branches that might appear in the audio.

3. During the first uninterrupted listening, students recorded only key words, repeated ideas, and major concepts. I reminded them to set aside unfamiliar details temporarily and focus on the overall message.
4. During the second listening, students added relationships among ideas, such as cause and effect, contrast, examples, problems, and responses.
5. After listening, students compared their maps in pairs or small groups, explained the connections they had made, and revised the main idea when necessary.

For instance, if a passage focused on unemployment, the center of the map might read “unemployment.” Students could then create branches for “causes,” “effects,” “government response,” “youth,” and “economy.” They were not expected to capture everything they heard. Instead, they focused on identifying what the passage was mainly communicating and how its major ideas related to one another.

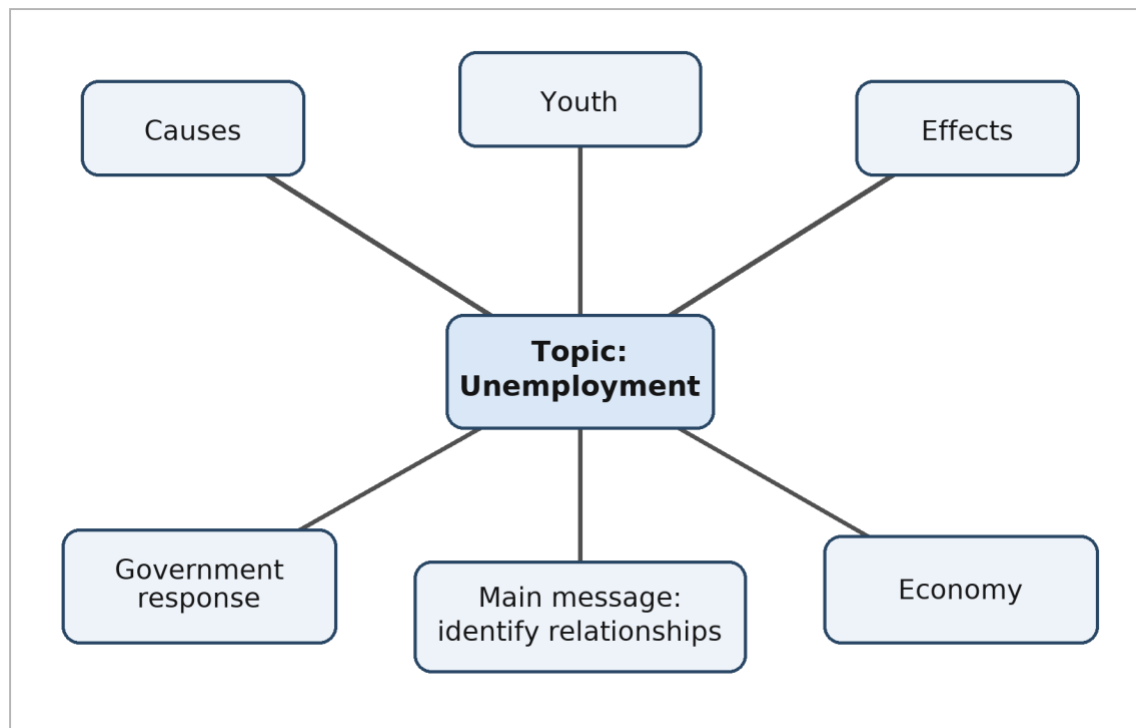
This technique supported top-down processing. It allowed students to use context, background knowledge, discourse clues, and repeated key terms to form a global understanding of the passage. Concept mapping and related visual organizer techniques have long been associated with helping learners represent relationships among ideas and organize knowledge meaningfully (Novak & Cañas, 2008). In listening instruction, concept mapping can provide scaffolding for learners who struggle to connect main points (Ebadi & Vakili Latif, 2015). More recent research on mind mapping in second language listening has also reported positive effects on listening comprehension and learner engagement (Jiang et al., 2026).

In my classroom, the most immediate benefit was affective as much as cognitive. Struggling learners appeared less anxious when they realized that missing a word did not mean losing the entire passage. A mind map gave students permission to listen for meaning first. It also gave me a quick visual way to see what students understood and where comprehension broke down. The activity also led to productive collaborative discussions. By comparing mind maps and discussing how ideas connected in logical ways, students practiced critical thinking and justification. As a result, they became more willing to connect details and use those connections to reach a main idea.

Mind mapping also has limitations. Some students may spend too much time trying to produce a perfect or highly detailed mind map, while others may record too many isolated words and create a list rather than a map. The activity works best when the instructor models a simple map, asks students to begin with only three or four main branches during the first listening, and reminds them that the map is a temporary thinking tool rather than a finished product. Students can add more branches and supporting details during the second listening.

Figure 1

Sample Mind Map for an Arabic Listening Passage



Note. The sample map created by the author is intentionally simple. Students may use English, Arabic, symbols, arrows, or abbreviations as long as the map helps them organize the speaker's main message.

USING CLOZE LISTENING TO HEAR THE DETAILS

Mind mapping helped students reach the global idea, or the speaker's overall message, but it did not solve every listening problem. Some students still needed practice hearing details accurately. In Arabic, those details often carry important meaning: tense markers, negation, pronoun suffixes, connectors, and words that signal cause, contrast, or result. When these details are missed, comprehension can become incomplete or even inaccurate.

For this reason, I incorporated cloze listening activities. In a typical cloze activity, students received a short transcript with selected words or phrases removed. As students listened, they filled in the missing items. I did not remove words randomly. I selected blanks based on the listening objective. Sometimes the blanks targeted unfamiliar Arabic sounds, and sometimes they targeted transition words. Other times, the blanks targeted verb forms, pronoun suffixes, or key content vocabulary that had been reduced or blended in connected speech.

For Arabic L2 learners, I organized the missing items around four practical areas. Lexical targets included important content words that students might easily miss. Grammatical targets included verb forms, negation, agreement, and attached pronouns. Discourse targets included connectors and expressions that signal cause and effect, contrast, sequence, or result. Finally, phonological targets included assimilated or reduced sounds and words that students might have difficulty

separating in connected speech. I usually selected one or two areas for each activity rather than including all four at once. This kept the cloze task manageable and ensured that the missing items supported the lesson's specific listening objective.

Unlike mind mapping, cloze listening directs attention to the sound signal itself. Students must notice word boundaries, recognize familiar forms in unfamiliar acoustic environments, and connect what they hear to what they know about grammar and vocabulary. This is bottom-up work. Field (2008) argues that listening instruction should include attention to decoding processes rather than relying only on general comprehension questions. Siegel and Siegel (2015) likewise make a case for explicit bottom-up activities in L2 listening instruction and report that learners can benefit from practice focused on dictation, perception, and word recognition.

At the beginning, some learners found cloze activities uncomfortable because the task revealed exactly where their listening broke down. Yet this discomfort became productive when the activity was framed as training rather than testing. Students could compare answers, listen again, and discuss why a particular word was difficult to hear. In Arabic, this often led to useful conversations about assimilation, attached pronouns, definite articles, or the way common words sound in natural speech.

COMBINING THE TWO TECHNIQUES

The greatest benefit appeared when I used the two techniques in sequence. First, students listened for the global idea and produced a mind map. Then, after a brief discussion of the main point and supporting branches, students completed a cloze listening activity focused on selected details from the same passage or a related passage.

This sequence mattered. If students began with the cloze activity, some immediately narrowed their attention to blanks and lost the overall message. If students only completed the mind map, they sometimes developed confidence about the topic but remained weak in recognizing precise details. Together, the two techniques created a balance: first meaning, then accuracy; first the whole message, then the parts that supported it.

Goh and Vandergrift (2018) explain that listeners draw on both top-down and bottom-up processes, depending on the listening purpose and the nature of the input. In my classroom, mind mapping and cloze listening made those processes visible. Students could see that different listening tasks require different kinds of attention. They also began to understand that missing a detail did not necessarily mean missing the message, and understanding the message did not excuse them from improving accuracy.

Table 1
Comparing Mind Mapping and Cloze Listening Activities

Feature	Mind Mapping	Cloze Listening	Classroom Value
Primary focus	Global idea and relationships among ideas	Specific words, phrases, forms, and details	Together, the two tasks move students from general comprehension to precise comprehension.
Student product	A visual map with branches, arrows, keywords, and categories	A completed transcript or worksheet with missing items filled in	The products give the instructor evidence of where comprehension succeeded or broke down.
Best used when	Introducing or reviewing the main message of an authentic audio passage	Training recognition of details, grammar, connectors, names, numbers, or reduced forms	The teacher can choose the activity based on the objective and available time.
Benefit	Reduces anxiety by showing that every word is not required for basic meaning	Builds accuracy by training learners to hear difficult details in connected speech	The combination supports confidence and skill development at the same time.

REFLECTIONS AND PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Upon sustained reflection on these lessons, I identified several beliefs and principles embedded in my approach to teaching listening.

1. Many struggling listeners are working hard but using inefficient strategies. Struggling listeners are not passive or careless learners. Some attempt to process every word equally. Others give up when the first few seconds of an audio passage move too quickly. Instructors should not interpret these reactions as a lack of motivation. They are often signs that learners need a more manageable way into the text.
2. Visual support can reduce cognitive load and support comprehension. Mind mapping gave students a practical structure for organizing ideas. It also helped me avoid turning every listening lesson into a sequence of comprehension questions. When students mapped the passage, they demonstrated understanding in a way that was visible, flexible, and easy to adjust.

3. Bottom-up listening needs explicit practice. Students often need repeated opportunities to hear how words behave in natural speech. Cloze listening activities provided that practice. They trained attention to word boundaries, forms, connectors, and details that can disappear for learners inside the sound stream.
4. Time limitations require flexibility. These techniques do not need to consume an entire lesson. When class time was limited, I used mind mapping during the main instructional hours to support comprehension of the day's authentic text. Cloze activities could then be used as a shorter review task, homework preparation, or afternoon reinforcement. The point is not to add more work for its own sake, but to select the technique that best supports the listening objective at that moment.
5. Artificial intelligence can assist preparation, but it cannot replace teacher judgment. Tools such as Microsoft Copilot or ChatGPT can help instructors save time by generating first drafts of cloze worksheets from a transcript. However, such materials require careful editing. The instructor must check the transcript, choose blanks aligned with the lesson objective, ensure that the answer key is accurate, and verify that the activity is appropriate for students' proficiency level.

CONCLUSION

Teaching listening is a complex instructional task because listening itself is complex. This is particularly true in Modern Standard Arabic, where morphology, attached forms, and connected speech can make spoken language difficult for learners to segment and interpret. My classroom experience suggests that students benefit when listening instruction separates, and then reconnects, global comprehension and detailed comprehension.

Mind mapping helped learners identify the main idea, organize information, and build confidence through top-down processing. Cloze listening activities helped learners notice words, forms, and details through bottom-up processing. Used together, the techniques created a practical bridge between understanding the message and hearing the language accurately.

Ultimately, the goal of listening instruction is not simply to test whether students understood an audio passage. The goal is to help students become stronger, more independent listeners. For struggling students especially, mind mapping and cloze listening activities can transform listening from an intimidating event into a process they can manage, practice, and improve.

REFERENCES

- Boulaares, D. M. (2026). Vocal prosody and listening comprehension in advanced Arabic L2 learners: A mixed-methods study with comparative insights from English L2 pedagogy. *Language Teaching Research*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688251411423>

- Ebadi, S., & Vakili Latif, S. (2015). Dynamic assessment of EFL learners' listening comprehension via computerized concept mapping. *i-manager's Journal of Educational Technology*, 12(2), 29–41. <https://doi.org/10.26634/jet.12.2.3613>
- Field, J. (2008). *Listening in the language classroom*. Cambridge University Press.
- Goh, C. C. M., & Vandergrift, L. (2018). Reflective and effective teaching of listening. In M. Zeraatpishe, A. Faravani, H. R. Kargozari, & M. Azarnoosh (Eds.), *Issues in applying SLA theories toward reflective and effective teaching* (pp. 179–197). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004380882_013
- Goh, C. C. M., & Vandergrift, L. (2021). *Teaching and learning second language listening: Metacognition in action* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429287749>
- Jiang, S., Wu, J. G., Xiong, Z., Xian, J., & Lam, C. T. (2026). The impact of artificial intelligence-enhanced mind mapping on second language learners' listening comprehension: Perspectives from Macau. *SAGE Open*, 16(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440261418365>
- Novak, J. D., & Cañas, A. J. (2008). *The theory underlying concept maps and how to construct and use them*. Institute for Human and Machine Cognition. <https://cmap.ihmc.us/publications/researchpapers/theorycmaps/theoryunderlyingconceptmaps.htm>
- Siegel, J., & Siegel, A. (2015). Getting to the bottom of L2 listening instruction: Making a case for bottom-up activities. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 5(4), 637–662. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssllt.2015.5.4.6>
- Vandergrift, L. (2004). Listening to learn or learning to listen? *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 24, 3–25. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190504000017>