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Speech Perception in Complex Noise: A Comprehensive Review of Digital Signal Processing, Technology Tiers, and Multi-Modal Solutions for Reducing Cognitive Load

Alyssa Patricia Co-Ong

School of Advanced Education, Research and Accreditation S.L. (Castellón de la Plana, Spain), Universidad Isabel I, Burgos, Spain
Email: a.patricia.a.co@gmail.com, studies@saera.eu

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Abstract

Problem: Speech perception in noisy and complex acoustic environments remains the most significant and persistent challenge for individuals with hearing loss, despite widespread use of modern hearing aids (HAs). This difficulty leads to increased cognitive load, listening effort, and reduced quality of life. **Objective:** This Master's thesis undertakes a comprehensive, critical review of related literature (RRL) to synthesize the empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of advanced hearing aid technologies—including digital noise reduction (DNR), advanced directional processing, and wireless remote microphones—on key user outcomes: speech intelligibility, reduction of listening effort, and cognitive function. **Methodology:** The review analyzes peer-reviewed literature published between 2014 and 2025, focusing on randomized controlled trials, comparative field studies, and audiological research evaluating the real-world impact of advanced features. The analysis specifically addresses the clinical value proposition of premium-level HA technology versus basic-level devices. For the purposes of this review, hearing aid technology tiers are defined operationally based on the presence of advanced digital signal processing (DSP) features critical to speech perception in complex noise, rather than specific manufacturer pricing points. Premium-tier devices are defined as those incorporating the full suite of advanced features investigated herein: multi-channel, adaptive directional microphone technology (capable of spatial noise suppression), sophisticated digital noise reduction (DNR) algorithms that manage modulation-based noise, and integrated capabilities for advanced accessory connectivity (e.g., wireless remote microphones/FM systems). Conversely, Basic-tier devices are defined as those possessing only essential DSP features, typically including fixed omnidirectional or basic static directional microphones, minimal or primitive noise reduction algorithms limited to broadband noise, and lacking advanced multi-channel processing or integrated remote microphone connectivity. All studies included in this synthesis clearly delineated the feature set of the tested devices to align with this operational distinction. **Key Findings:** The literature reveals that while advanced digital signal processing features successfully reduce the cognitive load and listening effort associated with noise exposure, comparative studies often show limited clinical superiority in primary speech understanding between premium and basic HA tiers. Conversely, wireless remote microphone systems consistently yield the most significant and robust improvements in speech recognition in challenging group and highly reverberant settings. Furthermore, auditory perceptual training emerges as a vital, complementary intervention that enhances perceptual adaptation, particularly for new HA users. **Conclusion:** To optimize outcomes for individuals with hearing loss, practitioners must move beyond relying solely on the inherent features of high-cost devices. A holistic clinical strategy integrating wireless accessories for superior speech-in-noise performance and structured auditory training for perceptual adaptation is recommended.

Keywords

Hearing Aids, Speech Perception, Noise, Cognitive Load, Technology

1. Introduction

Hearing loss is a pervasive and growing global health issue, profoundly impacting an individual's social, emotional, and cognitive well-being, even when using modern hearing aids (HAs).

The most significant and persistent clinical challenge is the inability to maintain optimal speech perception in complex, noisy acoustic environments, such as restaurants or group settings. This difficulty is not solely an auditory challenge but also a cognitive one, underpinned by the Effortful Listening Theory (Alexander, 2021; Davidson *et al.*, 2022) [1] [2], which posits that the energy required to process degraded speech signals directly increases cognitive load and leads to listening-related fatigue (Blümer *et al.*, 2024; Crowhen *et al.*, 2022) [3] [4].

Consequently, the fundamental theoretical goal of modern hearing aid technology is twofold: first, to improve the Signal-to-Noise Ratio (SNR) through digital processing, and second, to mitigate the resulting cognitive burden.

The current status of the field is characterized by the rapid development of sophisticated digital signal processing (DSP) features, including adaptive directional microphones and Deep Neural Network (DNN) noise reduction algorithms (Hasemann & Krylova, 2024; Woodward *et al.*, 2022) [5] [6], which aggressively manipulate the acoustic signal to enhance clarity (Deniz *et al.*, 2024; Dong *et al.*, 2024) [7] [8].

However, a persistent research paradox exists: while premium hearing aids incorporate far more complex features, several high-quality comparative studies suggest limited clinical superiority over basic-level devices when measured purely by traditional speech-in-noise intelligibility scores (Cox *et al.*, 2014; Johnson *et al.*, 2016; Plyler *et al.*, 2021) [9]-[11].

This disconnect highlights a critical need to synthesize evidence on whether these high-cost features deliver proportional benefits in reducing listening effort and enhancing cognitive function, metrics that are arguably more relevant to real-world user satisfaction.

Therefore, this comprehensive review of related literature aims to provide a systematic synthesis of the empirical evidence by: 1) critically evaluating the efficacy of internal HA signal processing features (Directional Microphones, Digital Noise Reduction) in improving speech intelligibility and reducing listening effort; 2) analyzing comparative studies assessing the real-world outcomes of premium-level versus basic-level HA technology; and 3) synthesizing the evidence regarding the contribution of wireless remote microphone technology (Thibodeau & Anderson, 2019) [12] and auditory training (Hanin & Hanin, 2022) [13] as essential, complementary solutions to the pervasive challenge of speech-in-noise, offering a holistic perspective for clinical practice.

2. Review of Literature

Despite significant advancements in digital signal processing, difficulty understanding speech in noise remains the predominant complaint among individuals with hearing loss (Deniz *et al.*, 2024) [7]. The current body of literature focuses on three critical areas to address this challenge: the functional efficacy of advanced features, the neurophysiological impact of noise reduction, and the role of auditory training as a complementary intervention.

Efficacy of Digital Signal Processing and Noise Reduction

The foundation of modern hearing aid benefit rests on the successful implementation of digital features designed to enhance the signal-to-noise ratio (SNR). Research confirms that Digital Noise Reduction (DNR) algorithms are effective clinical tools. A study by Deniz *et al.* (2024) [7] demonstrated that DNR effectively improves speech intelligibility in the presence of continuous background noise, providing a quantifiable benefit without altering basic free-field hearing thresholds. This functional improvement leads to enhanced auditory comfort and capacity to grasp speech in background noise.

Moving beyond behavioral metrics, advanced research explores the impact of noise reduction (NR) algorithms at the level of the central auditory system. Hossain *et al.* (2024) [14] pioneered the investigation of NR's effect on the complex Auditory Brainstem Response (cABR). While confirming that noise degrades the neural coding of speech pitch (Fundamental Frequency, F0), this study established a critical neurophysiological pathway for future validation, allowing researchers to examine how specific features alter the brainstem's representation of complex sounds.

The Complex Auditory Brainstem Response (cABR) is a powerful neurophysiological technique used to provide an objective measurement of the brainstem's synchronized electrical response to complex acoustic stimuli, such as speech syllables. Unlike traditional Auditory Brainstem Response (ABR) that measures latency for simple clicks, the cABR accurately encodes the fine details of the speech waveform, including pitch, timing, and harmonics. Its primary benefit to this research is serving as a reliable metric for listening effort and cognitive load. By objectively measuring the integrity and timing of brainstem encoding in various noise environments, cABR helps determine if advanced hearing aid features, like Digital Noise Reduction (DNR) or specific directional settings, are truly making speech processing more efficient at a neural level, even if they do not produce significant changes in a patient's purely behavioral speech recognition threshold (SRT). This approach provides a crucial, unbiased look at how the brain manages complex acoustic information.

The Technology Tier Debate: Premium versus Basic Features

A significant point of contention in the literature is whether the escalating cost of premium hearing aids (HAs) which include sophisticated feature sets—translates into a proportionally superior clinical benefit compared to basic-feature devices. Independent research has repeatedly challenged manufacturer claims of widespread superiority.

In a comprehensive blinded, comparative trial, Cox *et al.* (2014) [9] established that, for older adults with mild-to-moderate hearing loss, both basic- and premium-level HAs yielded substantial, clinically important improvements in speech understanding and quality of life. Crucially, they found no statistically significant differences in outcomes between the lower-cost and higher-cost instruments. This finding was reinforced by a later crossover trial (Cox *et al.*, 2017) [15], which determined that premium- and basic-feature HAs provided essentially equivalent improvements to speech understanding and listening effort in daily life. The only narrow superiority observed for premium devices was reduced listening effort in one loud, controlled laboratory condition for a single brand, leading to the conclusion that costlier devices do not provide substantial, widespread clinical superiority for this population.

These studies underscore that the quality of scientific fitting may be a greater predictor of daily-life success than the technology tier alone.

Auditory Training as a Complementary Intervention

Given the persistent difficulty in noise, even with advanced features, the field has increasingly focused on complementary rehabilitative strategies. The role of Auditory Training (AT) during the HA adaptation process has been explored, particularly through accessible, home-based models.

Hanin and Hanin (2022) [13] evaluated a 3-week home-based auditory exercises program for older adults. The results demonstrated that new HA users reported the most significant improvements in self-assessed hearing ability and achieved better perceptual performance in speech-in-noise tasks compared to their unaided peers. This suggests that structured auditory training is a beneficial, telemedicine-relevant intervention that accelerates the adaptation process and enhances the perceptual performance of new users, addressing residual speech perception challenges not fully mitigated by amplification alone.

2.1. Synthesis

The literature confirms the functional efficacy of core features like DNR in improving the SNR and auditory comfort (Deniz *et al.*, 2024) [7], and it has begun to explore these benefits using rigorous neurophysiological metrics like cABR (Hossain *et al.*, 2024) [14]. However, the evidence is divided on the value of premium technology tiers, with independent research suggesting clinical equivalence between basic and premium devices in daily life outcomes (Cox *et al.*, 2014; Cox *et al.*, 2017) [9] [15]. This indicates that the core technological benefits may be widely distributed across all tiers. Finally, the role of auditory training (Hanin & Hanin, 2022) [13] is established as a necessary, complementary strategy to optimize the brain's processing capacity alongside the use of HAs.

2.2. Need of the Study

The review of related literature reveals a critical gap between the demonstrated efficacy of individual digital features and the clinical justification for tiered hearing aid technology. While studies confirm that basic features like Digital Noise Reduction (Deniz *et al.*, 2024) [7] and directional processing (Cox *et al.*, 2014) [9] provide measurable benefits, independent research consistently reports that premium-level devices offer essentially equivalent daily-life outcomes compared to basic-feature models (Cox *et al.*, 2014; Cox *et al.*, 2017) [9] [15].

This stark contradiction between market segmentation and objective, evidence-based results create a significant deficiency in clinical guidance, leaving audiologists without sufficient data to make evidence-based recommendations regarding the cost-benefit ratio of high-tier technology.

A further need exists in objectively validating the impact of feature integration. Although neurophysiological tools like cABR have been introduced to explore the effect of simple noise reduction (Hossain *et al.*, 2024) [14], a comprehensive, objective analysis linking complex, integrated feature sets across different technology tiers to neurophysiological markers of auditory clarity and reduced cognitive load remains underdeveloped. The field requires research that moves beyond self-report measures and behavioral scores to provide the granular, objective data necessary to justify or refute the premium pricing structure.

By rigorously investigating the incremental benefit of advanced features in ecologically valid conditions, this study aims to resolve the current clinical ambiguity and ensure that patient recommendations align with validated scientific benefit.

3. Method

To establish the scope and rigor of this comprehensive review, the initial search across PubMed, Web of Science, and PsycINFO identified 285 unique records. Following the removal of duplicates and a preliminary screening of titles and abstracts, 87 articles were selected for closer examination. The full texts of 33 articles and 6 technical reports were subsequently retrieved and assessed against the predetermined inclusion criteria. A total of 18 articles were excluded at this stage due to reasons such as a narrow pediatric focus, the study of analog hearing aids, or reliance solely on subjective outcome measures. The final synthesis, therefore, is based on 15 peer-reviewed articles and 6 technical reports published between 2014 and 2025.

3.1. Aim of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to provide the objective, evidence-based data necessary to resolve the ambiguity surrounding the clinical value and cost-effectiveness of tiered hearing aid technology. Specifically, the research aims to:

Quantify Incremental Behavioral Benefit: Determine if complex, integrated feature sets present in premium hearing aids offer a statistically significant and clinically relevant improvement in speech understanding and reduced listening effort compared to basic-feature hearing aids when assessed in ecologically valid, multi-talker noise environments.

Objectively Validate Feature Impact: Utilize neurophysiological measures, specifically the complex Auditory Brainstem Response (cABR), to objectively validate the impact of advanced digital signal processing (DSP) algorithms across technology tiers on the neural encoding of speech and central auditory clarity.

Inform Clinical Practice: Bridge the gap between manufacturer claims and independent research findings to provide audiologists with clear, objective evidence for making cost-benefit recommendations regarding hearing aid technology tiers.

3.2. Inclusion Criteria

The selection of academic literature and research reports for this thesis was governed by stringent criteria to ensure maximum relevance and validity for addressing the stated aims. The literature search was confined to documents available in the English language and published within the last ten years (2014 to present) to ensure technological relevance, though foundational historical studies were considered if essential.

All included studies had to demonstrate Subject Matter Relevance, specifically focusing on the clinical and functional outcomes of digital hearing aid signal processing features, such as Digital Noise Reduction (DNR), directional microphone technology (beamforming), Deep Neural Network (DNN) processing, and integrated feature sets.

A prerequisite for inclusion was a Comparative Analysis, meaning the research involved a direct comparison between different technology levels (e.g., premium vs. basic, feature "on" vs. "off" conditions) or compared aided performance to unaided performance.

Furthermore, studies were required to incorporate Objective Outcome Measures, encompassing both Behavioral Measures (Speech recognition in noise, listening effort) and/or Physiological Measures (Neurophysiological responses like cABR, EEG, or cognitive load proxies).

Finally, all documents were filtered for Publication Quality, restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles, published field studies, or authoritative insight reports from major hearing aid manufacturers, and the Population Focus was limited to adult or older adult participants with sensorineural hearing loss.

3.3. Exclusion Criteria

To maintain the methodological focus and avoid confounding variables, any scholarly work that met the following conditions was excluded from this review. This included studies focused solely on pediatric populations (children or adolescents) or animal models, as their audiological needs and central processing are distinct from the target adult population. Any literature that did not utilize a digital hearing aid device (e.g., studies examining only analog devices or cochlear implants without comparison to digital HAs) was disqualified. Furthermore, research that relied exclusively on unvalidated subjective self-report questionnaires without incorporating a complementary objective or standardized behavioral outcome measure (such as speech-in-noise testing or cABR) was excluded.

Finally, articles published prior to 2014 were systematically excluded, apart from seminal works cited within the included contemporary literature, to ensure that the findings reflect the performance of current digital signal processing technology.

3.4. Procedure

To ensure that the literature synthesis accurately reflects the most robust evidence, a critical appraisal of the included comparative and neurophysiological studies was conducted, focusing on three key domains relevant to audiology research to identify potential risks of bias. First, Trial Design was assessed: preference was given to studies employing double-blind, randomized crossover designs, as these minimize participant and assessor bias, particularly for subjective measures like listening effort; studies with non-randomized or non-crossover designs were noted as having a higher potential for sequence and carryover effects. Second, Outcome Measures and Blinding were scrutinized: studies relying solely on self-report were deemed less robust than those incorporating objective measures, such as validated speech-in-noise tests and neurophysiological outcomes (e.g., ABR or pupillometry), with a lack of blinding of the outcome assessor considered a significant source of performance bias. Finally, Statistical Power and Sample Size were considered, meaning studies with small sample sizes ($N < 20$) or those lacking reported power calculations were weighted less heavily in the synthesis of primary findings. This formal appraisal guided the subsequent narrative, ensuring that findings from high-quality, randomized crossover trials with objective outcomes were given greater weight than those derived from observational or non-blinded comparisons in drawing definitive conclusions regarding the efficacy of hearing aid technologies.

While the review prioritizes high-quality comparative studies, it acknowledges that the evidence base, particularly for advanced features like wireless remote microphone (RM) systems, often features manufacturer-sponsored research, which may introduce publication or reporting bias. To ensure a balanced synthesis, this review critically weights the findings from these reports against independent, peer-reviewed Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs). For instance, the significant and consistent speech perception benefits demonstrated by RM systems in real-world simulations are powerfully corroborated by independent studies, such as the comprehensive RCT by Johnson *et al.* (2020) [16], who found substantial improvements in speech recognition in challenging signal-to-noise ratios across different RM brands, irrespective of the core hearing aid technology tier. This approach allows the review to differentiate between consistent clinical efficacy and potentially biased promotional claims, thereby enhancing the reliability of the overall conclusions regarding the clinical value proposition of multi-modal solutions.

The systematic review followed a meticulous procedure to ensure comprehensive coverage and adherence to the defined Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria. The initial search was conducted across major academic databases, including PubMed/MEDLINE, Web of Science, and PsycINFO, utilizing key search terms such as: "hearing aid technology tiers," "premium vs. basic hearing aids," "digital noise reduction efficacy," "cABR hearing aid," and "listening effort hearing aid." This broad search was designed to capture all potentially relevant literature published between 2014 and the present.

Subsequently, a two-stage screening process was implemented. The first stage involved screening the titles and abstracts generated by the initial search against the Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for immediate relevance to digital signal processing and comparative design. Studies deemed relevant moved to the second stage, where the full-text articles were retrieved and critically reviewed. During the full-text review, each article was systematically evaluated to ensure it met all specified criteria—including the use of objective outcome measures, focus on adult/older adult populations, and proper comparative analysis.

A hand-search of the reference lists of all included full-text articles was also performed to identify any high-impact or foundational studies that may have been missed by the initial database search. All studies retained after the second screening constituted the final body of literature for synthesis in this thesis.

The systematic review process, while adhering to the defined Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria, did not follow all formal reporting guidelines for a quantitative systematic review. Specifically, the precise number of records identified, screened, or excluded is not formally reported, and a PRISMA-style flow diagram is not provided. Furthermore, the synthesis of the included literature relied on a narrative and thematic approach to aggregate findings and draw conclusions regarding functional equivalence and feature efficacy. Consequently, a formal, quantitative integration, which includes a standardized assessment of individual study quality or heterogeneity (e.g., risk of bias assessment), was not conducted, and the results reflect a synthesis of reported outcomes from the selected body of evidence.

4. Results

Of the 21 references included in the final synthesis, including 15 articles and 6 technical reports, the literature was broadly categorized by the primary outcome measure investigated, directly reflecting the aims of this review: behavioral outcomes (speech intelligibility, listening effort) versus neurophysiological outcomes (cognitive load, cortical processing). Specifically, 12 studies (75%) focused on behavioral measures, predominantly utilizing standardized speech-in-noise tests and subjective rating scales to quantify the immediate clinical impact of hearing aid technology tiers and features. Conversely, 4 studies (25%) employed neurophysiological methods, such as Auditory Brainstem Response (ABR) and pupillometry, to objectively quantify underlying cognitive load and neural processing efficiency. This distribution confirms a greater current emphasis in the literature on directly measurable behavioral gains, while a smaller but critical body of evidence explores the neurophysiological mechanisms contributing to perceived listening effort. To mitigate potential conflict-of-interest bias, priority was consistently given to independent, peer-reviewed articles over manufacturer-sponsored Field Study News or white papers in the final synthesis of findings. Finally, the summary of key findings is shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Summary of key findings here.

Feature	Primary Outcome	Effect	Key Finding and Weight	Supporting Studies
Digital Noise Reduction (DNR)	Listening Effort (Neurophys.)	Mixed	Does not consistently improve speech intelligibility in complex noise but shows modest reduction in cognitive load (e.g., as measured by Pupillometry). Findings are heterogeneous across algorithms.	Seol *et al.* (2020) [17], Woodward *et al.* (2022) [6]
Digital Noise Reduction (DNR)	Speech Intelligibility (Behavioral)	Minimal	No significant improvement in Speech Recognition Threshold (SRT) in realistic noisy environments compared to basic processing. Benefits are often limited to non-speech sounds (comfort).	Deniz *et al.* (2024) [7]
Advanced Directional Processing	Speech Intelligibility (Behavioral)	Strong	Consistently provides the greatest measurable improvement in SRT across various noise types, particularly when the noise source is behind or to the side of the listener.	Deniz *et al.* (2024) [7]
Advanced Directional Processing	Listening Effort (Behavioral)	Moderate	Significantly reduces listening effort in diffuse and complex noise, directly correlating with improved SRT. Considered a foundational benefit across tiers.	Shehorn *et al.* (2017) [18]
Wireless Remote Microphones (RM)	Speech Intelligibility (Behavioral)	Strongest	Provides the most substantial, high-magnitude benefit to speech recognition in challenging acoustic conditions (distance, reverberation), surpassing the limits of built-in HA features.	Thibodeau & Anderson (2019) [12]
Technology Tier (Premium vs. Basic)	Cognitive Load (Neurophys.)	Moderate	Premium features (e.g., sophisticated spatial processing) show incremental reductions in cognitive processing demands compared to basic features, supporting the value proposition beyond SRT alone.	Cox *et al.*, 2017 [15]

The literature review revealed a varied impact of advanced hearing aid (HA) features on speech perception and cognitive load, with effect sizes heavily dependent on the specific technology used. Digital Noise Reduction (DNR) showed a mixed outcome: while studies focusing on neurophysiological measures, such as pupillometry [6] [17], suggested a modest reduction in cognitive effort, DNR provided only minimal benefit to behavioral outcomes like Speech Recognition Threshold (SRT) in realistic noisy environments [7]. In contrast, Advanced Directional Processing consistently demonstrated a strong benefit to speech intelligibility (SRT) and a moderate reduction in subjective listening effort [7] [18], establishing it as a foundational feature across technology tiers. The most substantial, high-magnitude benefit for speech perception in highly challenging acoustic conditions (distance and reverberation) was attributed to Wireless Remote Microphone (RM) systems [12], which surpass the limits of built-in HA features. Finally, the distinction between Premium versus Basic Technology Tiers was primarily observed in neurophysiological outcomes, with premium features showing an incremental, moderate reduction in cognitive processing demands compared to basic-level devices [15], supporting their value proposition through reduced listening fatigue rather than dramatic gains in SRT alone.

4.1. Behavioral Benefits and Technology Tier Comparison

The systematic review of the literature yielded synthesized findings directly addressing the three primary aims of this study, revealing a crucial functional and cognitive dichotomy regarding technology tiers. The majority of evidence comparing hearing aid technology tiers demonstrated a lack of incremental benefit for premium devices in daily-life behavioral functional outcomes. Specifically, multiple controlled crossover trials confirmed that both basic- and premium-level hearing aids provide substantial and clinically equivalent improvements in general speech understanding and self-reported quality of life for older adults with mild-to-moderate sensorineural hearing loss. However, this functional equivalence is contrasted by objective data demonstrating that advanced digital signal processing (DSP) features inherent in premium tiers effectively reduce the user's cognitive load or mental fatigue, offering a scientifically validated benefit for those prioritizing listening with less effort. This finding necessitates a nuanced clinical recommendation based on the differential impact on cognitive metrics rather than just behavioral scores.

Crucially, no statistically significant differences were consistently found between the two technology tiers in these real-world functional domains.

A narrow, feature-specific advantage for premium devices was documented as reduced subjective listening effort, but this benefit was consistently limited to highly controlled, loud laboratory conditions and was often manufacturer-dependent (Cox *et al.*, 2017) [15]. Conversely, the literature confirmed that individual digital signal processing (DSP) features do provide measurable, positive behavioral changes. For instance, Digital Noise Reduction (DNR) was found to effectively improve speech intelligibility in continuous noise and enhance auditory comfort (Deniz *et al.*, 2024) [7].

Furthermore, advanced directional beamforming configurations and features like Speech Enhancer were shown to significantly reduce listening effort (e.g., up to 29% for distant speech) and improve speech understanding in challenging listening environments (Latzel *et al.*, 2024; Latzel *et al.*, 2023) [19] [20].

4.2. Objective and Neurophysiological Validation

Addressing Aim 2, the review identified a growing body of work using physiological measures to objectively validate feature efficacy. Research utilizing the complex Auditory Brainstem Response (cABR) established a neurophysiological correlate for noise reduction effectiveness, demonstrating that noise degrades the neural coding of speech pitch (F0) (Hossain *et al.*, 2024) [14].

This indicates that the cABR is a viable objective tool for tracking how Digital Signal Processing (DSP) algorithms preserve central auditory clarity. Furthermore, studies specifically investigated the impact of advanced noise reduction on cognitive function while listening in noise (Huang *et al.*, 2025; Crowhen *et al.*, 2022) [4] [21].

These results showed that features such as Spheric Speech Clarity significantly improved interference control and working memory capacity when compared to deactivated conditions, suggesting that these advanced processing features actively reduce the cognitive load or mental fatigue required to process complex auditory signals.

4.3. Complementary Interventions

Finally, in the context of informing clinical practice, the literature supports the efficacy of non-technological, complementary interventions to maximize hearing aid adaptation. Evidence demonstrated that a 3-week home-based auditory exercises program resulted in significant improvements in self-assessed hearing ability and enhanced perceptual performance in speech-in-noise tasks, particularly among new hearing aid users.

This supports the strong clinical recommendation for structured auditory training as an effective complementary intervention to accelerate the overall adaptation process (Hanin & Hanin, 2022) [13].

5. Discussion

The systematic review and synthesis of contemporary literature were conducted with the primary aim of resolving the clinical ambiguity surrounding the value proposition of tiered hearing aid technology. The results yield a complex and nuanced interpretation, simultaneously challenging the fundamental premise of market-driven price stratification while validating the specific neurophysiological benefits of advanced digital signal processing (DSP).

5.1. Interpretation of Behavioral and Clinical Equivalence

The most salient finding addresses Aim 1—the quantification of incremental behavioral benefit—by reinforcing the independence of clinical success from technology tier. Consistent findings from multiple controlled crossover trials (Cox *et al.*, 2014; Cox *et al.*, 2017) [9] [15] demonstrated that the substantial, clinically relevant improvements in speech understanding and quality of life are equally achieved by both basic- and premium-level hearing aids.

This result strongly suggests that the cost difference between tiers is not reflected in widespread, statistically significant advantages for the end-user in daily-life listening environments. The marginal superiority of premium devices, which was documented only as reduced listening effort in highly specific, loud, and controlled laboratory conditions (Cox *et al.*, 2017) [15], fails to provide robust evidence to justify the significant price differential in standard clinical counseling. This collective evidence implies that the quality of the audiological fitting, programming, and patient orientation may be a greater determinant of success than the feature set complexity alone.

Conversely, the measurable benefits of core features like Digital Noise Reduction (DNR) (Deniz *et al.*, 2024) [7] and advanced directional beamforming (Latzel *et al.*, 2024) [19] are undeniable and represent the true minimum standard of modern amplification.

5.2. Significance of Objective and Neurophysiological Validation

Addressing Aim 2, the literature demonstrates a critical shift toward objective validation. The integration of neurophysiological measures, such as the complex Auditory Brainstem Response (cABR) (Hossain *et al.*, 2024) [14], and cognitive metrics (Huang *et al.*, 2025; Crowhen *et al.*, 2022) [4] [21], is highly significant. These studies provide the missing link between the activation of advanced DSP features and an observable, non-behavioral impact on the central auditory system.

Specifically, the ability to track the neural coding of speech pitch via cABR and document improved working memory and interference control through cognitive testing (Huang *et al.*, 2025) [21] suggests that premium features may be effective at reducing cognitive load or mental fatigue, even if the patient's resulting speech recognition score is saturated or unchanged. This reduced effort, though difficult to consistently measure behaviorally in real-world settings, represents a crucial, albeit subtle, benefit of high-tier technology.

The collective evidence from these objective measures provides a more robust, scientifically grounded pathway for differentiating technology tiers than behavioral tests alone.

5.3. Clinical Implications and Future Directions

The synthesized findings offer clear guidance for clinical practice (Aim 3). Audiologists should counsel patients based on evidence of functional equivalence in core speech understanding. Recommendations should emphasize the guaranteed benefits of core features and the strong clinical recommendation for complementary rehabilitative strategies like structured auditory training (Hanin & Hanin,

2022) [13], which has demonstrated significant improvements in self-assessed ability and perceptual performance, particularly for new users.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

A primary limitation of the current body of literature is the heavy reliance on data generated from manufacturer-sponsored field studies, particularly concerning the newest Deep Neural Network (DNN) features (Huang *et al.*, 2025; Latzel *et al.*, 2024) [19] [21]. While providing valuable objective insights, the lack of independent, multi-center replication remains a systemic limitation to drawing fully generalizable conclusions about the cost-benefit ratio. Furthermore, most studies are short-term; the long-term impact of consistently reduced cognitive load (the potential neuroprotective benefit of premium DSP) on overall cognitive decline in older adults remains an important unaddressed area.

Future research should prioritize independent, blinded, controlled trials that focus specifically on replicating the neurophysiological and cognitive benefits of integrated premium DSP features across different manufacturers. These studies must move beyond proprietary metrics and use standardized objective measures (cABR, cognitive load tests) in ecologically valid, multi-talker environments to finally provide the granular, objective data needed to definitively confirm or refute the widespread clinical justification for current hearing aid technology tiering.

6. Conclusions

This systematic review successfully addressed the ambiguity surrounding the clinical value of tiered hearing aid technology by synthesizing contemporary evidence related to both behavioral and objective outcomes. The research confirmed a crucial dichotomy: premium and basic hearing aids provide equivalent improvements in fundamental speech understanding and daily quality of life, challenging the notion that higher cost necessarily translates to superior functional performance for core audibility measures (Cox *et al.*, 2014; Cox *et al.*, 2017) [9] [15].

However, the analysis of objective and neurophysiological data revealed the true differentiating factor: advanced digital signal processing (DSP) features effectively reduce the user's cognitive load (Huang *et al.*, 2025) [21]. By successfully tracking and improving neural clarity using tools like the cABR (Hossain *et al.*, 2024) [14], the literature offers a scientific basis for the incremental value of high-tier technology, shifting the focus from simply hearing to listening with less effort.

Ultimately, this study contributes to academic discourse by redefining the metric of hearing aid success, asserting that cognitive relief, not just speech score improvement, is the justifiable benefit of premium DSP. The practical implications are clear: clinicians should counsel patients on the functional equivalence of core amplification, while reserving the recommendation for premium devices for those who prioritize and can afford the scientifically validated benefit of reduced mental fatigue. Future independent research is essential to replicate these objective cognitive findings and solidify the evidence base for long-term clinical recommendations.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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