

# LISTENING COMPREHENSION DIFFICULTIES FACED BY EFL STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the students' difficulties in comprehending listening in English. The study used a quantitative method to investigate the problems faced by students in taking listening comprehension test. The data were collected by distributing the questionnaires and carrying out interview to the students. The study was carried out at an Islamic Boarding School in Aceh Besar District, Aceh Province. The findings showed that the students had limited chance to repeat the words, lack of listening length and speed, lack of contextual, culture and background knowledge, and poor grammar and vocabulary.


**KEYWORDS:** *EFL Students, Listening Comprehension, Listening Difficulties.*

## INTRODUCTION

Talking about listening means that talking about an activity to hear, transform, absorb, accumulate, and retrieve information (Grunkemeyer, 1992). Many experts agree that listening is significant in learning a language and communicating because it is commonly used in everyday life. Without listening skills, learners will never learn to communicate effectively (Hamouda, 2013; Osada, 2004). In addition, listening skills also contribute more than any other types of oral communication in and out of classroom in daily life (Ferris, 1998; Swanson, 1996).

Listening is the ability of one person to perceive another through the auditory system, to give meanings to the information, and to absorb them (Steinberg, 2007). In terms of listening comprehension, the purpose is to understand oral communication in natural pace in an automatic circumstance (Chastain, 1971). In listening comprehension, listeners attempt to create meanings within their logical senses when they gain input from a listening source (Goss, 1982).

In the context of English as foreign language (EFL) learners, many learners face difficulties in listening comprehension. One of the factors is most schools put emphasis



on grammar, reading, and vocabulary, and tend to neglect listening in EFL teaching (Hamouda, 2013; Osada, 2004).

Regarding the important and the difficulty in listening comprehension, it is essential to take a deep a look on what aspects that EFL learners encounter in listening comprehension. This paper investigated the problems in listening comprehension among students of an Islamic Boarding School to help gain insight into teaching English listening skills.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

##### *LISTENING COMPREHENSION*

Many definitions are given to elaborate listening comprehension. Brown and Yule (1983) define listening comprehension as the ability of a person to comprehend what he or she has heard. It also refers to an interactional activity in which listeners partake in the meaning-making process, in comprehending, and in making sense of spoken language (Hamouda, 2013; Rost, 2002). More specifically, listening comprehension is “one’s ability to comprehend spoken language at the discourse level – including conversations, stories (i.e., narratives), and informational oral texts – that involves the processes of extracting and constructing meaning” (Kim & Pilcher, 2016, p. 3).

Listening itself is an important aspect of successful communication as it allows people to understand the world around them (Rost, 2009). Jafari and Hashim (2015) remark that listening is a conduit for intelligible information, in which language learners take a great deal of time in learning.

##### *LISTENING DIFFICULTIES*

In listening comprehension, numerous factors may influence the learners’ listening ability. Buck (2001) classifies some of the challenges that can be encountered in listening including unknown words, unexpected themes, quick speaking pace, and unfamiliar accents.

Related to EFL, some factors influencing listening comprehension can be grouped into five aspects: the speaker, the listener, the medium and environment, the stimulus factors, and the context factors (Boyle, 1984; Teng, 2002; Yagang, 1994).

From these five aspects, the difficulties that EFL learners may come across in the listening comprehension process can be summarized as follows:



1. *Quality of Recorded Materials*: the audio quality of the listening material can have an effect on the listening comprehension of EFL learners (Bingol, Celik, Yidliz, & Mart, 2014).

2. *Listening Length and Speed*: some EFL learners may have an issue when they listen to long audio and then try to store the listening input in their mind (Bingol et al., 2014). In addition, Goh (2000) found that many EFL learners easily forgot what they heard during listening. Theoretical explanations of listening comprehension give us insight into the difficulties that students confront when listening to a spoken material. The majority of EFL teachers and learners have agreed that speeches uttered in a slow rate might help learners understand what they are hearing (Blau, 1990; Zhao, 1997).

3. *Limited chance to repeat the words*: It is also hard for ELF learners to listen to the listening audio when played in a limited time and when they cannot replay the audio as they want as it is the teacher who decide how many times the audio is repeated (Underwood, 1989).


4. *Cultural differences and unfamiliar topics*: As language and culture are inextricably linked (Brown, 1994), EFL learners need to be familiar with the cultural elements of language which may significantly affect their understanding. Thus, some topics may also be unfamiliar within the culture of the EFL learners, and the learners may find it challenging to comprehend what is uttered by the speaker (Bingol et al., 2014; Buck, 2001; Brown, 1994).

5. *Lack of contextual knowledge*: EFL learners who have lack of knowledge on speech can have a problem in understanding what is said. They may understand the meaning of the speech superficially; however, unless they are familiar with the context, the learners can face a significant difficulty in comprehending the full meaning of the speech (Underwood, 1989).

6. *Accent or pronunciation*: EFL learners may also have a difficulty understanding different accents in listening to the speakers of English. Therefore, EFL teachers need to expose learners with various types of accents of English as English is spoken by many people around the globe so that they are familiar with the accents and able to understand what is said (Bloomfield et al., 2010; Buck, 2001; Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Goh, 1999).

7. *Unfamiliar vocabulary*: EFL learners will also face a problem understanding words unfamiliar to their ears. Many English words have multiple meanings, and when some words are used in their less common meanings, learners may become confused (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Graham, 2006; Hasan, 2000; Hung, 1998; Underwood, 1989).

8. *Poor grammar*: EFL learners with poor grammar will find it difficult to catch the meanings of the listening material (Graham; 2006). This is because learners need to identify the linguistic part that corresponds to the word to understand the meaning (Hasan, 2000; Vandergrift, 2007; Walker, 2014)



9. *Misinterpretation about listening task*: when the instruction is not comprehended well, EFL learners may feel confused about what to do (Graham, 2006).

10. *Physical conditions*: inconvenient situations in the classroom may also influence learners' listening comprehension, such as noise from outside and hot temperature of the classroom.

11. *Lack of concentration*: a brief lapse in focus might sometimes prevent comprehension. EFL learners will have an easier time concentrating if the listening passage is engaging to them, so that they can pay attention to listen to and comprehend what is spoken (Hasan 2000; Underwood, 1989).

12. *Lack of motivation*: an influential aspect that also affects listening comprehension is learners' motivation (Bloomfield et al., 2010). EFL learners will find it easy to comprehend the listening material if the topic is fascinating so that it will keep them attracted to what is said by the speaker.

#### *SOME SUGGESTIONS TO HELP LISTENING DIFFICULTIES*

Besides increasing vocabulary, grammar, and phonology aspects of EFL learners, introducing listening strategies to the learners is also very helpful (Goh, 2000). Vandergrift (1999) states that it is necessary in listening training to develop listening strategies since the strategies are consciously carried out by learners to direct and examine their listening comprehension. Strategies may vary depending on the learners' competence level (Jalongo, 1995).

The following are several suggestions which may be helpful to deal with EFL learners' listening comprehension issues (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016):

- a) Listening tasks should include authentic listening material and based on the learners' needs and competence levels.
- b) Teachers need to provide listening activities that pique the learners' interest and motivate them to participate. In addition, background and linguistic knowledge, as well as necessary feedback should be provided by teachers to encourage learners to pay attention.
- c) Learners need to be motivated to build their own listening strategies, and teachers may include predicting, asking for clarification, and employing nonverbal clues to enhance learners' listening comprehension skills.
- d) Teachers need to acquaint learners with the different sets of pronunciation and accents of various native speakers of English. This will allow learners to train their ears to different speakers and understand the messages.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study utilized a quantitative method. The participants of the study were 50 students of a private Islamic boarding school, Aceh Besar, Aceh Province. They were second year students of senior high school, which were selected purposively. The data for this study were gathered by means of questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The interviews were conducted with some students who provided similar responses to the questionnaire in order to get the data about the problems they faced during listening activities.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS


The following table 1 displays the results of the questionnaire distributed to the students:

TABLE 1. *Students' Problems in Listening Comprehension*

No	Problem	Frequency	%
1	The quality of recorded materials	20	40
2	Length and speed of listening	30	60
3	Limited chance to repeat the words	48	96
4	Cultural differences and unfamiliar topics	30	60
5	Lack of contextual knowledge	45	90
6	Accent or pronunciation	30	60
7	Unfamiliar vocabulary	35	70
8	Poor grammar	40	80
9	Misinterpretation about listening tasks	20	40
10	Physical conditions of the classroom	20	40
11	Lack of concentration	20	40
12	Lack of motivation	20	40

Based on above table, the study found several problems that were highly problematic during listening comprehension in English among students. The first problem that the students felt the most difficult was limited chance to repeat the words, reaching as high as 96%. In the interview, the students said they could not replay the recording section as they wanted to since it was the teacher who could control the recording of the listening.

The second most difficult problem that the students faced during listening was the lack of contextual knowledge, gaining 90%. The interviewed students stated that sometimes the topics in the listening materials given were mostly new for them so they did not understand the contexts.



The third and fourth most difficult aspects among the students was poor grammar (80%) and unfamiliar vocabulary (70%), respectively, both of which made them have a trouble to understand the meanings of the spoken sentences. Although the students stayed at the boarding school wherein they needed to use English in communicating with their friends, they still encountered a difficulty in using English vocabulary. This is because usually the students would use daily vocabulary in English when they interacted, and thus, they had a trouble when they listened to unfamiliar words in English, including academic or scientific words or jargons or idioms.

The next problem they had was about the length and speed of the listening, reaching 60%. The students explained that they quickly forgot what they heard during catching the information, and they also got distracted during listening so that they could not understand the material given. Moreover, they also could not ask the teacher to replay the recording material as they wanted to.

Another problem obtaining 60% of the responses was related to cultural differences and unfamiliar topics. It happened especially when the teacher tried to introduce the authentic material or real situations, such as broadcasting radio or scientific topics related to the western culture which was a new thing for them. The topics in the listening material talked about specific events that they had never have in Indonesia, so those became something new for them.

Furthermore, accent or pronunciation of the speakers also became a problem for them, gaining 60%. This problem was also related to the issue about the speed of the spoken sentences. The students felt that the native speakers talked too fast and so they could not understand the words said.

Meanwhile, some problems which received less than half of the students' responses at 40% each consisted of the quality of the recorded materials, which sometime made them hard to understand the material especially for those who had poor grammar, misinterpretation about listening tasks, which made the students sometimes confused about what to do, the classroom conditions, the lack of concentration, and also the lack of motivation during the listening activities.


## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that the majority of the students encountered problems in listening comprehension because of several factors, including limited chance to repeat the recording material, the listening length and speed, poor grammar and unfamiliar vocabulary, the lack of contextual, culture and background knowledge that the students had, and the accent or pronunciation of the speakers.

The study suggests that EFL teachers provide listening strategies to help the students enhance their listening comprehension skills, which may include familiarize the students with accents and cultures from around the world.

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