

“I Listen, Yet Somehow I Do Not Understand”: The portrait of students’ perceived challenges in Listening class

Muzdalifah Mahmud¹, Moh. Mirza Er. Pateda², Helena Badu³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Negeri Gorontalo

Jln. Jend. Sudirman No. 06, kel. Wumialo Kecamatan Kota Tengah, Kota Gorontalo Provinsi Gorontalo

muzdalifah.mahmud@ung.ac.id¹, mohmirza29@gmail.com², helenabadu@ung.ac.id³

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Abstract

Listening is a fundamental skill in language acquisition and learning, yet it is often perceived as one of the most challenging skills by students, as this is also the case with English language classes. Listening requires significant attention and concentration to comprehend material such as dialogues and monologues. The objective of this study is to gain insight into the perceptions of students in the English Department class of 2019 regarding the difficulties they encounter in developing listening skills, as well as the factors that contribute to these difficulties. Based on initial observations and previous research, key challenges have been identified including difficulties due to physical limitations, poor audio quality, unfamiliar accents, and limited vocabulary. A qualitative research method with a narrative inquiry design was employed to explore students' experiences through in-depth interviews. The findings indicate that students struggle with listening due to a number of factors, including poor audio quality, unfamiliar accents, and limited vocabulary. The study also highlights additional challenges arising from online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on students' listening comprehension. These insights are expected to inform English language teaching practices to enhance the effectiveness of listening skills instruction.

Keywords: *Listening skills; students' perception; listening challenges and difficulties.*

1. Introduction

Listening is the first gate to acquiring and learning a language, listening skills are one of the skills that must be learned for students who learning English or other languages. If students want to have meaningful communication, they need to be continuously exposed to a wide variety of accents in a natural setting. The meaningful input that students acquire through listening activity will facilitate a conducive environment for acquiring and learning listening skills. According to Rost (in Gilakjani and Sabouri, 2016), listening helps us to understand the world around us and is one of the necessary elements in creating successful communication; in this case, listening greatly affects the process of receiving messages from delivery so that it can provide understanding for the listeners itself.

In many language classes, listening is often considered the most challenging skill because it requires a high level of attention and concentration to understand various materials, including dialogues and monologues. Nevertheless, in most listening classes, instructors have very critical demands on the learning process. To ensure that students have the best experience in listening classes, instructors must be able to effectively manage student and classroom dynamics. Initial observations indicate that few lecturers pay sufficient attention to the challenges students face in developing listening skills. When lecturers do address these issues, students often feel uncomfortable admitting their difficulties. This reluctance to express their limitations can hinder their progress. Based on the researcher's experiences the number of lecturers who pay attention to those kinds of things is very limited, or if any the students are sometimes not comfortable admitting their limitations. Hamouda (2013), Abidin (2013), and Anadapong (2011) stipulated that to help students improve their listening skills, language instructors must understand students' hearing difficulties in understanding listening texts and provide effective guidance strategies. By understanding students' listening challenges and implementing appropriate strategies, Lecturers can create a more effective and supportive learning environment, ultimately helping students improve their listening skills

Further observations reveal that there are several reasons why listening skills can be a challenging skill for students to master/study. Some of them are the following: 1) the students' difficulty in hearing due to their physical limitations. This can be a problem and hinder their ability to not only listen but also comprehend the material, the teachers' explanation, the discussion or conversation; 2) the teachers' talk can also be found problematic for some students; 3) different accents of English; 4) students' level of vocabulary also play an important role in determining the students' challenge in understanding listening text.

Additionally, Hamouda (2013) also proposed that a number of factors may be responsible for the difficulties that students encounter in the comprehension of spoken language. These factors may be classified into four principal categories: those related to the texts and materials used for listening, those associated with the tasks and activities that students are required to perform, those related to the context in which the listening takes place, and those connected with the methodology employed by the teacher. The identification of these difficulties may be achieved by considering three key aspects: the listening factor, the listening material, and the physical settings.

One method for identifying obstacles to learning, as observed in listening classes, is through the implementation of a student perception study. The analysis of student perceptions has been employed to comprehend and address the challenges students confront in diverse aspects of language learning, especially in the development of listening abilities. These studies provide significant insights into the particular difficulties students face in learning listening skills and assist lecturers in adapting their pedagogical approaches to more effectively align with students' needs. Perception involves more than just sensing stimuli through the senses. It includes interpreting and understanding these stimuli. Walgito (2018) describes perception as a sensory process, while Irwanto (in Janah, 2018) emphasizes that perception involves recognizing and making sense of the stimuli. Thus, perception is the interpretation of sensory experiences.

In their studies, Darty (2017) and Sabouri (2016) investigate students' perceptions of the difficulty in listening. Darty identified ten common difficulties encountered by students in self-directed learning activities about listening comprehension. These include a lack of vocabulary, poor mastery of grammatical structures, challenges with accent and pronunciation, difficulties in maintaining concentration, difficulties in processing speech at a fast pace, anxiety, the presence of background noise, an inability to apply effective listening strategies, and poor recording quality. Furthermore, Sabouri's study revealed that a significant number of English programs tend to overlook listening comprehension, often characterizing it as a challenging aspect of language learning. Following the trend, the present study is a descriptive analysis of the perceptions of the English Department's Class of 2019 students regarding the difficulty of listening skills and the factors that contribute to this perception.

According to other researchers, the real reasons vary just as much as students' explanations. However, educators can still learn the reasons for students cheating and think critically about solutions to keep away the students from it. According to Wiley (2020), Students who lack self-efficacy aren't confident that they can complete an assignment or do well on a test. And when they think they're incapable of doing the work, students are more likely to cheat. Furthermore, students have their motivation to learn such as students who love to learn or just getting into medical school, landing a job after graduation, or simply getting grades to please their parents. The last reason is about social situational factors in which students who believe that their peers are cheating are one of the most important predictors of academic dishonesty.

In cases in STIKes Bina Cipta Husada Purwokerto especially in English subjects, students fear failing and then desire to cheat on exams because they are disinterested in the subject and believe they will not get caught. This problem is seen when the researcher observes students in almost all study programs both in classroom activity and exams. For example, the students who are inactive in the classroom get very good scores on exams. While those who are active get not too high a score. It is distinctive from reality and should be a concern whether they have applications to cheat on exams or not.

Based on the background above, there are three problems in this research such as the reasons for students' cheating, the applications used by students to cheat on exams and the solution for educators to avoid students from cheating.

2.Method

This study uses a qualitative method. According to research by Moleong (2017), qualitative methods are methods commonly used to analyze data without participating in statistical analysis of data interpretation. He further argues that qualitative methods aim to understand the object of research, point of view, motivation and phenomena that occur in action. This method is considered very suitable for this study because the researcher wants to investigate the problem of students' perceptions of listening difficulty faced by students of the English Department class of 2019 State University of Gorontalo. The research was conducted in the class of 2019, the English Department of the Faculty of Letters and Culture, at the State University of Gorontalo.

To gain information regarding students' difficulty in learning listening skills, three students were selected to be respondents. Certain criteria were used to select the respondents. First, the respondents are students who have completed

the academic listening course which is offered in the fifth semester at the English Department. Second, of the three respondents, one student was chosen for having the highest score, another for having an average score, and a third for having the lowest score.

In this study, the researchers used a Narrative Inquiry research design in which this research design is the experience of an individual or small group, revealing the life experience or a certain perspective of the individual, usually mainly through interviews which are then recorded and compiled into a chronological narrative. Often recorded as biographies, biographies or in the case of older recordings of traditional stories oral histories.

To collect the data, this study employed the interview technique. According to Esterberg (2002) an interview is a communicative act between two individuals whereby information and ideas are exchanged through a series of questions and answers. This process ultimately leads to a mutual understanding of a specific topic. Interviews are employed as a data collection method when a researcher seeks to identify potential research problems or gain more detailed insights from respondents. This technique relies on self-reports or personal knowledge and beliefs. Stainback (1988) observes that interviews facilitate a more profound comprehension of how participants perceive a situation or phenomenon, which may not be wholly discernible through observation alone. Further Esterberg (2002) expounded that that interviewing is the fundamental methodological approach in social research. A review of the contents of most sociological journals will reveal that a significant proportion of social research is based on interviews, either standardized or more in-depth.

In analyzing the interview data, the researcher used the content analysis method described by Hsieh and Shannon (in Hsieh, 2005). They believed that content analysis is more suitable for open-ended questions because researchers will get more general information about the phenomena discussed in the study. In addition, Hsieh and Shannon (in Hsieh, 2005) emphasize that this method is very important for researchers who want to get general comments from a study without involving existing theories to support their views. On the other hand, opinions and comments are based solely on the interviewee's view of the problem being studied by the researcher.

Further, the researchers first listened to the respondents' audio recordings about their opinions on the difficulty of listening when they communicated carefully using English to get an accurate analysis. In analyzing the results of this analysis, the researchers carefully highlighted several words and sentences in the audio recording which showed the factors experienced by each student in listening problems when they communicated using English. After that, the researchers re-listened the audio recording by making notes about the respondents' initial impressions, thoughts, and analyses. Furthermore, the factors or problems experienced by students are sorted into categories based on how different factors or problems are linked and linked. After that, the researchers drew conclusions based on the respondents' opinions about the difficulty of listening, and the opinions and comments of the respondents about the difficulty of listening are described by graphs for a more accurate analysis.

3. Findings and Discussion

Findings

Why listening is considered a difficult skill?

The interviews revealed several reasons why students of the English Department, State University of Gorontalo enrolled in the 2019 academic year considered listening as a challenging skill to master and study.

Firstly, three respondents stated that listening is one of the most challenging subjects. To listen effectively, it was argued that they must listen well. They must demonstrate immediate responsiveness and active engagement. *"For me in comparison to other skills, listening represents a particular level of difficulty for me. One of the difficulties encountered when listening to audio during examinations is the necessity to respond immediately. In contrast to other skills such as reading, if an important point is missed, it can be revisited by returning to the relevant page. However, this is not possible with listening."*

Additionally, the respondents also noted that their difficulty in understanding listening stems from the fact that English is not their native language. *"Because I don't listen to foreign languages every day, I find it difficult when I have to. This makes listening a skill course with its own level of difficulty."*

Further, students also pointed out that they found listening to a challenging skill due to cultural differences when they engaged in listening exercises. They found that the differences in communication styles, non-verbal cues, and contextual understanding also hinder effective listening activities. *"I find listening difficult because sometimes the audio is about something that is not real with everyday life. this may be due to different cultures, different communication styles, or sometimes there is vocabulary that I don't understand."*

What are the factors affecting the difficulty of listening skills?

When asked what they thought were the factors contributing to the difficulty of mastering listening skills, students responded that there were several contributing factors. One of the factors is the quality of the sound being listened to. Students perceived that when their teachers used audio with bad quality of listening audio the reason their having difficulty in listening is that the quality of listening audio is bad. *"In my opinion, one of the difficulties I face when in listening class is the use of audio as a learning medium; but the audio used has poor recording quality so that the*

articulation of some words is less clear and causes misunderstanding. Not only that but sometimes I also find that some of the audio used has often been used in the past few years so that the topics used are less relevant to the development of the current time."

Another factor that contributed to this finding is the length and speed of listening materials/audio. This is attested by "Actually, I'm not the only one experiencing this problem, I discussed this problem with my friends when I finished the listening course; where when listening to audio listening, which is too fast to speak or when the lecturer explains the material and uses English, which from the speed of speech is too fast for us who still have to translate words, it makes us lose concentration and are left behind with the next sentence. It disturbs us in the learning process."

They also acknowledged that the variety of accents and different ways of word pronunciation are something to be blamed too; "In my opinion, one of the difficulties I faced in the listening class was the use of audio as a learning medium; but the audio used has a poor recording quality so that the articulation of some words is not clear and causes misunderstanding. Not only that but sometimes I also find that some of the audio used has been used frequently in the past few years so that the topics used are less relevant to current developments." Or this responds, "I think it is also evident that proficiency in pronunciation is a significant factor in facilitating comprehension in a listening class. When pronunciation is unclear, it can lead to confusion and hinder the ability to grasp the intended meaning."

Lack of vocabulary mastery or unfamiliar vocabulary was also cited as a significant problem that the students found to be the source of problems in doing listening activities. "I found that vocabulary is an important key in learning a language, so when in listening courses, there is vocabulary that we don't know, that means it will make us confused in interpreting sentences." More on this, one respondent stated that her/his style of learning also plays a role in making the listening activities challenging. "For me, the listening course is a class that is quite difficult because I am a person who when I listen to sentences in English, will look for keywords from the sentence so that I can understand where or how the concept of the sentence is, and if I don't focus and miss that keyword, all the sentences that have been arranged that I remember will all be scattered."

In some cases, the determining factor is the classroom or learning environment itself. For instance, in a listening class, background noise can impede comprehension. Similarly, in an online lecture setting, students found that external distractions, such as background noise or other online activity, can hinder the ability to focus and listen effectively. "Sometimes the influencing factor is the classroom or environment that is not conducive, for example, we are in a listening class and the class is noisy or online lectures and the surrounding environment is not supportive because it is noisy so we have difficulty listening."

Discussion

Concerning the problems and challenges faced by the students in listening, the listening material is generally problematic due to some factors :

Accent

The students often find it difficult because sometimes the accent in an example of a conversation makes it very difficult to recognize the word. This research indicated that one of the problems in listening faced by three respondents was the accent, the respondents were problematic with accents because in formal school they just learned and heard British and American accents. As indicated by Goh (Gilakjani and Sabouri, 2011), 66% of learners identified a speaker's accent as one of the most significant factors influencing listener comprehension. The comprehension of spoken language is significantly affected by unfamiliar accents, whether native or non-native. It has been demonstrated that familiarity with an accent facilitates the comprehension of spoken language. Buck (in Gilakjani and Sabouri, 2011) indicated that when listeners encounter an unfamiliar accent, such as Indian English, for the first time after studying only American English, they will experience significant difficulties in listening comprehension. Such an impediment will undoubtedly affect the entire listening comprehension process. Furthermore, an unfamiliar accent will have an impact on listeners comprehension.

The body of literature on listening confirms the result of this study in terms of how students perceive the difficulties in listening. Thus, based on the result discussed above the students perceived that the source of their difficulties in learning listening skills are:

Pronunciation

In this case, pronunciation is influential in the listening learning process because in listening when an audio is heard by students or students are in conversation, they not only hear but also interpret; especially when students learn English or other foreign languages, so that when there is an error in the pronunciation it can be misunderstood as well when students listen to it. According to Gilakjani (2016), English pronunciation is one of the most difficult skills to acquire and learners should spend lots of time to improve their pronunciation.

Vocabulary

Extensive knowledge of vocabulary is one of the absolute or key requirements so that we can learn foreign languages; in this case when in the process of learning a foreign language and we lack knowledge of vocabulary which

can make us confused when interacting using the foreign language. According to Bingol (in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2011), when listening to texts containing known words, students can easily identify them. If students understand the meaning of words, it can pique their interest and motivation, as well as improve their listening comprehension ability.

Not Conducive Environment

The condition of the classroom is also responsible for challenging situations that students experience in listening activities. They said that they had difficulty in listening class because the environment was not conducive, they could hear audio material being played.

Listening Audio

In this study, the researchers found that all respondents experienced difficulties during the listening-learning process when audio was used as teaching media. This is because the quality of the audio is poor, making it difficult for respondents to understand the material being explained through audio. Some teachers use low-quality recorded materials in their classrooms. The quality of the sound system can affect learners' listening comprehension; Bingol at (in Gilakjani and Sabouri, 2016).

The application of online class

In this research, researchers found interesting things, namely the application of online classes, where this had a significant impact; and where there is a negative impact that makes it an obstacle for respondents. A study by Asikhia (in Irfan and [Sulaiman](#) 2021 found that students are required to attend their online classes from various locations, which necessitates their adaptation to newly encountered conditions, including environmental, technological, and psychosocial aspects. The transition to online learning has had a significant impact on student academic performance and academic integrity. There are several reasons for the poor academic performance of students. A significant number of educational institutions lack the necessary technological resources to fully support online learning. Internet connectivity issues, the lack of access to digital devices such as laptops and mobile phones, and the absence of home internet facilities are among the challenges that students face.

Self-Learning Method

The self-learning method is one of the findings in this study because the respondents had problems with it in the listening-learning process. Respondent three admitted that he is a person who when listening to a sentence in English will look for keywords from the sentence so that he can understand where or how the concept of the sentence is, and if he does not focus and miss that keyword all the sentences that have been written what he remembered would all disperse. Based on his experience in listening class, several friends had the same problem. This can mean that what is heard is not in line with what is being explained during listening class hours. This is closely related to one's listening strategies. Goh (2000) argued that it is critical to teach students listening strategies; however, the teacher must first increase the student's knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and phonetics. In line with this, Vandergrift (1999) also purported that students' ability to develop strategies for listening training is important, so they can understand and understand their understanding and answers.

Length and Speed of Listening

One of the factors that the researchers found in this study is the length and speed of listening. This is considered a problem for most students who learn foreign languages when they learn to use one of the skills, namely listening skills. The students will find the speed of speech from the lecturer or the audio being played challenging if it is unfamiliar with it. In line with that, the respondents who were asked also gave the same explanation about the problems they faced during the listening class, namely the length and speed of listening. Refers to the statement of Bingol at. al, (in Gilakjani and Sabouri, 2011), the level of students can have a significant role when they listen to long parts and keep all information in their mind.

4. Conclusion

The challenge experienced by all students majoring in English is that listening courses are relatively difficult subjects due to some problems. In addition to the inherent problem in listening, which is the problem that comes from factors directly related to listening, the respondents confessed the external problems such as the impact caused when carrying out the online teaching and learning process caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the problematic audio listening materials and so on.

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