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Exploring Listening Difficulties of EFL Higher Education Students

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ABSTRACT

This study explored English as a Foreign Language students' listening difficulties in higher education. A 30-item questionnaire adapted from Calub (2018) items was distributed to 28 first-year students in the academic year 2024/2025 in an English Education program at Universitas Riau Kepulauan, Indonesia. The questionnaire included eight categories, including linguistic, cognitive, affective and environmental factors that contribute to listening difficulties. The study used descriptive statistics to indicate the listening difficulties most students frequently reported which were low recording quality, poor sound clarity, complex grammar, difficulty in concentrating, and fast speech. These factors were indicative of external barriers (i.e., physical context and speaker delivery) or internal barriers (i.e., linguistic and cognitive) to listening effectively. The results of the study support the notion that listening comprehension problems are multidimensional in nature and emphasize the importance of improving listening instruction further. Recommendations for engaging students in listening activities include improving clarity of recorded audio, reducing speed of speech input by the audiolingual material, and facilitating grammatical comprehension.

Keywords: EFL students, listening comprehension, listening difficulties, higher education

Introduction

Listening is a primary aspect of second language learning, mainly in learning English as a foreign language (EFL). It is the source of valuable input for word learning, pronunciation development, and grammar learning in real contexts. Listening is the most difficult of the four skills because of the speed of spoken language, the absence of visuals, and the need to process and immediately respond to the spoken text at once (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). The difficulty of listening has the potential to impact students' performance in an academic institution where English is used as the mediating language.

Prior research has identified difficulties in listening comprehension in the following areas. Linguistic factors include unfamiliar vocabulary, complicated sentence structures (problem complexity), and accents. Cognitive factors include vocabulary load, memory load, etc and Listening Anxiety (Bang & Hiver, 2016). The interrelated complexity of these characteristics exemplifies that listening comprehension is not a passive skill, but an active mental task that requires coping with emotional components.

Listening is specifically a key in contact learning arrangements, where students are asked to process lectures, dialogues, discussions and a lot of multimedia content. However, students are often not taught about listening behaviors in as much detail as some associated skills, and students' listening challenges are not specifically addressed. There has been plenty of research around listening as a global phenomenon but there has been no systematic studies to explore listening comprehension challenges using a methodological instrument, particularly the context of Indonesian EFL. This research gap prevents teachers from efficiently addressing their students' actual listening difficulties (Nushi & Orouji, 2020).

The current study seeks to address this gap by examining what the specific difficulties of listening comprehension are that EFL students in higher education face. To identify potential challenges in the listening comprehension process among EFL higher education students, a questionnaire that had 30 questions was developed from material adapted from Calub (2018). The questionnaire identified possible listening comprehension difficulties that fell into eight domains: linguistics; cognitive; affective; environmental; strategies; and social. The research question to guide this study is: What typesoflistening comprehension difficulties do EFL students in higher education face?

Methods

The study used a descriptive quantitative method to explore listening comprehension difficulties encountered by EFL students. The participants were 28 first-year students enrolled in the English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Riau Kepulauan, Indonesia. Data were collected using a questionnaire consisting of 30 items adapted from Calub (2018), which was selected for its relevance in identifying perceived listening comprehension difficulties. The instrument was divided into eight categories (A) Difficulties Related to the Process of Listening Comprehension, (B) Linguistic Features, (C) Failure to Pay Attention, (D) Psychological Characteristics, (E) Listener Factors, (F) Speaker Factors, (G) Physical Setting, and (H) Content of the Text. Each item was rated using a 4-point Likert scale that ranged from 4 (Always) to 1 (Never), with the highest scores indicating most perceived difficulty. The questionnaire was distributed digitally. Descriptive

- statistics, such as mean and standard deviation, were used to analyze the data and identify the most substantial listening comprehension difficulties experienced by the participants.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

In order to investigate students' primary listening comprehension difficulties, students' responses to the 30-item survey or questionnaire were analyzed descriptively. The items of the questionnaire represented different dimensions of listening difficulties that included language aspects, attentional aspects, speaker delivery aspects, and physical environment aspects. Table 1 shows the five items that had the highest average ratings, which illustrated which problems students most often experienced.

Table 1. Five Highest-Rated Items on Listening Comprehension Difficulties

No	Item Code	Item	Mean	SD
1	**C3**	I lose my concentration if the recording is in a poor quality.	3.32	0.77
2	**G2**	Unclear sounds resulting from poor equipment interfere with my listening comprehension	3.00	0.72
3	**B2**	Complex grammatical structures interfered with my listening comprehension.	2.96	0.79
4	**A2**	I find it challenging to focus on the text when I have trouble understanding.	2.93	0.81
5	**F2**	I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast.	2.86	0.89

The highest-rated item was C3 (*I lose my concentration if the recording is in a poor quality*.), with a mean score of 3.32. It falls into Category C: Difficulties Caused by the Failure to Concentrate which suggests that bad audio quality was a major barrier for students to concentrate and understand the spoken texts. Item G2 (*Unclear sounds resulting from poor equipment interfere with my listening comprehension*.), which falls into Category G: Listening Difficulties Related to the Physical Setting, received the second highest mean score at 3.00 which suggests that environmental and mechanical conditions considerably obstruct the listening experience.

The next highest item, B2 (*Complex grammatical structures interfered with my listening comprehension*.), had a mean score of 2.96 and is placed in Category B: Linguistic Features. This item shows the difficulty students have in processing dense/complex spoken input that only involves grammatical language features. After that, item A2 (*I find it challenging to focus on the text when I have trouble understanding.)* in Category A: Listening Comprehension Process reflects the cognitive strain that occurs when comprehension is disrupted as this can take students away from the rest of the listening task. Finally, item F2 (*I find it difficult to understand well when*

- *speakers speak too fast*.) had a mean score of 2.86. Part of Category F: Speaker Factors, this item emphasizes the difficulty of keeping up with fast speech which requires a greater level of processing speed and language familiarity.

Overall, the five most common obstacles illustrate the various forms of student challenges classified into the broad categories (1) physical environment, (2) language features, (3) comprehension process, and (4) speaker issues. The top five items showed moderate variety in responses, with standard deviation values ranging from 0.72 to 0.89. This shows that though many students shared similar experiences, individual perceptions still varied. These results propose that listening comprehension difficulties are multifaceted with both the internal (cognitive and linguistic) and external (technological and presentation) contributing to the students' experiences.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that EFL higher education students have multiple difficulties with listening comprehension involving technical, linguistic, cognitive, and speaker aspects in their listening tasks. These results are consistent with previous studies which have highlighted that listening is more than simply hearing words, and that listening involves complex cognitive and perceptual processes in real time (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). The most frequently reported difficulty — poor audio quality — further highlights the role of the physical environment in successful listening. As Rahimirad & Shams (2014) noted, components of the environment such as types of noise and unclear recordings can affect a student's ability to process input.

The second item which concerns vague sounds from equipment underscored this point. Scholars (Graham, 2017; Wahyuningsih & Salsabila, 2023) have noted that the sound clarity and technological reliability are important factors in facilitating listening comprehension. When learners do not receive clear input from the equipment, it is incredibly difficult for them to process meaning surely, even for skilled learners.

When it comes to linguistic challenges, students reported that they struggled to comprehend complex grammatical structures. This finding corroborates the previous research indicating that complex grammatical structures accompanied by limited vocabulary knowledge negatively impact EFL students' listening comprehension (Hermida, 2021). Likewise, Dewi (2017) discovered that grammatical knowledge is an important factor in listening comprehension, as limited awareness of grammatical structures preventing students from decoding spoken input as it is spoken.

Cognitive overload appeared as a prominent issue, and was captured in the item about the challenge of focusing when comprehension lags. This is consistent with working memory constraints as revealed by Alnajjar et al. (2023), where learners' inability to make sense of previous segments, result in disengagement from the subsequent information. This is consistent with Nagaraj (2021), who pointed out that listening effort, especially when the auditory conditions are unclear, can instigate mental fatigue and withdrawal based on ongoing failures to understand.

Another major difficulty identified was the fast rate of speech used by the speakers. This supports findings by Saraswaty (2018) and Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016), who reported that rapid delivery impairs students' decoding and inferencing ability. A fast rate of

- speech affects the amount of time one has to make a mental translation, mostly for learners who still rely on their L1 when processing L2 language input.

Moreover, the current study affirms that listening comprehension is affected by both internal (affective and cognitive) and external (acoustic and contextual) factors. This is similar to the research by Namaziandost et al., (2018), who found that learners' capacity to process spoken input was significantly hampered by factors such as undesirable audio quality, background disturbances, and internal cognitive load. These issues often led to comprehension breakdowns among students.

The findings also contribute to the literature in terms of providing a structured and category-based approach to researching listening difficulties in an Indonesian context. Although research on EFL listening difficulties has become widespread globally (e.g., Graham, 2017; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012), studies that explore listening challenges based on specific localized learner experiences using a more holistic measure like Calub's (2018) measure is still limited. The findings of this research, therefore, provide practical implications for textbook developers and instructors to consider, such as clearer audio, scaffolded grammar instruction, and pacing of listening activities.

Conclusion

This study investigated first-year EFL students' listening comprehension problems in higher education. The most frequently identified problems were related to poor recording quality, unclear sounds, complex grammars, not concentrating, and fast speech rates. These challenges had different dimensions in the following areas: physical setting, language features, comprehension processes, and speaker-related problems. This implies that listening problems are partly external and partly internal. This study provides pedagogical considerations for students' listening comprehension difficulties. However, it is needed to address the limitations of this study. The study was limited to a certain institutional and cultural context and this may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should use larger samples with learners from several institutions, as well as do qualitative methods like interviewing and observation in order to gain insight into students' listening experiences. Although the findings cannot be generalized, they have implications for educational practice. Teachers may reflect on the findings of this study when designing listening instruction that can address the technical and linguistic problems the students encounter. Teachers could help listening comprehension by providing clearer audio, slightly slowing the pace of speech and/or providing additional grammar help. Overall, these all may help enhance the students listening comprehension and academic performance.

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