



## AN INVESTIGATION INTO ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN DOING THEIR LISTENING COMPREHENSION TASKS

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### **Abstract:**

This study aims to investigate difficulties faced by the English-majored students in doing listening comprehension tasks. To facilitate this investigation, the researcher recruited a group of 38 English-majored students who study English as a foreign language. A questionnaire was used to collect the data of the study. The participants were asked questions concentrating on a series of 20 items put in the three categories of difficulties in doing listening comprehension tasks. These difficulties are related to listening materials, the role of the listener, and the physical setting. The results of this study showed that most of the students had difficulties related to the listening materials when they contain many unfamiliar words including jargons and idioms, speed of the speakers' speeches, and long-spoken texts. Meanwhile, in terms of the listener, the students revealed that such difficulties as colloquial languages and slangs, unknown words while listening, and reduced forms have caused them to lose while listening. Finally, the students also found difficulties related to the physical setting. For instance, when the tests are taking place in a deafening place.

**Keywords:** difficulties, listening comprehension tasks, English majored students

### **1. Introduction**

Listening skill is one of the four fundamental English language skills besides reading, writing, and speaking. In the context of listening, Trisno, et al. (2019) mentioned that listening is one of the skills provided for foreign language students that they need to have besides speaking, reading, and writing. Sa'diyah (2016) said that "*Listening has an important role in the process of getting main topic or information. Therefore, listening to foreign language is not as easy as we think especially in English which has inconsistent pronunciation*" (p.53). What is more, Howatt and Dakin (1974, as cited in Panduranga, 2016) added a definition of listening as the ability to identify and understand what others are saying.

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This involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and grasping the meaning.

Up to now, many English majored students is encountering problems in their listening comprehension. They not only get low scores in subjects related to listening but also failed in listening exams. Therefore, in order to facilitate this aim, one objective is that the participants will be asked questions concentrating on difficulties in doing listening comprehension tasks related to listening materials, listener, and physical setting. The result of this research can be beneficial for the teachers as they are able to find more suitable teaching methods of listening, which helps students enhance their listening skills. To have this study go in a direction, the researcher would like to concentrate on one primary matter: What are the English majored students' difficulties in doing listening comprehension tasks?

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Definitions of listening comprehension

Many researchers have explained the definition of listening comprehension. Zia et al. (2019) asserted that listening comprehension is a complete process where listeners need to be active in order to understand the message of the communication. Moreover, Abbas & Naries (2016) said that listening comprehension plays a vital role in language learning. Learners want to understand native speakers and listening passages on multimedia such as both DVDs and the Internet. In addition, "*listening comprehension is understanding the native conversation at the normal rate in a spontaneous condition*" (Chastain, as cited in Azmi et al. 2014, p. 1). According to Vandergrift (1999),

*"Listening comprehension is a complex, active process in which the listener must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intonation, retain what was gathered in all of the above, and interpret it within the immediate as well as the larger sociocultural context of the utterance."* (as cited in Rameshwar, 2020, p. 2)

### 2.2 Related studies

Linni & Rusdi (2020) did a study on "*An analysis of students' difficulties in listening comprehension: a descriptive study at English language and literature department FBS UNP*". The purpose of the study was to discover the difficulties that are mostly faced by students in doing listening comprehension tasks. The research sample included 32 students selected by using the cluster sampling technique. The results of this study showed that the difficulties that the students faced in doing listening comprehension tasks were related to three categories namely, listening material, the listener, and the physical setting.

Trisno, et al. (2019) carried out a project on the students' problem in listening comprehension at the university level. This study aims to identify problems encountered by students in listening skills at the English Department at the university level. The data

of this study were obtained from the students of the English Department of FBS, State University of Padang. The data collection was done through listening tests to get information about problems faced by students. Moreover, observation on the learning process and evaluation of the teaching materials used were also carried out. The research findings show that there are six sub-listening skills that are often become the problems faced by students.

Cubalit (2016) also studied listening comprehension problems of Thai university English learners. It was about listening comprehension problems encountered by students related to the listening text, the speaker, and the listener. It also studied strategies the students used to resolve their listening comprehension problems. The participants of this study were 30 students randomly selected from the second to the fourth year of study. The findings indicated that most participants encountered English Language, listening problems related to the listening text, the speaker, and the listener at a high level. Other factors contributing to the listening difficulties of EIC learners were the lack of opportunity to practice and use them.

Syifa & Silih (2020) shared the students' difficulties in listening and explored the factors of students' listening difficulties. The researcher used mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) with questionnaires and interviews as the data collecting techniques. The participants of this research were 100 students of a senior high school in West Java who filled in the questionnaires and 8 students who took part in in-depth interviews. The findings of the research showed that the difficulties in listening skills faced by the students include unfamiliar words, rate of speech, unfamiliar accent, unclear pronunciation, recording quality, and inadequate facility. As for the factors of those difficulties, it involved the students' background knowledge, lack of practice and lack of a comfortable environment.

Rameshwar (2020) also explored English language students' listening comprehension difficulties. The research sample randomly selected sixty male and sixty female students studying English at three community schools of Rupandehi district, Nepal as the research respondents. A closed-ended questionnaire with 24 items on students' listening problems was administered to elicit the data from the respondents. The results of the questionnaire indicated that the content of the listening text (e.g., unfamiliar words, idiom, feeling fatigued while listening to the long text) was the major source of listening difficulties for the students. The second source of difficulty was related to the listener including lack of concentration with long listening text and the existence of noise in the place. The third difficulty included linguistic features such as complex grammatical structures, pronunciation and problems in distinguishing the word boundaries. The last source of the listening problem was concerned with the speaker's speed of speech and different accents. The findings also raise awareness of both teachers and students regarding the listening comprehension problems.

Asep, et al. (2021) investigated the difficulties faced by the students dealing with listening comprehension. This research is a descriptive qualitative research with the case study approach that examines six students in their third semester of the English

education study program in Universitas Muhammadiyah Kotabumi with three different proficiency levels: low, moderate, and high level. The results of this study showed that students with low levels faced difficulties with unfamiliar words (message content), speed of speech (speaker), and lack of vocabulary (listener). Then at a moderate level students felt difficulty in the speed of speech (speaker) and noises (physical setting). Meanwhile, students with high levels faced difficulty with the long-spoken text (message content), variety of accents (speaker) and noises (physical setting). It can be concluded that the listening comprehension difficulties encountered by the students at the tertiary level are different depending on their proficiency in English.

Hamouda (2013) investigated the listening problems encountered by a group of first-year English major students of Qassim University. The research sample included 60 students who took the listening course in 2012/2013 and were selected for the study. Data was gathered by means of both questionnaires and interviews. The results of the study uncovered that accent, pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, the different accent of speakers, lack of concentration, anxiety, and bad quality of recording were the major listening comprehension problems encountered by EFL Saudi learners.

Nushi & Orouji (2020) investigated EFL teachers' views on listening difficulties their students face. The participants of this study were 208 teachers' views on listening difficulties among Iranian EFL learners. A mixed-methods approach integrating a questionnaire and an interview were employed. The results from the questionnaire suggested that the top 10 identified difficulties ranged from practical issues such as poor-quality audio materials to content-based impediments such as unfamiliar topics.

Darti & Asmawati (2017) suggested some problems hindered the students from doing listening comprehension tasks well. The participants of this study were 37 students English Education Department of Tarbiyah and Teacher training Faculty Academic year 2016/2017. To have the data, they used the questionnaire and interview to see how they do listening comprehension tasks. The result unveiled that listening is a very difficult skill for students who study a foreign language. It was based on three factors influencing their listening such as listening materials, listener factor, and physical setting. Therefore, accents, pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, the different accents of the speakers, lack of concentration, and bad quality of recording were seen as the major problems encountered by students' English Education Department.

Based on those studies discussed above, the students normally experience many difficulties in doing listening comprehension tasks, which encourage this study to further investigate this difficult matter.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Participants of the study**

This study employed a group of 38 English-majored students who study English as a foreign language in a four-year English undergraduate program. Most of them are females and they have had much experience in learning English. The students not only

learn listening skills for 4 periods a week but they also have to learn other skills namely, speaking, writing, and reading, not to mention other subjects such as English linguistics. Therefore, they took part in the study voluntarily.

### 3.2 Instrument

To gain the expected data for the research question, the researcher used a questionnaire, which consists of three sections with 20 items. The first section has ten items concentrating on English majored students' difficulties related to listening materials in their listening comprehension tasks. In the second section, seven items are used to ask student's problems related to the role of the listener who is doing the listening comprehension tasks. In the last section, three statements highlight students' problems related to physical setting. All of the items were designed by using a five-point Likert-scale, ranging from 1 to 5, which means (1: Strongly disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Neutral, 4: Agree, 5: Strongly agree). The reliability of the responses obtains 0.876, which can be used for analysis as shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** Reliability statistics of the questionnaire

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.876	20

### 3.3 Procedure

Firstly, the researcher asked an English teacher's permission to come to his/ her online class to conduct the survey. Then, the participants were given information about the purpose of the research; the questionnaires were delivered to the participants. After that, the researcher clearly explained the purpose of conducting this survey and it aims at finding their problems in doing their listening comprehension tasks. It was conducted at the recess in their afternoon class session. The researcher made an effort to create a relaxing and friendly atmosphere while the participants were working on answering the questions so that all of them did their best. Furthermore, all the participants finished their questionnaire and sent the survey forms to the researcher. Finally, the researcher collected all these answers for analysis afterwards.

### 3.4 Data processing

The data were analyzed using the SPSS software, version 22 (Statistic Package for the Social Sciences). The researcher looked for the reliability of the survey responses and run Descriptive Statistics. The result of the reliability has been reported in the instrument section.

## 4. Results

To answer the research question, the researcher would like to present the results obtained from the three categories of the difficulties in listening comprehension tasks such as, (a)

difficulties related to the listening materials; (b) difficulties related to the listeners; (c) difficulties related to the physical setting. The three tables below report the participants' opinions for each category.

### a. Students' difficulties related to the listening materials

In the first section, the students were asked about the difficulties that the students' faced when doing their listening comprehension tasks related to the listening materials. The result can be seen in the following Table 2 below.

**Table 2:** Difficulties related to listening materials

No	Items	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
1	I find it difficult to understand listening texts in which there are too many unfamiliar words including jargons and idioms.	38	2	5	4.03	.822
2	Complex grammatical structures interfered with my listening comprehension.	38	2	5	3.89	.798
3	I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast.	38	2	5	4.00	.838
4	I find it difficult to understand listening texts when the speaker speaks with varied accents.	38	2	5	3.79	.777
5	I feel fatigue and distracted when I listen to a long-spoken text.	38	2	5	4.00	.959
6	I find it difficult to understand listening texts when the topic is unfamiliar.	38	2	5	3.76	.820
7	I use my experience and background knowledge of the topic to understand the spoken text.	38	2	5	3.89	.863
8	I find it difficult to understand every single word of incoming speech.	38	1	5	3.74	1.005
9	I find it difficult to understand English when there are unclear sounds resulting from a poor-quality CD player.	38	2	5	3.95	.899
10	I find it difficult to understand the listening text when the speaker does not pause long enough.	38	2	5	3.79	.741
	<b>Overall</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>1,9</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3.88</b>	<b>0.852</b>

As can be clearly seen in Table 2, the mean values of this set of items range from 3.74 to 4.03, respectively and the standard deviations range from 0.74 to 1.005. Furthermore, the mean score of the problems related to the listening materials as follows: Many students considered that many unfamiliar words including jargons and idioms caused difficulties in doing listening tasks; this category accounted for the mean score of 4.03 with its standardization of 0.822, showing the highest compared to other categories in total. Moreover, the second problem is the length of the spoken text, which accounted for the mean score of 4 with its standardization of 0.959. Following it is the speed of the speakers, which made up of the mean score of 4 and its standardization of 0.838 while seven out of nine items obtained the neutral response on a five-point Likert scale. However, the mean score of the item "The difficulty in understanding every word of incoming speed" took up the mean score of 3.74 and its standardization of 1.00, which was seen as the lowest in this category.

**b. Student's difficulties related to the role of the listener**

In the second section, the students were asked about difficulties related to the role of the listener in doing his or her listening comprehension tasks. The result of the students' difficulties related to the role of the listener is shown in Table 3 below.

**Table 3:** Difficulties related to the role of the listener

No	Items	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
11	I find it surprising and difficult to deal with colloquial language and slangs.	38	3	5	4.05	.733
12	I find it difficult to understand reduced forms.	38	2	5	3.89	.894
13	I find the pronunciation familiar but cannot recognize the words.	38	2	5	3.76	.913
14	I do not often pay attention to the intonation of the speaker.	38	1	5	3.34	.994
15	When encountering an unknown word, I stop listening and thinking about the meaning of the word.	38	1	5	3.61	.887
16	I find it difficult to infer the meaning of an unknown word while listening.	38	2	5	3.89	.863
17	I find it difficult to follow the sequence of the spoken text when the sentences are too long and complex.	38	2	5	3.71	.802
	<b>Overall</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>1,85</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3.75</b>	<b>0.869</b>

As can be seen from Table 3, the mean scores of the difficulties related to the role of the listener were discovered. The students selected colloquial language and slangs as the most problematic issue in doing their listening comprehension tasks ( $M= 4.05$ ,  $SD=0.73$ ). This mean score was significantly higher than any of the six problems related to the listener in doing listening comprehension tasks. Furthermore, the students tended to regard that it is difficult to understand reduced forms as they found it hard to transcript the reduced sounds into words. Furthermore, they saw it challenging to infer the meaning of an unknown word while listening. This item achieved the mean score of 3.89. By contrast, the students seem not to often pay attention to the intonation of the speaker and this item constituted the mean score of 3.34 with its standardization of 0.994. This mean score was seen as the lowest compared to the mean scores of the other listening problems.

**c. Students' difficulties related to physical settings**

In the last section, the students were asked about the difficulties that they faced in doing their listening comprehension tasks related to the physical setting. The result of the students' difficulties related to the physical setting is illustrated in Table 4 below.

**Table 4:** Difficulties related to the physical setting

No	Items	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
18	I find it difficult to concentrate on listening with noise around.	38	3	5	4.00	.735
19	I find it difficult to concentrate when the room is not air-conditioned.	38	2	5	3.82	.801
20	I find it difficult to understand English when there are unclear sounds resulting from poor acoustic conditions of the classroom.	38	2	5	3.89	.727
	<b>Overall</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>2,3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3.90</b>	<b>0.754</b>

As can be seen from Table 4, they found it difficult to concentrate with noise around, which amounted to the mean score of 4 with its standardization of 0.735, which was recognized as the highest in this category. The second problem that they encountered while doing listening comprehension tasks was poor acoustic conditions of the classroom (M = 3.89, SD = 0.727). Finally, they found it difficult to concentrate when the room was not conditioned (M = 3.82, SD = 0.801), which was seen as the lowest in this category.

## 5. Discussion

This part will discuss in detail the results found above. The study aims to address the three categories related to the difficulties in doing listening comprehension tasks: the listening materials, the role of the listener, and the physical setting.

First, the study will discuss difficulties that the students meet while doing listening comprehension tasks. That is the listening comprehension materials. Most of the participants confessed that factors influencing their listening comprehension ability are unfamiliar words including jargons and idioms, too fast speeches, and long-spoken texts. The present result reflects the finding of Linni & Rusdi (2020), who purposed to analyze students' difficulties in doing their listening comprehension tasks; this is a descriptive study and they found that many factors such as complex grammatical structures, inability to understand every single word, inability to interpret the meaning of long spoken texts, unfamiliar topics, and new vocabularies cause the listener much trouble. Moreover, Rameshwar (2020) found that unfamiliar words, idioms, and feeling fatigued while listening to long texts were seen as the major sources of listening difficulties for the students. Therefore, the listening materials should be adapted to facilitate listening comprehension. As clearly seen, this current finding continues to prove that listening materials are one of the factors affecting students' listening comprehension.

In terms of the role of the listener, the students also discovered the difficulties related to the listener. They are about colloquial language, slangs, unknown words, and reduced forms while listening. This result is in accordance with the study conducted by Darti & Asmawati (2017), who found out the problems regarding the listener factor. He or she is worried, loses attention, find it difficult to recognize signal words/phrases, encounter unknown words, and listen without a transcript while listening. By contrast,



the result of Hamouda (2013), who added other influential factors such as accent, pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, anxiety, and bad quality of recording were the major listening comprehension problems met by the learner.

With regard to the physical setting, the students found several difficulties such as noise around and poor acoustic conditions of the classroom hindering them from doing a good listening comprehension task. This result is similar to that of the study carried out by Asep, et al. (2021), who discovered that the noise caused the listener much difficulty in achieving the best result in doing their listening tasks.

## 6. Conclusion

All the items listed in the survey obtained relatively high agreement (difficulties in listening material: 3.75, difficulties in the listener himself or herself: 3.75 and the setting: 3.90). Jargons and idioms achieved the most agreement. In addition, the listener finds it hard to grasp the meaning when the speaker/s in the recording is speaking too fast. Long-spoken texts were also uncovered to be the factor negatively influencing the quality of listening. With regard to the listener, the study found that students had some listening obstacles like listening to colloquial language, slangs, unknown words and reduced forms. Finally, the study also found that students who had difficulties can come to the conclusion that findings indicated that the students faced difficulties in doing listening comprehension tasks, which were related to the three categories namely the listening materials, the role of the listener and the physical setting. In terms of the listening materials, it was found to be the students' difficulties in unfamiliar words including related to the physical setting such as noise around and poor acoustic conditions of the classroom.

## 7. Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, the researcher would like to propose some recommendations that can be made for both students and teachers. For students, they should spend more time practicing at home. They should spend at least 30 minutes listening to what they enjoy such as watching films in English and listening to English songs. Moreover, the students ought to listen frequently to be accustomed to a variety of topics. They should listen to listening texts starting from familiar to unfamiliar topics to enrich sociocultural knowledge. For teachers, English teachers should create an interesting listening environment. They are able to begin lessons by playing exciting games related to English. In addition, teachers also allow their students to listen to English songs because they do not feel bored or sleepy. Moreover, teachers should choose listening texts that are suitable for their students' level. Similarly, teachers also seek suitable teaching methods which may support students in enhancing their listening skills. Next, teachers should not test their students' listening comprehension if they cannot find a quiet place to conduct the test. It is not fair if students have to do listening

comprehension tasks in such a thunderous place. Finally, due to the limitation of this study, the study only explored students' difficulties in doing listening comprehension tasks, so future researchers should seek possible solutions for students to overcome these listening problems.

This study owes some limitations. First, the author was not able to delve in-depth into each category of listening difficulty. Second, the author was unable to investigate different groups of students to see how they perceive listening comprehension tasks. Finally, if this had been used to survey a group of English teachers, more positive results could have been observed as this elite group is seen as professionals who can provide the study with more knowledgeable responses for reference.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

### **About the Author**

Mai Hung Dong has graduated English major at Tra Vinh University, Vietnam.

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