

Investigating Students' Listening Problems in EFL Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate students' listening problems in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. It is conducted in one of private Junior High School in Purwakarta. This research is categorized as qualitative research by conducting a semi structured interview as the instruments of this research. The interview guideline was adopted from the categorization of listening problems from of Trismasari, et al., (2016). 8 students were selected as participant of this research using purposive sampling technique and adjusted to the criteria of students with low level of listening skills. In reason that this type of students is considered as students who experienced high level of listening difficulties. Based on the data found, the researcher concluded that students encounter various kinds of listening problems in learning comprehension such as lack of listening ability, limited English vocabulary, poor knowledge of grammar, listening strategies, linguistic knowledge, familiarity with the topic, rate of speech, the inability to concentrate, different accent and dialect, and environmental variables. By knowing the problem encountered by students in listening comprehension, it is hoped that this research can provide useful insights into learners' performance on the listening comprehension test and its relation to listening problems. Besides, the finding of this research can also be used by the teacher on how to make enjoyable listening activities in language classroom.

Keywords: *listening problems, EFL learning, listening comprehension*

1. INTRODUCTION

Listening is one of the learning process activities, and the teacher can help students comprehend what they listen to by providing the appropriate teaching and method. According to Zhu (2011), listening is one of the four language skills that are most commonly used in communication. Meanwhile, Krashen (1984) contends that listening is the most important aspect of language learning and that the ability to speak and write fluently in the second language will develop on its own over time. On the other hand, Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016) found that many teachers only focus on writing, reading, and mastering vocabulary so that learners often face difficulties while learning listening skills.

The difficulties faced by students could be due to cultural differences or unfamiliar words. Besides, the students also get difficulties distinguishing clearly what foreigners say on the recording of listening that given by the teacher in the classroom. Meanwhile, Listening skill is an important skill for students. It is mainly related to the ability to understand the meaning of a form of language use that is expressed orally. This involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, his grammar and his

vocabulary, and grasping his meaning (Howatt & Dakin, 1974). However teaching listening is considered essential for teacher to be the main focus of teaching material in the classroom in order to increase the students' comprehension in learning English.

Generally, listening comprehension are important point in understanding a language. Listening comprehension is the distinctive form of understanding spoken language. According to Hamouda (2013) listening comprehension refers to the understanding of what the listener has heard and it is his/ her ability to repeat the text despite the fact that the listener may repeat the sounds without real comprehension. To be more specific, Listening comprehension has a number of advantages. Among them, recorded audio material allows students to hear a variety of different voice apart from just their own teacher (Harmer, 2007). Listening comprehension as the various processes of understanding and making sense of spoken language. These involve knowing speech sounds, comprehending the meaning of individual words, and understanding the syntax of sentences (Gilakjani and Sabouri 2016). According to Hamouda (2013), listening comprehension is an individual understanding of what he has heard and it is the listener's ability to repeat the text despite the fact that the listener may repeat the sound without real comprehension.

Al-Khayyat (2015) stated that listening is more than merely hearing words. Listening is an active process by which students receive, construct meaning from, and respond to spoken and or nonverbal messages. As such, it forms an integral part of the communication process and should not be separated from the other language arts." This suggests that listening will bring the audience members to urge the message or goal of what they need to be specific. Listening comprehension is a processing of linguistic knowledge and non-linguistic knowledge in order to understand or gain the meaning of spoken text or utterance (Underwood, 1989). Without listening comprehension, it is impossible for students to be able to understand a certain language. However comprehending listening skills is the most crucial skills in learning a language. Eventough, in reality, it still becomes the most difficult skills that students experienced (Alzamil, 2021)

In the term of students' problem in listening, Underwood (1989) stated that there are some difficulties in listening for students, namely (1) Listeners cannot control the speed of speech of the person conveying the message, (2) Listeners do not have the opportunity to ask the speaker to repeat or clarify the message conveyed, (3) The limited vocabulary of the listeners makes the listeners unable to understand the contents of the text they hear and can even make them bored and frustrated, (4) Failure of listeners to recognize and understand the 'signs' sent by the speaker which causes the listener to misunderstand the contents of the message he receives, (5) Mistakes in interpreting the message received, so that the contents of the message conveyed are received or interpreted differently by listeners, (6) Unable to concentrate due to various reasons, and the last is (7) Concern about the difference in the method and material taught by the teacher with material heard through audio devices or native English speakers.

In addition, Rubin (1994) stated that general factors that influence listening skills are (1) text characteristics (variation in a listening passage/text or associated visual support); (2) interlocutor characteristics (variation in the speaker's personal characteristics); (3) task characteristics (variation in the purpose for listening and associated responses); (4) listener characteristics (variation in the listener's personal characteristics); and (5) process characteristics (variation in the listener's cognitive activities and in the nature of the interaction between speaker and listener). In a different view, (Goh 1999) also presented 5 general factors in her research: (1) environment; (2) tasks; (3) texts, (4) speakers, and (5) listeners. Thus, studying the students' problems in the listening is considered important to be analyzed. This research is focused on the listening test. As we know that there are

some audio types that can be used as materials in listening comprehension practices. Tyagi (2013) mentioned that there are 12 types of listening, the skills in listening to the audio of speech and conversation are classified as comprehension listening. In this research, the researcher focussed on listening to speech audio and conversational audio. Those audio types are mostly found in some kinds of English proficiency tests such as; TOEFL (Test Of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is classified as descriptive research which is also known as the description of characteristics of the population and phenomenon being studied. Descriptive research is a technique that describes and interprets the meaning of the data that has been collected with pay attention and recording as much as possible aspects of the situation under study at that time, to obtain a general and overall picture of the real condition.

Descriptive research also known as statistical research describes data and characteristics about the population and phenomenon being studied. It means that researchers serve the thesis by writing the result of the data using the description of behavior, human or students being observed, and all phenomena in the natural setting (Moleong, 2007). This research tired to analyze the listening problems experienced by students in ceertain privat school in Purwakarta. Based on the students' statements and the teachers' explanation that many students' experienced difficulties in listening especially it can be clearly seen when they were having a listening comprehension test. Many of them got the lowest scores in listening among the other skills. This situation is fit with this research objective which has an aim to investigate students' problems in listening.

The population of the research was the ninth-grade students in one of the junior high schools in Purwakarta. The total students were 104 students divided into 5 classes namely IX A, IX B, IX C, IX D, and IX E. According to Arikunto (2010), the population is the whole of the research subject, whereas the sample is the part or representative of the population studied. The researcher picked up 8 students adjusted to the criteria of students with low level of listening skill. In reason that this type of students is considered as students who experienced high level of listening difficulties.

Semi structured interview was selected as the instrument of this research, the interview guideline was adopted from the theory of Trismasari, et al., (2016); saying that there are generally five problems that affect how hard it is for students to listen in English. These problems are divided into the listening text, the speaker, the teacher, the listener, and the physical environment.

In the interview session, the respondents were allowed to speak in their native language during the interview. It was caused by the speaking ability of junior high school students that is still beginners, besides, the students felt shy if they had to speak in English. Thus, the researcher transcribed their language into English language in order to analyze the data of interview results. According to Danerek (2015), transcription is a transfer of speech in the form of sound into written form of writing words, sentences, or text using sound symbols. So, transcription is a written representation of an audio or visual signal. Additionally, the result from interviw was transcribe, coded, and interpreted to find the answers to the research problems.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

According to Oxford (1990), there are six categories of learning strategies: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Therefore, following are the results of strategies analysis on student responses to each strategies category separately where the results are obtained from the questionnaire that given to selected students based on the document analysis. The results are the average percentage of the use of learning strategies by high, mid, and low score students There are six types of strategies used by students as follows:

According to Trismasari (et al., 2016) that there are generally five problems that affect how hard it is for students to listen in English. These problems are divided into the listening text, the speaker, the teacher, the listener, and the physical environment. The message's content and the text feature are included in the factor pertaining to the listening text. The speech rate of delivery, different accents, reduced form, redundancy, pronunciation, hesitation, pauses, and visual assistance are among the factors associated with the speaker. The component is related to instructor is split into the basic teaching as asking, reinforcing, variation, explanation, opening-closing the lesson, structuring class and focusing group attention or individual. The listener's factors include unfamiliarity with the topic, lack of prior knowledge, poor language, and lack of linguistic knowledge, lack of listening strategies, psychological states, physical problem, and task. The physical environment, which includes visual cues, low-quality equipment, and noise, is a contributing factor. These elements affect pupils who struggle with listening comprehension in English, which will result in subpar performance.

Based on the findings in this research, the researcher found that almost every respondent in the research felt that they have quite low skill and medium ability in listening to English. Only two of the chosen students thought that their listening skills are good. One of them caused he often watched Western movies and played games where the language instruction was conveyed in English language. Besides, another student told that his father who have graduated from one of the universities in London got him used to hearing and speaking in English language. So that these two students could rate their listening are good enough because they have extra learning and it came from the internal of the students themselves in the skill of listening to English language.

The causes of students' difficulties in listening to the English language actually can also come from the internal and external of the students themselves, it depends on how the way of the students' perception about English. Such as in the findings of the interview results, the interviewees reported the following difficulties in listening such as lack of listening ability, limited English vocabulary, poor knowledge of grammar, listening strategies, linguistic knowledge, familiarity with the topic, rate of speech, the inability to concentrate, different accent and dialect, and environmental variables may influence their comprehension during listening. Here are detailed comments from the interviewees related to their listening problems;

a. Lack of Listening Ability

Many students said that they were not successful in understanding what the speakers said because of their lack of listening ability. The students recognized words in written texts of English but they could not understand what they listen. This problem generally happened when the student tried to understand the native speakers' pronunciation but the listener got misperception. As the respondent

said that *"saya tidak bisa mengenali apa yang dikatakan pembicara"* (I could not recognize what the speaker said).

On the other hand, The words spoken by the native speaker were different from the words that the respondent had known. It was proved by the respondent's words that stated *"meskipun saya berusaha keras untuk mendengarkan"* (even though I tried hard to listen). Hence, the respondent considered that it heard blurry which means as an unclear pronunciation.

It is also found that the respondent got difficulties in understanding audio listening especially in pronunciation. As he said *"saya sering terdengar pengucapan yang tidak jelas"* (I often heard unclear pronunciation). In this respondent's problem was probably caused that the respondent getting used to hearing or listening slowly speaking. As he said that *"kalau di kelas biasanya kita mendengar guru ngomongnya pelan-pelan"* (when in the class, we usually heard the teacher spoke slowly). This thing definitely made a difficulty for the respondent where it was needed to adapt when the speech rate became too fast. So in this case, rate speech adaptability can relate to make perception of an unclear pronunciation by the listener. Such kinds of problems also found in Graham (2006) saying that the language learners hope that they can improve their skills in order to have a clear understanding of how the native speakers' say.

b. Limited English Vocabulary

Lack of vocabulary was one of the major problems that influenced students' listening comprehension. Many students admitted that they have poor vocabulary treasury even for students with high level in the junior high school.

The English language has more than hundreds of vocabularies, for instance of Oxford English Dictionary which contained of 171.476 vocabularies. This thing showed that the amount of vocabulary in a language is very huge. Mastering all vocabulary is one of the aspects that is difficult to be reached even for native speakers, it is considered that there are so many vocabularies in the English language. The problem of limited English vocabulary by the students can be caused of lack of mastery. As one of the respondents clearly admitted to it. As he said *"Pastinya kosakata saya yang terbatas"* (Definitely my limited vocabulary) and also another the respondent said *"jika kosakatanya asing bagi saya, itu sangat sulit untuk dipahami"* (if the vocabularies were unfamiliar to me, it was so difficult in understanding). In conclusion, students who have a limited vocabulary, feeling unfamiliar, and not knowing how to pronounce it would be an obstacle for listening comprehension. This is in line with Hardiyanto et al. (2021) less focus and lack of vocabulary became learners' difficulties become the factors which influence their comprehension.

c. Poor Knowledge of Grammar

Some students found the important role of grammar in relation to listening comprehension. Although the learner did not explicitly illustrate the relationship between grammar and listening comprehension, the concern was there.

In listening to English, grammar is needed to be learned (Rossiter, 2021) because grammar is a system composed of many interconnected components that ensure accuracy and meaning (Dalil & Harrizi, 2013). Regarding to problems of grammar, the respondent 3 and respondent 5 had the same reason in this case. Both of them stated that their English was badly caused by poor knowledge of grammar, as Respondent 3 said *"kemampuan listening saya kalau ngomong sama buruknya dengan grammar bahasa Inggris saya"* (my listening ability when I have a conversation is as terrible as my English grammar) and Respondent 5 who also said *"karena grammar saya buruk jadi bahasa Inggris saya tidak bagus"* (because my grammar is poor so my English is not

good). Based on these reasons, it implicated the lack of interest in learning grammar which affects to their English skills.

Poor knowledge of grammar because rarely learn the grammar of English and lack of interest in learning caused of the respondent's feeling that their English skill was bad. Those students probably thought that English was a difficult language with lots of complicated grammatical rules to master. This is actually not really true. As with many analytic languages, English has a lot less rules to learn than languages such as French or Spanish, with their long tables of tenses and endings and agreements. While English does have tenses and endings and agreements, it has far less than many languages do, and the rules for using them are often quite simple and intuitive. This is probably one of the reasons for the success of English as a world language. Hence, the students should be interested and motivated in learning grammar considering it is as a set of rules that govern a language.

d. Listening Strategies

The students sometimes forgot to apply listening strategies while they were in listening test. As one of the students said "*Terkadang saya lupa mempersiapkan diri sebelum melakukan tes listening*" (Sometimes I forgot to prepare myself before having a listening test). In this case, Forgetting to apply strategy probably can make anxiety in the listening process. Therefore, In order to overcome the listening obstacle caused by anxiety, the teacher or instructor need to prepare the readiness of the listeners before conducting a listening test. This thing made the respondent had to face difficulties in listening because of no use of strategies. In listening, listeners must pay attention to the listening process and remember the content they have heard. As a good listener, we need to understand and work with the components of the listening process (Purdy, 1997). If listeners do not have sufficient listening strategy, they will lose the significant items of information and fail in the process of grasping information.

Based on the interview, all of the respondents reported that they spent about two hours a week learning English in the school. The researcher got only three students whose average time of practicing listening outside class was 3 days a week and minutes a day. Among them, one was a student who had a personal habit of playing games with the English language as instructions and the other two were students who had a habit of watching movies and listening to songs. However, the rest students reported that they never practice listening outside class. It could not be denied that the more often students practice listening, the easier it was for students to find strategies for facing listening. whereas the students who never or seldom practice listening, that must be difficult to do listening because there were no strategies and less experience.

e. Linguistic Knowledge

According to Brindley (1997), both linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge are required for one to understand a listening input. This accounted for the reason why the learners could not understand the lesson. It seemed that the main factor that obstructed them from understanding the lesson was their linguistic knowledge.

A little knowledge of English language probably indicated that the learners did not have many language skills. This problem came from respondent 5 who said "*sedikitnya pengetahuan saya tentang bahasa Inggris*" (my little knowledge of the English language). If the students have little knowledge of linguistics, they do not know much about how to pronounce English words, arrange sentences in order, or comprehend an English text caused of the little knowledge of it. So that was why the student implicated that he rarely learn English independently in particular linguistics.

f. Familiarity With The Topic

A few participants stated that they could not understand some listening materials because they were not really familiar with the topic (Chou, 2015). When the interview data were analyzed, it was found that this factor was actually related to the previous one, namely word knowledge. It can be vocabulary or grammar. An audio listening with familiar topics can ease listeners in conquering the test. It is all for the reason of mastery of topics or known vocabulary. On the contrary, the listeners find it difficult if they can not master the topics and the vocabulary heard is extraneous. This problem happened to two respondents, as respondent 6 said *"Jika kosakatanya asing bagi saya, itu sangat sulit untuk dipahami"* (If the vocabularies were unfamiliar to me, it was so difficult in understanding) and respondent 3 said *"familiar atau engaknya dengan topik listening sangat mempengaruhi kemampuan saya dalam menaklukkan pelajaran listening"* (familiarity with the topic of listening really influences my ability in conquering a listening lesson). Hence, if the teacher could adjust the topic to what the students were familiar with, the students can easily process the listening test. It was proven by Brown & Brown (2011) that topic familiarity had a positive effect on the students' comprehension.

g. Rate of Speech

Another problem that bothered the interviewees was the rate of speech. Many students told that it was easier to understand speakers who had a slow rate of speech and difficult to understand speakers with a quick speech rate (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). This problem generally happened when the student tried to understand what the native speakers said but the listener was unable to catch it. As the respondent said that *"saya tidak bisa mengenali apa yang dikatakan pembicara"* (I could not recognize what the speaker said). The respondent 4 said *"biasanya kita mendengar guru ngomongnya pelan-pelan"* (we usually heard the teacher speaks slowly) indicated that the respondent was not used to hearing speech in a fast rate. Besides, the rate of his teacher speaking was slow, this thing probably would make the students difficult in understanding the spoken words because of lack of practice in listening to audio in a fast rate. So that the respondent needed a sort of habituation of listening to audio in a fast rate.

h. The Inability to Concentrate

Some of the interviewees stated that attention was fundamental thing to listening and identified their lapses in concentration as another listening problem.

In learning, students mostly need a noiseless class or place with the intention of getting concentration on gaining information. This circumstance was really needed by students. The example was the respondent who gave statement in the data above. As he said *"saya sangat membutuhkan area yang kondusif saat listening"* (I really need a conducive area while listening), it aimed to get the concentration, as he said, *"karena sangat berhubungan dengan konsentrasi saya"* (because it really deals with my concentration). Thus, in conducting a listening test, it is important to prepare a conducive area considering it is related to the student's concentration that influences the listening test results.

The answer of respondent 8 indicated that concentration factors could also come from the student himself. In this case, the respondent stated that the too-long audio duration could influence his concentration. As he said, *"di bagian tes listening audio pidato terlalu lama bagi saya, saya tidak bisa lebih berkonsentrasi"* (In the speech audio listening test section is too long for me, I could not concentrate more). Basically, this condition probably influenced the student's mind at the time of transferring information process from the audio. The too-long audio listening was also taking extra time in conceiving the meaning. Thus, this condition probably made the student lost concentration (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

i. Different Accents and Dialect

Some of the students felt confused because English has different versions. Especially for the difference between British English and American English was an influence on listening confusion.

The answer of respondent 4 stated that he preferred American to British in learning. The respondent probably chose the easiest one accent, namely American accent. He implicated that there was significant difference between both of them. As the respondent said, *"pelafalan dan intonasi antara Amerika dan Inggris sangat berbeda"* (The pronunciations and intonations between American and British are quite different). Another cause, the respondent chose what accent he usually used in learning, either in school or home. This was proved as the respondent told that he got used to learn English by American accent. As he said, *"dan saya terbiasa mendengar aksen Amerika"* (and I was used to hearing American accent).

Preferring an accent is not always based on the easiest one. As an example that many people chose American accent than British. Aside from its familiarity or simplicity, it was easier to pronounce the words. In fact, based on the interview that has been done, there was a respondent that prefer British to American. As the respondent said, *"sejujurnya, saya lebih suka accent Inggris daripada Amerika pada tes listening meskipun banyak orang mengatakan bahwa Amerika adalah yang paling mudah"* (To be honest, I prefer British to American on listening test even though many people said that American is the easiest one). The reason of this respondent preferred to British was because of getting used since a child. As he said *"my dad taught me using British accent since I was a child"* (my dad taught me using British accent since I was a child). In addition, the respondent was known that his father had studied at one of the university in England. Hence, his father taught and got him used to learning and listening to English as the knowledge of the British accent that his father has.

On the other hand, their listening difficulty in understanding the native speaker's accent was related to the impact of their experience of listening practices at school. In the class, their teacher used to explain a lot of the materials related to the theory of English, then the students must do the task and read aloud the listening passage for them. Because the students seldom have listening lessons, they relied on the teacher's speaking in understanding the pronunciation of English language. As a result, they were accustomed to their teachers' accents. Whenever they listen to the natural speech of the native speakers, the students said that they were difficult and confused to grasp the pronunciation. The comments of those students indicated that they were trying to learn not only English language in one accent but also variations of it. This fact sometimes made it very difficult for them to understand the spoken language.

j. Environmental Variables

A number of respondents commented that comprehension was also distracted by environmental factors inside and outside class. The weather was a common factor reported by the students in bothering students comprehension.

The respondent 7 stated that he needed a conducive area in the case of environmental variables. As he said, *"saya sangat membutuhkan area yang kondusif saat listening"* (I really need a conducive area while listening). This condition was a normal thing when somebody learning or doing something serious and it is supposed to be in a conducive area. According to Antoniuk et al. (2023) a comfortable place ensures the students' successful personal development. Learning is not supposed to be in a noisy area because the human brain will be distracted when there are many voice sources going in the direction of the mind. Moreover, this thing probably will cut off the learner's concentration, as the respondent said, *"karena sangat berhubungan dengan konsentrasi"*

saya” (because it really deals with my concentration). Hence, this was concluded that the respondent can lose the concentration if the area was not conducive.

4. CONCLUSION

Students Encounter various kinds of listening problems in learning comprehension such as lack of listening ability, limited english vocabulary, poor knowledge of grammar, listening strategies, linguistic knowledge, familiarity with the topic, rate of speech, the inability to concentrate, different accent and dialect, and environmental variables. By knowing the problem encountered by students in listening comprehension, it is hoped that this research can provide useful insights into learners’ performance on the listening comprehension test and its relation to listening problems. However, teacher also can consider the best way to handle with students who have such problems for their better language performance. Besides, the finding of this research can also be used to consider on how to make enjoyable listening activities in language classroom.

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