
Listening Comprehension Performance and Problems: A Survey on Undergraduate Students Majoring in English

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Abstract

This study was aimed at finding out the performance of listening comprehension, problems faced, the causes of the problems, and the relationships between the problems and their causes. The samples of this study were the students of bachelor program of an English education study program. The data were the TOEFL prediction listening comprehension test and questionnaires. It was found that 30% of the samples were in a fair listening category and 70% were in a poor listening category. The students' main problems in listening were then categorized as listeners, listening materials, and listening settings. The causes of the problems were specified as linguistic knowledge, pronunciation, concentration, and environment. The data were analyzed using chi-square association with p-value 514.84 which was greater than the critical value of 179.58. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between the listening problems and the factors causing the problem.

Keywords

Causes, comprehension, listening, problems, teaching materials

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Introduction

It is widely known that listening has a very important place in language learning because it is one of the four skills in which significantly contributes to the language acquisition in spite of the fact that other skills such as reading, speaking, and writing are also crucial to develop proficiency in language. Listening is essential as it is the receptive skill that develops for the first time in human being's language development and certainly learning to listen to the target language will improve language proficiency. The pronunciation, intonation, rhythm, and stress of the language could only be improved perfectly through listening activities (Renukadevi, 2014). Listening is the most significant part of communication since it provides substantial and meaningful language inputs, especially when it is learnt for communicative purpose. It helps language learners to learn sounds, pronunciation, word stress, and vocabulary. The good comprehension of spoken messages can only happen when these aspects and also the tones of voice, pitches and accents are sufficiently acquired. In other words, without comprehending languages input appropriately, language learning simply cannot get any improvement and no communication can be achieved without listening (Croom, 1998)

Moreover, having good listening skill will make language learners able to understand what other people are saying regardless of choice of words, accents, speaking speed, intonation, complicated grammar, and other language comprehension barriers (Hien, 2015). Nevertheless, listening comprehension is less considered to be a priority in English teaching and learning process. Richards and Renadya (2002) state that listening is disregarded by most English teachers compared to other language skills such as reading, speaking and writing. Wang and Fan (2015) also claim that L2 listening is rarely seen as worthy of serious research or pedagogical attention. They consider listening as a soft skill that can be obtained outside schools and not to be officially taught by teachers. This thought has led to the unending problems in listening comprehension.

Problems in listening comprehension are caused by many factors. The first one is the listeners themselves. The listeners' language proficiency can interfere the listening comprehension processes. The listeners' exposures to native speakers' pronunciation have great influence on the listeners' comprehension. The listeners' vocabulary mastery may become an obstacle for the listeners to find out the overall meaning or the main point of the spoken discourse. The difficulties in listening comprehension may as well be caused by lack of listening material. Also, Jaya (2017) explains that gathering the listening teaching materials is not as effortless as gathering teaching materials for other three skills because the amount of learning sources for listening comprehension is not as abundant as the source for speaking, writing, and reading skill. The third problem in listening comprehension is the physical settings or the surroundings where the listening activities take place such as noises, audio player, and audio unclarity.

Indonesian students are still struggling to improve listening comprehension. The report on test taker of TOEIC (2014) revealed that Indonesia's listening performance was in the 42nd rank out of 44 countries. This has made many teacher training faculties at Indonesian universities provide more courses in their curriculum. On the average, there are

12 credits semester offered to students. However, students still have difficulties in listening. It is still the TOEFL section that they scored the lowest. Hamouda (2013) states that EFL students have crucial problems in listening comprehension because universities pay attention to grammar, reading, and vocabulary. Listening and speaking skills are not significant parts of many books and teachers do not consider these skills in their classes. Similarly, Osada (2004) stated that listening is not very important for both teachers and students, teachers teach language not to teach listening and students learn language not focusing on listening comprehension. Consequently, it remains the most neglected aspect of language teaching and learning. It is also the research topic that is less embraced by the teachers and students at the university. This study tried to fill the gap and was aimed at finding out the performance of listening comprehension, problems faced, the causes of the problems, and the relationships between the problems and their causes.

Literature Review

Potential difficulties in listening comprehension

Listening difficulties is the hindrance for the students to achieve optimal comprehension performance in listening. That is why to avoid the possibility of encountering the difficulties during the process of listening; we have to find the causes of the problems. Bingol et al. (2014) state the so-called problems in listening comprehension are supposed to be known by both the learners and educator in order to find the solution for the problems. The difficulties in listening comprehension are varied, but in this study, the difficulties will be focused on several aspects, which are the listeners, listening materials and external settings and condition. According to Hien (2015), the problems that arise in listening comprehension comes in several aspects, namely from the listeners themselves, the listening materials, and the result from physical settings. Similarly, Darti and Asmawati (2017) analyses ten problems of listening comprehension which are; lack of vocabulary, poor grammar mastery, accent, pronunciation, lack of concentration, speed of speech, anxiety, noisy, inability to apply listening strategy, and bad quality of recording that is used for listening.

Listeners' difficulties

The difficulties in listening comprehension are caused by the limitation of the listeners' knowledge. Goh and Taib (2006) state that listeners' knowledge of their skill in English is very important especially in the process of listening because the more knowledge they have, the more they become confident during the process of learning. EFL students often stumble upon unknown vocabulary, unfamiliar accent and failed to grasp the whole concept on what the speaker talks about when they have a listening test or simply in an informal conversation. These difficulties arise from the listeners who face challenges in grasping English such as grammar understanding and vocabulary collection.

Materials' difficulties

Most of the times, EFL students encountered difficulties in listening comprehension because of the listening materials. Listening materials are means that is used for English learning purposes in listening. The materials that are usually used in the classroom mostly provided in the form of a dialogue and monologue which often use various accents. EFL students especially find difficulties in distinguishing the accent that is used by the speaker in the audio. Buck (2001) states that listeners will have difficulties in listening, especially when they encounter an unfamiliar accent such as Indian English. A speaker that talks too fast, the unfamiliar topic, and a non-formal form of dialogue and monologue that is used in the listening materials will also bring difficulties for the EFL learners

Unfamiliar topics have confused the listener because topics that are used as listening material come from beyond the students' field of learning. The topic that discusses heavy matter such as business or political issue may bring confusion. Students that have learnt English as a second language and taught by a non-native teacher may also find a problem when they hear a discourse that comes from a speaker that has an unfamiliar accent. Authentic listening material also takes a big part in listening comprehension process of the students. That is because students' mostly less exposed to an informal form of conversation inside the classroom which led to the students' problem in understanding the unfamiliar words that are come from a more informal form of conversation in real-life context. Finally, Graham's (2006) found out that the difficulties in listening faced by EFL students mainly come from the students' inability to catch the meaning of words especially when the delivery of the spoken discourse is too fast for the students to catch up on. Listeners tend to feel under pressure when they listen for too long and thus lose concentration.

Difficulties from physical settings

External or physical settings can also bring significant difficulties in the listening comprehension process. The use of an inefficient media for listening such as a broken tape, noises from inside or outside the classroom and the use of poor equipment can cause the students to confuse and make a mistake during the English learning process or during the listening test the quality of the listening equipment and recorded materials are very important because it can affect the students' listening performance acutely. Loud sounds that come from outside or inside of the classroom can make the students unfocused on their listening materials. That is why in order to achieve an optimal result in listening performance, the use of language lab or sound-proof room is recommended for listening comprehension activities in order to hinder the unnecessary noises from the outside. Most of the time, broken audio will make unnecessary noises or even missing some parts, can make the students lose their concentration in the middle of the listening process. Hien (2014) states that the use of poor-quality recordings or audio can severely affect the listening comprehension performance of the students.

The equipment that the teacher uses has to be compactable and efficient in order to bring a comfortable situation for the students to learn. The last few years along with the

development of technology, the use of learning media for listening which tends to be impractical and not easily accessible such as CDs, tapes, and boom boxes are no longer needed because there are so many other learning resources that do not require extra energy to be accessed and can be accessed anywhere and anytime through applications or websites such as YouTube, Spotify, or Podcast.

Potential causes of the difficulties

Difficulties in the listening aspect can come from many causes. Bingol et al. (2014) examine the problems that the students possibly meet during the process of listening comprehension, the problems included; quality of recorded materials, cultural differences, accent, unfamiliar vocabulary, length and speed of listening. Similarly with Hien's (2015) study which implied that EFL students have difficulties in guessing the meaning behind the new words, unfamiliar topic, and accent, failed to figure out the context of what the speaker talks about, failed to grasp the main points, unfamiliar speech style, and the use of poor-quality recordings or audio, noises, and poor equipment. Sumalinog (2018) also conducted a study of the factors that affecting listening comprehension difficulties of EFL students. The factors are unfamiliar accent, speed of delivering the speech, the learners' limited knowledge of vocabulary and language structure and the use of unfamiliar expressions. Sumalinog (2018) believes that the students' have a problem in listening comprehension because of the level of difficulty of the listening material is either too difficult or too easy for them.

Methodology

This was a survey study. The participants of this study were the sixty-seven students of bachelor program of an English education study program. The instruments used to collect the data were listening test and questionnaires. Content validity was used to test the validity of the listening test. The test was adopted from a ready-made TOEFL-like test listening material. The listening test consists of 50 questions, each listening passage was associated with a set of questions intended to assess test takers' ability to understand main ideas or important details, recognize a speaker's attitude or function, understand the organization of the information presented, understand relationships between the ideas presented, and make inferences or connections among pieces of information.

The questionnaires were adapted from Hamouda's (2013) study of listening comprehension problems. The original questionnaire consists of 71 question items that are divided into seven sections which are the students' self-assessment of their listening proficiency (11 items), problems related to the teaching method at school (4 items), problems concerning the students' method of studying (5 items), and problems that are grouped into seven sections based on their factors, including listeners factor, listening materials, physical settings, psychological factor, speakers, and concentration (51 items). Hamouda (2013) ensured the validity of the questionnaire by asking four experts that have related backgrounds with the study to examine the structure, flow of the questionnaire, clarity, length, and the order of the questions.

This study focused on the listeners, listening materials, and physical settings, so several items from the original questionnaire were selected based on their functions in serving the purpose of this study. The selected questionnaire items were divided into three sections namely the difficulties related to the listeners (5 items), difficulties related to the listening materials (6 items), and difficulties related to the physical settings (3 items). The questionnaire originally consists of seven sections reduced into three sections because the other sections of questionnaire items were not related to the variables of this study. Results of the reliability test showed that Cronbach's Alpha is 0.756 which means that it is reliable. The listening test was scored by using conventional number right (NR) scoring method. Each correct answer was scored 1 and wrong answer was scored 0. According to Bereby-Meyer et al. (2002), correct answers are scored with positive value, incorrect answers and blank answers with value of zero. The questionnaires employed Likert Scale and analyzed based on the level of agreement and disagreement that the students chose from the responses that are available. The responses were then put into percentages and described.

Findings

Students were given a TOEFL-like listening test to find the current condition of their listening performance. There were fifty questions and scored based on the correct or wrong answers. The results of the test were described in the table 1 below:

Table 1. *Results of the listening test*

Score Interval	Category	Frequency	Percentage
86.00 – 100.00	Very Good	0	0%
71,00 – 85.99	Good	0	0%
56.00 – 70.99	Fair	20	29.8%
40.00 – 55.99	Poor	29	43.2%
<40.00	Very Poor	18	26.8%
Total		67	100%

Table 2 below shows the aspects of the listening comprehension test results associated with micro and macro skills of listening comprehension

Table 2. *Results of listening test associated with the aspects*

Category	Aspects				
	Words Recognition	Grammar Recognition	Function Recognition	Inference	Making Prediction
Very Good	2 (3%)	1 (1%)	2 (3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Good	11 (16%)	8 (12%)	2 (3%)	6 (9%)	2 (3%)
Fair	20 (30%)	13 (19%)	18 (27%)	10 (15%)	4 (6%)
Poor	28 (42%)	26 (39%)	26 (39%)	23 (34%)	31 (46%)
Very Poor	6 (9%)	19 (28%)	19 (28%)	28 (42%)	30 (45%)
Total	67	67	67	67	67

Results of the questionnaires

In order to see the students' problems in listening comprehension, questionnaires were distributed. Table 3 and 4 below shows the results of the questionnaires.

Table 3. *Results of the questionnaire on listening problems*

Difficulties		Frequency	Percentage
Listener	Prediction making	24	51%
	Word guessing	25	53%
	Understanding main points	25	53%
Listening Materials	Unfamiliar topic	24	51%
	Unfamiliar accent	25	53%
	Slang words	25	53%
	Long audio	31	65%
	Fast audio	35	74.4%
Physical Setting	Noises	41	87.2%
	Poor quality audio	40	85%
	Poor quality equipment	39	82%

The second questionnaire was given to the students who got the low scores. The purpose was to get more information related to the listening problems. The questions were designed to find the causes of the listening problems. The results were described on the following table:

Table 4. *The results of the questionnaire on the causes of listening problems*

Aspect	Causes	Frequency
Linguistic Knowledge	Word by word translation	69
	Lack of vocabulary	95
	Limited knowledge of varied accents	78
Unclear pronunciation	Informal form of communication	90
	Inability to distinguish sound features	98
	Intonation	72
Inability to concentrate	Unfamiliar topic	55
	No audio repetition	55
	Inability to catch the keywords	74
	Fast spoken discourse	104
Environmental variables	Exhaustion	83
	Inability to understand the context	63
	Unsuitable condition/ surrounding	84
	Disturbing noises	160
	Broken tape	37
	Poor-quality boombox/ cassette player	127

Results of statistical analysis

The data of the questionnaire on listening problems and the data of the questionnaire on the causes of the listening problems were statistically analyzed to find the associations between problems and the causes of the problems as shown in table 5.

Table 5. *Frequency of listening difficulties associated with the causes*

Causes	Aspects				Total
	Linguistic	Pronunciation	Concentration	Environment	
Listeners	106	81	88	58	333
Listening Materials	95	103	301	80	579
Physical Settings	55	17	21	270	363
Total	256	201	410	408	1275

In order to find out the significant association between the problems and the causes of problems in listening comprehension, the Chi-Square Association Test was done. The result of the Chi-square association test is shown in the table 6 below.

Table 6. *Results of Chi-Square association test*

Causes	Aspects			
	Linguistic	Pronunciation	Concentration	Environment
Listeners	22.91	15.48	3.40	22.13
Listening Materials	3.89	1.51	70.80	59.82
Physical Settings	4.39	28.28	78.51	203.74
Total	31.19	45.26	152.71	285.69

Based on the Chi-Square association table above, the p-value is 514,842 and greater than the critical value of 179.581. It means the null hypothesis is rejected. So, there is a significant association between the problems in listening and the factors causing the problems.

Discussion

Based on the results of the listening comprehension test, 47 students or 70% of the population got poor scores, 20 students or 30% of them got fair scores, and no student got good score. The results indicated that the students still had problems in listening. Underwood (1989) states the problems in listening comprehension are usually caused by lack of control over the speed at which speakers speak, not being able to get things repeated, the listener's limited vocabulary, failure to recognize the language, problem of interpretation, inability to concentrate, and established learning habit. Higgins (1995) adds that the problems in listening comprehension frequently faced by students are caused by speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Moreover, this study showed that the first listening problem was related to the listeners themselves such as difficulties in making prediction (24

respondents or 51%) and difficulties in guessing meaning of unfamiliar words (25 respondents or 53%). Another problem in listening comprehension was related to the listening materials. There were 51% or 24 respondents agreed that the use of unfamiliar topics in the listening materials had caused difficulties for them to understand the whole context of what the speakers were talking about. The use of unfamiliar accent also became problems in which 25 respondents or 53% agreed that they got confused by the use of various accent of the speakers. Most of the students also thought that if the spoken discourse was too long, they often found it difficult to focus on what the speaker was talking about. 31 students or 65% respondents agreed that listening duration makes it difficult for them to follow the speaker successfully. In addition, 35 students or 74.4% of the respondents agreed that they often found it difficult to understand the spoken discourse if the speaker spoke too fast. 41 students or 87.2% of the respondents agreed that surrounding noises frequently made them difficult to concentrate on the listening materials. Similarly, 40 students or 85% of the population also agreed that the poor audio quality mostly affected their listening.

The fact that listening is still a problem for the students at the university might have caused listening comprehension course received more than 10 credit hours in the curriculum almost in every university with English major in Indonesia. At our English education study program, there are 12 credit hours for listening comprehension course which students must take starting from the first until the fourth semester. However, students still find listening the most challenging course. Hamouda (2013) claims that EFL students have crucial problems in listening comprehension because universities pay attention to grammar, reading, and vocabulary. Listening and speaking skills are also not significant parts of many books and teachers do not consider these skills in their classes. Osada (2004) shared the same idea that listening is not very important for both teachers and students and teachers teach not to teach listening and students learn listening not listening comprehension.

The findings of this study revealed that there were many factors that could cause listening difficulties which can be divided into external and internal ones in terms of what contributes to them. According to Azmi et al. (2014), students may find problems in listening comprehension because of the quality of the recording materials. Teachers usually use some recorded materials that have been rerecorded for more than three times. These will reduce the quality of the sounds which eventually will affect the students in trying to comprehend the listening materials. Munro and Derwing (1999) stated that too many accented speech can lead to an important reduction in comprehension. Unfamiliar accents both native and non-native can cause serious problems in listening comprehension and familiarity with an accent helps students' listening comprehension. Similarly, Buck (2001) mentioned that when listeners hear an unfamiliar accent such as Indian English for the first time after studying only American English will encounter critical difficulties in listening. This will certainly interrupt the whole listening comprehension process and at the same time an unfamiliar accent makes comprehension impossible for the listeners.

The other factor causing the problems is vocabulary. When listening materials contain known words, it would be very easy for students to comprehend listening materials. If students know the meaning of words this can also arouse their interest and motivation and can have a positive impact on the students' listening comprehension ability. A lot of words have more than one meaning and if they are not used appropriately in their appropriate

context students will get confused. It is also very difficult for lower level students to listen more than three minutes long and complete the listening tasks. Short listening passages make easy listening comprehension for students and reduce their tiredness. According to Underwood (1989), speed can make listening passage difficult. If the speakers speak too fast students may have serious problems to understand L2 words. In this situation, listeners are not able to control the speed of the speakers and this can create critical problems with listening comprehension. Despite the fact that we can cope with missing whole chunks of speech when having a conversation on a noisy street in our own language, many people don't seem to be able to transfer that skill easily to a second language let alone a foreign language. Sometimes inconvenient classrooms also affect students listening comprehension. In the large classrooms, students who are sitting on the back rows may not hear the recording as well as those sitting in the front. Students who prefer to stay next to the windows are effected by the noises that come from the outside. Teachers actually have to take into account all this conditions. The size of the classroom also makes it difficult for teachers to manage the class in group activities or to get feedback from students. The class that does not have air conditioner may start to be too hot in early morning

Conclusion and Recommendations/Implications

In conclusion, the students' listening comprehension performance was still bad. None of them got a good score in the test. Most of them were in a poor listening category. 70% of the students got a poor score or below 56 and 30% got a fair score or below 70. There were three kinds of problems the students faced in listening comprehension namely the listeners, listening materials, and the physical settings. The first was related to the students' limited linguistic knowledge such as prediction making problem, word guessing problem, and understanding main point problems. The second was unfamiliar topic, unfamiliar accent, slang words, and fast audio. The last was noises, poor audio quality and poor equipment. The listening problems were caused by the limited vocabulary, limited knowledge of accents, informal form of communication, inability to distinguish sound features, intonation, unfamiliar topics, fast spoken discourses, surrounding noises, broken tapes, and poor quality boom box. It was also found that there was a significant association between the problems in listening comprehension and the factors contributing to the difficulties.

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