

**STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF DIFFICULTIES IN THE LISTENING SECTION  
OF THE TOEFL AMONG ENGLISH EDUCATION STUDENTS OF FKIP  
UNIVERSITAS RIAU**

Sona Greti Aritonang<sup>1</sup>, Afrianto Daud<sup>2</sup>, Fadly Azhar<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Universitas Riau

[sona.greti3258@student.unri.ac.id](mailto:sona.greti3258@student.unri.ac.id), [afrianto.a@lecturer.unri.ac.id](mailto:afrianto.a@lecturer.unri.ac.id),

[fadlyazhar57@gmail.com](mailto:fadlyazhar57@gmail.com)

**ABSTRACT**

*This study investigated students' perceptions of difficulties in the listening section of the TOEFL among English Education students of FKIP Universitas Riau. The study aimed to identify which listening indicators were perceived as the most difficult by students. A descriptive quantitative method supported by interviews was employed. The participants consisted of 177 English Education students selected using stratified random sampling. Data were collected through a questionnaire adapted from Phillips' (2001) TOEFL listening indicators and semi-structured interviews to support the quantitative findings. The results revealed that several listening indicators were perceived as highly difficult by the students. Indicators categorized as high difficulty included identifying speakers' implied meanings, understanding idiomatic expressions, recognizing almost negative expressions, and distinguishing similar sounds. These findings indicate that students experienced significant challenges in comprehending implicit information and specific linguistic features in TOEFL listening tasks. The study suggests that greater instructional emphasis should be placed on these listening indicators to improve students' listening comprehension skills.*

**Keywords:** *listening difficulties, student perceptions, TOEFL listening*

**ABSTRAK**

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui persepsi mahasiswa terhadap kesulitan yang mereka hadapi dalam bagian listening TOEFL pada mahasiswa Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris FKIP Universitas Riau. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kuantitatif yang didukung oleh wawancara. Responden penelitian berjumlah 177 mahasiswa yang dipilih menggunakan teknik stratified random sampling. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner yang diadaptasi dari indikator listening TOEFL oleh Phillips (2001) serta wawancara untuk memperkuat data kuantitatif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa beberapa indikator listening termasuk dalam kategori tingkat kesulitan tinggi. Indikator tersebut meliputi pemahaman makna tersirat penutur, ungkapan idiomatik, almost negative expressions, serta pembedaan bunyi yang mirip. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa

mahasiswa mengalami kesulitan terutama dalam memahami informasi implisit dan fitur linguistik tertentu pada tes listening TOEFL. Oleh karena itu, diperlukan perhatian lebih dalam pembelajaran listening terhadap indikator-indikator tersebut guna meningkatkan kemampuan pemahaman listening mahasiswa.

**Kata Kunci:** kesulitan listening, persepsi mahasiswa, TOEFL listening

## **A. INTRODUCTION**

In the era of globalization, English is recognized as a crucial worldwide language, especially in educational environments where university students have to achieve proficiency in English to enhance their studies and future employment (Fitriani, 2022; Faridatuunnisa, 2020). Listening is the most important of the four English language skills since it serves as the main means for obtaining information and helps to improve other abilities like speaking, reading, and writing (Kajiura et al., 2021; Uzun, 2023). Listening is also the most common language skill in daily conversation, accounting for about half of all communicative actions (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). Listening skill is seen as a critical component of effective communication and language acquisition.

Listening is not a simple or passive activity. It involves complex cognitive processes in which students

must analyze auditory information, evaluate meaning, maintain information, and respond properly (Walker, 2023). Effective listening requires focus, linguistic knowledge, and the ability to comprehend spoken language in real time (Lengkoan et al., 2022; Tashniyazova, 2024). Many researchers emphasize that listening is an essential receptive ability in second language learning and serves as the foundation for establishing communicative competence (Karimova et al., 2020; Nabiyeu & Idiyev, 2022; Suri et al., 2022). Without good listening skills, learners may fail to absorb spoken material, which inhibits overall language development.

Despite its significance, listening frequently appears as the most difficult skill for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. According to Diora & Rosa (2020), learners usually confront obstacles due to unfamiliar vocabulary, fast speech, various accents, and complicated

grammatical structures. Furthermore, listening difficulties can be caused by psychological aspects like anxiety, lack of concentration, and limited short-term memory, as well as environmental factors like poor audio quality and loud areas (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Nushi & Orouji, 2020; Zulfikar et al., 2020). These issues demonstrate that listening comprehension difficulties are impacted by linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and external factors all at the same time.

Listening difficulties become more evident in high-stakes language tests, especially the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The TOEFL is a standardized English proficiency exam that is extensively used to evaluate students' academic English skills for educational and professional goals (Waluyo & Rofiah, 2021). TOEFL scores are generally required in Indonesia for university graduation, scholarship applications, and work prospects (Fitria & Prastiwi, 2020; Situmorang et al., 2020). Among the evaluated abilities, the listening factor is sometimes regarded as the most difficult because the audio is presented just once and demands test takers to understand spoken

English rapidly and precisely (Fitria, 2021).

Previous research has found a variety of factors that contribute to difficulty in the TOEFL listening section. These include limited vocabulary, unfamiliar topics, fast speech, different accents, unclear pronunciation, and difficulties comprehending implicit meanings and idiomatic phrases (Hardiyanto et al., 2021; Jyoti, 2020; Yuniarti et al., 2022). Phillips (2001) offers seventeen specific listening skills needed to successfully comprehend TOEFL listening materials, such as identifying key information, recognizing synonyms, avoiding similar sounds, interpreting implied meanings, and understanding idiomatic expressions. Failure to master these abilities frequently results in misunderstanding and poor performance in the listening section.

English Education students are required to have outstanding comprehension abilities as they prepare to be future English teachers. However, preliminary findings and previous studies indicate that even English majors continue to struggle with the TOEFL listening section (Aprino et al., 2022; Lengkoan et al.,

2022). The TOEFL is a graduation requirement for students at Universitas Riau's Faculty of Teacher Training and Education (FKIP), including those enrolled in the English Education program. Regardless of their academic background, many students fail to attain the necessary score on their first try, due to difficulties with the listening part. These difficulties include perceiving implicit meanings, interpreting idiomatic phrases, dealing with quick speech, and dealing with foreign language, all of which go beyond basic listening comprehension and need higher-level cognitive processes.

Understanding students' perceptions of these challenges is important because perception influences how they comprehend and respond to learning challenges (Liando et al., 2021; Qiong, 2017). Individual experiences, motivation, educational background, and psychological factors can influence how students perceive their own listening skills and challenges (Slameto, 2010; Robbins & Judge, 2013). Investigating students' perceptions allows lecturers to uncover particular listening patterns that need more instructional focus and

develop more successful teaching strategies. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how English Education students at FKIP Universitas Riau perceive difficulties with the TOEFL listening section. This study focuses on three academic cohorts (2023, 2024, and 2025) and employs Phillips' (2001) TOEFL listening framework to identify the listening skills that are considered as the most difficult. The findings are intended to help lecturers, students, and future researchers improve TOEFL listening instruction and preparation.

## **B. RESEARCH METHODS**

This study used a descriptive quantitative approach with interviews to investigate students' perceptions of difficulties on the TOEFL listening test. A descriptive technique was chosen appropriate because the objective of the research was to describe and evaluate students' perceived difficulties based on particular listening indicators rather than to test hypotheses or establish causal correlations.

This study included 177 English Education students from FKIP Universitas Riau over three academic

cohorts: 2023, 2024, and 2025. Participants were chosen using stratified random sampling to ensure that each cohort was properly represented. This sample strategy was used to get a more representative picture of students' perspectives at various academic levels.

The primary instrument employed in this study was a questionnaire based on Phillips' (2001) TOEFL listening indicators, which were released in Longman Complete Course for the TOEFL Test. The questionnaire had items reflecting seventeen listening skills intended to assess students' perceived level of difficulty on the TOEFL listening test. To establish the students' perceived level of difficulty, responses were measured using a Likert scale. In addition to the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews with chosen students were carried out to support and clarify the quantitative findings.

Before the gathering of data, the questionnaire was validated and reliable. The validity test confirmed that all questionnaire questions were valid, and the reliability test revealed a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.869, suggesting a good level of internal consistency. The quantitative findings

from the questionnaire were evaluated using descriptive statistical approaches, such as mean scores and difficulty level categorizations. The findings were then divided into three categories: low, moderate, and high difficulty.

To give more in-depth explanations of students' reported difficulty in the TOEFL listening exam, descriptive analysis was used on qualitative data from interviews. The interview data were utilized to improve and understand the quantitative results, particularly to explain why several listening indicators were considered as extremely challenging by the students.

## **C.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of the research are offered in two parts: quantitative data from the questionnaire and qualitative findings from interviews. The questionnaire assessed the difficulties students faced with seventeen TOEFL listening skills, while the interviews explored the circumstances that drove the three most challenging listening skills.

### **1. Summary of Research Findings**

This research explored the difficulties English Education students at FKIP Universitas Riau had in the TOEFL listening section using Phillips' (2001) listening skills. The data were acquired through a questionnaire distributed to 177 students and supplemented with interview data to provide more in-depth explanations of the findings. The research of seventeen TOEFL listening indicators revealed that students had varying levels of difficulty across the indicators.

The findings showed that nine skills were classed as having a high level of difficulty, showing that listening difficulties were not evenly dispersed but rather concentrated on certain listening microskills. These findings indicate that students faced increased challenges in listening tasks that required accurate sound discrimination, comprehension of nonliteral meanings, and inferential processing under time limitations.

## 2. TOEFL Listening Indicators with High Difficulty Level

The summary of TOEFL listening indicators categorized as having a high level of difficulty is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. TOEFL Listening Indicators with High Difficulty Level**

No	TOEFL Listening Indicators	Mean	Category
1	Avoid similar sounds	3.90	High
2	Listen for idioms	3.83	High
3	Listen for almost negative expressions	3.80	High
4	Focus on the last line	3.74	High
5	Listen for untrue conditions	3.66	High
6	Listen for who and what with multiple nouns	3.56	High
7	Listen for negatives with comparatives	3.55	High
8	Listen for wishes	3.50	High
9	Listen for who and what in passive sentences	3.43	High

As shown in Table 1, all nine indicators are in the high difficulty category. The skill of avoiding similar sounds had the greatest average score, followed by listening for idioms and recognizing almost negative expressions. Meanwhile, indicators of grammatical complexity and sentence structure, such as identifying meaning in passive sentences and phrases that contain multiple nouns, presented

significant obstacles to students. These findings suggest that TOEFL listening difficulties include a variety of listening microskills rather than a single feature of understanding.

### 3. Discussion of High-Difficulty TOEFL Listening Indicators

The data show that students' TOEFL listening difficulties are directly related to phonological perception, limited exposure to real-time language usage, and inferential processing impairments. TOEFL listening tests demand learners to comprehend spoken language properly and effectively without repetition, which presents considerable obstacles for EFL students (Phillips, 2001).

Among the nine indicators identified as having a high level of difficulty, avoid similar sounds remained the most difficult. Interview data demonstrated that students frequently failed to discern terms with similar sounds, especially when the speakers spoke quickly or with natural pronunciation.

One participant commented, "*When the speaker talks fast, the words sound almost the same to me, so I miss the meaning*" (P3). Another participant stated, "*Sometimes I know the word, but the pronunciation*

*sounds different, and I get confused*" (P4). These replies imply that shortened forms and related speech severely impair student listening comprehension. This conclusion confirms Phillips' (2001) argument that sound discrimination is a basic yet difficult ability in TOEFL listening, and it is consistent with Nushi and Orouji's (2020) findings on the influence of poor phonological awareness on listening performance.

The indicator listen for idioms is considered the second most challenging indicator. According to the interview data, students failed to grasp colloquial terms since their meanings could not be translated literally. According to one participant, "*I understand the words, but I don't know what the speaker actually means*" (P1). Another participant explained, "*By the time I try to think about the idiom, the audio has already moved on*" (P2). These arguments suggest that students have processing delays when encountering idiomatic language. This conclusion is consistent with Hardiyanto et al. (2021), who observed that idioms increase cognitive load during listening tests, and Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), who highlighted the

significance of restricted exposure to actual language in EFL listening difficulties.

The indicator listen for almost negative expressions was also regarded as highly difficult. According to interview data, students were frequently uncertain when comprehending expressions with meanings based on intonation and inferred purpose. One participant commented, *"I'm not sure if the speaker agrees or disagrees, because it's not said clearly"* (P2). Another participant stated, *"I have to think about the meaning first, and then I miss the next sentence"* (P6). These replies indicate that students' inferential listening abilities remain weak. This conclusion backs up Diora and Rosa's (2020) claim that almost negative expressions need high-level inferential processing and are especially difficult in test-based listening contexts.

The remaining indicators classified as having a high level of difficulty, such as focus on the last line, listen for untrue conditions, listen for who and what with multiple nouns, listen for negatives with comparatives, listen for wishes, and listen for who and what in passive sentences, reflect

students' listening difficulties. Interview responses revealed that students frequently lost concentration toward the conclusion of sessions and struggled to absorb complex phrase structures under limited time. Overall, employing interview excerpts strengthens the quantitative findings by giving personal evidence of students' experiences with the TOEFL listening tests. The findings show that students' listening difficulties are multifaceted and impacted by phonological, lexical, grammatical, and inferential elements discovered in prior research.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

This research investigated the difficulties English Education students at FKIP Universitas Riau faced in the TOEFL listening section using Phillips' (2001) listening skills. The findings found that students encountered varied levels of difficulty across the seventeen listening indicators, with nine being classified as having a high level of difficulty. This finding suggests that students' listening challenges are not evenly distributed, but rather focused on certain listening micro-skills.

The most challenging indicators were to avoid similar sounds, listen for idioms, and recognize almost negative expressions. These indicators suggest students have difficulties in phonological discrimination, comprehending nonliteral meanings, and perceiving implicit information. The interview findings revealed that quick speech, natural pronunciation, limited exposure to actual language, and difficulty with inferential processing were the primary causes of students' listening impairments. Overall, the findings indicate that TOEFL listening impairments are multifaceted, with phonological, lexical, grammatical, and inferential aspects.

Based on these findings, it is proposed that listening teaching focus more on establishing specialized listening micro-skills rather than broad listening practice. Lecturers are advised to expose students to more genuine auditory materials, focus on sound discrimination exercises, and clearly present idiomatic expressions and implicit meanings that are prevalent in TOEFL listening tests. These activities may benefit students' listening comprehension and overall TOEFL score.

Future research ought to explore instructional techniques or teaching interventions designed to address particular TOEFL listening difficulties highlighted in this study. Future investigations may also try including participants from other institutions or use experimental designs to investigate the efficacy of targeted listening teaching in enhancing students' TOEFL listening skills.

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