

ENGLISH STUDENTS' STRATEGIES IN ANSWERING THE TOEFL LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate English students' strategies in answering TOEFL Listening Comprehension questions at the University of Mataram. This research employed a qualitative approach with purposive sampling, involving three students of the English Education Program who achieved a minimum listening score of 50. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and supported by documentation, and analyzed using the interactive model of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that students encountered various difficulties, including linguistic factors (fast speech, accent variation, and intonation), cognitive factors (difficulty maintaining concentration), limited vocabulary, challenges in interpreting implied meaning, external factors (noise and poor audio quality), and affective factors (anxiety and lack of confidence). To overcome these difficulties, students applied several strategies, such as focusing on main ideas and keywords, using prediction, visualization, paraphrasing, and note-taking, as well as engaging in self-directed practice through online resources. The findings also indicate that students combined strategies recommended by ETS with their personal learning approaches. The selection of these strategies was influenced by the need to manage fast speech, reduce cognitive load, enhance memory retention, minimize confusion in answering questions, and increase exposure to listening materials. Overall, students' strategy use was adaptive and shaped by their learning experiences and perceived effectiveness.

Keywords: TOEFL Listening, listening comprehension, learning strategies.

A. Introduction

Listening comprehension is one of the most essential skills in English language learning because it enables students to understand spoken information and communicate effectively in academic contexts. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, listening is often considered

one of the most difficult skills since learners must process spoken language in real time while simultaneously recognizing pronunciation, vocabulary, intonation, and meaning. According to Nurmatova (2022), listening comprehension refers to a person's ability to understand information

conveyed through hearing. Similarly, Nabiyeu and Idris (2022) emphasize that listening contributes significantly to language acquisition and communication effectiveness because successful interaction cannot occur without adequate listening skills. In addition, listening plays an important role in academic achievement because students are required to process information quickly and accurately during classroom learning and language testing activities.

In the context of standardized English proficiency tests, listening comprehension becomes one of the major components assessed in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). TOEFL is an internationally recognized English proficiency test administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to measure learners' ability in using English for academic and professional purposes. According to Elfiandri et al. (2020), TOEFL measures English proficiency through several sections, including listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. Furthermore,

Hartanto and Inayati (2016) explain that TOEFL is one of the most widely used English proficiency tests in higher education institutions. The listening section specifically measures test takers' ability to understand spoken English in conversations, lectures, and academic discussions. As a result, listening comprehension becomes an important indicator of students' English competence in academic settings.

However, many EFL students still experience considerable difficulties in answering TOEFL Listening Comprehension questions. Listening activities in TOEFL require students to process information in a limited amount of time, understand different accents, recognize implied meanings, and maintain concentration throughout the listening process. According to Lubis and Irmayana (2019), the listening section is often considered the most difficult part of the TOEFL test because students must understand spoken language quickly and accurately. Similarly, Saraswati (2018) found that students commonly face problems related to fast speech,

unfamiliar vocabulary, accent variation, and lack of concentration during listening comprehension activities. These difficulties become more challenging because listening differs from reading in that students cannot replay the audio or review the spoken text repeatedly during the actual TOEFL test.

Several factors are known to influence students' listening comprehension performance on the TOEFL. According to Hasan (2015), linguistic and cognitive factors such as vocabulary limitation, sentence structure understanding, speaker speed, accent variation, and concentration ability significantly affect listening comprehension. In addition, external and environmental factors, including poor audio quality, noise, and psychological conditions such as anxiety, may also interfere with students' listening performance (Pratiwi & Andriyanti, 2019). Moreover, affective aspects such as confidence and emotional readiness contribute to students' success in listening activities. Farmasari et al. (2023) state that positive emotional conditions and learning satisfaction can improve students' engagement,

concentration, and academic achievement in language learning. Therefore, students need effective strategies to overcome these listening difficulties and improve their TOEFL performance.

To overcome listening difficulties, students often apply various learning and test-taking strategies. Educational Testing Service (ETS) through the "TOEFL iBT Test Prep Planner" (2024) recommends several strategies, such as focusing on main ideas, identifying keywords, making predictions, taking notes, recognizing speaker intentions, and practicing listening regularly using various English materials. These strategies are intended to help students process spoken information more effectively during the listening test. Furthermore, Gagné and Driscoll (2018) explain that learning strategies involve learners' ability to select and adapt appropriate methods according to their learning needs and situations. This indicates that successful students often combine formal strategies with their own personal approaches based on their learning experiences and preferences.

Several previous studies have discussed students' difficulties and strategies in TOEFL listening comprehension. Saraswati (2018) found that metacognitive strategies help students improve listening comprehension because learners actively monitor and evaluate their understanding during listening activities. Meanwhile, Rosaria, Gunantar, and Ellyawati (2021) reported that students often use lecturer-recommended strategies as well as personal techniques such as reading answer choices while listening to the audio. In addition, Lubis and Irmayana (2019) found that long conversations and fast speech are among the greatest challenges in TOEFL Listening Comprehension. Although these studies have investigated listening difficulties and strategies, research focusing specifically on English students who have successfully achieved a minimum TOEFL listening score of 50 remains limited.

At the University of Mataram, TOEFL is one of the graduation requirements for university students. However, many students, including English Education students, still

struggle to achieve the minimum TOEFL score requirement of 500. According to Arifuddin et al. (2023), the average TOEFL-like score of English Education students at the University of Mataram remains below the required standard. This condition indicates that TOEFL listening comprehension continues to be a significant academic challenge for students. Therefore, it is important to investigate the strategies used by students who have successfully achieved satisfactory listening scores in order to provide practical references for other learners facing similar difficulties.

Based on the explanations above, this study aims to explore English students' strategies in answering TOEFL Listening Comprehension questions at the University of Mataram. The study focuses on identifying students' difficulties, the strategies they use, and the reasons behind their strategy selection. The findings of this study are expected to contribute theoretically to research on listening comprehension and practically to help students develop more effective

strategies in preparing for TOEFL Listening Comprehension tests.

B. Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the strategies used by English students in answering TOEFL Listening Comprehension questions at the English Education Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, University of Mataram. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because this study focused on exploring students' experiences, strategies, and difficulties in depth within a natural context. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is used to understand and interpret the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems.

The participants of this study were selected using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was applied because the researcher intentionally selected participants who met specific criteria relevant to the objectives of the study. The participants consisted of three students from the English Education Program at the University of Mataram who had achieved a minimum TOEFL

Listening Comprehension score of 50. These students were considered capable of providing rich and relevant information regarding the strategies used in answering TOEFL Listening questions.

The data of this study were collected through in-depth interviews and documentation. The interviews were conducted semi-structuredly in order to obtain detailed information about the participants' experiences, strategies, and challenges in answering TOEFL Listening Comprehension questions. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to prepare guiding questions while still giving participants the opportunity to express their ideas freely and comprehensively. In addition, documentation was used to support the interview data, including students' TOEFL scores and related academic documents.

The researcher acted as the primary instrument in this study. In qualitative research, the researcher plays an important role in collecting, interpreting, and analyzing data directly from participants (Moleong, 2017). To support the data collection process, the researcher also used

interview guidelines and audio recordings during the interviews.

The data analysis in this study employed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. In the data condensation stage, the researcher selected, focused, simplified, and organized the data obtained from interviews and documentation. The second stage, data display, involved presenting the data in descriptive and systematic forms to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusion drawing and verification were conducted to identify patterns, interpret findings, and ensure the validity of the conclusions.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the researcher applied triangulation techniques. Data triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from interviews and documentation. Furthermore, member checking was also applied by confirming the interview results with the participants to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the data.

Through these research procedures, the researcher expected

to obtain comprehensive findings regarding the strategies used by English students in answering TOEFL Listening Comprehension questions and the difficulties they encountered during the listening process.

C. Findings and Discussions

Findings

The findings of this study were obtained from in-depth interviews with three English Education students at the University of Mataram who achieved a minimum TOEFL listening score of 50. The data were analyzed using qualitative procedures consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings are categorized into three major aspects: students' difficulties in answering TOEFL listening comprehension questions, students' strategies, and the reasons for selecting certain strategies.

1.1 Students' Difficulties in Answering TOEFL Listening Comprehension Questions

The findings revealed that students experienced several difficulties in answering TOEFL listening comprehension questions. These

difficulties can be classified into linguistic, cognitive, vocabulary, question interpretation, external, and affective factors.

From the linguistic aspect, students reported difficulties in understanding fast speech, unfamiliar accents, and intonation. Fast speech made it difficult for them to catch important information, especially when combined with unfamiliar vocabulary. One participant stated,

"I sometimes struggled to understand long conversations, especially when speakers talked quickly or had different tones and emotions" (P1).

Another participant explained,
"It is also challenging when the speaker talks too fast or uses unfamiliar vocabulary" (P2).

In addition, accent variation, particularly British and Australian accents, became another obstacle because students were more familiar with American English pronunciation.

Cognitive difficulties were also experienced by the participants. Students admitted that maintaining concentration during long conversations or lectures was challenging. When they lost focus,

even briefly, they missed important information that affected their understanding of the audio. One participant mentioned,

"My main difficulty is maintaining concentration during long conversations" (P2).

Another participant stated,

"Long recordings can make me lose focus, and I may miss some important details" (P3).

These findings indicate that listening comprehension requires sustained attention and cognitive endurance.

Another difficulty was related to question interpretation. Students found implied meaning questions difficult because these questions required understanding tone, context, and the speaker's intention rather than only the literal meaning. Similar answer choices also caused confusion. One participant explained,
"I also found implied meaning questions difficult because they require understanding tone and context" (P1).

Another participant stated,

"I get confused by similar answer choices, especially if I do not clearly remember key words" (P3).

Vocabulary limitation also influenced listening comprehension. Students reported that unfamiliar words and idiomatic expressions interrupted their understanding of the main idea. However, some participants attempted to use contextual clues to infer meaning. One participant stated, *"When I don't know the meaning of certain words or idioms, I lose focus on the main idea"* (P1).

Meanwhile, another participant explained, *"Unfamiliar words do not significantly affect my overall comprehension because I can use context"* (P2).

External factors such as background noise and poor audio quality were also found to affect students' listening performance. Noise from the surrounding environment reduced their ability to hear the audio clearly. One participant stated, *"Background noise and poor audio quality make it harder to catch the speaker's words"* (P1).

Another participant explained that sounds from outside the room distracted from concentration during the listening test.

Finally, affective factors such as anxiety and lack of confidence influenced students' performance. Students admitted that nervousness during the test reduced concentration and made them doubt their answers. One participant stated, *"When I lack confidence, I sometimes doubt my answers"* (P1).

Another participant mentioned feeling anxious about failing the exam, which negatively affected listening performance.

1.2 Students' Strategies in Answering TOEFL Listening Comprehension Questions

The findings showed that students employed several strategies to overcome difficulties in TOEFL listening comprehension. These strategies can be categorized into core listening strategies, cognitive strategies, question-related strategies, note-taking strategies, independent practice strategies, and adaptive strategies.

The first strategy involved focusing on the main idea and keywords instead of trying to understand every word. Students reported that understanding

every word was difficult because TOEFL recordings are delivered quickly. Therefore, they prioritized identifying key information and contextual clues. One participant stated,

"I do not focus on every word, but on the main idea, tone, and feelings to understand the meaning" (P1).

Another participant said,

"I listen carefully and focus on the main ideas and key words" (P2).

Students also applied prediction strategies. Before or during listening, they predicted the topic and possible answers based on the questions provided. This helped them remain focused and reduce anxiety when they missed certain details in the audio.

Another important strategy involved cognitive processing such as visualization, paraphrasing, and summarizing. Students mentally imagined the situation and reconstructed information to understand long conversations more effectively. One participant stated,

"I imagine the situation and the speakers to help me understand long conversations" (P1).

These strategies helped students retain important information and improve comprehension.

Note-taking was also widely used by the participants. Students wrote short keywords or important points while listening to reduce memory load. One participant explained,

"Taking short notes with keywords" (P2).

Another participant stated,

"I write short and simple notes so I can stay focused and remember the important points" (P3).

In addition, students practiced independently through online TOEFL prediction tests, podcasts, YouTube videos, TikTok live sessions, and other digital platforms. This independent practice increased their exposure to listening materials and improved familiarity with TOEFL listening patterns. One participant stated,

"I often practice by taking online TOEFL prediction tests" (P2).

Another participant mentioned learning through TikTok listening discussions.

The findings also showed that students combined strategies recommended by ETS with their own learning strategies. Rather than following strategies rigidly, students modified and adapted them according to their learning preferences and perceived effectiveness. One participant stated,

“I follow ETS strategies, but adjust them to suit my learning style” (P1).

1.3 Reasons for Choosing Certain Strategies

The findings further revealed several reasons why students selected particular strategies over others. First, students chose strategies that helped them manage fast speech and avoid cognitive overload. Focusing on main ideas and keywords was considered more effective than attempting to understand every word because it allowed them to follow the audio more efficiently.

Second, students selected strategies that suited their learning styles and helped them process information more effectively. Visualization, paraphrasing, and summarizing were used because these strategies made

complex information easier to understand and remember.

Third, note-taking was chosen because students realized that they could not remember all the information from the audio. Writing short notes reduced memory burden and helped them recall important details during the test.

Another reason was to reduce confusion in selecting answers. Students attempted to predict possible answers and identify the main idea before looking at answer choices because TOEFL listening questions often contain similar distractors.

Finally, students relied on independent practice because they believed classroom exposure alone was insufficient to improve listening skills. They continuously evaluated and modified strategies based on personal effectiveness and previous TOEFL experiences. These findings indicate that strategy selection is adaptive, flexible, and influenced by students' learning experiences and perceived effectiveness.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that TOEFL listening comprehension involves multiple interconnected difficulties related to linguistic, cognitive, vocabulary, environmental, and affective aspects. These findings are consistent with Saraswaty (2018), Hasan (2022), and Pratiwi and Andriyanti (2019), who explain that listening comprehension is influenced by both internal and external factors.

Linguistic problems such as fast speech, unfamiliar accents, and intonation became major obstacles for students. This supports Saraswaty (2018), who found that speech rate and accent variation significantly affect listening comprehension among EFL learners. Since TOEFL listening requires real-time processing, students often experience cognitive overload when they must decode pronunciation, vocabulary, and meaning simultaneously.

The study also revealed that maintaining concentration during long conversations was difficult for

students. This finding aligns with Isnaini et al. (2020), who state that listening requires continuous concentration because information cannot easily be repeated during the test. Long listening passages increase cognitive demands and reduce students' ability to retain information accurately.

Vocabulary limitation was another important factor affecting listening comprehension. Hasan (2022) explains that insufficient vocabulary knowledge interrupts comprehension because students fail to connect important information within the listening context. In this study, some students attempted to overcome this problem through contextual inference strategies, indicating the importance of compensatory listening strategies during real-time comprehension.

Regarding strategy use, the findings indicate that students actively applied adaptive listening strategies rather than relying solely on passive listening. Focusing on main ideas, keywords, and contextual clues reflects selective attention strategies that help learners process information more efficiently under time pressure.

These findings support the ETS TOEFL iBT Test Prep Planner (2024), which recommends identifying main ideas and important details instead of understanding every word.

The use of cognitive strategies such as visualization, paraphrasing, and summarizing also demonstrates active information processing. According to Gagné and Driscoll (2018), learners tend to choose strategies that match their cognitive preferences and learning styles. In this study, students reorganized spoken information mentally to improve comprehension and retention.

Furthermore, note-taking strategies were used to reduce short-term memory burden during listening. This supports Farmasari et al. (2023), who argue that positive learning experiences encourage learners to maintain strategies that improve comprehension and performance. By recording keywords, students were able to recall important details more effectively.

Another important finding is that students combined ETS-based

strategies with self-developed learning approaches. Rather than applying strategies rigidly, they modified them according to personal learning needs and test situations. This supports Saraswaty (2018), who emphasizes that learners actively adapt strategies based on situational demands and previous learning experiences.

Overall, the findings suggest that successful TOEFL listening performance is not determined solely by language proficiency, but also by students' ability to manage cognitive load, apply adaptive strategies, maintain emotional control, and continuously evaluate the effectiveness of their learning approaches.

D. Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that English Education students at the University of Mataram experienced various difficulties in answering TOEFL listening comprehension questions. These difficulties included fast speech, unfamiliar accents, limited vocabulary, difficulty maintaining concentration during long

conversations, confusion with implied meaning questions, background noise, poor audio quality, anxiety, and lack of confidence. These factors affected students' ability to process spoken information effectively during the listening test.

To overcome these difficulties, students applied several adaptive listening strategies. The strategies included focusing on main ideas and keywords, predicting topics and possible answers, using visualization and paraphrasing techniques, taking short notes, and practicing independently through online TOEFL prediction tests and digital learning platforms. Students also combined strategies recommended by ETS with personal learning approaches that suited their individual learning styles and experiences.

The study further revealed that students selected strategies based on their perceived effectiveness in managing cognitive load, improving comprehension, reducing confusion, and increasing confidence during the listening test. This indicates that successful TOEFL listening comprehension depends not only on

linguistic competence but also on students' strategic awareness and ability to adapt learning strategies according to listening situations.

Therefore, it is recommended that Students who will take the TOEFL are also encouraged to practice listening independently and consistently through various digital media to improve their listening comprehension skills and familiarity with TOEFL listening question patterns. Future researchers are recommended to conduct similar studies with larger participant groups and different educational contexts to obtain broader findings regarding TOEFL listening comprehension strategies among EFL learners.

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