

DIFFICULTIES IN LISTENING COMPREHENSION ENCOUNTERED BY STUDENTS OF ENGLISH DEPARTMENT OF MUHAMMADIYAH UNIVERSITY OF MALANG

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Abstract: This study described the difficulties in listening comprehension encountered by and strategies used by freshmen of English Department, in a university in Malang. This study employed descriptive quantitative method. Questionnaires with close and open-ended questions were used as the research instrument. The subjects of this study were 42 students of English Department who had completed their first semester. The study revealed that several problems occurred in the teaching and learning of listening namely problems related to listeners' performance, listening materials, students' physical limits, and supporting equipment. Based on the data obtained, two major issues faced by the students were the students' performance and listening materials. Different phonological system, which was related to the materials and guessing unknown words seemed to also affect their listening comprehension. The study also found that the students applied several strategies to develop their listening mastery. Most of them (78.6%) conducted independent study outside the class. Most of them prefer listening to English songs and watching English movies. Some loved to listen to news and watching *YouTube* videos.

Keywords: *Listening comprehension, difficulties*

INTRODUCTION

EFL learners must master four language skills: writing, reading, speaking, and listening skills. One of the important skills that yet has not received priority in language teaching is listening (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Even though listening plays an essential role, students only listen to repeat and develop a better pronunciation (Vandergrift, 2011). It seems that listening is placed before speaking (Vandergrift, 1999). In early 70's, some scholars brought attention to the role of listening as a tool for understanding and a key factor in facilitating language learning. Listening has appeared as a vital element in the process of second language acquisition (Feyten as cited in Vandergrift, 2011).

Studies reveal that listening is the most difficult skill to learn (Wilson, 2009; Prastiyowati, 2014). Wilson (2009) categorises the difficulties of learning listening skills into four: characteristics of the message, the delivery, the listener and the environment. Characteristics of the message relate to the listeners in recognizing the speech. For example, 'slip of the ear—simple mishearing in 'merger and acquisitions' are heard 'murders and executions'—may contribute to the understanding of the text. Other difficulties consist of unknown words, lexical density (short spaces of time between content words, forcing listener to concentrate harder), and complex grammatical structures.

In a study at Muhammadiyah University of Malang, Prastiyowati (2014) found that the 'slip of the ear' and the short spaces between the words that make the students think harder to recognize the words, appeared to challenge students' listening activity. For example, the word *ethical* may be heard as *article*, or *optical*. The students also find difficulties in recognizing unknown words. The phrase *neurological problems* seems to be unfamiliar to them. Some students also write *just each time* or *eighteen times* for the phrase *since ancient times*.

The objective of the study is to uncover and address the students' listening comprehension difficulties and strategies. The research questions are:

1. What listening comprehension problems do the students of English Department at University of Muhammadiyah Malang encounter?
2. What strategies do the students of English Department at University of Muhammadiyah Malang use to succeed in listening comprehension?

Definition of Listening

Listening is more than simply hearing words. Listening includes an active process by which students receive, construct meaning from, and respond to spoken and or nonverbal messages (Emmert, as quoted in Gilakjani, 2011). Listening, in other words, is extremely an active process, but the activity happens in the mind. Listeners guess, predict, infer, criticize and, above all, interpret (Wilson, 2009). Listening seems an important part of the communication process and should not be separated from the other language arts.

Rost (as cited in Vandergrift, 2011) defined listening as a process of receiving what the speaker actually says, constructing and representing meaning, negotiating meaning with the speaker and responding, and creating meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy. To listen well, listeners must have the ability to decode the message, the ability to apply a variety of strategies and interactive processes to make meaning, and the ability to respond to what is said in a variety of ways, depending on the purpose of the communication.

Thus, listening involves complex activities, such as: understanding, receiving and interpreting content and then responding with verbal and nonverbal feedback. Dealing with language learning, listeners attempt to listen with maximum accuracy to a relatively brief speech. Next, the learners can develop their listening ability and maintain their fluency.

Factors that Make Listening Difficult

Yagang (as cited in Hien, 2015) mentions that the problem in listening was accompanied with the four following factors: the message, the speaker, the listener and the physical setting. Moreover, a numbers of research have been conducted to pick out the problem in listening. The problems were believed to be caused by the speech rate vocabulary and pronunciation (Higgins, 1995; as quoted in Idrissova, Smagulova, and Tussupbekova, 2015). Related to the difficulties of listening performances, the following eight characteristics need to be considered (adapted from Richards, 1983; Ur, 1984; Dunkel, 1991; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005, as cited in Brown, 2007):

1. Clustering: attending to appropriate “chunks” of language—phrases, clauses, constituents,
2. Redundancy: recognizing the kinds of repetitions rephrasing, elaborations, and insertions that unrehearsed spoken language often contains, and benefiting from that recognition,
3. Reduced forms: understanding the reduced forms that may not have been a part of an English learner’s past learning experiences in classes where only formal “textbook” language has been presented,
4. Performance variables: being able to “weed out” hesitations, false starts, pauses, and corrections in natural speech,
5. Colloquial language: comprehending idioms, slang, reduced forms, shared cultural knowledge,
6. Rate of delivery: keeping up with the speed of delivery, processing automatically as the speaker continues,
7. Stress, rhythm, and intonation: correctly understanding prosodic elements of spoken language, which is almost much more difficult than understanding the smaller phonological bits and pieces,
8. Interaction: managing the interactive flow of language from listening to speaking to listening, etc.

Listening Strategies

Appropriate strategies are needed to reach the expected goal, especially in listening comprehension. In this case, strategies can be perceived as conscious actions which are conducted to improve learning and allow the learners to use information more effectively (Oxford, Chamot, and O’Malley (as cited in Wilson, 2009). The strategies are categorized into three groups: cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective strategies. Cognitive strategies are strategies that we use in order to complete an immediate task. For instance, a student may find out the topic before listening to predict contents. Metacognitive strategies are related to learning in general and often have long-term benefits. For example, students might choose to tune in www.newseenglishlessons.com once a week as a strategy to improve their listening. Socio-affective strategies are concerned with the learners’ interaction with other speakers and their attitude towards learning. For example, students may choose to rehearse a telephone conversation in L2 with another student in order to develop confidence.

In short, good listeners may use many strategies at the same time and in accordance with the task at hand. They may listen regularly to a radio broadcast (metacognitive), take notes on the key points (cognitive) and then meet fellow students in the café and tell them all about what they just listened to (socio-affective).

METHOD

Research Design

In terms of research design, this study employed descriptive quantitative research design. This design was employed in order to get descriptive statistical information about students' problems encountered in Listening Comprehension 1 subject.

Population and Sample

The population of this research was the freshmen of English Department academic year 2015/2016 consisting of 275 students, which were divided into ten classes. The researcher took 42 cohorts (two classes) as the sample of the research using convenience sampling method.

Research Instrument

A questionnaire which used closed and open-ended questions, was employed to gather the opinion from the students. The aim of using both types of questions was to gain more flexible and accurate answers from the subjects of the study.

The questions were about students' listening problems which occurred during the process of teaching and learning (i.e. the students' performance, listening materials, students' physical limits, and supporting equipment) and strategies. Eighteen close-ended questions on the students' listening problems were asked in the questionnaire. They were in the form of close and open-ended questions. With regards to the students' learning strategies, seven questions on were asked in the questionnaire. The questionnaires were given at nearly the end of the semester, before the students had their Final Examination.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The result of the study is elaborated into two parts, namely: problems related to students' performance, listening materials, physical limits, and supporting equipment and students' listening strategies

Problems Related to Student's Performance

The result of the questionnaires showed that 21.4% of the students always faced the difficulty in making prediction about the text that was going to be learned. Six students (14.3%) said that they often found difficulty in making prediction. However, 47.6% and 14.3% mentioned that they sometimes and never found difficulty in making prediction respectively.

The subsequent problem was lacking background knowledge. Similar to the previous one, thirty students (71.4%) reported that they did not find obstacles in listening to the text. Only small part of the students (28.6%) admitted that they had problems dealt with their background knowledge.

The last, students said that they did not find meaningful problems related to recognizing the main point of the text (61.9%). The rest, (38.1%) mentioned that they often see that finding the main point was a confusing subject. The complete result can be described in Table 1.

Table 1: Students' Problems Related to Students' Performance

No.	Problems	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
1	Making prediction	14.3%	47.6%	14.3%	21.4%
2	Guessing unknown words	2.4%	42.9%	33.3%	21.4%
3	Unfamiliar topics	26.2%	45.2%	16.7%	1.2%
4	Lacking background knowledge	7.1%	64.3%	21.4%	7.1%
5	Recognizing main points	7.1%	54.8%	28.6%	9.5%

All in all, the result indicated that in general, students did not find meaningful obstacles in terms of their learning style.

Problems Related to Listening Materials

The findings showed that there were seven issues related to the listening materials. They were different phonological system, speed of speech, linking words, authentic materials, ungrammatical sentences, different accents, and colloquial words. The first, different phonological system contributed greatly to students' listening mastery. A half of the class (50.5%) reported that different phonological system affected their comprehension. Six students (14.3%) and 15 students (35.7%) said that they never and rarely had problems with this topic correspondingly.

Other six problems seemed not hinder students listening comprehension. It was shown by the result that greater number of the students stated that they did not feel puzzled in understanding the text (see Table 2). The use of authentic materials in listening comprehension did not hinder students' ability in comprehending the text. It was shown by students' response in terms of the use of authentic materials in the classroom. In addition, 76.8% showed that they had no problems with this matter. Only 4.8% felt that this kind of material always obstruct their comprehension.

Table 2: Students' Problems Related to Listening Materials

No.	Problems	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
1	Different phonetic systems	14.3%	35.7%	35.7%	14.3%
2	Speed of speech	16.7%	40.5%	33.3%	9.5%
3	Linking words	19%	66.7%	9.5%	4.8%
4	Authentic materials	28.6%	47.6%	14.3%	4.8%
5	Ungrammatical sentences	38.1%	45.2%	9.5%	7.1%
6	Different accent	14.3%	50%	21.4%	14.3%
7	Colloquial words	19%	47.6%	23.8%	7.1%
8	Long listening text	23.8%	47.6%	21.4%	4.8%

Problems Related to Students' Physical Problems

The problems in listening comprehension might be caused by student's physical limits, fatigue and hesitation for example. However, the result of the study reported that these factors did not significantly affect students' listening ability. The detailed results were illustrated in the following table.

Table 3: Students' Problem Related to Physical Limits

No.	Problems	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
1	Fatigue	31%	45.2%	21.4%	2.4%
2	Hesitation	19%	45.2%	26.2%	9.5%

Students' Problems Related to Supporting Equipment

The last problems derived from equipment that support the activity of listening comprehension. The problems in equipment related to noises, poor tape quality, and poor equipment. Nonetheless, based on the study, these factors did not contribute considerably to students' listening activity.

Table 4: Problems Related to Supporting Equipment

No.	Problems	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
1	Noises	28.6%	33.3%	28.6%	7.1%
2	Poor tape quality	21.4%	57.1%	9.5%	11.9%
3	Poor equipment	26.2%	64.3%	7.1%	2.4%

In this study, more than half of the total respondents said that they found difficulty in guessing unknown words. In this case, the students have to be able to recognize vocabulary to support their listening mastery. Other elements of listening seems not contribute greatly to students' problems. Since this investigation was conducted in the early stage of Listening offered in this school, the topic and the complexity of the text seems not too complicated.

Second, in terms of listening materials, different phonological system and speed of speech contributed greatly to students' listening mastery. As suggested by Rost (as quoted in Vandergrift, 2011), listening involves a process of receiving what speaker says. Listeners must be able to decode the messages to respond to what is said. In this case, the materials, or the message contains several topics, which some of them become obstacles in students' listening comprehension.

Third, students' physical limits did not contribute greatly in students' problems. Vast majority of the students feel neither fatigue nor hesitated during the listening process. In Listening Comprehension 1, the texts presented were generally short, simple and easy ones.

The last, related to supporting equipment, only small number of students faced the trouble related to the equipment. The result of this investigation reported that the equipment used in the listening process were good. In addition, the teaching and learning process were held in a language laboratory with computerized equipment. In old-fashioned laboratory equipment, teacher used tape or cassettes that tend to have troubles during the process of learning. The devices were easily worn out and it disturbed the learning process. Along with the advance of the current technology, people use digital media to make easy in every aspect of life.

Listening Strategies

In terms of students' strategy to develop their listening skill, most of them conducted independent study. They frequently used songs to improve their listening skill. The next activities are watching English movies. Some of them listen to English news and some listening to YouTube tutorials.

In this case, students may have more than one method in doing self-study. Listening to English song was one of popular way to learn. The youth tend to love music that can be freely downloaded from the Internet. Furthermore, it was obvious that songs are a kind of interesting media that brings joyful learning. The similar result on the way of independent learning was watching English movies. Same as songs, movies are considered a popular media to improve students' language competence. Not only developing listening skill, students also can develop their mastery on vocabulary, speaking, as well as writing if they paid careful attention to the language features, not to mention the fun itself. There were only few students who were interested in listening to English news. Unlike the two other media, songs and movies, news seemed to be less attractive. It may only be in the form of audio, sometimes it was equipped with text. Some Podcasts provided this kind of news for teaching and learning materials that can be free-downloaded from the Internet. The study reported that no respondents used tape or disc for their independent listening. Living in this digital era made this last media seemed to be left behind. Even, the laboratory in which the teaching and learning listening conducted did not support the old method. Tapes or cassettes were no longer used.

The technology today enables people to access their independent learning strategy based on their needs. Regarding the students' enthusiasm in accessing various online media to improve their ability was a satisfying matter. The findings were in line with what had mentioned by Oxford, Chamot, and O'Malley (as cited in Wilson, 2009) that learners may use more than one strategies to develop their ability.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The results of the investigation indicated that several problems occurred in the teaching and learning of listening. The problems were related to listeners' performance, listening materials, students' physical limits, and supporting equipment. Based on the data obtained, the major problem faced by the students was related to listening materials and students' performance. Different phonological system, which dealt with the materials, and guessing unknown words seemed to affected their listening comprehension.

The study also found out that students applied several strategies to develop their listening mastery. Most of them conducted independent study outside the class. The learners prefer listening to English songs, watching English movies. Some loved to listen to news and having chat with native speakers or watching YouTube videos.

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