

## **EFL LEARNERS – FACED PROBLEMS IN LISTENING COMPERHENSION**

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**Abstract:** This research focuses on the EFL learners' problems in listening comprehension. The present research attempts to investigate listening problems encountered by a group of low level at seniors of a private university in Kuningan. This qualitative case study involved 10 participants who took TOEFL course in 7<sup>th</sup> semester. The data was gathered by means of questionnaires and interviews. The result of the research showed that accent, pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, different accent of speakers, lack of concentration, anxiety, and bad quality of recording were the major listening comprehension problems encountered by EFL students. This research also found that most students (60%) used compensation strategy to overcome the problems by guessing the answer, while the others (30%) used memory strategy by using their knowledge or experiences, and the rest 10% of the students used affective strategy by motivating themselves to try answering the questions. Knowing students' learning difficulties may enable EFL teachers to develop the effective learning strategies and ultimately improve their English listening abilities. Suggestion is made for addressing problems regarding how students can help themselves and the teachers can help their students to overcome the listening comprehension problems encountered by the students.

**Keywords:** *EFL Learner, listening comprehension, listening problem*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Listening has an important role in the process of getting main topic or information. Therefore, listening foreign language is not as easy as we think especially in English which has inconsistent pronunciation. As stated by Buck (2001, p. 247) that "listening is a complex process in which the listener takes the incoming data, an acoustic signal, and interprets it based on a wide variety of linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge." The aim of listening comprehension is to understand the native conversation at normal rate in a spontaneous condition (Chastain, 1971). Without comprehending the listening skill, learners never learn to communicate or speak effectively.

Furthermore, Mendelsohn (1994) as cited in Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011)

states that listening has an important role in communication in which listening takes up 40-50%; speaking, 25-30%; reading, 11-16%; and writing, about 9%. Thus, it is important to give more attention to listening skill. It is supported by Harmer (2007, p. 133) who states that "listening is good for our students' pronunciation too, in that the more they hear and understand English being spoken, the more they absorb appropriate pitch and intonation, stress and the sounds of both individual words and those which blend together in connected speech." Then, Richards (2008) states that understanding spoken discourse are bottom-up and top-down processing. Two different kinds of processes are involved in understanding spoken discourse. Bottom-up processing

refers to the use of the incoming input as the basis for understanding the message. Meanwhile, top-down processing refers to the use of background knowledge in understanding the meaning of a message. Whereas, bottom-up processing goes from language to meaning, top-down processing goes from meaning to language.

Listening problem is barrier to everyone who learnt languages because listening is the basic of language study. According to Goh (2000) as cited in Hamouda (2013, p. 115), "listening difficulties are defined as the internal and external characteristic that might interrupt text understanding and real-life processing problem directly related to cognitive procedures that take place at various stages of listening comprehension." According to some experts as cited in Hamouda (2013, p. 118) and Essays (2013), there are some problems in listening comprehension: Boyle (1984) classifies the factors influencing listening comprehension and directly related to EFL listening into four inter-relating categories: listener, speaker, medium and environment factors. Aside from these, Chang, Chang, and Kuo (1995) discovered five major listening difficulties: speed, a cluster of sounds difficult for segmentation, obsession with the translation, association of sounds with words and meanings, and idiomatic expressions. Yagang (1993) proposes that the sources of listening difficulties came mainly from the four aspects: the message, the speaker, the listener, and the physical setting.

Apart from those difficulties, there are some strategies proposed by some experts that can be applied to overcome the problems. According to Oxford (1990), listening strategies are one of the ways which makes successful in listening comprehension. Strategies will be thought as the ways in which a learner

approaches and manages a task, and listeners can be taught effective ways of approaching and managing their listening. There are six strategies that can help EFL learners effectively in doing listening comprehension, those are:

- 1) *Memory strategies*, such as grouping or using imagery, have a highly specific function, such as helping students store and retrieve new information.
- 2) *Cognitive strategies*, such as summarizing or reasoning deductively, enable learners to understand and produce new language by many different means.
- 3) *Compensation strategies*, like guessing or using synonyms, allow learners to use the language despite their often large gaps in knowledge.
- 4) *Metacognitive strategies*, which allow learners to control their own cognition-that is, to coordinate the learning process by using functions such as centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating.
- 5) *Affective strategies* help to regulate emotions, motivations, and attitudes.
- 6) *Social strategies* help students learning through interaction with others.

Based on the explanation above, this research intends to achieve these two following objectives; finding out the problems faced by EFL learners in listening comprehension and finding the students' strategies to overcome the problems faced in listening comprehension.

## **METHOD**

This research applied a qualitative method. Creswell (2009, p. 4) states that "qualitative research is means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem." In line with

this, Fraenkel and Wallen (2009, p. 425) mention that “qualitative research is research studies that investigated the quality of relationships, activities, situations, or materials.” In more detail, the researcher used case study to make the research more focus on the exploration of phenomena that occur within individual. Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2012, p. 444) stated that “a case study research is a qualitative research approach in which the researcher focuses on a unit of study known as bounded system.”

The participants of this research were the seniors in a private university in Kuningan. They were students who have been learning TOEFL course in 7<sup>th</sup> semester. Students’ listening skill was analyzed by establishing the level of achievement of classes, and some students who have low level for listening comprehension in the paper of TOEFL test were chosen as participants in this research.

In collecting the data, this research used questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire consisted of ten categories, including students’ general self-rating to listening proficiency, students’ perception to the importance of listening skill, using different means to enhance listening skills, listening problems related to the content of the listening text, listening problems related to linguistic features, problems caused by the failure to concentrate, learners’ perceptions of listening problems related to psychological characteristics, listening problems related to listener, listening problems related to the speaker, and listening problems related to the physical setting (Hamouda, 2013).

The answers were recorded on 4-point *Likert scale* (never, sometimes,

often, and always). The data collected from questionnaire was calculated by using the following formula.

$$FK \text{ rel} = \frac{FK}{\sum F} \times 100\%$$

FK rel : percentage of each problem and strategy

FK : Total types frequency of sub-category

$\sum F$  : Total of all categories

100% : percentage

(Subana in Oktoma, 2013, p. 79)

In addition, interview was also used to collect the data in this research. Creswell (2012, p. 217) stated that “a qualitative interview was occur when researchers ask one or more participants general, open-ended questions and record their answers.” It was a process in collecting the data through asking some questions to only one participation and recorded it. This research chose one-on-one interview and e-mail interview type in conducting the interview. The results of the interview were analyzed by using “meaning condensation” method. Meaning condensation entails an abridgement of the meanings expressed by the interviewees into shorter formulations. Long statements are compressed into briefer statements in which the main sense of what is said is rephrased in a few words (Kvale, 1996).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Students’ Problems in Listening Comprehension***

The data regarding listening problems faced by students in listening comprehension in the TOEFL test were collected through questionnaire. The result of the questionnaire is presented in the following table.

**Table 1.** Data Analysis of Questionnaire

No.	Items	Always	Often	Sometimes	Never	Result	Percent
1	Item 1	-	3	4	3	10	1.90 %
2	Item 2	10	14	26	10	60	11.32 %
3	Item 3	5	12	26	7	50	9.43 %
4	Item 4	9	41	30	-	80	15.09 %
5	Item 5	8	27	24	1	60	11.32 %
6	Item 6	6	36	18	-	60	11.32 %
7	Item 7	7	21	20	2	50	9.43 %
8	Item 8	11	20	39	-	70	13.21 %
9	Item 9	13	29	27	1	70	13.21 %
10	Item 10	11	6	3	-	20	3.77 %
<b>Total</b>						530	100 %

Table 1 showed the analysis of the questionnaire regarding the problem faced by the students in listening comprehension. The problems that was mostly found in the listening for TOEFL test was item 4, it was about listening problems related to the content of the listening text with result of 80 (15.09%), item 9 and 8 with same results of 70 (13.21%), item 2, 5 and 6 with the same results of 60 (11.32%), item 3 and 7 with the same result of 50 (9.43%), item 10 with result of 20 (3.77%), and item 1 with result 10 (1.90%).

The first item was about *Students' general self-rating to listening proficiency*. Most students felt pessimist in listening comprehension. This might be a reflection of their frustration caused by their previous failures or unhappy experiences in dealing with English. So, the students seemed unconfident when they rate themselves in listening comprehension.

The second item was about *Students' perception to the importance of listening skill*. The students thought that listening skill was very important skill but sometimes it was boring and not interesting. They were bored because they have some difficulties when they faced listening test and they have poor knowledge regarding the listening strategy. The finding is supported by Bremner and Narayan (1998, p. 495) in Hamouda (2013, p. 122) who state that

“only by reaching a certain level will a students be likely to use a given strategy.”

The third was about *Using different means to enhance listening skills*. The students still depend on their class (lessons) in enhancing their listening skill than they learn by themselves. The percentage of the different meant to enhance listening skills, it was still in “mean and poor” to the students who enhance their listening skills by listening to the radio (English) and watching British/English channel TV, or the other activities.

The fourth was about *Listening problems related to the content of the listening text*. Listening text itself can be the main source of listening comprehension problems. In particular, unfamiliar words, complex grammatical, long spoken text, complexity of sentences, and unfamiliar topic pose listening difficulties to EFL learners.

Then fifth was about *Listening problems related to Linguistic features*. Some difficulties in understanding and remembering information from speakers may be due to the lack of English language skill itself. Most students faced that problems in listening comprehension test, they were confused to answer some questions because of those problems.

The sixth was about *Problems caused by the failure to concentrate*.

Concentration is the important thing in listening comprehension. Students need to focus and refresh their atmosphere and create good condition around them. Concentration is barrier in listening comprehension. Chen (2005, p. 102) stated that "habitual barrier is students often lost their concentration when listening to spoken question, though they always tried to listen carefully, but they still had trouble in understanding every word."

The seventh was about *Learners' perceptions of listening problems related to psychological characteristics*. Most students have big problem related to psychological side. Boredom and frustration may affect the extent to which attention was paid to listening. This occurs as a result of poor stimulation caused by disinterest in the topic, lack of motivation, failure in the part of the teacher to present meaningful material in a stimulating manner, or presenting the lecture in a monotone instigating sleep (Hamouda, 2013).

The eighth was about *Listening problems related to listener*. Listeners' factors can interfere with students' listening comprehension. The students'

inability to apply listening strategies, their inability to grasp pronunciation, inability to manage challenging tasks, and frustration interfered with their listening comprehension.

The ninth was about *Listening problems related to the speaker*. Most of students faced all problems that have been mentioned above.

The last item was about *Listening problems related to the physical setting*. Almost students faced the difficulties in listening comprehension were due to the bad recording quality/poor quality tapes or disks. For example, the cassette might be recorded, while there were noises around or the cassette was used for such a long time so the quality was worn out. Unclear sounds are resulted from poor-quality equipment can also be interfered by the listener's comprehension.

### ***Emerging Students' Strategies in Listening Comprehension***

One of the methods to make students actively involved in controlling their own learning is by using strategies. The strategies identified in this research are presented in the following table.

**Table 2.** *The rank of listening strategies usage*

Rank	Strategies	Percentage
1	Compensation	60%
2	Memory	30%
3	Affective	10%
<b>Total</b>		<b>100%</b>

From the interview analysis, it was found that the students used compensation, affective, and memory strategies in listening comprehension. The first listening strategy frequently used by the students was *compensation strategy*. In this strategy, the students comprehended and answered their questions by using the similar and

understandable words, and guessing the unknown words in English.

The second strategy used by students in listening comprehension was memory strategy. They used this strategy when they confused with the spoken text, topic, and the other problems that they faced in their listening test, so they answered the

question by using their own language and knowledge/experiences.

Affective strategy was the last common strategies used by the students in listening comprehension test. Here, most students try to motivate themselves to finish their test.

### **CONCLUSION**

Based on the data analysis, it can be concluded that the problems that are mostly found in the listening for the paper TOEFL test are about listening problems related to the content of the listening text with result of 80 (15.09%), listening problem related to the listener and speaker is 70 (13.21%), problems related to linguistic feature and problems caused by the failure to concentrate with same results of 60 (11.32%), item different means to enhance listening skill and learners' perceptions of listening problems related to psychological characteristic with same result of 50 (9.43%), listening problems related to the physical setting with result of 20 (3.77%) and item students' general self-rating to listening proficiency with result 10 (1.90%). From those problems, most students guessing the answer when they find the difficulties in listening comprehension for the paper TOEFL test. Besides, this research shows that the most frequent strategy used by the students is the compensation strategy, with the percentage is 60%.

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