



FACTORS AFFECTING EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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Abstract

Mastering listening comprehension remains a significant challenge for EFL university students. Despite numerous studies in this field, limited research has specifically investigated the multidimensional factors influencing listening comprehension within the Indonesian EFL context, particularly among university students. This study aimed to identify the factors affecting the mastery of listening comprehension among these students. A survey design was employed, involving English Education Department students from the classes of 2020–2023. A total of 76 participants, consisting of undergraduate students aged 19–23, were selected using purposive sampling. The data collection methods used were closed-ended questionnaires, open-ended questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed several factors affecting students' listening comprehension, categorized into four main areas: listening content, speakers, physical setting, and listeners. Listening content emerged as the most influential factor, with unfamiliar vocabulary, audio quality, and speech rate presenting significant challenges. Other notable factors included pronunciation and accent variations, environmental distractions, and students' motivation and proficiency levels. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to identify key influencing factors. They suggest that teachers and students should collaboratively identify learning strategies tailored to address specific challenges in listening comprehension. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of carefully selecting listening materials that align with students' proficiency levels, particularly in terms of vocabulary. Finally, the findings indicate a need for strategies to enhance student motivation and encourage regular listening practice. This research contributes to our understanding of the complexities involved in EFL listening comprehension and provides valuable insights for EFL pedagogy by highlighting the need for more targeted instructional practices and learner-centered material selection.

Keywords: listening comprehension factors, survey design, closed-ended questionnaire, open-ended questionnaire, semi-structured interview

Introduction



Listening is a crucial skill for language learners. Listening accounts for a significant portion of the time spent communicating (Fadhly, 2023). Listening comprehension also plays a significant role in both academic and lifestyle contexts because it is crucial in maintaining successful communication (Yıldırım & Yıldırım, 2016, Patni, 2022). According to Leloup (2007), Ahmadi (2016), Shah Reza et al., (2019), Hardiyanto et al. (2021) the most crucial ability required in the educational process particularly to understand what teachers are saying is the ability to listen. In line with these views, the researcher believes that listening comprehension is not just a passive skill, but an active mental process that enables students to construct meaning from spoken input. This makes it a foundation for successful learning in EFL classrooms. Due to the growing emphasis on listening in the 1990s, auditory understanding played a big role in foreign language learning because good listening comprehension helps EFL students learn the language more effectively (Yıldırım & Yıldırım, 2016).

Apart from being the most essential skill to master, listening was also considered the most challenging (Alzamil, 2021). EFL students struggle greatly with listening comprehension in the English language because colleges put greater focus on English grammar, writing, reading, and vocabulary (Fadhly, 2023, Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016, Bozorgian, 2012). Due to their shared difficulties with listening comprehension, a large number of students keep learning at a lower level (Ramadhianti & Somba, 2021). However, not all non-native speakers of English can easily master the skill of listening. For example, a student can speak English well but struggle to understand native speakers, which can be due to fast speaking rates or limited ability to respond to what they hear (Nur et al., 2023). While Ramadhianti & Somba (2021) stated that one of the challenges to master listening comprehension in an English education program is when it is challenging for students to comprehend the information they are listening to.

Numerous investigators have conducted comparable investigations, including Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016), Fadhly (2023) who investigated The approaches of listening comprehension, recognized the difficulties that students had with listening comprehension when they were listening to spoken texts, and aimed to make teachers more aware of the listening issues that students confront. They found that Pronunciation, speech rate, lack of vocabulary, speaker accents, lack of focus, nervousness, and poor recording quality were the main causes of the students' difficulties with listening comprehension. Another study that was done in a similar field by Nur et al., (2023). The outcome of her study indicated that the utilization of audiovisual contents in experimental group classes to help students concentrate and provide better answers to questions results in a notable distinction in value. The impact of audiovisual media on students' listening comprehension can raise their enthusiasm for learning and increase the amount of new language they listen to (Nur et al., 2023).



In sum, these studies demonstrated the difficulties of listening comprehension which showed that many students struggled with listening in dealing with pronunciation, speech rate, vocabulary deficiency, speaker accent variance, inattention, and nervousness. Based on these findings, the researcher believes that listening comprehension deserves more focused attention in the EFL classroom. Teachers should adopt strategies that address specific listening difficulties while helping students build confidence and motivation. Therefore, This study aims to address that gap by investigating the internal and external factors that influence Indonesian EFL university students' listening comprehension.

While numerous studies have explored listening comprehension challenges among EFL learners, most have been conducted in general contexts and have focused primarily on linguistic features or instructional techniques. However, there is still a lack of research that examines these challenges specifically within the Indonesian university context, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Furthermore, only a few studies have integrated psychological and environmental factors into the analysis of listening comprehension in a practical and detailed way. By combining data from close-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, this study offers a more holistic perspective on the real difficulties students encounter in the classroom. It was expected that the study's findings would be inform teaching practices and contribute to more effective instruction in EFL environments.

Literature Review

This study draws upon three major theoretical perspectives to analyze the factors affecting EFL students' listening comprehension: bottom-up and top-down processing models, metacognitive theory, and linguistic-affective factors. These perspectives provide an integrative foundation for understanding both cognitive and contextual challenges in listening.

1. Theoretical framework

This study draws upon three major theoretical perspectives to analyze the factors affecting EFL students' listening comprehension: bottom-up and top-down processing models, metacognitive theory, and linguistic-affective factors. These perspectives provide an integrative foundation for understanding both cognitive and contextual challenges in listening.

a. Bottom-Up and Top-Down Processing Models

Brown (2004) categorizes listening comprehension skills into micro-skills (processing sounds and words) and macro-skills (interpreting meaning based on context). Listening processing models include bottom-up (phonetic and syntactic processing) and top-down (using prior knowledge to understand speech) (Gu, 2018). Difficulties in decoding pronunciation, identifying vocabulary, or processing fast speech are often linked to bottom-



up limitations, while challenges in interpreting meaning or following discourse flow may relate to top-down processing limitations. These models directly inform this study's categories such as listening content, speaker, and listener factors.

b. Metacognitive Listening Strategies

Metacognitive theory emphasizes the importance of planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's listening process (Vandergrift, 2004). Students who are aware of their listening weaknesses can apply strategies such as focusing attention, making predictions, or checking understanding. In this study, psychological and listener-related factors such as students' motivation, self-confidence, and concentration are interpreted through the lens of metacognitive theory, as they influence how students regulate their listening.

c. Linguistic and Affective Factors

Listening comprehension is also affected by linguistic feature (eg., complex grammar structures, slang, and unclear intonation, vocabulary) and affective factors (eg., anxiety, stress, motivation, and concentration levels) (Hamouda, 2013, Alzamil, 2021). These elements are relevant to several themes in this study, including pronunciation clarity, speech rate, vocabulary difficulty, and emotional responses to listening tasks. Understanding how students respond emotionally to listening challenges helps contextualize their comprehension difficulties.

2. Previous Studies

Prior research, such as Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016) and Fadhly (2023), has identified major listening comprehension challenges among EFL students, supporting the relevance of the factors discussed. Bozorgian (2012) emphasized that effective listening comprehension is closely tied to students' concentration and the ability to construct meaning in real time. In a classroom-based study, Nur et al. (2023) demonstrated that incorporating audiovisual materials significantly improved students' listening performance by enhancing their engagement and helping them retain information better. Furthermore, Alzamil (2021) found that psychological factors such as anxiety and low self-confidence negatively affect listening performance, especially during assessments or fast-paced conversations. These studies support the selection of key factors explored in this research and provide empirical grounding for the investigation.

3. Theoretical Implications

By integrating bottom-up and top-down processing models, metacognitive theory, and linguistic-affective perspectives, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of the complex nature of listening comprehension. The findings confirm that effective listening requires both linguistic decoding and the activation of prior knowledge, particularly when learners are confronted with unfamiliar vocabulary or rapid speech. Furthermore, the incorporation of psychological and



environmental factors broadens existing models by underscoring the influence of motivation, anxiety, and situational barriers such as background noise or limited replay opportunities. The results also emphasize the significance of metacognitive awareness, as students' ability to regulate attention and maintain focus plays a crucial role in managing listening challenges.

This framework supports the view that listening comprehension is a complex skill affected by various internal and external elements. These theoretical insights contribute to the growing literature on EFL listening by emphasizing the need for a more integrated instructional approach that combines strategy training, material selection, and learning environment adjustment. In this way, the study both confirms and expands upon established theoretical models in foreign-language listening research. Also, The study contributes to existing literature by proposing adaptive teaching strategies to improve EFL students' listening abilities.

Methodology

This topic is determined according to a topic that is relevant to the actual problem. This study related to the problem faced by English Education Department students' of Universitas Perjuangan Tasikmalaya. The study employs a survey research design. Survey research offers a numerical or quantitative description of a population's opinions, perceptions, and trends (Creswell, 2018). Survey designs are used in social movement research to analyze both individuals and organizations (Klandermans, 2013). There are two fundamental components of survey design: sample selection considerations, and survey media selection concerns (Priscilla, 2005).

The participants were 76 students from the English Education Department, ranging in age from 19 to 23 years old, with a majority being female (approximately 75% female and 25% male). The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, targeting students who had already taken at least one listening course in their academic program. In this study, the researcher employed multiple types of devices in collecting the data, there are close-ended questionnaires, open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Following the calculation to find out the percentage of each statement, the data from the students' closed-ended questionnaire has been analyzed in the form of descriptive analysis. In addition, open-ended questions were included to provide students with the opportunity to elaborate on specific difficulties they encountered. To gain a deeper understanding of the issues, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants who volunteered after completing the questionnaire, offering more detailed insights into their listening comprehension challenges.

The Likert-scale format was chosen because it allows the researcher to measure the intensity and frequency of students' listening comprehension difficulties in a structured and quantifiable way, enabling easier identification of dominant factors across participants. A Likert scale is applied to classify any item on a responses



scale (Colosi, 2006). There are 20 closed-ended statements in total, with 4 optional answers ranging from (1) strongly disagree (SD), (2) disagree, (3) agree, and (4) strongly agree. Quantitative data from the closed-ended questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify overall trends, while qualitative data from interviews and open-ended responses were thematically analyzed. Responses were manually coded and grouped into key themes such as vocabulary difficulty, fast speech rate, and environmental distractions.

Participants were informed of the study's objectives and provided their consent voluntarily. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process. To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by two English education lecturers. A pilot test was also conducted with 30 students outside the sample group, and feedback was used to refine the questionnaire. The reliability of the closed-ended questionnaire was measured using Cronbach's Alpha, with a score of 0.82, indicating a good level of internal consistency.

Findings

The purpose of this research is to investigate the elements that impact their capacity for listening comprehension of EFL university students. This current paper was addressed to investigate students' perception and preference on the factors that affect their listening comprehension. Although the tables are presented based on the five categories of listening comprehension factors (content, linguistic, speaker, psychological, and physical), the following narrative findings are grouped thematically to synthesize the data more meaningfully. These themes reflect common patterns that emerged across multiple factors and are supported by both quantitative results and student responses.

Table 1 The Result of Listening Content Factor

Statements	SD	D	A	SA
I have difficulty understanding listening materials that contain too many unfamiliar words, such as idioms	2.6%	15.8%	53.9%	27.6%
I have difficulty recognizing the referring to of a long-spoken content	1.3%	32.9%	57.9%	7.9%
I feel disturbed when the quality of the recording or audio used is poor	1.3%	6.6%	39.5%	52.6%
I have difficulty understanding listening materials when speaker speed is too fast for me	-	15.8%	43.4%	40.8%

Table 2 Result of Linguistic Feature Factor



Statements	SD	D	A	SA
I have difficulty understanding slang and common language	2.6%	30.3%	53.9%	13.2%
I don't pay attention to the speaker's intonation	14.5%	46.1%	32.9%	6.6%
I have difficulty identifying signals that the speaker is switching between ideas.	3.9%	36.8%	50.0%	9.2%
I have difficulty determining the tenses used in listening content or material	9.2%	30.3%	44.7%	15.8%
I find it difficult when speaker do not shows the tone of voice in speaking	2.6%	13.2%	50.0%	34.2%

Table 3 The Result of Speaker Factor

Statements	SD	D	A	SA
I have difficulty comprehending native English speakers when they communicate in spoken English	7.9%	38.2%	42.1%	11.8%
I have difficulty comprehending what words that are not pronounced clearly signify	3.9%	15.8%	50.0%	30.3%
I have difficulty understanding speakers who speaks with a variety of accents	3.9%	17.1%	56.6%	22.4%
I have difficulty comprehending the purpose of the spoken word without seeing the posture of the speaker	13.2%	39.5%	36.8%	10.5%
I have difficulty comprehending the listening text if the speaker doesn't take enough time to pause	3.9%	21.1%	61.8%	13.2%
I find it difficult to identify the familiar words due to the speakers' pronunciation	6.6%	28.9%	51.3%	13.2%

Table 4 The Result of Psychological Factor

Statements	SD	D	A	SA
I feel disappointed when I am unable to fully understand a spoken text	5.3%	22.4%	38.2%	34.2%



I have difficulty providing the answer of the questions which require more than short answer	5.3%	30.3%	50.0%	14.5%
I have difficulty understanding words that I can recognize in writing, but cannot catch when listening to them in a stream of speech	3.9%	31.6%	53.9%	10.5%

Table 5 The Result of Physical Setting Factor

Statements	SD	D	A	SA
I lose focus while listening when I already have a certain response in mind	7.9%	21.1%	47.4%	23.7%
I have difficulty understanding recorded material if I can't get certain items repeated	2.6%	11.8%	69.7%	15.8%

Theme 1: Vocabulary and Processing Speed

The first theme that emerged from the data relates to vocabulary difficulty and the speed of spoken delivery. Based on Table 1, many students reported struggling with unfamiliar vocabulary, especially idiomatic or rarely used expressions. Additionally, fast-paced speech and poor audio quality were also significant obstacles. In the closed-ended responses, 33 students explicitly stated that unfamiliar words, audio speed, and recording clarity negatively impacted their comprehension.

“The factor that most influences my listening comprehension is when I find unfamiliar vocabulary such as idioms that are rarely used or encountered in everyday vocabulary, then listening comprehension will be affected.” (R45)

“The audio quality really influences me in understanding the content of the listening content.” (R45)

“I think it’s the audio speed of the speaker when he speaks that really affects me. For example, there are phrases that are unclear and challenging to comprehend because the speed is too fast, it is quite tricky for me to understand the context or content of what is being said”. (R39)

These results highlight that vocabulary unfamiliarity, poor recording conditions, and fast delivery are dominant challenges for EFL learners. This is consistent with Hamouda (2013), who emphasized that unfamiliar phrases, expressions, or difficult speech rates can disrupt listening comprehension. This suggests that difficulties in



vocabulary processing may stem not only from linguistic gaps, but also from insufficient exposure to authentic spoken texts.

Theme 2: Speaker-Related Challenges

The second theme centers on difficulties related to speaker characteristics, including accent, pronunciation, and speaking style. Table 3 and 4 show that 81.3% of respondents had trouble with unclear pronunciation, and 78.9% with unfamiliar accents. Students also found it challenging to understand when speakers did not pause adequately or lacked clear intonation. Furthermore, Table 2 shows that linguistic complexity such as the use of slang, colloquial language, and tense variation also contributed to the struggle.

“The factors that most affect my listening comprehension are the speaker's pronunciation and the speaker's way of speaking. Because, in my opinion, if a speaker speaks with clear pronunciation, then this makes me understand what the speaker is talking about.” (R29)

“In my opinion, factors include the speaker (speakers are not clear in their pronunciation of words) and I also have difficulty if native speakers use a British accent.” (R31)

“Sometimes, I have trouble understanding the content of the listening material when the speaker does not show the tone of voice when speaking” (R17)

“Slang and colloquial language can affect me in listening” (R39)

These findings confirm that pronunciation clarity, accent variation, tone of voice, and grammatical complexity significantly impact EFL learners' ability to follow spoken texts. Students with limited exposure to native or varied English speech patterns are particularly vulnerable to these speaker-related issues.

Theme 3: Environmental and Psychological Factors

The third theme involves environmental conditions and internal psychological factors that influence listening performance. According to Table 5, 85.5% of students reported difficulty understanding recorded material when repetition was not possible, and 71.1% admitted to losing focus when they already had an expected answer in mind. These distractions point to the importance of both the physical listening environment and students' cognitive load.

“The factor that most influences my listening comprehension is when I am listening and I am distracted by the answer in my mind so I don't focus on listening to the speaker, it's very distracting.” (R25)



In addition, psychological aspects such as stress, disappointment, and low self-confidence were also common. Based on Table 4, 72.4% of students felt frustrated when they failed to understand spoken texts, and many experienced cognitive overload when trying to track too much information at once.

“I often feel confused about what is conveyed by the speaker, even though if I read in written form, I can understand it” (R20)

“When I go through some parts of the listening material, I can't focus on understanding the others” (R25)

Lastly, motivation, proficiency level, and habits such as regular listening practice also played a role. Students with greater exposure to English, higher proficiency levels, or who regularly practiced through media like music or English conversation, reported fewer challenges.

“There are two factors influencing my listening comprehension: the level of English proficiency used in the audio itself and the method of viewing. I fully understand when listening to audio without text at the A1 and A2 levels. However, I find it difficult to comprehend at the B1 and B2 levels. That's why I need a viewing strategy, which involves listening while reading English subtitles.” (R19)

“From internal factors, namely motivation because it has a very important role because it can be an encouragement so that I can and should be able to have better listening comprehension, and then I can understand what I listen to, particularly when it's written in a language other than my own tongue.” (R61)

Regarding several factors that influence listening comprehension for EFL students, the majority of students struggled with the unfamiliar word, audio quality, and audio speed. Proverbs, common discourse, novel items, and situations the student is unfamiliar with could all be included (Hamouda A, 2013). Speakers were also one of the main factors that influence listening comprehension. Studies indicate that a deficiency in English language proficiency may be the root cause of certain challenges related to comprehending and recalling information conveyed by speakers (Hamouda, 2013). The problems faced by students referring to this factor are likely resulting from both the absence of students' fluency in English and the usage of English by its speakers.

Besides, the researcher found noise or distraction such as background sounds during online classes or noisy classroom settings affected their listening comprehension. The issues originate not just from the speaker, the listener, or the content, but also arise from the surroundings in which the students are situated, such as crowded environments or poor acoustic conditions. Bloomfield et al. (2010) claimed that audio stream distortion or noise impairs listeners' ability to understand what they are listening to. The findings of the current study could be attributed to the fact that



listener factor is among the root factors that affect students' listening comprehension. However, students with higher motivation, better English proficiency, and regular listening practice reported fewer difficulties, highlighting the importance of both internal and external support in improving listening skills.

Discussion

Referring to the research results which answers the research question about what factors that affect listening comprehension of EFL University students', it was previously indicated through a preliminary study that listening comprehension is the most challenging skill to master compared to other English skills. numerous factors affecting students' listening comprehension, such as (1) listening content; unfamiliar words, audio quality, audio/speaker speed (2) speakers; pronunciation, visual needs, and accent variations (3) physical setting; less concentration and focus, noises and distraction, audio repetition (4) listeners; lack of motivation, lack of learning, listening comprehension level. However, the factor that is found as the most affecting students' listening comprehension is listening content/material. Then, vocabulary among the types can have an impact on students' comprehension of listening. This was particularly evident in the participants' difficulty in understanding idiomatic or uncommon expressions, which often caused them to miss the overall message. Fast-paced delivery and poor audio clarity further exacerbated this issue.

From those results, it appears that every factor discovered was consistent with the earlier conclusions made by previous researchers. Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016) stated that speaker speed, students cannot replay the recording, lack of vocabulary, lack contextual knowledge, and lack concentration are the most affecting students' listening comprehension. Hamouda (2013) declared that the various kinds of listening factors that affect listening comprehension such as such as strange words, the spoken text's length, the speaker's pace, different accents, inattention, and pronunciation. Hardiyanto et al., (2021) found that unfamiliar words, speaker speed, and lack of vocabulary are the most affecting listening comprehension. Fadhly (2023), found that the most affecting factors of listening comprehension are unclear remarks made by speakers, accents, a lack of focus, a lack of pace, and a lack of vocabulary. These previous findings reinforce the idea that limited vocabulary, unclear pronunciation, and lack of concentration remain persistent barriers for EFL learners.

Considering the discussions drawn above, this implies that listening comprehension is considered to be among the skills that is difficult to master because the participants who participated in this study expressed several different opinions. It is intended that teachers and students have the capability to identify learning strategies that are suitable for the challenges, issues, and factors that affect students' ability to complete listening classes successfully. Listening to content is also important in this issue. Students often encounter unfamiliar words, possibly because the listening material used does not match their level of listening comprehension.



In addition to that, speaker-related aspects such as unclear pronunciation, accent variation, and tone of voice also contributed to comprehension difficulty. Many students struggled with unfamiliar accents, and others were affected by a lack of clear intonation or rhythm in speech.

Furthermore, psychological and environmental aspects such as distraction, limited focus, and emotional factors (e.g., nervousness, frustration, or low confidence) also play a role in comprehension challenges. The inability to replay audio or noisy surroundings during listening activities can worsen the students' experience. These findings align with Bloomfield et al. (2010), who argued that distortion or background noise can negatively affect one's ability to comprehend oral messages. Students with higher motivation, stronger English proficiency, and more frequent exposure to listening activities (such as songs or videos with subtitles) tended to report fewer challenges. Therefore, both internal and external support are essential in improving listening skills.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The factors found in the findings which include listening material, speakers, physical setting and the listener himself are stated as factors that influence students' listening comprehension, this is because the student's level of vocabulary and material knowledge does not match the material provided by the teacher. According to Uzakgoren (2004), listening comprehension issues are mostly connected to the type of listening material. Then, vocabulary among the types may impact students' comprehension of what they listen to. This confirms that the content of the material, especially the complexity of vocabulary, is a dominant challenge for many students. Besides, they feel that their listening lessons or listening activities often experience some disturbances due to the environment and tools. The listening materials and the surroundings were also having a disruptive impact on the students' listening comprehension (Alzamil, 2021).

This finding contradicts with Jemadi & Rosdiana, (2022) that the results of his research stated the factor that affects students' listening comprehension is the strategy used by the teacher. So, In order to help foreign language teachers implement the best teaching techniques, he advises them to be aware of the various listening issues that listeners encounter. However, the factor that is found as having the most impact on students' listening comprehension is listening content/material. It was further strengthened by Asmawati (2017) who claimed that one of the challenges pupils experience in developing their listening skills is language. Thus, vocabulary proficiency and the match between students' level and the material are crucial elements that need attention.

This research has some limitations, particularly in terms of the number of participants involved. This research must be conducted with a larger sample, as the current size is insufficient for generalizing conclusions applicable to all EFL learners, especially in the English Education Department at Universitas Perjuangan



Tasikmalaya as the research location. However, several factors found by researchers in listening comprehension can be used as a reference for teachers and students with an efficient way to diagnose the difficulties encountered. Future studies are encouraged to involve wider research areas and more diverse participants to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Considering this result, it suggests that students enhance their vocabulary proficiency and consistently exercise their listening skills. It is expected that this research's findings will help to provide better listening comprehension classes in Universitas Perjuangan Tasikmalaya.

Based on the factors that have been discussed, students stated several factors that they thought made listening comprehension easier for them, and factors that made it difficult for them too. Therefore, the role of the teacher is no less important in improving students' abilities in listening comprehension. Students must be given more motivation to spend more time learning, as well as strategies that suit students' abilities by taking into account the obstacles they face. Teachers are also advised to use level-appropriate materials, reduce environmental distractions during listening activities, and offer support that fosters students' confidence and focus.

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