

# Listening to Students' Voices: Students' Problems in Listening Comprehension

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**Abstract** - Listening is the basic part in determining students' success in communication, but in reality the position of listening skill is neglected by some other institution. This makes the students cannot develop their listening skill effectively as the receptive skill which has a crucial part in language learning. The aims of this study were to investigate the perception, problems and strategies that have been faced by university students in listening skill. In this study, 40 students were selected. Data were gathered by means of questionnaires and interviews. The result of this research showed that listening material, psychological characteristic, physical setting, listener, and speaker were the problems that the students' face. The implications of this research for teaching and learning are the lecturer may get new knowledge and ways of teaching to face the student's problem, and the students may find new strategies to solve their problem to conduct an effective listening.

**Keywords:** listening comprehension, listening difficulties, listening strategies.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Listening is one of the most pivotal skill among the other skills. Listening is claimed by some of the researchers as a fundamental skill which can develop another skill. According to Rost (2001) listening is the most important skill for language learning because it is the most widely used language skill in normal daily life. In addition, Oxford (1990) also states that listening develops faster than the three other language skills, which in turn suggests that it can facilitate the emergence of the other language skills.

Listening is one skill which is difficult to understand by some students. According to Hasan (2000) and Graham (2003), as cited in Kurita (2012), say that listening is included as one of the most difficult language skills to learn. It is also supported by Vandergrift (2007) cited in Kurita (2012) arguing that one of the reasons is because students do not know how to learn listening effectively. Students may face the difficulties of the listening and the teacher need to emphasize the listening in the learning process. Furthermore, the problem also arises when the listening comprehension does not get attention from the teacher. Some of the teacher and the institution tend to neglect listening comprehension and pay more attention to structure, writing, reading and vocabulary. As a result, the students tackle many problems on their listening comprehension.

Some of the teachers believe that listening can be developed naturally within the process of language learning. Persulesy (1988) states that one of the reasons for the opinion that listening is a skill that tends to be neglected is the feeling

among language teachers that this skill is automatically acquired by the learner as he learns to speak the language.

Brown (2001) argues that listening is not a one-way street. It is not merely the process of a unidirectional receiving of audible symbols. Rost (2001), as cited in Townsend (2014), claims that listening is not only a passive skill, but also an important means of acquiring a new language. The learners cannot get the effect with their speaking, reading, and writing ability when they cannot comprehend the input that they are exposed to in the classroom. Furthermore, listening ability is also a key to participating in spoken conversation, as Rost (2001) points out, "there is no spoken language without listening". Coakley and Wolvin (1997) also indicate that efficient listening skills were more important than reading skills as a factor contributing to academic success.

Listening is a critically important activity, both for learners who want or who need to participate in oral, interpersonal communication and for learners who want or need to receive information from some sources. According to Oxford (1993), as cited in Arevalo (2010), listening is a complex problem solving skill and it is more than just the perception of the sounds.

The limitation of time which is given to the teacher in teaching listening makes some students lose their time and attention in improving the quality in listening comprehension from themselves. Without understanding the input, the learners cannot get any improvement; in addition the communication skill cannot be achieved. The perception of the students in terms of listening and their experience during the listening process will guide them into some consideration about the strategies that come to them to get the listening comprehension to be more effective. Likewise, Hedge (2000) in Townsend (2014) points out that input gained from listening can have a key role in language acquisition, so the development of effective strategies for listening becomes important not only for oracy but also in the process of acquiring new language and contributing to academic success.

Regarding to the issues raised earlier, this study attempted to investigate a broad view how a college student in the EFL context faces the listening difficulties. Firstly, this study was aimed at identifying student's perception of the importance of studying listening comprehension. Secondly, this study was purposed at finding out kinds of listening comprehension problems encountered by English students in one of University in Bandung. Finally, this study seek at providing some suggestion in overcoming the listening problems

## 2. METHODS

The research utilized the descriptive research design through which quantitative and qualitative data were obtained. The instruments used in this study were: (1) questionnaire, (2) semi structures interview. The survey questionnaire was used to draw the socio-demographic characteristics and the perception of the students on listening skill. The research was conducted in one of the Universities in Bandung on November, 12<sup>th</sup> 2015. For the sample, the researcher took 40 students of four graders majoring English education who have taken a listening course to fill the questionnaire and 7 students to be interviewed to get in depth understanding and some supporting data toward the questionnaire. The interviewee were chosen by using purposive sampling technique with the following criteria: high achiever, middle achiever and low achiever. The questionnaire and interview questions were adapted from Hamouda (2013). The data were analyzed by using Ms. Excel in which the result will be presented in the form of descriptive statistics.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 3.1 Students' Perception of the importance of listening skill

The data showed that most of the students agreed that English listening is an important skill. It was roughly a half of the students answer "always", while no one of the students chose "never". About 92.02% students found that listening comprehension was difficult while only 2.63% students thought that they did not find any difficulties. It was also nearly nine second of students chose "sometimes" in defining that listening comprehension was boring and not interesting. In addition, most of the students (94.74%) declared that they ever heard about listening strategy. It can also be seen from the answer of the students during the interview,

*"Mmm, yes it is important, because from listening we can know more about the information and it is a basic for English, and from listening we can get more, for example, we hear the music and from the music we can get the new vocabulary and we know how to pronounce the word."* (Nurfallah)

Some of the students were aware that listening is an important skill, but most of them did not know how to listen effectively, especially when the teacher gave some activities during their listening class. For them, listening was a part of a course that they should take in this semester. According to the students in listening session, the teacher asked them to find the missing words, or listen based on the textbook. Teacher did not have any strategies to engage the students in listening skills.

*"I enjoy for the listening class, but the lecturer does not make me enjoy with the lesson (Novia)"*

### 3.2 Problems Related to the Listening Materials

According to Yagang (1993), the causes of listening come from many sources: the message to be listened to, the speaker, the listener, and the physical setting. From the data, it

reflected that almost all of the total students (89.47%), agreed that one of the problem in listening was based on listening material which consisted of some factors such as: students got the difficulties in understanding unfamiliar words in listening, finding some complex grammatical structures, inferring long spoken text, interpreting the meaning, getting fatigue feeling and unfamiliar with the topic. It was also supported by the answer of the students during the interview.

*"The speaker speaks too fast, and I don't really understand about every word that he said and by the word which has the same sound."*  
(Devita)

### 3.2.1 Basic Linguistic Problems Perceived by Learners

Linguists involved in English language and some of the students found their difficulties in the basic linguistic problems. Brown (1994 in Huang, 2004) points out several linguistic sources which makes listening difficult: 1) the use of colloquial and slang; 2) the use of reduced forms; 3) the "prosodic features" of the English language; and 4) to strange accent and pronunciation.

From the data, students argued that "an unknown word" made them difficult to comprehend the meaning in listening (55.56%). According to Vendergrift (2004), as cited in Townsend (2014), the problem of the listener is when they try to understand every word, it will make them exacerbated in the process the spoken text automatically and they must constantly focus on the details.

### 3.2.2 Listening Problems Caused by the Failure to concentrate

Concentration was another factor that affected the students on listening. Concentration was needed to interpret and to catch the meaning from the spoken text. Lack of concentration made the misunderstanding about what the spoken text was talking about.

Almost a half of the students (57.89%) answered sometimes for the item number 26 (I am unable to concentrate because I search for the answers, and I listen to the dialogue at the same time), this means that the students had a problem in pertaining to focus loss which results from thinking about another question. It was difficult for the students to find the meaning while they were listening to the material at the same time.

*"When I miss one word, it will make me not focus to another word."* (Hendi)

Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011), as cited in Hamouda (2013), suggest that, it would be better to make into the short part when students or teacher find the longer exercise.

### 3.2.3 Psychological Characteristics

Learners often experience feelings of anxiety and insecurity when confronted with L2 listening, it is because the input must be processed in real time or directly (Field, 2008) cited in Townsend and Cartwright (2014). From the data, students (39.47% sometimes, 31.58% often, and 13.16% always) agreed that they always felt nervous and worried when they could not understand the meaning. Only one

twentieth students never felt panic with the spoken text that they would face. Another factor was the mood of the students in doing some listening activities. It was hard for them to interpret the meaning when they were not in a good mood.

*"The first when I entered listening class, I am getting sick so I am not focusing to do that, when I gloomy I am not focus too."* (Sinka)

### **3.2.4 The listeners**

A factor that influenced the learner was not only come from external factors, but also from the learner itself. The problem came from their inability in recognizing the main word. From the data, it can be seen that the majority of the students found it difficult to recognize the words because of the way they were pronounced.

### **3.2.5 The Speaker**

The speaker is a part of materials which facilitates the students to hear. When the students listened to the speaker, that aspect related to natural speech, pronunciation, varied accents, and voice heard. Over 90% of the students stated that unclear pronunciation caused many difficulties for them in understanding the meaning and also because of the accents of the material or their teacher; students felt surprised and shocked when they found the new accent that they never heard.

*"Sometimes it sounds like, like G sounds like what, I think in alphabet it seems like the same sound, so I think it's really hard to choose what word is that."* (Rosa)

### **3.2.6 Physical Settings**

The physical setting is an external factor which influences the students on hearing the tape recorder in the class. According to Harmer (2007), if teacher uses the audio material in the classroom, it will get worse effect based on that situation, for example the students had to listen in the same speed, and they needed to give more their attention in hearing the audio in a classroom due to their surroundings were crowded. In addition, by hearing the audio material the students were not really sure about the nature of sounds, the students wondered why they should get involved with such material.

The data presented that noise was an environmental barrier to comprehension. The students would lose their attention when the noise surrounded them; they needed a quiet situation to concentrate on understanding the spoken text. Over 86% students claimed that they were not concentrating on listening to the recording material and poor quality of CD-players also affected them in interfering the meaning. It was also supported by one of the students who stated:

*"The class, enjoy, but the class is small, musty, and narrow makes the students not comfortable."* (Sinka)

Related to this problem, it would be better for the school or the teacher to provide some machines so the students can hear in appropriate situation, or invited the students in the language center so they can practice listening more.

Every problem has solution, and so do the students. In overcoming the problem that they faced in listening skills, some of the students said that:

*"I think, just try to listen more than once, so I can differentiate between the words that have the similar sound. The more I practice, the more I familiar with the sound."* (Rosa)

*"I like listening to music and watching movie with the subtitle."* (Devita)

*"I just concentrate on the sound and try to focus."* (Hendi)

*"I make myself enjoy and then focus to the speakers or native speaker."* (Nurfallah)

*"The first, I have to focus, I have to hear the music, and also listen to all of material that I can listen, and I think I can improve and encourage myself so I have to do that"* (Sinka)

*"Perhaps, by more listening to the music and take a conversation with native speakers."* (Novia)

## **3.3 Students' Strategies in Overcoming the Listening Problems.**

Some strategies that the students mentioned in enhancing their listening can be narrowed down as an extensive listening, where they did their own listening outside the classroom, students also felt free to choose what kind of activities that they needed in improving their comprehension toward listening. By giving and by showing the purpose of listening in the real life context, the students will be aware and consider that listening is needed and important (Harmer, 2007). For instance, the learners preferred to learn from audio material like listening to music and film in order to make them understand about the meaning and also make their ears become familiar with the words. Each strategy used by students was based on their learning experiences.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

Participants argued that listening is an important skill that should be taught by the teacher in the campus. Since it is also a basic skill which helps them in developing other skills. Participants also shared their problem when they were in listening course and activity. There were seven main problems that students faced such as, problems related to the listening materials, basic linguistic problems perceived by learners, listening problems caused by the failure to concentrate, psychological characteristics, the listeners, the speaker, physical settings. Some strategies for internal of the students need to be developed in order to overcome those problems. Most of the strategies that the learners did were included as an extensive skill where they practiced it outside the classroom.

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