

AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' PROBLEMS IN THE LISTENING SECTION OF TOEFL IN ENGLISH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT OF UIN ALAUDDIN MAKASSAR

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze the students' problems in the listening section of TOEFL tests in English Education Department of UIN Alauddin Makassar. This study was qualitative research. The Research subjects were 12 students who had undertaken TOEFL test from English Education Department of UIN Alauddin Makassar. The instrument was documentation and interview guideline. The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman analysis. This research indicated that the students encountered three problems in the listening section of TOEFL tests. The first problem was listening to material such as grammatical structure, unfamiliar words, unclear pronunciation, speakers' speed, and long spoken text. The second was the listeners' personal problems, such as worrying, losing concentration, having limited English vocabulary, and rarely practicing TOEFL tests. The third was the environmental situation, such as the noise around and the low quality of the recording.

Keywords: Students' Problems, Listening Section, TOEFL

INTRODUCTION

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is used to assess non-native speakers' English competence. English-language institutions and universities generally require it. Organizations such as government agencies, enterprises, or scholarship programs may also require this test. The TOEFL test currently exists in paper and computer formats (Deborah, 2001).

TOEFL is an essential test for Indonesian university students who expect to study at the University of the United States of America or other countries where English is the language instruction. However, many language learners find problems in the listening section of TOEFL, especially those who want to complete their degrees. Meanwhile, the TOEFL test

examines English Education Department students' English competence and pre-requirement graduate level for the eighth-semester English Education Department students of UIN Alauddin Makassar.

Several factors cause students to obtain problems in the listening TOEFL section. Hamouda (2003) investigated that accent, pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, the different accents of speakers, a lack of concentration, anxiety, and impaired recording quality were the major listening problems encountered by EFL learners. In addition, Rahmah (2011) found in her research that there were specific areas in listening comprehension of TOEFL that students find challenging, such as synonyms for keywords, expressions of agreement, idioms, and detecting particular information. The challenges' elements originated from six sources: tool problems, hearing text content problems, mental conditions, physical conditions, environmental conditions, and time difficulty.

Several students encountered problems in their listening comprehension of the TOEFL test, such as a lack of concentration, vocabulary, comprehension deficiency of English native speakers, and lousy recording. Based on the preliminary research on Students of the English Education Department in the eighth Semester, the problems in their listening comprehension were based on their relatively low TOEFL scores. It was very interesting to analyze the students' problems in the TOEFL listening section so that lecturers could choose an effective teaching method for the listening section of TOEFL.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Definition of Analysis

An analysis is studying or evaluating something systematically to understand more about it. According to Gray, Lorraine R, & Geoffrey E. M (2016), in their book, analysis is an attempt by a researcher to summarize data collected for a study dependably and accurately. In qualitative research, data analysis usually involves coding and finding patterns or themes in narrative data. Michael M (1991) also defined analysis as breaking down a complicated topic or substance into smaller bits to obtain a better knowledge of it. An investigation of the pieces of a topic, each independently, as the words that comprise a phrase or the simple propositions that enter into an argument; a resolution of anything, whether an object of the senses or the brain, into its constituent or original constituents.

Students' Problems in Listening

Several factors cause the students' problems in listening TOEFL Section. Those three factors are: The first is listening materials. The materials become the primary source of

listening comprehension problems. Some listening material problems were grammatical structure, unfamiliar words, unclear pronunciation, speakers' speed, and long spoken text. The second is Listeners' personal problems. Students' difficulties in listening are not only from the listening material but also from the listeners' lack of English language skills. Understanding listening also needs concentration when the students feel nervous or anxious not to concentrate. The listener factor problems were worrying, losing concentration, having limited English vocabulary, and rarely practicing TOEFL tests. The third is the environmental situation. The listening section's difficulties come from the environment, such as noise and the low quality of the CD player. These can disturb students listening comprehension (Darti & Asmawati, 2017).

Listening Section of TOEFL

One of the sections of the TOEFL test is listening. Based on Deborah (2001), both on the paper or computer TOEFL test, the first section is called Listening Comprehension. This section consists of fifty questions. Students listen to recorded materials and respond to multiple-choice questions about the materials. Students must listen to various passage types on a tape recording to demonstrate their understanding of spoken English. Students must carefully listen because they hear the recording only once, and the material on the recording is not written in the test book. In the listening section, there are three-part of listening, which are:

1. *Short dialogue*; in this part, students hear short conversations between two people. After each conversation, students listen to a question about the talk. The conversation and question will not be repeated. After the students listen to a question, they read the four possible answers in their test book and choose the best answer. The thirty-short-dialogues and 30 questions about them comprise part A of the TOEFL test (Deborah, 2001).
2. *Long conversation*; it is a 60-90 second conversation on casual topics between students, each followed by several multiple-choice questions. Students listen to each long conversation and each of the questions accompanying it on the recording, and then students choose the best answer to each question from four choices in the book. The two conversations and the seven to nine questions accompanying them comprise part B of the TOEFL test (Deborah, 2001).
3. *Talks*; this part is a 60-90 second talk about school life or academic subjects, each followed by several multiple-choice questions. Students listen to each long conversation and each of the questions accompanying it on the recording and then choose the best

answer to each question from four choices in the book. The three lecturers and the 11-13 questions accompanying them comprise part C of the TOEFL test (Deborah, 2001).

General Strategies in Answering Listening Section of TOEFL

Answer the listening section in TOEFL needs strategies. Some general TOEFL test-taking strategies are: Firstly, pay close attention to the texts. Students only hear the tape once and should pay close attention to what the speakers say. Secondly, understand the approximate location of the more straightforward and challenging questions. The questions in the TOEFL listening section of the paper test usually move from simple to challenging. Thirdly, become acquainted with the test's tempo. On the recording, students have twelve seconds between each question, so they must answer each question in twelve seconds or less and then be ready for the following question on the tape. Fourthly, never leave any answers on the answer sheet blank. Students must respond to each question even if unsure about the proper answer because there are no consequences for guessing. Lastly, use any remaining time to anticipate the answers to the following questions. When you finish one question, you might have time to look at the solutions to the following one (Fitriana C. & Rohim A., 2021).

METHOD

Research Design

This research used the qualitative method. It gathers data in the field, in the site where participants experience the issue or problem under investigation. Qualitative researchers get information by analyzing documents, observing behavior, or interviewing subjects. The primary concept of qualitative research is to learn about a problem or topic from people and then conduct research to gather the data. Thus, this research aims to analyze students' problems in the listening section of the TOEFL test.

Research Subjects

The subject of this research was the eight-semester students of English Education Department at UIN Alauddin Makassar. Twelve students were selected as the research subjects based on their TOEFL section 1 (Listening test) scores. The reasons for choosing them were: Firstly, their scores on the TOEFL test were below 500. Secondly, their scores in the listening section of the TOEFL test were under 500.

Research Instruments

Two instruments used in this research were documentation and interviews. According to Arikunto (2002), documentation is data or students' learning outcomes obtained from notes, transcripts of grades, and learning outcomes. The researchers used the students' TOEFL test

scores as the documentation and found the lower scores as subjects. At the same time, the structured interview with a specified set of open-closed questions was used to identify the students' problems in the listening TOEFL section.

Data Collecting Procedures

The researchers searched for data transcripts of students' TOEFL scores. After getting the transcript data on students' scores, the researchers only selected subjects with low scores in the listening section. The researchers then interviewed the subjects to find out more information about their problems in the listening section from their perspective. The researcher gave some questions to get additional data. The participants were asked several questions to identify and define their perceptions, opinions, and feelings about the topics. To collect the data from the interviews, the researcher used smartphone recording to gain original data. Afterward, the researchers listened to the recording, transcribed, and interpreted the data.

Data Analysis

The researchers used Miles and Huberman's (1994) analysis data consisting of three concurrent activities flows. The first was data condensation. This activity involved choosing, emphasizing, clarifying, abstracting, and managing information from written-up field notes or transcriptions and converting data from the entire collection of notes, interview transcripts, documents, and other empirical materials. By condensing, the researcher strengthened the data. The second was data display. A display was a well-organized, condensed data collection that allowed for conclusion drawing and action. Looking at displays helped to grasp what was going on and then do something, further evaluating that information. The third was verification and conclusion. Verification could be as brief as a second idea passing through the researchers' minds while writing. It was utilized to describe all the facts gathered to create a conclusion that the researchers and others can understand.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Listening Material Problems

Materials became the primary source in the listening section of TOEFL. The listening material problems were grammatical structure, unfamiliar words, unclear pronunciation, speakers' speed, and long-spoken text.

Based on the data from the interview, the researchers found that 9 of 12 students stated they had difficulty understanding the structure of the sentence spoken on the audio. Knowing about the text's structural components was important in listening comprehension. According

to Hasan in Gilakjani A. P. & Sabouri N. B. (2016), unfamiliar words, difficult grammatical structures, and the length of the spoken passages are the most important factors that cause problems in learners' listening comprehension. Thus, the students had difficulty understanding the audio because they had poor grammar, so their ability to listen to complex sentences was lacking. This statement is supported by Subjects 1 and 7 as follows:

Subject 1: "Yes, I have difficulty understanding sentence structure. Because I don't know what the speakers are talking about, I don't get anything."

Subject 7: "Sometimes I have difficulty understanding the structure of sentences because sometimes they speak too fast. That's why I don't get the topic discussed on the audio."

Related to unfamiliar words in TOEFL listening, all subjects have difficulty understanding the words that were rarely heard. They did not know the differences between jargon and idioms. Moreover, English is a foreign language learned by students, which makes them not know a lot of English vocabulary. Students may encounter a new term that causes them to pause and consider the meaning of that word, causing them to miss the next portion of the speech (Gilakjani A. P. & Sabouri N. B., 2016). In addition, the problems with unfamiliar words were evidenced by the statements of Subjects 2 and 4 as follows:

Subject 2: "Because of the words that I rarely hear, I certainly have difficulty in answering listening questions."

Subject 4: "I have difficulty understanding new words or the first thing I found in listening because I did not know the meaning of that vocabulary."

The interview result indicated that the subjects struggled to understand a new word in the listening section. Yulia and Lastri (2019) stated that not knowing a word interrupts students' listening and makes them miss some information in listening to speakers. They usually try to understand the speaker's whole words, but when they get words they do not recognize, they focus on those words and make them lose concentration. Those unfamiliar words in the TOEFL listening section are in the short conversation, long conversation, or talk part.

Other students' problem in TOEFL listening was speakers' unclear pronunciation. Different aspects made it difficult for students to understand speakers' utterances, including problems with the obscurity of speakers' pronunciation, the diversity of speakers' accents, and the speakers' rapidity in providing listening content. This statement is in line with Erzad, A. M. (2020) stated that restricted vocabulary, speed of speech, native speaker's accent, unfamiliar pronunciation, and class conditions contributed to the students' problems.

The interview result indicated that 10 of 12 subjects had problems listening speech of native speakers each time answering TOEFL questions. Sometimes they recognized the words in written text, but they could not understand when it came to the audio. It meant that some speakers' unclear pronunciation was also considered a source of listening problems. Subjects 3 and 5 stated as follows:

Subject 3: "Yes, I have a problem with the accent of the native speakers."

Subject 5: "I have difficulty listening to native speakers. They have different ways of pronouncing a word. Sometimes the same word sounds different in my ears, making me interpret that word incorrectly."

Furthermore, results from interviews revealed that most students' problems were caused by the inability to comprehend the speech transmitted by the speaker due to the native speakers' speed. Ten students pointed out that when the speakers started talking too fast, it was difficult to understand what was being said, even if they used familiar words. According to Erzad, A. M. (2020), speedy delivery caused students to ignore listening content, skip the primary point, and be unable to give answers. In addition, the subjects of this research also provide their statements as follows:

Subject 8: "When the speaker speaks too fast, I have a problem understanding the context of the sentence or topic being discussed; it is complicated for me, who is not fluent in English."

Subject 9: "The speaker talks too fast, making me difficult to understand the material."

The statements of Subjects 8 and 9 indicated that speech speed became a fundamental problem in the listening section. Sofyan and Mushrihah (2019) stated that this was a typical problem that students encountered in the listening segment, especially when the materials were obtained from the original language. As a result, they must become used to the native speed of speech and practice listening to long-spoken text.

The length of the spoken text could be one main concern interfering with students' listening comprehension since it interrupted their focus. Long-spoken texts were sometimes difficult for them. As a result, it is feasible to infer that students' listening comprehension is affected by the long-spoken text. This statement is in line with the findings of Yulia and Lastri (2019) that one aspect that has a significant impact on learners' listening comprehension is the length of the talk. All of the subjects assumed that long spoken text or

monologue made them difficult to answer listening questions in TOEFL tests as stated as follows:

Subject 11: "Because the text is long, the vocabulary used is difficult to understand and takes a long thought to understand the purpose of the discussion."

Subject 12: "I am difficult to get information because I lose concentration and do not know to determine the topic or main idea if the text is too long."

The statements of Subjects 11 and 12 indicated that long-spoken texts became a problem in the listening section. According to Maulida (2018), students' level plays a significant role when listening to long parts and keeping all the information in mind. It is not easy for the lower-level Student to attend for more than three minutes of listening and then complete the desired activities.

Personal Problems

The listening section of TOEFL tests needs students to focus on answering the questions. They might lose concentration when feeling nervous or anxious. The problems included in the listener factor were feeling worried, losing concentration, having limited English vocabulary, and rarely practicing TOEFL tests.

The interview result indicated that 8 of 12 students were nervous and worried about answering questions in the listening section of TOEFL. They were aware of passing the TOEFL test. They must reach the target score that had been determined. During the test preparation, they could not predict how the listening test would be and how high they would achieve the score target. Moreover, they felt uncertain whether they could reach their goal score. Prastiyowati (2019), in her research, indicated that students' nervousness and low confidence contributed to their listening performance. In addition, Oteir and Hashimah (2017) stated that listening comprehension anxiety affected students in three ways: personal, academic, and social effects, which included losing concentration and feeling depressed. The students stated as follows:

Subject 3: " I sometimes feel anxious because I am doubtful and confused in choosing an answer, whether the answer I chose is correct or not."

Subject 6: "Because I am confused about whether my answer is correct or not, it makes me doubt every time I answer a question."

When students feel nervous and worried about answering the listening section in TOEFL, they sometimes lose concentration. Losing focus could obstruct the students from following the dialogue or monologue. Concentration in listening was considered something

essential to keep because of the limited time of the listening section. The students did not have time to think about the correct answer. Sari and Fithriyana (2019) stated that students could not concentrate since they searched for answers while listening to the talk. They need to focus due to search for the correct answer at the same time as listening to the dialogue or monologue. This statement was also supported by the result of the interview as follows:

Subject 3: "I lose concentration when answering questions because when listening to the speaker, I also need to read the answer choices."

Subject 10: "Because I haven't done the previous question, and the question has changed, so I lose concentration on which one to answer."

Another personal problem that the students had was their limited English vocabulary. One of the most important aspects of English is vocabulary. It is the most crucial for students studying English as a foreign language. The interview result indicated that 9 of 12 students experienced problems in answering the TOEFL listening section due to their lack of English vocabulary, as stated as follows:

Subject 4: "Because the vocabulary that I have is arguably a little so to answer questions from the audio is quite difficult; I can only answer familiar questions using familiar words."

Subject 7: "I always have difficulty answering the questions because I rarely learn new vocabulary. Every time a question comes, I hesitate to answer that question."

The statements of Subjects 4 and 7 indicated that limited vocabulary became a fundamental problem in the listening section of TOEFL. Hamouda (2013) stated that many students stop listening and consider the meaning of an unknown word they heard. It disrupts the flow of speech then students may miss essential information.

A lack of practice and a tendency to lack preparation often occurs in answering TOEFL questions. Even though the TOEFL tests had been scheduled, several students started to study the day before the test. Students with low TOEFL scores tend to be less prepared for the TOEFL test, especially in listening and memorizing vocabulary and rarely reviewing TOEFL material. The interview results indicated that 8 of 12 students had difficulties in answering listening questions due to a lack of practice, as stated as follows:

Subject 10: "I only practice when I want to take the TOEFL test."

Subject 11: "I rarely practice even if I have limited time on the day of the TOEFL test."

Subjects 10 and 11 indicated that the lack of practice was a problem in the TOEFL listening section. Susiana (2020) said motivation should be essential to lack of practice. Therefore, students need the motivation to practice habits to achieve the target score.

Environment Situation Problems

The situation around was significantly influencing students' listening section in the TOEFL test. Noises around students were one of the problems generated in the listening section. Many students were distracted by noises no matter how hard they tried to focus on the test, it was difficult to have a good result in the listening section. The result of this research in line with Maulidiyah (2015), who found that the three most common problems encountered by students in listening were difficulty concentrating with noises around, unclear sounds as a result of poor acoustic conditions in the classrooms, and difficulty to understand fast speakers.

Based on the interview result, eleven students stated that they had a problem listening to audio due to noisy room conditions when answering questions. Most of them claimed that they could not focus on listening to the recording because of the interferences they experienced during the test; the students' statements were as follows:

Subject 2: "Because the situation is noisy, I do not understand what the speakers deliver. So, I do not concentrate on answering questions."

Subject 11: "I am an auditory person. For example, when I am listening to the dialogue, the situation must be calm and quiet so that I can hear clearly. If there is a commotion, I was disturbed."

The other problem related to the listening environment setting was the low quality of the tapes. Low audio quality makes the speaker's sounds unclear and makes them lose concentration. The majority (10 students) responded that the difficulty they faced in the listening section was because of low-quality tapes or disks. The students stated in the interview as follows:

Subject 1: "This is also difficult because the audio quality is low or the audio setting is not good. So, only a few words are heard, and the rest are doubtful whether the word interpretation is correct."

Subject 4: "When the audio player or the speakers are damaged, the quality of our listening decreases."

Subjects 1 and 4 indicated that the low quality of the recording becomes a fundamental problem in the listening section. Based on Hamouda (2013) stated that the cassette might be recorded while there are noises around or the cassette is used for a long time, so the quality is

worn out. Unclear sounds from low-quality equipment can also interfere with the listener's comprehension.

CONCLUSION

Based on the interview and data analysis, the researchers concluded that the students' problems in TOEFL Listening Sections were in three categories. The first was the listening material Problems. The materials became the primary source of listening comprehension problems. The listening material problems were grammatical structure, unfamiliar words, unclear pronunciation, speakers' speed, and long-spoken text. The second was Listeners' personal problems become the obstacle in listening sections. The problems were worrying, losing concentration, limited English vocabulary, and rarely practicing TOEFL tests. The last one was environmental situation Problems such as noise around and low quality of the recording.

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