

INVESTIGATING MEDICAL STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN TOEFL LISTENING TEST

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ABSTRACT

This research investigated the students' responses to listening difficulties in taking the listening section of the TOEFL test and their efforts made to overcome the difficulties. This study is descriptive qualitative research that used the online questionnaire attached in the google forms to gather data needed. The questionnaire was distributed to 100 medical students at UP3BI class (*Unit Pengembangan Program Pendamping Mata Kuliah Bahasa Inggris (UP3BI)*) of Syiah Kuala Language Center. The questionnaire was divided into two. Part one consisted of students' personal information on the listening skill questionnaire. It was found that watching English TV programs or movies (65.10%) and listening to English songs (60%) as the highest rank of students' efforts made to overcome listening difficulties of the TOEFL test. Section two of the questionnaire consisted of listening difficulties. It was found that most respondents were difficult to understand the native speaker's pronunciation (64%). In addition, it is suggested that for English lecturers, other researchers, institutions, and testing organizers to contribute a standardized knowledge of the TOEFL test and also to provide a conditioned testing place for a better improvement of listening TOEFL in particular. Besides, the test takers or students should practice and learn more about listening TOEFL as often as possible. Therefore, they will get used to listening and can minimize the difficulties during taking the TOEFL test.

Keywords: *TOEFL, listening, listening difficulties.*

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INTRODUCTION

According to Phillips (2001), for foreign language learners, the TOEFL test is used to rate their personal English competence (Phillips, 2001). Moreover, the TOEFL test is considered by most universities in Indonesia as one of the graduation requirements for students before taking the final examination. Each university has a different standard score in graduation policy. According to Pyle and Page (2001), different schools have different requirements in the TOEFL test score. In Syiah Kuala University, the standard score of TOEFL is 477 on average while Ar-Raniry State Islamic University determines 400 of the TOEFL score for all faculties but for the English Department, it is required 500 as the standardized TOEFL score before graduation. Moreover, some universities use the test to measure students' language skills in order to know the language capabilities that can make them successful to compete in international standards.

As a tool of communication, English is used for formal or informal needs. For academic purposes, English is used to writing or practicing a formal language in order to ensure better language competence. For example, if a learner can cope with good academic writing, it will be easier for them to take the English exercises completely. Besides, it also helps learners while taking a test in a formal English written such as the TOEFL test. However, in an informal context, learners can practice English out of the formal need. They can practice it in anyway they want, but most importantly, both a speaker and a listener can understand a topic being discussed.

In learning a foreign language, sometimes it is difficult for learners to understand English especially in listening context even after they have been dealing with English since elementary school. As compared to other language skills, listening is regarded as one of the most difficult skills for some college students. In this case, we chose the medical students of a supported program for the TOEFL course (*Unit Pengembangan Program Pendamping Mata Kuliah Bahasa Inggris (UP3BI)*) of Syiah Kuala Language Center because we believed that most of them were still unfamiliar with a listening section of the TOEFL test.

In late 2017, we got involved in the supported program of the language center as a TOEFL tutor. We felt that the learning atmosphere in the classroom seemed overwhelmed. It was found that most medical students felt difficulties in the listening section of the TOEFL test. During the TOEFL test, they could listen to the recorded materials, but

it was hard for them to understand what the native speaker said. Other listening difficulties that made students complicated in listening were the fast speed of talks and long conversations especially in part B and part C of the listening section. It can interfere with their concentration totally.

According to Flowerdew and Miller (1996), the fast speed of listening, the theory of listening, listening attentiveness, and the physical setting are regarded as listening problems for EFL learners. In addition, Underwood (1989) states that there are some listening difficulties faced by listeners such as fast speed of native speakers' conversations, feeling overwhelmed with talks, less vocabulary, lack of understanding the signals of the spoken talk, lack of concentration due to the listening aspect, and a regular listening practice. In this case, many listeners found difficulties in listening and still have a small awareness of why it happens so far. Therefore, it is suggested for students to maximize their listening proficiency by practicing the TOEFL exercises as their habitual action. Besides, the role of teachers is also important for the students' improvement of listening skill especially in preparing a good learning strategy and lesson plan.

Javid (2011) said that types of vocabulary in the field of medicine is academically hard to understand. Thus, the medical students have to be familiar with English words in general in order to approximately understand about the medical issue. In this case, the study background of the medical students of Syiah Kuala University are not foreign language learners in particular, but they mostly used English for Specific Purposes (ESP) of medical guide books, articles, or journals written in an English context. It is highlighted that this research brings up a new finding to make this research more specialized in the medical context.

Moreover, undergraduate students of medicine who are internationally qualified in English proficiency can take an opportunity to study abroad to pursue a higher academic degree. Thus, they must have requirements needed, one of which is TOEFL score or other language proficiency tests. Furthermore, the TOEFL test must be taken for every student as a standardized requirement before completing a study at Syiah Kuala University. Therefore, the medical students of this University needs to struggle to learn English in order to comprehend the authentic materials of the medical context and also know how to understand the listening content of the TOEFL test. Therefore, it is worthy to conduct research on medical students of Syiah Kuala University.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)

TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is one of the measurements to know individual English proficiency. According to Schmidt (2010, p. 601), TOEFL is a standardized test to measure English language capability for foreign students when entering the universities of the United States and it is commonly administrated by the Educational Testing Service. Nowadays, TOEFL is used on many occasions such as for getting scholarships to study abroad, getting a job both national and international companies, and many more. TOEFL test is also used to know a personal English proficiency (Ismalia, 2015). Therefore, having a standardized TOEFL score is very helpful and important in many aspects and other opportunities for certain purposes as personal competence.

Definition of Listening

Listening is one of the language skills that is required by people to comprehend messages over talks. Thus, TOEFL tests non-native English speakers' listening skill to measure how well they can understand both short and long English messages spoken in informal or formal contexts. In the listening section of TOEFL, listeners should consider many aspects, not only relating to what is being spoken, grammatical aspect, intonation and speed, but also understanding the physical environment to ensure a well-organized listening section of the TOEFL test. Purdy (1997) said that listening is the process of receiving, making meaning from, and answering spoken and/or nonverbal messages. Rost (2002) defined listening as a complex process of interpretation in which listeners match what they listen with what they already know. According to Bowen, Madsen and Hilferty (1985), listening is hearing verbal dialect. Here, listeners hear an oral speaking, receive sounds, and then comprehend messages of what is being heard.

Listening Comprehension

According to Scarcella and Oxford (1992, p. 139), listening is not just perception of sound and foundation but Listening is more than that, it requires the understanding the meaning of the sound. Sometimes, listeners should not listen to every single word in detail, but they just take important information on a topic being discussed. Hayrapetyan

(2016, p. 205) elaborated that a good listener does not listen to an entire spoken text in details, but to needed information.

Listening TOEFL

TOEFL PBT (Paper Based-Test) has three sections, namely listening, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. The first section is listening comprehension. This section consists of three parts, part A, B, and C. The length of the listening section is approximately 30 minutes to answer 50 questions (Pyle & Page, 2001, p. 3). According to the ETS TOEFL (2010, p. 4), the listening section contains short and long conversation of recorded material that includes the vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and grammatical constructions used in listening.

Listening Tips before taking the TOEFL test

For test-takers, it is better to prepare themselves in order to minimize the listening difficulties in several tasks or conversations. There are a couple of tips for a listening test according to Pyle and Page (2001, p. 23). It is necessary for students/test-takers to mostly speak to native speakers as often as possible. Moreover, they are suggested to watch news and weather reports on television, or listen to radio recording. In addition, they have to make telephone calls to recorded messages such as weather reports, time of day, or movie theaters. Furthermore, students/test takers are advised attend to English lectures at school or everywhere. Last, they should make a language laboratory club and practice English with friends.

Willis (1981) mentioned that there are some recommendations that should be prepared by students/test takers in taking listening test such as anticipating what individuals are aiming to talk about, speculating obscure words or expressions without panicking, assisting one another to understand listening, recognizing pertinent focuses, and dismissing unimportant data, holding important focuses (note-taking, summarizing), recognizing talk markers, recognizing cohesive gadgets, understanding distinctive pitch contour and accent, and understanding gathered data such as speakers' mindset and determination.

Listening Difficulties

When listening to a foreign language, many language students face listening difficulties. It will certainly block listening comprehension and

at the same time a new dialect makes a test taker difficult to understand the topic (Buck, 2001). Fourth, Unfamiliar vocabulary is another factor that causes the difficulty in listening. According to Bingol, Celik, Yildiz and Mart (2014), if a spoken text contains familiar words, it would be very easy for students to understand listening materials. Therefore, students can easily know word meaning, so that it will ensure their interest to complete the test because they have already comprehended spoken texts. However, too many words that have more than one meaning will lead test takers to get confused in listening.

Listening difficulties related to speaker

Speaker is one of the listening difficulties that may be encountered by the test taker. Moreover, it hard for them to understand the conversation without seeing the speaker directly. According to Brown (1994), gesture and accent of the native speakers were related each other that contained supportive data of talking that can help the learner to comprehend the conversation.

Listening difficulties Related to Listening Texts

Listening a text hold on many contexts in life or society such as a trade report, habitual discussion, or a political issue. Some of the talks contain words, expressions, or unknown terms unfamiliar to listeners. Besides, different accents of speaking lead to listening difficulties. For example, if Chinese students speak English in their language style, it will make a listener difficult to listen. Words pronounced are difficult to guess because of its different dialect. Therefore, it is easier learners to understand a familiar dialect that they generally hear (Yagang, 1994).

Listening difficulties related to the physical setting

The more comfortable a physical setting, the easier a test taker takes the listening test. However, noise around often leads to listening difficulty in the physical setting. It is difficult listeners to listen to recording materials within interrupted noise even though they put too much concentration in it. Watson and Smeltzer (1984) and Yagang (1994) said that listening problems can be caused by the sound of the surrounding situation and also the poor quality of listening hardware, for example, the sound produced by bell and phone ringing, door knocking, coughing, sneezing, background noises, volume control, etc. The poor quality of equipment may be resulted from cassette used for a long time. Therefore, the quality of the sound is worn out. Good quality of a cassette

recorder or a CD player can support the test running well. It is considered that a good atmosphere of a classroom setting can improve a good result of the listening test.

Listening difficulties related to failure to concentrate

The distractions while listening can break the listener's concentration. For example, sound and other complicated things make a listener fail to pick the needed information (Hasan, 2000). It is difficult for a listener to target what is being spoken due to unconditioned quality equipment. A listener has already set expected answers. Thus, it is totally tough for them to grasp the message of listening. As a result, the information of listening will be missed and the expected answers will be lost. Another listening difficulty due to failure to concentrate occurs when listening to a long conversation and then attempt to cover each information in detail on the recording material.

Listening difficulties related to a listener

Underwood (1989) considered that listening difficulties related to test takers happen because of the unclear information of listening. Therefore, they felt overwhelmed to catch the meaning of the whole of listening. For a listener, it is suggested that making the prediction of listening is very helpful. They can easily figure it out based on their expectation in mind. Berman (2003) said that guessing the topic in the questionnaire answer can improve students' concentration in listening. It will lead the listener to find the needed information in the conversation.

Listening difficulties related to linguistic features

The linguistic features are also a language barrier to learners. According to Yagang (1994), listening difficulty also can be found in discourse and ungrammatical structure of linguistic features because it can make a speaker confused while listening. Therefore, poor listening comprehension can also affect listeners.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Participants

This study investigated the responses of 100 medical students about listening difficulties of the TOEFL test and the students' efforts to overcome the difficulties. The respondents were the students of the TOEFL course of UP3BI class (*Unit Pengembangan Program*

Pendamping Mata Kuliah Bahasa Inggris) and also are used to learning with some medical books, articles, and journals written in English. Thus, we are interested to choose them as the respondents.

Research Instrument

In conducting this study, the instrument of this descriptive qualitative research was a questionnaire within a survey design. The questionnaire was adapted from Assaf (2015) and designed under reviewing the validity from the board examiner of TEFL at Arab American University of Jenin and also from Najah National University of Palestine. Additional information about the questionnaire was also adapted and modified from Anh (2019). The questionnaire included in this study was closed and open-ended questionnaire. It was easier for us to collect and analyze the result of students' responses in order to get a piece of more accurate information. The questionnaire was translated into Indonesian in order to make the respondents clear in completing the questions.

We used google forms to collect the data and is available at <https://forms.gle/rFGYUEfBz9CnxXH7A>, so that it was easier to access by the respondents who have the link. The questionnaire consisted of 55 items and was divided into two parts. The first one was about students' personal information related to the competence of listening (Anh, 2019) which consists of 10 items. Section two dealt with the students' responses on listening difficulties in the TOEFL test (Assaf, 2015) consisting of 45 items. This questionnaire asked the students' responses on the importance of listening skill (5 items), listening difficulties related to listening text (6 items), listening difficulties related to linguistics features (6 items), listening difficulties related to speaker (8 items), listening difficulties related to listener (11 items), listening difficulties related to physical setting (4 items), and listening difficulties related to failure to concentrate (5 items).

Technique of Data Collection

According to Crossman (2019), there are several methods used while conducting a qualitative study such as observation and immersion, interviews, open-ended surveys, focus groups, content analysis of visual and textual materials and oral history. He added that survey can be used not only to analyze quantitative data, but also to process qualitative data within open-ended questions. The quantitative data results can also be presented in graphs, tables, etc. and then descriptively analyzed. It is

important, though, to realize that just because qualitative information is presented in a graph, it does not suddenly become quantitative, but a graph of qualitative information which has been presented quantitatively (Assessment Capacities Project, 2012, pp. 7-9).

To collect the data, we distributed the link of google forms to the respondents through WhatsApp to complete the online questionnaire. Then, the result of the questionnaire was automatically recorded based on their answers. The findings are presented in the table and figure directly.

Technique of Data Analysis

According to Humphrey (2019), analyzing data gathered from google forms is a new qualitative research analysis and collaboration tool specifically designed to analyze free-text data like user testing observations, survey responses, academic papers, etc. In this study, the questionnaire was automatically calculated and analyzed by google forms and then interpreted in all responses (individual and summary of all data) into basic statistical description through percentages, graphs, etc. The analyzed data of google forms were adapted from Arnkling (2012) and then we modified them based on the needed analysis. The data were processed through several stages as follows:

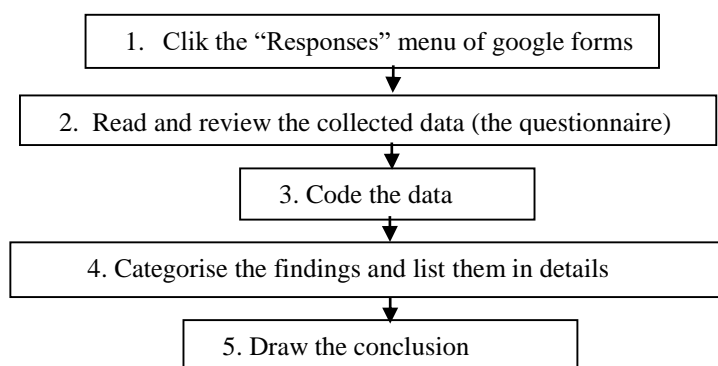


Figure 1. Data Analysis of Google Forms

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

The most common difficulties faced by medical student in Listening TOEFL

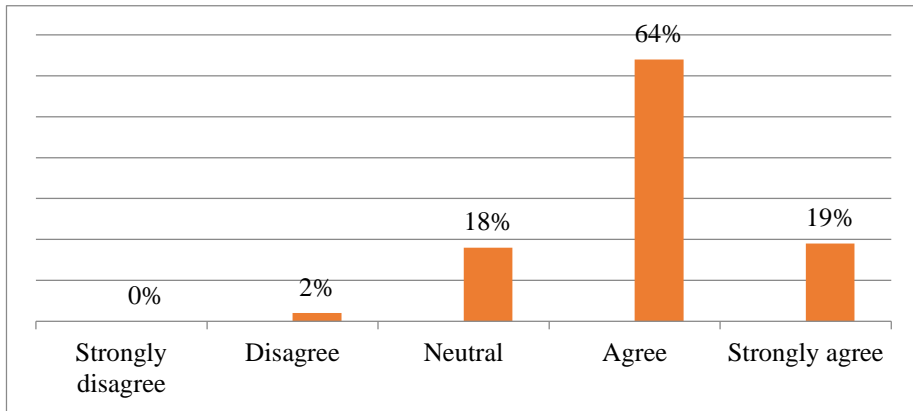


Figure 2. Inability to Understand the Native Speakers' Pronunciation

From Figure 2, it is found that most respondents were unable to understand listening materials due to native speakers' pronunciation (64%). It is hard for them to guess what the speaker said in the recording, so that it can disturb their concentration while listening. The percentage of strongly agree option (19%) was almost close to the neutral option (18%), indicating that listening to native speakers is difficult. Meanwhile, only 2 respondents disagreed with the statement (2%). None of them choose 'strongly disagree'.

Students' efforts to overcome Listening difficulties

This figure shows the highest percentage of all statements in both two questionnaires related to students' best efforts made to overcome listening difficulties and their self-listening practice at home (Part I: students' personal information of listening skill questionnaire). The data are illustrated below in details.

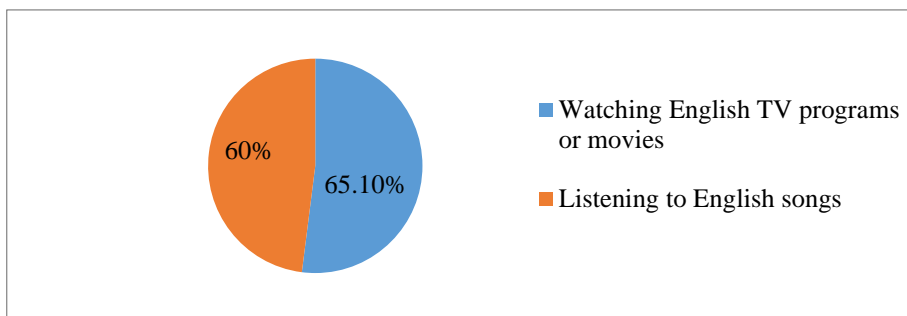


Figure 3. The Highest Rank of Students' Responses Made to Overcome Listening Difficulties

As seen from Figure 3, the students were used to watching TV programs or movies and listening to English songs, showing the highest percentage of all responses.

Discussions

Students' Responses to Listening Difficulties

The following is a description of students' responses to listening difficulties based on the result of the questionnaire. We listed some listening difficulties faced by medical students in taking listening section of the TOEFL test. Listening difficulties present six (6) categories that relate to the speaker (3 items), listening text (4 items), physical setting (4 items), lack of concentration (2 items), listener (3 items), and linguistic features (3 items). The items were classified based on the highest percentage to the last top ten of listening difficulties.

Based on the results found in the questionnaire, it is shown that it is difficult for the respondents to understand the listening materials due to the native speaker's pronunciation. The statement stood as the highest rank of listening difficulties. Higgins (1997) stated that listening difficulties can result from from the fast speed of listening and also from the native speaker's pronunciation. It was still complicated for the listener to understand the speakers due to their pronunciation. The students were unfamiliar with their accents and language style of speaking. Therefore, it can be the major problem of listening comprehension so far. Besides, the unfamiliar topics, stress and intonation patterns, poor quality of equipment, listening strategies and training, linguistic features, speed rate of listening, lack of concentration,

and other physical settings are also regarded as the vital problems of listening.

Students' Efforts of Listening Difficulties

The students used different ways of listening based on the students' responses due to their best efforts to overcome listening difficulties and also their self listening practice at home. It shows that watching English TV programs or movies and listening to English songs stood as the highest percentage of the questionnaire option. Other supported responses were listening to English classroom lectures, talking to foreign friends, practicing some online and offline listening TOEFL at home, taking the TOEFL course of listening section, having a self-study with the TOEFL guide book and listening to the disks, listening to English news, and listening to English radio programs.

Moreover, it is followed by the data taken from the students' responses to the additional comment of "the other" option in question number 5, students' responses related to their best efforts to overcome listening difficulties, such as reading English novels, books, journals, and anything in English, and listening to English Song. Moreover, the data taken from the "other" option in question number 8 related to students' responses on self-listening practice at home shows that the respondents did a self-study such as reading English comics, articles, and other English contents, speaking in front of the mirror and speaking with parents in English, watching the interview of some artists in English talks, videos, movies with and without English Subtitle, and also watching youtube about learning English, listening to English songs. However, there were still some of them who did nothing to improve their listening skill. Besides, the listening competence of learners can be supported by the teacher role. The teachers can guide the students in many ways to improve their listening skills. Moreover, the teacher can modify the suitable syllabus and good lesson plan of listening and try to introduce the new trick in the listening context.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

From the result of the questionnaire, it is found that most respondents were unable to understand the listening material due to the native speaker's pronunciation. Moreover, the difficulties came from unfamiliar topics, stress and intonation patterns, poor quality of equipment, listening strategies and training, linguistic features, speed

rate of listening, lack of concentration, and other physical settings. Dealing with students' efforts made to overcome listening difficulties, it is found that most of the respondents were used to watching TV programs or movies and listening to English songs, showing the highest percentage of all. Other efforts from the respondents were watching and listening to English classroom lectures, news, interview, youtube, and radio, speaking in front of the mirror, talking to foreign friends and parents in English, practicing some online and offline listening TOEFL, taking TOEFL course of listening section, reading to English novels, comics, medical books or journals, articles, and anything written in English. Finally, the questionnaire has answered the two research questions.

It is suggested that for the institution and testing organizers, English lecturers, students, and other researchers in this study. For the institution and testing organizers, it is expected to provide conditioned acoustic classrooms and other supported sources for the TOEFL test in order to minimize the listening difficulties. For English lecturer, it is expected to provide suitable authentic listening materials like English talks, offline and online reports, movies, announcements, daily conversations, other oral discussion with various pronunciations and accents, basic knowledge of linguistic features, or invite the native speaker to the classroom and doing other great contributions to familiarize the listening strategy.

For students, it is expected to practice and learn more whether online or offline TOEFL test as often as possible in order to improve listening competence. Getting involved in English Speaking Club, speaking to foreigners, and listening to all English materials are also great ways to develop language skill especially in listening because these can make the students easier to improve their listening skill, well-trained, and get used to listening in daily life. For other researchers, it is expected to provide new research findings related to listening difficulties, to strengthen, and to support some theories about listening difficulties that have been done by some experts. Hence, the findings can be used for a better improvement of listening TOEFL as well.

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