

## Listening Comprehension Problems Encountered by EFL Students at Coastal Area

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**Abstract:** *The study investigated listening comprehension problems of EFL students at coastal area, the strategies they used to solve the problems, and the learners' view on learning listening with prior knowledge related content. To collect the data, 90 students taking the listening course on on-going semester participated by answering questionnaire which consist of 31 items. The results show that the students experienced listening problems on moderate level in all three cognitive processing related to perception problems, parsing problems, and utilization problems. This finding also indicate that the students have poor competency on the speech rate, clarity, vocabulary, and grammar structure. Meanwhile, to overcome these difficulties, the students prefer authentic listening audio and activities indicating 'listening more to English songs', 'watching more English movie', and 'listening more to English classroom lectures' on the highest demand. Reasonably, the EFL students at coastal area approve that listening to relevant knowledge content particularly marine life would support their comprehension. After all, considering content that links to students' environmental context is necessarily noteworthy to support EFL students' comprehension in listening.*

## INTRODUCTION

The capacity to receive and understand a language is affected by how well one could listen. Listening is vital in language learning as it provides input to the learners. Yıldırım & Yıldırım (2016) explains that this input facilitates learners to comprehend other basis of language learning covering phonology, grammar, vocabulary, and language use. In other words, optimizing listening in language learning would promote effective communication that is essential to proficiency.

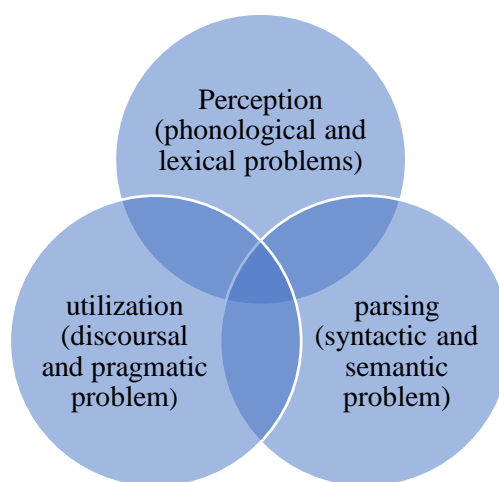
Anderson (1988), puts the idea that listening is individual ability to identify and perceive the speaker's utterances. This ability grasps the understanding of pronunciation, accent, dialect, grammar, vocabulary, or even implicit message of the speaker. Similar to Anderson's saying, Bodie (2018) states that listening takes the cognitive elements that involve internal process of individual minds. This process enables someone to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and make sense of spoken language. Simply put, listening is the activity to make spoken language sensible.

For EFL learners, listening prepares them for speaking. Zuhri et al. (2023) points out that listening skills are associated with better speaking performance. That is to say that speaking is successful if listening is done accordingly. In other words, listening can be granted as vital tools for the mastery of other language skills; speaking, reading, and writing. However, as the foundation of language learning, the skill of listening is not something that is instantly installed on a person. It is the skill that needs to be improved by investing more time to practice consistently. In that case, EFL learners may have troubles in the process of increasing their listening skills.



Ur (1984) learns that some of the learners' difficulties in listening could be hearing sounds, understanding accents, doing prediction, and using clues. Hue, T. T. (2019) also lists the obstacles that students may experience such speech rate, lack of contextual knowledge, less of focus, and limited vocabulary. Additionally, the learners face discorsal problems as well. Discorsal problems deal with implied meaning, unfamiliar topics, and organization of ideas (Trang, 2020). These cases provide evidence that learning listening is a real challenge for EFL learners and could hinder communication which is important in language classroom. To add, students' relevant knowledge may contribute to listening comprehension as it activates knowledge sources in learning process. Prior knowledge is also called as relevant background knowledge. If the students are able to make connections to what they are listening, their comprehension would increase (Alidoost, 2014). The indicators of poor prior knowledge is unknowing the sounds, inability to sound out words, frequently missing complexities, and unknowing the topic being discussed. Simply say, limited previous knowledge related content correlates with students' difficulty in listening.

A few studies already examined learners' problem in listening which is viewed from cognitive perspectives. In that case, Goh (2000) and Vandergrift (2006) identify three phases of listening process in which learners may face difficulties namely perception, parsing, and utilization.



**Figure 1.** Cognitive Processing Problems

Perception problems deal with the impotence of listeners to differentiate between sounds and words in a speech stream (Field, J. 2008b). Perception demands two understanding of phonology and lexicon. Phonology requires listeners to understand intonation, stress, and accent. Meanwhile the lexicon plays role in decoding process that prepares the listeners to analyze sound and match them to the listeners' prior knowledge of lexicon and syntax. Better listener must have stronger capacity to recognize the phonological and lexical form of high frequency words or phrases, and challenging vocabulary (Lange, 2020).

Another cognitive processing in listening is parsing. Parsing deals with syntactic and semantic (i.e. long utterances) understanding. The problems that may occur related to syntactic involves: (1) quickly forget what is heard; (2) failure in forming a mental representation from words heard; and (3) not comprehending subsequent parts of input

because of earlier problems (Tran, 2020). At the same time, semantic issues in listening could occur because of the restricted and shallow processing capacity in listener's short-term memory that get them focus on the meaning of specific words that may be redundant.

The final phase of cognitive processing in listening is utilization. Utilization deals with the problems of pragmatic (concern with facts, practicality, and consequences) and discourse (spoken communication). The problem that may occur in this phase involves: (1) understand words but not the intended message; (2) confused about the key ideas in the message; and (3) difficulty in connecting relationships among ideas.

The present study is an attempt investigate listening comprehension problems of EFL learners seeing from cognitive processing, figure out the learner's strategy to resolve the problem, and analyze learner's point of view towards learning listening based on their environmental context. To meet these objectives, the following research question were addressed:

- 1) What are the levels of listening comprehension problems; perception, parsing, and utilization that EFL students at coastal area encounter?
- 2) What strategies do EFL students at coastal area use to resolve their listening comprehension problems?
- 3) Do students think that learning listening would be easier if it is learnt according to students' environmental context?

## **METHOD**

The study followed quantitative method using survey to answer the research questions. The instrument that was used for collecting the data was a questionnaire adopted from Nowrouzi (2015) and Cubalit (2016). The questionnaire had 31 items and a five-point likert scale (1=never, 2= rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=usually, 5=always). Items 1-23 cover cognitive processing problems dealt with perception, parsing, and utilization. Items 24-29 cover students' own strategy to solve their listening problem, and items 30-31 find student's preference of learning listening related to their environmental context. The questionnaire was then administered to 90 students who were taking listening class at the on-going semester.

In this study, the 33rd percentile was the cut-off point between 'low' and 'moderate' levels of listening problems meanwhile 67rd percentile was the cut-off point between 'moderate' and 'high' levels. In that case, a mean 1.65 of 5 or below was regarded as a 'low' level of listening problems, a mean ranging between 1.66 and 3.35 was regarded as 'moderate' level of listening problems, and a mean 3.36 or higher was regarded as a 'high' level of listening problems.

## **RESULT**

The results of the research questions are presented and discussed sequentially.

### **3.1 Students' Listening Problems Related to Cognitive Processing**

Perception problems

**Table 1.** Perception Problems

No	Item	Mean	SD	Level
1	Hearing sounds but not clear words	3.36	0.66	High
2	Fast speech rate	3.56	1.05	High
3	Missing the beginning of the text	2.82	0.93	Moderate
4	Knowing the meaning of a word when seeing it	3.69	0.84	High
5	Slow in recalling the meaning of familiar words	2.96	0.96	Moderate
6	Mistaking one word for another	3.17	0.93	Moderate
7	Too many unfamiliar words or expression	3.27	0.92	Moderate
8	Not recognizing so many words and sound	2.83	0.93	Moderate
9	Missing the next part of the text while thinking about the meaning	3.49	1.00	High
10	Difficulty in concentration	3.19	1.02	Moderate

As presented in table 1, the listening problems dealt with perception (item 1-10) was valued as moderate and high level. The areas of perception such missing the beginning of the text which has mean value 2.82, slow in recalling the meaning of familiar words which has mean value 2.96, mistaking one word for another which has mean value 3.17, too unfamiliar words or expression which has mean value 3.27, and not recognizing many words and sounds which has mean value 2.83 were all experienced as a moderate level of listening problems by the students. Meanwhile, the rest areas were hearing sounds but not clear words which has mean value 3.36, fast speech rate which has mean value 3.56, knowing the meaning of a word when seeing it which has mean value 3.69, and missing the part of the text while thinking about the meaning which has mean value 3.49 were even reported as a high level of listening problems. This show that perception is quite challenging factor in students' listening comprehension.

#### Parsing Problem

**Table 2.** Parsing Problem

No	Item	Mean	SD	Level
11	Forgetting words or phrases just heard	3.10	0.72	moderate
12	Not understanding the meaning of sentences	2.77	0.79	Moderate
13	Difficulty in dividing long sentences into several parts	3.22	0.91	Moderate
14	Difficulty in guessing the accurate meaning of words in sentences	3.20	0.86	Moderate
15	Difficulty in following unfamiliar topics	3.21	0.96	Moderate
16	Difficulty in understanding a lot of new information in a short time	3.21	1.01	Moderate
17	Missing the next part because of earlier problems	3.38	0.93	High

From table 2, it can be known that cognitive process related to parsing was experienced as moderate level for the EFL learners. To put in details, 6 out of 7 items of parsing (forgetting words or phrases just heard, not understanding the meaning of sentences, difficulty in dividing long sentences into several parts, difficulty in guessing the accurate meaning of words in sentences, difficulty in following unfamiliar topics, difficulty in understanding a lot of new information in a short time) was reported as moderate level of listening problems. Meanwhile, 1 item (missing the next part because of earlier problems) was considered as high level of listening problems. The areas related parsing problem are the limited prior knowledge and context towards the topic being discussed and sentential problems.

#### Utilization Problems

**Table 3.** Utilization Problems

No	Item	Mean	SD	Level
18	Understanding words but not the intended messages	2.93	0.88	Moderate
19	Difficulty in getting the order of ideas in a text	3.04	0.94	Moderate
20	Getting confused about the main ideas	2.78	1.03	Moderate
21	Difficulty in getting the details	3.17	0.90	Moderate
22	Difficulty in getting the relationship among ideas	3.04	0.85	Moderate
23	Difficulty in getting supporting ideas	3.09	0.94	Moderate

As displayed in table 3, the areas of utilization problem were experienced as moderate level of listening problems ranging from 2.78 until 3.09. Utilization relates to the exact decoding of the message. The problems on this issue cover the discussion on general message of the text, main ideas, inferred messages, supporting details, as well as the relationship between the ideas.

**Table 4.** A Summary of Listening Problems Related to Cognitive Processing

Problem	Mean	Level
Perception	3.23	Moderate
Parsing	3.16	Moderate
Utilization	3.01	Moderate

Having found the detail, a summary of listening problems is provided in table 4. Table 4 shows that the students experienced moderate level of listening problem in all three parts of cognitive process; perception, parsing, and utilization. Perception problems take the first rank with the mean score of 3.23, followed by parsing problems on the mean score of 3.16. The third position is taken by utilization problems with the mean score of 3.01.

### 3.2 Students' Strategies to Resolve their Listening Comprehension Problems

This part figures out what strategies preferred by the students to clear up the problems on listening. The questionnaire items for this question consist of 5 details. As presented in table 5, the highest strategy that the students preferred to solve their listening problems is by 'listening more to English song' followed by 'watching more English movies' and 'listening more to English classroom lecturers'. These three strategies were on the high priority for the

students to increase their listening. Meanwhile, ‘listening more to English podcast’ and ‘talking to foreign friends’ were on moderate level of students’ choices.

**Table 5.** Students’ Strategies on Listening

No	Item	Mean	SD	Level
24	Watching more English movies	3.86	0.95	High
25	Listening more to English song	4.40	0.87	High
26	Listening more to English Podcast	2.91	0.89	Moderate
27	Listening more to English classroom lecturers	3.62	1.64	High
28	Talking to foreign friends (like having a chat through social media or directly)	2.73	1.25	Moderate

### 3.3 Students’ View of Learning Listening Integrated with Students’ Environmental Context

The last research question is to find out students’ outlook if they prefer learning listening related to their environmental context. As displayed in table 6, most students are on high demand to learn listening integrated with their environmental context. To add, discussion covering marine ecosystem, sea pollution, and sea preservation were on moderate level in which the students prefer the topic.

**Table 6.** Students’ preferences on learning listening related to their environmental context

No	Item	Mean	SD	Level
1	Do you think that learning listening would be easier it is learnt according to students’ environmental context?	3.61	0.84	High
2	What environmental context you wish to learn?			
	Marine ecosystem	3.14	1.02	Moderate
	Sea Pollution	3.03	0.94	Moderate
	Sea preservation	3.06	0.93	Moderate

## DISCUSSION

The results reveal that the learners experienced moderate level in all categories of cognitive processing. Similar to Gilakjani (2016), the study of learners’ problems with listening comprehension was related to accent, unfamiliar vocabulary, and length and speed of listening. In the same way, Thai (2018) and Sofyan (2019) indicate that the factors leading to unsuccessful comprehension experienced by the students were unfamiliar words, the clarity, lack of interest, anxiety, and difficult grammar structure. Since there is large effect for listening comprehension due to limited vocabulary knowledge, this may lead to listening anxiety that hinder student’ focus on listening (Umarova, 2022). In general, this all deals with students’ cognitive competency that involves conscious intellectual activity such thinking, reasoning, or remembering. The learner’s lack comprehension in listening must be related to their poor critical thinking ability. Critical thinking demands high order thinking skills as it takes analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and provide judgment for what they listen to. The relationship between listening and critical thinking ability has been previously studied by Nainggolan (2020), Erkek (2020), and Shahani (2022) who found that low critical thinking

skills contributes insignificantly to successful communication. In that case, it is necessary to put serious attention on how listening activities should be learnt in language classroom.

According to Brown (2011), it is important to provide visual support in pre-listening activities to activate students' background knowledge. Furthermore, other activities that may be helpful for students could be questions preview and vocabulary preview. Compared to no activity, pre-listening activity is effective to boost students' listening comprehension or minimize the difficulties that they may encounter while listening (Rajaei; 2015, Karimi; 2019, Madani; 2022). This means that EFL learners needs extra support before listening or even after listening for better comprehension performance. It is also in line with the previous note emphasized by Cauldwell (2002) that successful listening practice require help with coping with speech dynamics to make sense of familiar words or rarely spoken words.

Gallagher (2017) points it clear that listening activities is not limited to giving attention to a sound. Instead, it implicates cognitive process that includes attending to, understanding, receiving, reasoning, and interpreting the message. Because of this complex process, it is quite vital to choose activities to boost students' comprehension on listening. Similar to the present results regarding students' preference activity to improve their listening, underwood (1980) and Gilakjani (2016) views that listening strategies related to activities must involve authentic listening material to help learners understand better the natural speech uttered by the native speakers. To add, providing different types of input like films, tv plays, news, podcast, song, interview, and audio related everyday conversation is highly needed. The current results emphasize this view of students' high demand on 'listening more to English song', 'watching more movies', and 'listening more to English classroom lecturers' followed by activity 'listening more to English Podcast' and 'talking to foreign friends (like having a chat through social media or directly)' on moderate level.

Regarding students' point of view on the content of listening in language classroom, as EFL learners that lives by the sea life, they highly prefer listening content related to their environmental context particularly on maritime context such as marine ecosystem, sea pollution, and sea preservation. This finding indicates that the comprehension of listening is supported by the students' prior knowledge related content. Nurpahmi (2015), Hasan (2018), and Linh (2021) found the exact results of students' relevant background knowledge would increase students' comprehension in listening and reading. On the contrary, limited background knowledge would hinder the listeners to grasp the message comprehensively (Samian, 2012; Kelsen, 2016). Ultimately, it is reasonable if the students prefer the content that links to their daily life in search of fully comprehensive listening.

Coastal area of Riau islands makes it unique for students to possess the language communication skills. It is needed for Riau islands is one of the tourist destinations of surrounding countries (Siahaan, 2020). The diversity of its people requires students to be fluent in English particularly listening to produce successful communication. The students would actively participate if they have enough skills to perform the language. It is even better if in the process of learning listening, the teachers provide diverse teaching approach and the content that could trigger students' previous knowledge (Mahmoud, 2017). Thus, the students could show their best potential and neglect the problems that hinder their listening comprehension.

## **CONCLUSION**

The current research seeks to investigate the answer of listening problems encountered by EFL students at coastal area, the strategies they use to resolve their listening problems, and their belief on learning listening that suit to their environmental context. It is obvious for EFL students that listening skill is a significant part of effective communication. To be more precise, language learning counts on listening skills as this skill provides input

that is the basis for language acquisition. However, the students particularly on coastal area need to be familiar with what they hear to trigger them respond to the input. Speech rate, rarely spoken words, different accents, anxiety and motivation, and the requirement of different relevant knowledge can cause problem in comprehending the message. To emphasize the whole, contributing factors of listening difficulty vary encompassing the personal factors from the listeners themselves (phonetic, grammar, syntax, semantic), unauthentic learning material, lack of focus, and the learner's fond of activity to listen from numerous contents.

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