

## **Students' Challenges in Learning Listening: A Case in SMAN 2 Tanjungpinang**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the challenges faced by students at SMAN 2 Tanjungpinang in developing listening comprehension skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through listening tests and interviews with 35 students. The results identified key challenges, including limited vocabulary, unfamiliar topics, grammar knowledge deficits, fast speech, accent variations, unclear pronunciation, lack of practice, and environmental noise. These difficulties hinder students' ability to understand spoken English effectively. The findings suggest that targeted interventions, such as vocabulary-building activities, exposure to diverse accents, and improved classroom environments, are needed to enhance listening skills. This study provides valuable insights for teachers and policymakers to improve listening instruction in similar educational contexts.*

**Keywords:** *EFL Challenges, Listening Comprehension, Listening Skill*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Listening serves as a bridge between writing, reading, and speaking, functioning as a crucial skill frequently applied in daily interactions. (Wang, 2020) states that listening is a two-way interactive activity. Receiving the audible symbols is the process. Receiving sound waves through the ears and allowing the brain's nerve impulses to be conveyed is the very first phase of listening comprehension. Developing listening abilities significantly supports the enhancement of other language skills. To communicate effectively, meaningfully, and naturally, individuals need consistent and repeated exposure to various forms of spoken English. As a receptive skill, listening plays a vital role in providing linguistic input. According to Coakley and Wolvin, as referenced by Rara Saraswati (2018), listening is a key factor in supporting students' progress at all stages of their educational journey. Listening skills are fundamental to language acquisition, serving as a key element for effective communication and a prerequisite for mastering other language skills. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, listening comprehension plays a pivotal role in enabling students to understand spoken language and develop linguistic competencies. However, challenges in listening comprehension remain prevalent among students in Indonesia, including those at SMAN 2 Tanjungpinang. These challenges often stem from limited exposure to authentic listening materials, varying accents, and insufficient practice opportunities (Hardiyanto et al., 2021).

Various theoretical approaches emphasize the importance of listening strategies in overcoming these challenges. Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016) highlight that effective listening practices not only enhance comprehension but also improve

information retention. Meanwhile, Latupono & Nikijuluw (2022) emphasize the need for structured methods to train listening comprehension, which can significantly enhance students' overall language abilities. Approaches such as the bottom-up method, focusing on decoding sounds and words (Nasrudin, 2013), and the top-down method, leveraging prior knowledge and context (Buck, 2013), are crucial for building listening skills. The interactive approach, which combines these strategies, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding spoken language (Brown, 2001).

At SMAN 2 Tanjungpinang, the performance of students in listening comprehension tests has highlighted specific difficulties they face in understanding spoken English. Errors in listening tasks reveal patterns of struggles with vocabulary recognition, accent familiarity, and the ability to process information in real time. These findings align with issues observed in other Indonesian secondary schools, where students face obstacles in achieving proficiency in listening comprehension (Nadhira & Warni, 2021). Despite the recognized importance of listening skills in language learning, there remains a need to analyze these challenges through empirical data and tailor instructional strategies to the unique needs of local learners.

This study seeks to examine the listening comprehension performance of students at SMAN 2 Tanjungpinang through an analysis of their test results. By identifying specific patterns of difficulties and connecting these to broader instructional challenges, the study aims to propose evidence-based strategies to enhance listening instruction within this context. The findings will provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to improve EFL instruction, particularly in settings with similar educational and linguistic characteristics. At SMAN 2 Tanjungpinang, students often struggle with listening comprehension due to various factors, including the complexity of accents, limited practice opportunities, and inadequate teaching methods. These challenges are not unique to this school; similar issues have been documented in other Indonesian secondary schools, where students frequently encounter difficulties in understanding spoken English in listening classes (Nadhira & Warni, 2021). Therefore, this study addresses the question: What are the challenges faced by students at SMAN 2 Tanjungpinang in listening comprehension, as reflected in the results of a listening test?

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate the challenges faced by students at SMAN 2 Tanjungpinang in developing listening skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Qualitative research is effective for uncovering detailed insights into participants' experiences and understanding specific barriers to learning (Reinhartz, 2007). By focusing on listening as a core skill, this study aims to uncover specific barriers that hinder students' understanding of spoken English and to provide insights into the factors influencing their performance. A total of 35 EFL students participated, representing a typical cohort in this educational context. Data were collected through a listening test designed to evaluate comprehension and identify specific areas of difficulty, consistent with prior methods of assessing listening performance in language studies (Rara Saraswati, 2018).

The listening test employed a one-minute audio clip replayed five times to provide sufficient exposure, as recommended for minimizing performance anxiety (Inada, 2021). The test comprised 6 true-or-false and 6 fill-in-the-gap questions, which effectively measured students' abilities to extract both general and specific information. This structured approach aligns with strategies used in task-based learning frameworks, which emphasize iterative practice and contextual understanding to improve listening skills. The findings from this study contribute to the growing body of research highlighting the need for tailored interventions to address common listening challenges, such as accent unfamiliarity and rapid speech rates (AlNafisah, 2019; Hardiyanto et al., 2021)

### **Instruments**

The research instrument designed for this study aims to measure the listening comprehension skills of students at SMAN 2 Tanjungpinang, focusing on the challenges they face in understanding spoken English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The instrument consists of a listening test divided into two main sections: six *True or False* questions to assess students' ability to comprehend general information, and six *Fill in the Gap* questions to evaluate their understanding of specific details from the audio. The listening test uses a one-minute audio clip, played five times to ensure students have enough exposure to understand the content.

The audio contains everyday conversations, such as those in a restaurant, to provide contextual relevance. In the *True or False* section, students determine the accuracy of statements based on what they hear, while in the *Fill in the Gap* section, they complete sentences with the missing words from the audio. Each correct answer in both sections is awarded one point, with a maximum score of 12 points. The test results are analyzed to identify common challenges such as vocabulary recognition, accent familiarity, and the ability to process information in real time. The findings from this instrument will help provide insights into students' difficulties and inform instructional strategies aimed at improving listening comprehension skills in EFL contexts.

### **Procedures**

The procedures of this study aimed to investigating the challenges faced by students at SMAN 2 Tanjungpinang in developing their listening comprehension skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). A total of 35 students participated in the study, representing a typical cohort from the school. The primary data collection method was a listening test, which was specifically designed to assess students' ability to comprehend spoken English. The test consisted of two sections: six *True or False* questions, which focused on general information, and six *Fill in the Gap* questions that required students to complete specific details based on the audio. To ensure sufficient exposure and reduce anxiety, the audio, which lasted one minute, was played five times.

The test was structured to assess both general understanding and specific details, reflecting real-world listening challenges. After the test was administered, the student's answers were collected and scored, with each correct answer receiving one point, for a total of 12 points possible. The results were analyzed to identify patterns in students' performance, such as difficulties with vocabulary, accent

familiarity, and processing spoken information in real time. This analysis provided insights into the specific barriers that students faced, guiding the development of tailored strategies to enhance listening instruction and address these challenges in the classroom.

### **Data analysis**

Analysis of the listening test results from 35 students at SMAN 2 Tanjungpinang revealed major listening comprehension issues. The test consisted of 12 questions, six of which were True or False and six of which were Fill in the Gap. True or False questions had accuracy rates ranging from 51.43% to 85.71%. Students were quite good at identifying general facts but had trouble with specifics, as evidenced by the lower accuracy for nuanced questions. Students' performance improved in the Fill in the Gap segment, with most questions above 70% correctness; nonetheless, difficulties with new vocabulary continued. Scores ranged from 41.67% (5/12) to 100% (12/12), with an average score of 68.58%, reflecting varied listening proficiency levels. The findings highlight the need for targeted improvements in vocabulary knowledge, exposure to diverse accents, and contextual listening practice to enhance students' comprehension of detailed information and unfamiliar vocabulary. Recommendations include incorporating authentic listening materials, varying speech speeds and accents, and emphasizing consistent practice to build stronger listening skills and better prepare students for real-life listening scenarios.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The listening test was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of students' listening comprehension abilities in English and to address the primary research question: "What challenges do students at SMAN 2 Tanjungpinang face in listening comprehension as reflected in their test results?" The listening test was administered to 35 students to assess their ability to comprehend spoken English. The test consisted of 12 questions: six true-or-false questions and six fill-in-the-gap questions, and it was played five times to ensure students could follow along at their own pace. The listening test results revealed diverse levels of student performance in comprehending spoken English. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of each question's correct and incorrect responses, enabling an analysis of common challenges students faced.

In the True or False section, accuracy rates ranged from 51.43% to 85.71%. Students performed best on the question "There are two customers eating together" (85.71% accuracy), suggesting confidence in recognizing straightforward facts. However, the question "The two customers order the same starter" (51.43% accuracy) highlighted difficulties with processing specific details.

The Fill in the Gaps section demonstrated slightly stronger performance, with correct responses exceeding 70% for most questions. The question "I'd like French onion soup, please" achieved the highest accuracy (91.43%), showcasing familiarity with common phrases. In contrast, vocabulary-specific gaps were evident in "I'll have a fresh orange juice," where accuracy dropped to 71.43%, underscoring challenges with less familiar terms.

Performance scores across all 35 participants ranged from 5 to 12 out of a possible 12 points. Two students achieved perfect scores of 100% (12/12), while

others scored as low as 41.67% (5/12), indicating significant variation in listening comprehension skills. The average score was 8.23 (68.58%), reflecting a moderate overall comprehension level.

These results underline key areas for improvement, such as enhancing vocabulary knowledge, increasing exposure to different accents, and practicing contextual listening. Addressing these challenges through targeted instructional strategies can help students develop stronger listening skills, particularly in processing detailed information and unfamiliar vocabulary. The results of the listening comprehension test at SMAN 2 Tanjungpinang revealed a broad range of proficiency among students. While some students, such as AF and CAW, achieved perfect scores (100%), others, like NSR, J, and CFNA, struggled significantly, with scores as low as 41.66%. These findings demonstrate varying levels of listening comprehension abilities, which correspond with the test's ability to capture specific areas of difficulty.

### **Levels of Listening Comprehension**

The performance of students on the listening test highlighted significant variation in proficiency. For example, students such as AF and CAW scored 12/12, reflecting excellent listening comprehension, while others, like NSR and CFNA, scored significantly lower, indicating difficulty in understanding spoken English. The overall range of scores from 5 to 12 points suggests that, while the majority of students demonstrated moderate proficiency, gaps in understanding persist. This aligns with previous findings in EFL listening comprehension, where challenges in processing spoken language are common (Aldina et al., 2020; Nadhira & Warni, 2021).

Students' challenges primarily revolved around processing information in real-time, recognizing unfamiliar vocabulary, and adjusting to varying speech speeds and accents. These difficulties support the assertion made by (Aldina et al., 2020) and (Nadhira & Warni, 2021) who found that the complexity of listening tasks often outpaces students' preparedness, leading to underperformance.

### **Challenges in Listening Comprehension**

The qualitative data collected from student interviews provided valuable insights into the underlying factors that impacted the students' listening comprehension, which were also reflected in their test scores. These insights helped clarify why some students struggled more than others. The interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of the student's perceptions and revealed several recurring challenges, including issues with vocabulary limitations, unfamiliar topics, and insufficient exposure to various accents and speech speeds. Moreover, students highlighted specific difficulties such as poor grammar knowledge, unclear pronunciation, environmental distractions, and the lack of consistent listening practice. Each of these elements played a critical role in shaping students' ability to effectively process spoken language during the test. By analyzing these factors, it became apparent that listening comprehension is a complex skill influenced by multiple variables, ranging from individual linguistic abilities to external learning conditions. These findings not only supported the test results but also emphasized the need for a more comprehensive and targeted approach to listening instruction in EFL contexts (Hardiyanto et al., 2021; Tuan Vu & Thi Tham, 2023).

### ***Vocabulary Limitations***

Vocabulary limitations were identified as a significant barrier to listening comprehension. This challenge was reflected in the test scores, where many students struggled with gap-fill questions that required knowledge of specific vocabulary, such as "I'd \_\_\_\_\_ French onion soup, please." With only 42.86% of students answering this question correctly, it is clear that unfamiliar vocabulary affected comprehension. As noted by Aldina et al. (2020), vocabulary knowledge is crucial for decoding spoken language, which was clearly a difficulty for students in this study.

### ***Unfamiliar Topics and Words***

Several students, including M and FL, reported struggles when exposed to unfamiliar topics. This challenge was visible in the lower accuracy rates for certain questions, such as those that dealt with specific aspects of a restaurant setting (e.g., food orders). Limited exposure to a variety of topics made it harder for students to infer meanings from context, which supports the idea that diverse and contextually relevant listening materials are necessary for improving comprehension (Visoni & Marlina, 2020).

### ***Poor Grammar Knowledge***

While less frequently mentioned, grammar knowledge was also seen as a challenge. Students like CFNA cited difficulties with sentence structures, which were particularly evident in the more complex test items. This points to the importance of grammatical competence in understanding spoken texts and suggests that strengthening grammar skills may help students better comprehend complex listening tasks.

### ***Speed of Speech***

Speech speed was another major obstacle, as many students, including LO and AS, struggled to process fast-paced dialogues. This difficulty was especially apparent in the test, where students had to keep up with the pace of the recording, resulting in missed details. Slow speech rates could facilitate comprehension, as noted by (Hardiyanto et al., 2021), and may be crucial in instructional settings to ensure students grasp key information.

### ***Accent Variation and Pronunciation Clarity***

Accents, particularly British accents, posed significant difficulties for students such as ZF and LS. The complexity of understanding accents was evident in lower scores for questions involving specific pronunciation or phrasing. Accents and pronunciation variations, when unfamiliar, created barriers to comprehension, with unclear pronunciation mentioned by students like LA. This issue emphasizes the need for students to be exposed to a variety of accents and speech patterns in their learning process.

### ***Environmental and External Factors***

Environmental factors, such as background noise, were also mentioned by students like S and B as significant distractions. These external factors exacerbated

other listening challenges, particularly those related to speech speed and accent variations. These results underscore the importance of a conducive learning environment to optimize listening comprehension.

### ***Lack of Practice***

Finally, the lack of regular, structured listening practice emerged as a common theme. Students such as FL acknowledged that infrequent exposure to listening exercises limited their development in this skill. As highlighted by (Tuan Vu & Thi Tham, 2023), consistent practice is essential for improving listening proficiency. This finding indicates that incorporating more frequent and varied listening activities could help address gaps in students' listening abilities.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the listening comprehension challenges faced by students at SMAN 2 Tanjungpinang through qualitative analysis of test results and interview data. The findings revealed several key obstacles, including vocabulary limitations, unfamiliar topics, grammar knowledge deficits, fast speech, accent variations, unclear pronunciation, lack of practice, and environmental noise. These issues significantly hindered students' ability to process and understand spoken English effectively.

The challenges identified align with existing literature on listening difficulties in EFL contexts, emphasizing the interplay of linguistic, cognitive, and contextual factors in shaping students' listening experiences. Specifically, limited vocabulary and exposure to unfamiliar accents emerged as major barriers, echoing findings from prior studies in Indonesian secondary schools. Addressing these challenges requires targeted instructional strategies, such as integrating more vocabulary-building activities, exposing students to diverse accents and speech rates, and creating a supportive listening environment. By focusing on these areas, educators can help students improve their listening skills and overall English language proficiency, ultimately fostering better academic outcomes and communication abilities in EFL settings.

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