THE ANALYSIS OF STUDENT'S DIFFICULTIES IN COMPREHENDING MACRO AND MICRO-SKILLS OF LISTENING - Bambang Abdul Syukur

by Cek Plagiat 1 UKH

Submission date: 15-Nov-2023 02:11PM (UTC+0700)
Submission ID: 2182580415
File name: TIES_IN_COMPREHENDING_MACRO_AND_MICRO-SKILLS_OF_LISTENING_1.doc (790K)
Word count: 4482
Character count: 28252

SMART
(Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics)
Volume X, No. X, Month 20XX Page. 1-....
p-ISSN: 2356-2048 e-ISSN: 2356-203x

THE ANALYSIS OF STUDENT'S DIFFICULTIES IN COMPREHENDING MACRO AND MICRO-SKILLS OF LISTENING

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Abstract

This research aimed to explore the challenges students face while undertaking the TOEFL prediction test, specifically in the listening section at the University of Kusuma Husada Surakarta. The study utilized descriptive qualitative research methodology and employed a questionnaire. To attain proficiency in listening comprehension, students need to grasp both macro and micro skills, as outlined in Brown's taxonomy. The study demonstrated that students encounter difficulty in listening comprehension due to four major factors: sound, vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatic awareness. The findings indicated that the primary reason for students' struggle in understanding spoken language lies in micro-skills, particularly at lower proficiency levels, especially in recognizing word sounds. Consequently, it was deduced that introducing micro-skills is essential to enhance students' language knowledge.

***Keywords**: Difficulties, Listening, Macro-Micro Skills, TOEFL*

INTRODUCTION

Listening is crucial for successful communication, language acquisition, and academic success. It involves more than just the ability to hear sounds, but also the ability to understand and interpret spoken language accurately. As a result, both teachers and learners must prioritize their communication goals and work towards improving their listening skills. Listening also serves as a source of input for learners and is essential in developing their linguistic knowledge.

In some cases, EFL teachers may not fully understand the process of listening or the difficulties learners face in listening comprehension. Consequently, instructors tend to focus more on the outcome of listening activities rather than the actual process of listening. During the process of listening comprehension, students might face problems. Listening difficulties include understanding vocabulary, grammar, context, accent or pronunciation, and interesting skill conclusions (Fitria, 2021). She added that the student's difficulty in doing the TOEFL prediction test for both external and internal factors. The result supported (Romadhon, 2022) that the listening test was the most challenging for the participants

regarding the material and environment. It also details the difficulties experienced by students, such as difficulty in their concentration while listening, difficulty in vocabulary meaning, difficulty in catching meaning in long and rapid conversations, and difficulty in recognizing unfamiliar topics (Fitariana et al., 2021). Therefore, analyzing students' difficulties with listening comprehension assisted them in the listening test as well as the TOEFL (Asmawati, 2017).

TOEFL (Test of English as Foreign Language) is a test to measure English proficiency for non-native English speakers. In Indonesia, it is also taken by students to obtain a scholarship to an English-speaking country (Sudrajat & Astuti, 2018). Some universities in Indonesia apply the TOEFL test as one of the graduation requirements because of the importance of English proficiency for students, either at the continuing higher education level or as a condition for admission or applying for occupation.

The English Proficiency Test (EPT) which is commonly used by Kusuma Husada University is designed in such a way as equivalent to the paper-based TOEFL test. Therefore, The EPT examines language skills tailored to the academic and professional fields. The fields were then packaged and divided into sections. The EPT usually consists of three sections with 140 questions. The test included three aspects: (1) Listening Comprehension, (2) Structure and Written Expression, and (3) Reading Comprehension. The TOEFL test always starts with Listening Comprehension, consisting of Parts A, B, and C, followed by Structure and Written Expression, consisting of Parts A and B, and the last is Reading Comprehension. The listening section measures the skill of understanding authentic speech patterns used in both academic (formal) and non-academic (informal) situations. Listening. Within the realm of listening skills, there exist two distinct categories: macro-skills, encompassing the comprehension of main ideas and cultural nuances, and micro-skills, involving the finer aspects such as phonemic awareness and note-taking. In this study, we delve into the intricate landscape of students' learning experiences, aiming to dissect and analyze the challenges they encounter while developing these macro and micro-skills of listening.

Based on these findings, the primary emphasis of this study was on investigating listening comprehension. The distribution of time dedicated to communication and listening is as follows: 40-50% for listening, 25–30% for speaking, 11-16% for reading, and

approximately 9% for writing (Gilakjani and Ahmadi, 2011). Renukadevi (2014) demonstrated that language competence is acquired through communication, with 45% gained from listening, 30% from speaking, 15% from reading, and 10% from writing. Given its predominant role in effective communication, listening should be regarded as a foundational language skill. In contrast to other language abilities, learners often perceive listening as comparatively more challenging due to its interconnected subskills such as receiving, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding. Nevertheless, with the introduction of communicative language teaching and an increased focus on proficiency, the learning and teaching of listening have gained more prominence.

Previous studies have highlighted both commonalities and distinctions among these studies, which share a common focus on TOEFL listening comprehension and associated challenges. Nevertheless, disparities exist between these prior studies and the goals of the present study. This study specifically addresses learners' listening comprehension issues within the context of the English Proficiency Test (EPT) and scrutinizes the macro- and micro-skills associated with listening comprehension. According to (Galdames, 2018) the aim of teaching listening comprehension is to provide opportunities for learners to acquire microskills. The identification of macro- and micro-skills in listening comprehension assists teachers in pinpointing the most essential skills for learners to incorporate into their learning objectives. By utilizing a checklist of micro-skills, learners can gain a clear understanding of the areas their techniques should address within the realm of listening comprehension. It also helps to focus on clearly conceptualizing objectives. Therefore, this paper intends to analyze the factors that hinder students' ability to listen to comprehension. By identifying these difficulties, educators and curriculum designers can tailor their approaches to foster more effective listening skill development.

RESEARCH METHOD

The objective of this study was to assess the macro-micro skills involved in Listening Comprehension, an aspect that students find particularly challenging. It Employed a descriptive qualitative approach, the author detailed the test outcomes and concluded problematic aspects for students. An aspect is deemed problematic when the number of

incorrect answers exceeds the number of correct ones, and it is considered mastered when the reverse is true. Based on the preliminary research results, the authors examined a sample of 100 students.

Qualitative research served as the method for data collection. As indicated by Ross (2023), the sources of evidence focused on in case study data collection encompass 1) documentation; 2) archival records; 3) interviews; 4) direct observations; and 5) participant observation. In this study, the author utilized two sources: archival records and interviews.

Qualitative research was used as the data collection technique. (Ross, 2023) stated that the sources of evidence used as a focus for case study data collection include 1) documentation; 2) archival records; 3) interviews; 4) direct observations; and 5) participant observation. In this study, the author used two sources archival records and interviews.

In the first step, the researcher collected the test taker's answer sheets, and then each wrong answer and the correct answer were identified in each question. This was conducted to identify the listening skills that were the most difficult for students to solve. Furthermore, after collecting data on the most and least listening skills that were mastered by the participants, the researcher interpreted the data. Finally, the researcher conducted interviews with several students who experienced the most difficulties in their listening skills.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To identify the challenging segment of the EPT test for students, the authors conducted preliminary research involving non-English students at Kusuma Husada University. The test adopted the Complete Test (paper-based) from the book by Deborah Philips (2001) entitled *Longman Complete Course for the TOEFL Test*. According to the test outcomes, the majority of test takers struggled with listening comprehension. The listening scores were 39. The scores were aligned at the A2 (elementary) level based on the CEFR Standard. The structure score was 43 (B1), similar to the intermediate level. Reading comprehension has a score of 40 (A2) at the elementary level. The TOEFL Prediction Results table illustrates that certain students encountered challenges specifically in listening comprehension compared to the other sections.

Table 1. The result of students' test

English Proficiency Test	Listening Comprehension	Structure and Written Expression	Reading Comprehension
Average Score	39	43	40
Total Score		407	

The results of the data collected from students' responses and the results of interviews based on the macro- and micro-skills of listening comprehension problems are presented in the form table. There were four aspects of the TOEFL listening question based on macro and micro listening skills. This study revealed four primary factors that impeded the students' proficiency in listening comprehension.: 1) sound, 2) grammar, 3) vocabulary, and 4) pragmatics. The findings of this study are as follows:

Difficulties related to sound Aspects

Students face multiple challenges in listening comprehension, particularly related to difficulties in listening and distinguishing sounds in spoken English, including accents, intonation, and pronunciation. These challenges stem from factors like the absence of certain English phonemes in their native language (Indonesian), leading to struggles with differentiating distinctive English sounds such as /ʤ/, /ʧ/, and /Ɵ/, recognizing phonemic pairs like /ɔ:/ and /əʊ/, /ɪ/ and /i:/, /wen/ and /went/, and /fiks/ and /fæks/, identifying silent /l/, /h/, and /r/, capturing sounds in word clusters, and recognizing sounds within correct stress and intonation patterns. The absence of these phonemic distinctions in Indonesian contributes significantly to their listening difficulties. Additionally, students obtained a challenge to comprehend weak forms or unstressed words in English, including articles, prepositions, pronouns, auxiliaries, and contractions, which are essential for creating complete meaning in sentences. Intonation patterns in English also impact their ability to grasp the intended message at varying rates of speech delivery. Since students lack a foundational understanding of English phonetics and suprasegmental features, these issues further exacerbate their listening difficulties, making it challenging for them to process spoken language effectively. The results of this domain are provided as follows:

Table 2. Recognizing the distinctive sounds.

No	Micro and Macro skills of listening	Students Difficulties
1	Discriminate among the distinctive sounds of English	Difficulty in distinguishing phonemic pairs, recognizing phonological modifications in word clusters, and understanding morphological pairs.
2	Recognize reduced forms of words	Inability to recognize the sounds
3	Recognize English stress patterns, words in stressed and unstressed, and intonation.	Inability in stress pattern:
4	Process speech at different rates of delivery	The speech was too rapid, and the utterances were excessively lengthy.
5	Retain chunks of language of different lengths in short-term memory.	Inability to remember long words during fast conversations, recall phrases or sentences amidst distracting sounds, maintain multiple words in short-term memory during speech with a strong accent, or remember vocabulary or phrases when the speaker's voice is faint or there's substantial background noise.
6	rhythmic structures, intonation contours, and their roles in signaling information	Inability to recognize that sentence stress, rhythm, and intonation patterns affect the overall meaning, along with difficulty in recognizing signaling information and language variations.
7	Process speech containing pauses, errors, corrections, and other performance variables.	Pauses or mistakes can make students lose focus on the core of the speech, have difficulty distinguishing between the initially stated content and later corrections, struggle with processing the speaker's corrections, and determining the most important or relevant parts of the speech, particularly in the presence of numerous pauses or disruptions, potentially necessitating additional processing time or speech repetition.

Based on Table 1, the challenges in listening comprehension and comprehension encompass a wide range of difficulties, including the inability to recognize phonemic pairs, sound, and silence. Students/test takers may also struggle to identify phonological modifications in word clusters and morphological pairs. The inability to recognize the sounds and stress patterns can further hinder effective comprehension. Moreover, when faced with fast-paced speech or lengthy utterances, individuals may have trouble remembering long words and recalling phrases, especially in the presence of distracting sounds or strong accents. Furthermore, remembering vocabulary or phrases can be a challenge when the speaker's voice is faint, or background noise is prevalent.

In addition to these challenges, the inability to recognize how sentence stress and rhythm influence the overall meaning can lead to misunderstandings. For example,

distinguishing declarative and interrogative sentences solely based on rhythmic patterns can be problematic. Difficulties in understanding intonation patterns, such as recognizing rising intonation for questions and falling intonation for statements, can also impede effective communication. Recognizing signaling information, which may be conveyed through intonation or stress on specific words, can pose further challenges. Finally, the complexity of language variations, including variations in intonation and rhythm across languages and dialects, can make comprehension difficult. Pauses or mistakes in speech may disrupt students' focus on the core message and distinguishing between initial content and later corrections can be demanding, potentially requiring extra processing time. Determining which parts of a speech are the most important or relevant, especially amidst frequent pauses or disruptions, can further complicate the process of speech comprehension.

Difficulties related to grammar aspects

In the context of listening comprehension, When a listener's attention is focused on a spoken text, grammar serves as a tool to constrain the syntactic structure of the forthcoming input (Rahayu, 2013). However, during the listening of test items, students faced challenges in utilizing grammatical information, including chunks, grammatical word classes and systems, word boundaries, and constituents. This difficulty arose from their inadequate grammatical knowledge and practices. First, it points out that students struggle to use grammar as a tool to structure incoming spoken text when their attention is directed toward it. This difficulty arises from their limited grammatical knowledge and practice, hindering their ability to recognize chunking, grammatical word classes, word boundaries, and constituents within spoken language. This deficiency leads to difficulties in segmenting continuous speech streams and comprehending the intended message. Moreover, the study emphasizes that EFL learners with poor grammar skills encounter challenges in understanding listening materials, as they need to link linguistic elements to derive meaning. These students also find it challenging to identify sentence constituents and differentiate between major and minor elements within sentences during listening comprehension. Additionally, factors such as speaking speed, cultural knowledge gaps, unclear speech, fatigue, and ineffective listening strategies contribute to difficulties in both literal and implied listening comprehension. The study suggests that improving grammatical

knowledge can enhance students' ability to comprehend and interpret spoken language effectively, offering a solution to address these challenges.

Table 3. Difficulties related to Grammar aspects in Micro skills in listening

No	Brown's Micro and Macro skills in listening	Students Difficulties
1	Retain a chunk of the language of Different lengths in short-term memory	The students struggled to grasp the chunks within the utterances due to their difficulty in understanding the structure. e.g., retaining longer sentences, multiple clauses, passive voice constructions, verb tense changes, conditional statements, and relative clauses.
2	Distinguish word boundaries, recognize a core of words, and interpret word order patterns and their significance.	Inability to identify contractions, pinpoint key content words in sentences, understand the impact of word order changes on sentence meaning, and recognize idiomatic expressions.
3	Recognize grammatical word classes (nouns, verbs, etc.), and systems (e.g., tense, agreement, pluralization).	Inability to identify the grammatical role of individual words in spoken sentences. This includes distinguishing nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and other word classes.
4	Detect sentence constituents and distinguish between major and minor constituents	Inability to identify which parts of a sentence are critical for understanding the main idea.
5	Recognize cohesive devices in spoken discourse.	Inability to recognize cohesive devices, difficulty in recognizing pronoun references, identifying connectives, lack of awareness of transitional expressions, and failure to recognize repetition and synonyms

The students face a variety of listening challenges. They struggle to grasp the structure of spoken sentences, including retaining longer sentences, navigating multiple clauses, comprehending passive voice constructions, handling shifts in verb tenses, interpreting conditional statements, and deciphering relative clauses. Additionally, they encounter difficulties like failing to recognize contractions and their spoken forms, such as "wanna" for "want to" and "dunno" for "don't know." Identifying the key content words within sentences is another issue, especially when function words like "to" and "the" are spoken rapidly or unclearly. Shifting word order can lead to misunderstandings, as demonstrated in sentences like "I saw the cat chasing the dog" and "I saw the dog chasing the cat," where subject and object roles change, altering the meaning. Students also grapple with idiomatic expressions, where the combined words convey meanings not apparent from individual words. Furthermore, they have difficulty discerning the grammatical roles of

words, including nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Recognizing which parts of a sentence are essential for grasping the main idea can be a challenge, as exemplified in sentences like "Despite the rain, which was unexpected, we decided to go hiking," where students may struggle to distinguish minor constituents from major ones. Lastly, they encounter difficulties in recognizing cohesive devices, such as pronoun references, connectives, transitional expressions, and variations in repetition and synonyms within spoken discourse.

Table 4. Difficulties related to Grammar aspects in Macro skills in listening

No	Macro skills in listening	Grammatical factors
1	Inability to develop and use a battery of listening strategies, such as detecting keywords, guessing the meaning of the words from the context, appealing for help, and signaling comprehension	a. Inability to identify central message keywords. b. Inability to guess word meanings based on the surrounding context. c. Inability to Appeal for Help or Clarification. d. Inability to Signal Comprehension.
2	Couldn't infer situations, participants, and goals using real-world knowledge	a. Inability to infer situations (e.g., scenarios or situations), identify participants (including the speaker, speaker's friend, and the teacher), and goals (how to make a polite request) using real-world knowledge. b. Inability to detect cultural references. E.g., "Thanksgiving dinner" in American holiday

Students encounter various listening challenges, including difficulty in identifying central message keywords, making it hard for them to grasp the core message of a spoken passage. They also struggle with guessing word meanings from context, hindering their comprehension when faced with unfamiliar vocabulary. Additionally, they often hesitate to seek help or clarification when they don't understand, and they may fail to signal their comprehension, leading to misunderstandings. Beyond these challenges, students may find it hard to infer real-world situations, participants, and goals when listening, as well as detecting cultural references like "Thanksgiving dinner," which can impact their understanding of context and meaning within conversations or passages. These listening difficulties can impede effective communication and comprehension in various situations.

Difficulties Related to Vocabulary Aspects

Regarding the second factor, vocabulary plays a fundamental role in language as it serves as the foundational element from which the meanings of constructing more extensive

structures, including sentences, paragraphs, and entire texts (Read, 2000). These difficulties can arise from unfamiliarity with certain words or phrases and a lack of contextual understanding, which can make test content less engaging and potentially frustrating. (Celik et al., 2014) emphasized that incorporating familiar vocabulary into audio materials can enhance students' listening comprehension by sparking interest and motivation.

Table 5. Difficulties Related to Vocabulary Aspects

No	Micro and Macro skills of listening Difficulties	Students Difficulties
1	Recognize that a particular meaning may be expressed in different Grammatical forms (micro skill)	(a) Inability to comprehend the meaning of unfamiliar words: obtain, acquire, get, secure. (b) The students did not understand verb tenses and aspects, passive-active voice, modal verbs, phrasal verbs and prepositions, Idioms and Expressions, and word order. (c) The students could not transform simply to complex forms or vice versa.
2	Distinguish between literal and implied meanings (macro skills)	Inability to understand the meaning of words within utterances.

Based on the table above, Students encounter multiple language comprehension challenges, including difficulties in grasping unfamiliar words or variations in vocabulary usage (e.g., obtain, acquire, get, secure), a lack of comprehension regarding various grammatical aspects such as verb tenses, passive-active voice, modal verbs, phrasal verbs, prepositions, idioms, expressions, and word order, and struggles in transforming simple forms into complex ones or vice versa. These challenges collectively contribute to students' inability to discern the meaning of words within utterances, posing obstacles to their language comprehension skills.

A clear factor that can impact the understanding of a spoken passage is the alignment with the listener's vocabulary knowledge. This influence of vocabulary might be connected to broader characteristics of listeners, such as their exposure to the second language. Webb and Nation (2012) argued convincingly that listeners must possess sufficient vocabulary to comprehend a passage in another language. Assessing adequate vocabulary could involve determining the number of words a listener needs to know to understand a representative selection of texts.

Difficulties related to Pragmatics Aspects

This refers to difficulties in understanding the social and cultural context in which spoken English is used. Students might encounter challenges in understanding the meaning of spoken content in English due to their lack of familiarity with idioms, expressions, and cultural references used in the language.

Table 6. Pragmatic Factors

No	Micro and Macro skills of listening Difficulties	Students Difficulties
1	Recognize the communicative function of utterances, according to situation, participant, goal	a. Inability to utilize real-world knowledge and context clues to deduce the given situation. b. Inability to figure out whether the speaker is providing information, asking for help, expressing an opinion, or performing other communicative functions. c. Inability to determine the roles or relationships between the people in the conversation, such as who the main speaker is, who is listening, or whom the conversation is directed towards.
2	Infer situation, participants, and goals using real-world knowledge	a. Inability to use their real-world knowledge and context clues to infer what the situation is. b. Inability to deduce who the participants and individuals involved in the conversation are when they are not explicitly introduced.
3	Distinguish between literal and implied meaning	a. Recognizing when the information presented is straightforward and should be taken at face value. b. Inability to identify implied meanings.

The students faced several challenges in understanding the communicative aspects of listening comprehension. They struggled with discerning the speaker's intention, such as whether the speaker was providing information, seeking assistance, expressing an opinion, or performing other communicative functions. Additionally, they found it difficult to determine the roles and relationships among the conversation participants and the broader context, like the setting and the communication's purpose. They also had trouble

recognizing specific communication cues, such as request phrases or explanations. Furthermore, they were unable to link the information provided to the communication's goals and functions. Moreover, their inability to use real-world knowledge and context clues to infer the situation, deduce participants when not explicitly introduced, and grasp the conversation's purpose and implied meanings added to their communication challenges. For example, the sentence of *the meeting is at 3:00 PM in Room 101*, the literal meaning is that the meeting will take place at 3:00 PM in Room 101. And the sentence *It's quite warm in here, isn't it?* implies that the speaker is hinting at discomfort due to the high temperature.

The pragmatic perspective on listening comprehension focused on understanding what an utterance signifies to an individual in a specific speech context. In other words, understanding what an utterance signifies to an individual in a specific speech context (Ruzick, 2014). Therefore, pragmatic comprehension involves grasping the practical meaning conveyed through spoken communication, encompassing an understanding of speech concepts and conversational implicatures.

Regarding the concept of pragmatic comprehension, Ruzick (2014) proposed that second-language students must possess the ability to understand meaning pragmatically. This involved comprehending speakers' intentions, interpreting their emotions and attitudes, distinguishing speech act meanings (e.g., discerning between a directive and a commissive), assessing the intensity of speakers' meaning (e.g., distinguishing between a suggestion and a warning), recognizing elements like sarcasm, humor, and other facetious behaviors (conversational implicatures), and ability to respond appropriately.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of data used to investigate listening comprehension problems reveals that these challenges can be classified into micro- and macro-skills, aligning with Brown's taxonomy, and centering on four primary factors: sounds, vocabulary, grammatical awareness, and pragmatic differences. Notably, phonological aspects and prosody have emerged as notable hindrances to listening comprehension. Vocabulary comprehension also stands out as a crucial area of difficulty, with students encountering challenges in understanding the meaning of certain words, especially when expressed by native speakers. Grammatical knowledge deficiencies disrupt their ability to process the syntactic structure

of an incoming language, hindering their ability to detect keywords and infer meaning. Furthermore, challenges in understanding the pragmatic context of utterances, determined by the speaker's intent are added to this complexity. To address these obstacles and achieve higher levels of listening comprehension, the test takers are required to develop macro and micro-skills of listening, particularly in understanding sound factors, and benefit from extensive exposure to authentic native speaker conversations and micro-skill training. However, it is crucial not to overlook the significance of macro skills, which should be taught once micro-skills are mastered. Creating an encouraging and meaningful learning environment is essential for teachers to effectively guide students in this process.

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