

## UNPACKING LISTENING BARRIERS: AN INVESTIGATION INTO EFL LEARNERS' DIFFICULTIES IN THE TOEFL ITP CONTEXT

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### Abstrak

Listening comprehension remains one of the most challenging components for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, particularly in high-stakes assessments such as the TOEFL Institutional Testing Program (ITP). This study investigates the specific internal and external factors that contribute to students' difficulties in answering the Listening section of the TOEFL ITP. Adopting a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected from four eighth-semester university students who had repeatedly obtained low TOEFL listening scores. Instruments included documentation analysis, structured questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed that external factors such as the speaker's accent, speech rate, complex sentence structures, and lack of audio clarity significantly interfered with comprehension. Simultaneously, internal factors such as limited vocabulary, lack of listening practice, test anxiety, and poor concentration further compounded students' struggles. Notably, the interaction between these factors amplified the challenges, suggesting a need for an integrated pedagogical approach. The study highlights the importance of addressing listening difficulties from both cognitive and affective perspectives. It recommends that EFL instruction move beyond test-focused drills and instead provide learners with sustained exposure to authentic listening materials, explicit strategy training, and anxiety-reduction techniques. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of listening comprehension in EFL contexts and offer practical insights for TOEFL preparation and curriculum development

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## INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency tests have become integral tools in academic and professional settings, particularly in non-English speaking countries where English is used as a foreign language. Among these, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) serves as a globally recognized measure of English proficiency for academic purposes (Educational Testing Service [ETS], 2023). The TOEFL Institutional Testing Program (ITP), a paper-based version of the TOEFL, is commonly used by educational institutions to assess students' English skills, especially for graduation or scholarship eligibility.

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The TOEFL ITP comprises three major sections: Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression, and Reading Comprehension. Among these, the Listening Comprehension section is consistently reported as the most challenging for students (Fitria, 2021). Listening is a complex skill that involves interpreting spoken language in real-time, identifying key details, and understanding implied meanings. This skill becomes even more difficult in standardized testing environments where time constraints, unfamiliar accents, and academic vocabulary are prevalent (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Listening is not merely a passive process of hearing sounds; rather, it is an active, cognitive activity that requires focused attention, vocabulary knowledge, memory, and the ability to infer meaning (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005).

In the Indonesian context, the TOEFL ITP is often a mandatory requirement for university students before they can graduate or proceed to higher academic stages. At STKIP Paracendekia NW Sumbawa, for example, students are required to achieve a minimum score of 475 for English majors and 425 for Mathematics majors, with a sub-score of at least 380 in the Listening section. However, institutional records reveal that over 80% of final-year students struggle to meet this threshold, especially in the Listening component. These findings highlight a systemic issue that warrants further investigation into the underlying factors contributing to students' poor performance in listening.

Existing literature points to two primary categories of challenges in TOEFL Listening: internal and external factors. Internal factors relate to the learners themselves, such as limited vocabulary, lack of listening practice, low concentration, and poor memory retention (Yuniarti & Pratiwi, 2022; Windayamanti et al., 2022). External factors include elements such as the speaker's accent, speed, intonation, and technical issues like poor audio quality (Aprino et al., 2022). These challenges often coexist, compounding the difficulty for students in effectively comprehending spoken English during the TOEFL test.

Despite the growing number of studies examining TOEFL challenges in Indonesia, most research tends to focus on general TOEFL performance or the use of listening applications. Few studies have conducted an in-depth analysis specifically on the listening section of TOEFL ITP and categorized difficulties based on internal and external factors, especially in rural or semi-rural academic institutions. Moreover, while previous studies such as Fitria (2021) and Yuniarti and Pratiwi (2022) have identified some contributing factors, there is limited qualitative insight into students' lived experiences and perceptions during the test.

This study addresses these research gaps by investigating the specific difficulties encountered by students of STKIP Paracendekia NW Sumbawa in answering the Listening section of the TOEFL ITP. By employing qualitative methods—questionnaires, documentation, and interviews—the study provides a nuanced understanding of the real-time barriers faced by test-takers. This localized investigation contributes to the broader field of language testing and listening comprehension by offering insights from underrepresented educational contexts.

The novelty of this study lies in its dual categorization of listening difficulties into internal and external domains, supported by both quantitative and qualitative data. Unlike previous research which often utilized a single instrument, this study triangulates data sources to ensure validity and

reliability. Moreover, it explores the phenomenon in a context where TOEFL is used not only as an academic benchmark but also as a graduation requirement, adding institutional pressure on students' performance.

The research is guided by the following central question: *What are the difficulties faced by students in answering the listening section of the TOEFL ITP?* The primary objective is to identify and analyze these difficulties to provide a basis for pedagogical interventions and institutional support systems. It is anticipated that the findings will help educators, curriculum designers, and language trainers to develop more targeted listening instruction and preparatory programs for TOEFL ITP candidates.

In sum, understanding the specific challenges faced by students in the listening section of TOEFL ITP is essential for improving language instruction and test preparation strategies. By focusing on both internal and external contributing factors, this study aims to provide a holistic perspective that bridges theoretical understanding with practical applications in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings.

## **Literature Review**

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Listening Comprehension**

Listening is widely recognized as a foundational skill in language acquisition, crucial for communication and academic success, especially in standardized assessments like the TOEFL. Anderson's (1985) Information Processing Theory remains central to understanding listening comprehension. This theory proposes that listening involves three key stages: perceptual processing, parsing, and utilization. In this model, listeners receive auditory input, decode it into meaningful units, and integrate the information with existing knowledge. These stages highlight the cognitive complexity of listening and explain why learners may struggle with real-time comprehension in high-stakes contexts like the TOEFL ITP.

Complementary to Anderson's model is the top-down and bottom-up processing approach to listening. Bottom-up processing emphasizes the role of decoding sounds, words, and syntax, while top-down processing relies on background knowledge and contextual cues to derive meaning (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Effective listeners often alternate between both processes. However, learners with limited vocabulary or exposure to authentic English may over-rely on bottom-up decoding, which becomes ineffective when faced with native-like speed or accent variation.

The TOEFL ITP Listening section requires test-takers to demonstrate abilities aligned with both processes. It assesses their comprehension of short conversations, longer talks, and academic lectures. This section requires not only linguistic decoding but also inferencing and critical thinking under time pressure, which aligns with higher-order cognitive demands described in Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

### **Definition and Types of TOEFL**

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is an internationally recognized measure of English proficiency for non-native speakers. The two main types of TOEFL are the Internet-Based Test (iBT) and the Institutional Testing Program (ITP). The TOEFL ITP, which is the focus of this

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study, is a paper-based test used mainly for institutional purposes such as student placement, progress evaluation, and graduation requirements (ETS, 2023). It comprises three sections: Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression, and Reading Comprehension.

In the Listening Comprehension section, examinees listen to audio recordings and answer multiple-choice questions. The section is divided into three parts: short dialogues, longer conversations, and academic lectures. The audio is played only once, making it essential for students to process information quickly and accurately. This structure places high cognitive and linguistic demands on students, especially those with limited exposure to English in natural contexts.

### **Factors Influencing Listening Comprehension in TOEFL ITP**

Numerous factors influence learners' performance in listening tasks. These can be categorized as internal (learner-related) and external (test-related) factors. Internal factors include vocabulary limitations, anxiety, lack of practice, concentration issues, and low working memory capacity (Yuniarti & Pratiwi, 2022; Wang & Treffers-Daller, 2017). Vocabulary is particularly crucial; students who are unfamiliar with academic or idiomatic expressions may find it difficult to follow spoken texts (Nation & Newton, 2009).

Anxiety also plays a significant role. Horwitz et al. (1986) introduced the concept of Foreign Language Listening Anxiety (FLLA), which can significantly impair learners' comprehension and recall. The pressure of a formal testing environment, especially when the listening material is presented only once, can exacerbate cognitive overload and hinder performance (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

External factors involve the characteristics of the listening input. These include the speed of delivery, speaker accent, background noise, intonation, and test format. For instance, regional or unfamiliar accents can make it difficult for learners to identify keywords or infer meaning (Field, 2003). Likewise, rapid delivery often prevents learners from segmenting sentences properly, thereby impeding comprehension (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005).

Aprino et al. (2022) found that TOEFL test-takers in Indonesia cited accent and delivery speed as primary barriers in the listening section. Similarly, Windayamanti et al. (2022) reported that most students struggled to understand academic lectures due to low familiarity with topic-related vocabulary and listening fatigue.

### **Review of Relevant Studies**

Several recent studies have investigated students' difficulties in TOEFL Listening. Fitria (2021) found that Indonesian students commonly struggle with note-taking, identifying main ideas, and following academic discussions due to limited exposure to authentic English listening materials. Another study by Lubis et al. (2022) emphasized that students' unfamiliarity with native-speaker pronunciation patterns significantly affects their ability to comprehend listening texts.

Yuniarti and Pratiwi (2022), using an application-based TOEFL simulation, discovered that poor listening scores were linked to both technical issues (e.g., unclear audio) and internal challenges such as low self-confidence and limited lexical knowledge. While these studies confirm the multifaceted nature of listening comprehension difficulties, they often lack a comprehensive classification of the problems into internal and external categories supported by qualitative inquiry. Moreover, research focused on rural or semi-rural Indonesian institutions—like STKIP Paracendekia NW Sumbawa—is still limited, creating a gap that this current study seeks to fill.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts Anderson's (1985) Information Processing Theory as the core framework, supplemented by the top-down and bottom-up listening processing models. These theories collectively explain how listeners process and interpret auditory information in testing scenarios. The classification of listening challenges into internal and external categories is based on the synthesis of findings from prior studies (e.g., Windayamanti et al., 2022; Aprino et al., 2022; Yuniarti & Pratiwi, 2022) and contextualized within the realities of TOEFL ITP preparation and administration in Indonesia. This theoretical orientation not only informs the research design but also guides the interpretation of findings.

## **METHOD**

### ***Research Design***

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore students' difficulties in answering the listening section of the TOEFL Institutional Testing Program (ITP). A qualitative approach was chosen to allow for an in-depth exploration of students' experiences, perceptions, and challenges in a naturalistic setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The descriptive nature of the study aligns with the goal of portraying detailed phenomena as experienced by the participants, particularly the internal and external factors influencing their listening comprehension during the TOEFL ITP.

The qualitative design was guided by a constructivist paradigm, emphasizing the subjective meanings and interpretations students attach to their test-taking experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study used triangulated data sources, including documentation, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews, to increase the validity and richness of the data.

### **Research Context and Participants**

The research was conducted at STKIP Paracendekia NW Sumbawa, a higher education institution located in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. The site was chosen due to the institution's requirement for students to pass the TOEFL ITP as a graduation prerequisite, thus making it an ideal setting for exploring listening-related difficulties.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability technique commonly used in qualitative research to identify information-rich cases (Palinkas et al., 2015). The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) students who had taken the TOEFL ITP at least twice; (2) students in their 8th semester from the English and Mathematics Education Study Programs; and (3) students whose

listening scores were consistently below the institutional minimum standard of 380 (out of a possible 677). Four participants met these criteria and consented to take part in the study.

### **Instruments and Data Collection**

Three primary instruments were used for data collection: documentation, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews.

#### **Documentation**

Students' TOEFL ITP listening scores from two testing sessions were collected to verify persistent listening difficulties. These documents served as objective evidence of students' low performance in the listening section and provided the basis for selecting participants. Using institutional documents to support qualitative findings aligns with best practices in qualitative validation (Bowen, 2009).

#### **Questionnaire**

A structured questionnaire was developed based on Fitria (2021) and adapted to the local context. The questionnaire consisted of 21 dichotomous (Yes/No) items divided into two categories: internal and external factors affecting listening comprehension. Topics included vocabulary mastery, concentration, speaker accent, and audio quality. This instrument was used to capture students' self-reported difficulties and to quantify patterns before conducting in-depth interviews. The questionnaire responses were presented using simple descriptive statistics, mainly frequency and percentage distributions, calculated using the formula:

$$P = \frac{F}{N} \times 100\%$$

where  $P$  represents the percentage,  $F$  is the frequency of a particular response, and  $N$  is the total number of respondents

#### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

To obtain deeper insights, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all four participants. The interview protocol included open-ended questions exploring students' listening challenges, test-taking experiences, and perceived causes of difficulty. This format allowed for flexibility in probing responses and tailoring follow-up questions based on the students' answers (Kallio et al., 2016).

The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure comfort and clarity for the participants, then transcribed and translated into English. Translations were verified through back-translation to ensure fidelity to the original meaning.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

- **Data Reduction** involved selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw data from the questionnaire, interview transcripts, and documentation into thematic codes.
- **Data Display** included the use of tables, narrative summaries, and excerpts to organize patterns and categories related to internal and external listening difficulties.
- **Conclusion Drawing and Verification** entailed interpreting data within the framework of listening comprehension theory and relevant empirical studies. Emergent themes were cross-validated across data sources to ensure credibility and consistency.

## Trustworthiness

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation was employed through the use of multiple data sources: test documentation, student-reported questionnaires, and personal interviews (Denzin, 2017). Member checking was conducted by sharing interview transcripts and summaries with participants for confirmation. Furthermore, methodological transparency and audit trails were maintained to allow external verification of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study regarding the difficulties students faced in answering the listening section of the TOEFL Institutional Testing Program (ITP). Data were collected through documentation (TOEFL scores), structured questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. The analysis revealed two major categories of difficulties: external and internal factors. The results are organized accordingly, followed by an overview of the most frequently reported difficulties and the alignment between quantitative and qualitative findings.

### Overview of Participants and Score Data

The participants consisted of four eighth-semester students from the English and Mathematics Education programs at STKIP Paracendekia NW Sumbawa. All had taken the TOEFL ITP at least twice and had obtained a listening score below the institutional minimum of 380 in both attempts. The documented scores confirmed that the listening section was consistently the lowest-performing area for all participants.

*Tabel 1. Participants TOEFL Listening Scores*

Participant Code	Study Program	Attem 1 Listening Score	Attempt 2 Listening Score
ICN	English	340	350
AR	English	360	370

LWA	Mathematics	330	340
FR	Mathematics	310	330

### External Factors Affecting Listening Performance

From the questionnaire and interviews, several external factors were identified that contributed to students' difficulties in understanding the TOEFL ITP listening materials. These included speaker accent, speed of delivery, intonation, diction, sentence structure, and audio interruptions

*Table 2. Reported External Factors Influencing Listening Difficulty*

External Factors	Frequency	Percentage
Speaker's accent	4	100%
Speed of delivery	4	100%
Unfamiliar diction/word	3	75%
Complex sentence structures	3	75%
Intonation and rhythm	2	50%
Audio interruptions (noise, clarity issues)	2	50%

Participants commonly struggled with the speaker's accent, particularly American regional accents, which differed from the English pronunciation patterns taught in class. Fast-paced delivery made it difficult for them to identify key points, especially when multiple speakers were involved.

"The speaker's accent and speed made it hard for me to distinguish the words. I felt like everything just merged together." – Participant AR

Unfamiliar word choices and long, grammatically complex sentences also posed problems. Two participants noted that they often missed critical information because they were still processing the previous sentence when a new one started.

### Internal Factors Affecting Listening Performance

In addition to external challenges, internal learner-related factors were identified as significant barriers. These include limited vocabulary, lack of practice, low concentration, anxiety, poor note-taking strategies, and insufficient listening strategies.

*Table 3. Reported Internal factors Influencing Listening Difficulty*

Internal Factors	Frequency	Percentage
Limited vocabulary knowledge	4	100%
Lack of listening practice	4	100%
Easily distracted during test	3	75%
Difficulty concentrating	3	75%



Listening anxiety or nervousness	2	50%
Poor note-taking technique	2	50%
Lack of understanding TOEFL test strategies	2	50%

Lack of regular exposure to authentic listening materials, such as podcasts or academic lectures, was reported by all participants. They admitted that most of their listening practice was limited to classroom listening activities and that they rarely practiced independently.

*“I rarely listen to English outside of class. When I do the test, everything sounds unfamiliar.”* – Participant FR

Concentration problems were also cited. Participants admitted being distracted during the test, especially when they missed a sentence and then panicked trying to catch up.

*“If I miss one sentence, I just give up on the whole question because I can’t rewind it. That really affects my focus.”* – Participant LWA

### Most Prevalent Difficulties

When synthesizing the questionnaire data, the most frequently reported difficulties—across both internal and external categories—were: speaker accent, speed of delivery, lack of vocabulary, and lack of listening practice

*Table 4. Most Reported Listening Difficulties (Bar Chart)*

Difficulty Category	Factor	% of Participants
External	Accent	100%
External	Speed	100%
Internal	Lack Of Vocabulary	100%
Internal	Lack Of Listening	100%

*Table 5. Most Commonly Reported Listening Difficulties*

Difficulty Category	Factor	% of Participants
External	Accent	100%
External	Speed	100%
Internal	Lack of vocabulary	100%
Internal	Lack of listening	100%

These four factors were mentioned by all participants across both data sources and consistently emerged as core themes in their interviews. While external factors often interfered with perception and comprehension, internal factors appeared to hinder processing and strategy use.

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### **Alignment Between Questionnaire and Interview Data**

The data obtained from the questionnaires were supported and enriched by the interview findings. While the questionnaires helped to identify which factors were most common, the interviews provided nuanced explanations for how and why these factors affected students' performance. For instance, although three participants identified being easily distracted during the test in the questionnaire, interviews revealed that distractions ranged from test anxiety to self-doubt when they encountered unfamiliar words.

“Sometimes, I feel like I know the meaning, but I can’t focus because I’m already nervous about failing again.” – Participant ICN

The use of triangulation enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings, confirming that students’ listening difficulties stemmed from both linguistic and psychological challenges, compounded by test-specific conditions.

### ***Summary of Findings***

To summarize, this study found that students experienced a range of difficulties in the TOEFL ITP Listening section, which could be broadly categorized into external and internal factors. External difficulties were mostly related to the characteristics of the listening input, such as accent and speed, while internal difficulties involved cognitive and affective factors like vocabulary limitations and lack of practice. The most significant and recurring challenges were speaker accent, fast delivery, lack of vocabulary, and insufficient exposure to authentic listening practice. These findings provide a foundation for targeted instructional interventions, which will be further elaborated in the Discussion section

## **DISCUSSION**

This study explored the difficulties faced by students in answering the Listening section of the TOEFL ITP, with a focus on internal and external contributing factors. Using data from questionnaires, documentation, and semi-structured interviews, the research revealed that both types of factors significantly hindered students' listening performance. This section discusses these findings in relation to the research questions and contextualizes them within the theoretical framework and prior literature.

### **RQ1: What external factors do students perceive as contributing to their difficulties in the TOEFL ITP Listening Section?**

The most prominent external factors identified were the speaker’s accent and the speed of delivery, which all participants acknowledged as key obstacles to comprehension. These findings align with Field (2003), who argued that unfamiliar pronunciation or accent variation can interfere with a listener’s ability to segment and decode speech. In particular, American regional accents in TOEFL

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materials often differ from the English that Indonesian students are taught in class, leading to confusion and misinterpretation.

Speed of delivery, mentioned by all participants, also compounded their listening difficulties. Fast-paced speech reduces the processing time available to decode and interpret input, especially when students lack automaticity in word recognition (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). This supports Vandergrift and Goh's (2012) assertion that effective listening requires real-time coordination of bottom-up decoding and top-down inferencing. Students in this study appeared to struggle with both processes simultaneously, especially under time pressure.

Complex diction and sentence structures were also cited as barriers. These elements, though intended to mirror academic English, pose difficulties for learners with limited academic vocabulary (Nation & Newton, 2009). The use of idiomatic expressions, phrasal verbs, or multi-clause sentences can overwhelm working memory, particularly when no visual aids are present.

Interestingly, half of the participants also identified intonation and audio quality as external challenges. While often overlooked in TOEFL preparation, these aspects influence comprehension by either aiding or obstructing listeners' ability to identify information structure and speaker intent (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). Audio interruptions or poor sound clarity can further reduce intelligibility, especially in large or noisy test rooms, a common issue in rural testing environments.

### **RQ2: What internal factors contribute to students' difficulties in the TOEFL ITP Listening Section?**

Among internal factors, the most dominant were lack of vocabulary, lack of listening practice, low concentration, and listening anxiety. Each participant reported minimal exposure to authentic English input outside classroom instruction. This finding is consistent with Wang and Treffers-Daller (2017), who emphasized the strong correlation between vocabulary size and listening proficiency in second language learners. Students with limited lexical knowledge struggle not only with decoding but also with meaning integration.

Furthermore, insufficient listening practice, particularly with authentic materials such as English podcasts or academic lectures, limited students' ability to build familiarity with natural spoken discourse. Vandergrift and Goh (2012) suggest that frequent exposure to listening input fosters metacognitive awareness and listening strategies—both absent in many of the participants in this study.

Concentration issues were also prominent, especially when students missed a segment and were unable to "recover" in real-time. This echoes the findings of Goh (2000), who classified poor concentration as one of the cognitive barriers to successful listening, particularly under test conditions. Some students reported getting mentally "stuck" when they failed to catch a word or phrase, which supports Anderson's (1985) information processing theory: when parsing fails, comprehension also breaks down.

Anxiety, mentioned by two participants, manifested in worry about failure, nervousness about timing, and fear of repeated poor scores. This aligns with Horwitz et al.'s (1986) concept of Foreign Language Listening Anxiety (FLLA), which has been shown to negatively correlate with listening performance (Kim, 2000). In high-stakes testing like TOEFL, where results may determine graduation or job opportunities, anxiety can become a cognitive burden that competes for attention during listening tasks (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Additionally, poor note-taking strategies emerged as a hidden but influential factor. Some students attempted to write too much during the listening, while others took no notes at all. Effective note-taking is associated with active engagement and better recall, especially in academic listening contexts (Siegel, 2016). Lack of strategy training in this area suggests a pedagogical gap that must be addressed.

### **RQ3: How do internal and external factors interact to influence listening performance?**

Perhaps most significantly, this study found that internal and external factors were not isolated, but often interacted in compounding ways. For instance, a student's limited vocabulary (internal) made it harder to comprehend fast-delivered sentences with unfamiliar accents (external). Likewise, anxiety (internal) intensified when a student could not cope with the fast pace or failed to understand one part of the recording, leading to a loss of concentration.

This interaction supports Anderson's (1985) cognitive framework, which posits that successful comprehension involves a seamless flow through perceptual processing, parsing, and utilization.

Any disruption—be it external (e.g., audio difficulty) or internal (e.g., anxiety)—can interrupt this flow and impair performance. Moreover, the findings reinforce Vandergrift and Goh's (2012) model that emphasizes the integration of bottom-up and top-down processes, which was consistently weak in the participants studied.

The participants' responses also resonate with the findings of Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), who argue that both psychological (e.g., motivation, anxiety) and linguistic factors (e.g., vocabulary, grammar) must be addressed in tandem for listening comprehension to improve. TOEFL listening, in particular, tests both cognitive and emotional resilience under pressure.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

These findings highlight a need for pedagogical interventions that simultaneously address both internal and external listening challenges. Firstly, greater emphasis should be placed on exposure to authentic listening materials, particularly from TOEFL-like sources. These should include various accents and academic vocabulary, allowing students to gradually build familiarity and confidence.

Secondly, instructors should incorporate explicit training in listening strategies, including selective attention, inferencing, and note-taking. Strategy instruction has been shown to significantly improve

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listening performance (Graham & Santos, 2015). Teachers should also provide practice in managing test anxiety and concentration, possibly through simulated TOEFL environments.

Lastly, institutions should reconsider the preparation structure for TOEFL. Intensive TOEFL courses focusing only on test-taking techniques may not be enough. Instead, integrated listening-skills development across the curriculum may provide more long-term gains

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the listening difficulties experienced by students in the TOEFL ITP, specifically within the context of a higher education institution in Indonesia. Drawing upon documentation, questionnaires, and interviews, the research revealed a convergence of both external (e.g., speaker accent, speed of delivery, diction) and internal (e.g., vocabulary limitation, lack of listening practice, anxiety) factors that hindered the students' comprehension during the TOEFL ITP Listening section. The interaction of these factors significantly impacted the students' performance, revealing how linguistic and psychological variables operate simultaneously during high-stakes listening assessments.

The findings emphasize that difficulties in listening comprehension are multifaceted. Students are not only challenged by the technical aspects of the listening input (e.g., accents or sentence structures) but also by their own cognitive and affective states. The lack of vocabulary and insufficient exposure to authentic listening materials emerged as critical internal constraints. Externally, test input characteristics—such as fast speech and unfamiliar accents—amplified these difficulties. These findings align with the literature that frames listening as a dynamic process requiring simultaneous coordination of bottom-up decoding and top-down strategy use (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005).

Moreover, the study contributes to the growing body of research that views listening comprehension not merely as a matter of linguistic ability, but also as a function of learner training, exposure, and confidence (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). The presence of anxiety, for instance, shows that even students who possess partial linguistic competence may underperform when faced with cognitive overload or performance pressure. In the TOEFL ITP context, where time is limited and repetition is not allowed, this pressure can have a compounding effect on learners' ability to process input effectively.

### Implications

Theoretically, this study supports a more integrated view of L2 listening, one that includes not only linguistic processing (e.g., phonology, syntax, and vocabulary), but also affective and strategic dimensions. Pedagogically, the findings imply that instructors need to go beyond traditional TOEFL preparation methods, which often focus narrowly on practice tests and item analysis. There is a need for a more holistic listening curriculum that incorporates strategy training, affective support, and exposure to various English varieties and authentic materials.

Teacher preparation programs, especially in EFL contexts, should consider equipping future teachers with a deeper understanding of how to scaffold listening instruction using metacognitive strategies, targeted vocabulary instruction, and anxiety-reducing techniques. Institutional policy should also support these pedagogical shifts by integrating listening development into broader curricula, rather than isolating it within test-preparation courses.

### **Suggestions for Practice and Further Research**

Based on the results of this study, several actionable recommendations can be made. First, students should be encouraged to engage in extensive listening, particularly through exposure to various English accents and genres—such as lectures, interviews, podcasts, and news broadcasts. This can build familiarity with natural speech patterns, tone variation, and cultural pragmatics.

Second, explicit instruction in listening strategies—such as predicting, inferencing, and selective attention—should be included in TOEFL preparation courses. Educators should also provide practice in note-taking techniques and encourage self-reflection on listening habits through listening logs or journals.

Third, psychological preparation deserves attention. Techniques such as mindfulness, breathing exercises, or simulation-based training can help students reduce anxiety and build resilience during testing situations.

For future research, it would be beneficial to expand the sample size to include a more diverse range of learners and to explore longitudinal changes in listening ability following specific interventions. Additionally, future studies might adopt a mixed-methods design to quantify the extent of improvement after strategy training or compare performance across different proficiency levels.

### **Final Thoughts**

In conclusion, listening comprehension in the TOEFL ITP context is shaped by a complex interplay of internal and external variables. By understanding these variables through the perspectives of learners themselves, educators and institutions can better design responsive, inclusive, and effective instructional approaches. If the goal of language education is not only test success but also communicative competence, then listening instruction must evolve to reflect the realities learners face—both in and beyond the classroom.

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