LISTENING COMPREHENSION STUDY: DIFFICULTIES AND STRATEGIES USED BY COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract: Listening is viewed so momentous since they are central to get a language. Listeners often do not handle listening tasks in an effective way utilizing these strategies successfully. This study investigates the listening barriers as well as listening strategies used by intermediate and upper intermediate college students. The purpose of this study are determining the listening barriers faced by those intermediate and intermediate students and presenting the listening strategies used by those intermediate and upper intermediate students in order to overcome its barriers. Within the qualitative method undertaken of this research, the result has classified the listening barriers faced by intermediate, they are: (a) accents, (b) lack of concentration, (c) speed, (d) lack of vocabularies, and (e) unclear speakers' statement. Meanwhile, the upper intermediate's barriers are accents and lack of vocabularies. Moreover, in order to overcome the issues, those students used several strategies that mostly for both intermediate and upper intermediate levels use these strategies, such as: (a) reading, (b) focus, (c) predicting, and (d) find the keywords. The result undertakes to increase EFL learners' consciousness of these difficult areas in listening that are suitable and effective actions. Therefore, those EFL learners will be able to adopt several strategies in terms of listening.
Keywords: *Listening comprehension; listening barriers; listening strategies*

INTRODUCTION

Listening plays an important role in communication as it is said that of the total time spent on communicating. It assumes a vital part in language classrooms as it gives input for listeners. The skill is viewed so momentous since they are central to get a language. Language input is acquired through listening. Thus, language is gained mostly through accepting understandable information and listening capacity is the basic constituent in achieving unequivocal language input. Any sort of learning containing language learning verily cannot happen without understanding sources of inputs and comprehending.

There are a lot of definitions of the term "listening". Hamouda (2013) said that listening skill is very important in acquiring understandable input. Learning does not occur if there will not be any input. Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) expressed that listening has an important role in the communication process. They argued that out the four main areas of communication skills called listening, speaking, reading, and writing, listening is the most important of all.

EFL learners have serious problems in English listening comprehension due to the fact that universities pay more attention to English grammar, reading, and vocabulary. Listening and speaking skills are not important parts of many course books or curricula and teachers do not seem to pay attention to these skills while designing their lessons. Most teachers take it for granted and believe that it will develop naturally within the

process of language learning. Brownell (2010) stated that one of the reasons for the opinion that listening is a skill that tends to be neglected is the feeling among language teachers that this skill is automatically acquired by the learner as he learns to speak the language.

Listeners often do not handle listening tasks in an effective way utilizing these strategies successfully. They are not aware of listening strategies. Bozorgian (2014) pointed out that less successful language learners do not have the knowledge needed to select appropriate strategies. Goh (2010) emphasized the importance of these strategies by arguing that learners' awareness is related to effective learning in all learning contexts. Bozorgian (2014) drew attention to the specific context of L2 listening and claimed that strategies have a direct and positive influence on listening performance. Graham (2017) and Griffiths (2013) also indicated that one of the distinctive features differentiating successful listeners from unsuccessful ones is their use of listening comprehension strategies and they supported the idea that analyzing the role of these strategies in L2 listening helps listeners to approach the listening task more effectively.

There have been a great number of studies of the use of strategies in learning listening and its contribution to listening comprehension and proficiency that have been increasingly taken in the last few decades. Some of researchers investigated how strategy of learning could influence the learners' listening skill development and assured that more studies are needed to increase learners' awareness of strategies used in listening. As reception processes and strategies of the spoken language are a relatively unexplored field of study, the focus of this study is to analyze the mental steps involved in the reception strategies of listening.

The first study conducted by Ghoneim (2013), he determined several strategies faced by advanced and intermediate participants encountered the same problems with different percentages, and activated three groups of processes. The advanced group students used top down strategies more than the intermediate ones. Second study conducted by Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016), they defined that teachers are aware of students' learning difficulties they can help them develop effective listening strategies and finally solve their difficulties in

listening and improve their listening comprehension abilities.

Another study comes from Saraswaty (2018), she revealed that students' learning difficulties may enable EFL teachers to help students develop effective learning strategies and ultimately improve their English listening abilities. Further study from Namaziandost, Ahmadi & Keshmirshekan (2020), they argued that the relationship between listening problems and strategy used among the learners was significantly relevant. The outcomes totally insinuate that it is paramount for teachers of a second language to be aware of the various listening problems that are among listeners so as to enable them to use the proper strategies.

In this paper, the researchers focused on the strategies of listening comprehension used by EFL learners in intermediate and upper intermediate learners that are represented by the fourth year of English Department students at University of Kuningan. Hence, this research is to identify the learners' listening comprehension problems when listening to oral texts. This research is intended to increase EFL learners' consciousness of these difficult areas in listening so that becomes suitable and effective actions. Therefore, those EFL learners are able to adopt several strategies in terms of listening. The specific research questions within each area are outlined below: (1) What listening comprehension barriers are confronted by selected students? (2) What listening comprehension strategies are employed by the selected students?

METHOD
In order to reach a reliable identification of participants' listening processes and strategies, the current research uses the qualitative method to study the problem. Qualitative research is studies that investigate the quality of relationships, activities, situations, or materials (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2012). A qualitative approach investigates human behavior which is always bound to the context and portraying the meaning that is constructed by the participants involved in particular social settings or events. In conducting this research, content analysis is the appropriate design to apply in this research. Content analysis is a technique that enables researchers to study human behavior in an indirect way, through an

analysis of their communications (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2012).

Besides, the realization of content analysis is known in indirect interaction with others. That is why content analysis presents some advantages. According to Fraenkel & Wallen (2012) some of the advantages are: a researcher can observe without being observed, since the contents being analyzed are not influenced by the researcher's presence. The researcher can delve into records and documents to get some feel for the social life of an earlier time. The logistics of content analysis are often relatively simple and economical with regard to both time and resources as compared to other research methods. Lastly, the data are readily available and almost always can be returned to if necessary or desired, content analysis permits replication of a study by other researchers.

Site and participants

The present research is conducted on two groups; 3 upper intermediate learners of English as a foreign language and 3 intermediate ones. The participants are students in the fourth year of the English department in the Faculty of Education. The participants are selected on the basis of their listening proficiency level. A test is administered to the participants to divide them to advanced level and intermediate level. The test is distributed under the standard of CEFR as the international standard for assessing language according to Cambridge Language Assessing. Therefore, here are the continuous variables: (1) Those who have intermediate and upper intermediate level of listening skills that will be assessed by CEFR Cambridge Language Assessment, (2) Gender: male and female, and (3) Age: >20 years old.

Data collection techniques

In order to measure the validity and accuracy the data, the researcher uses listening comprehension test and interview.

CEFR listening test description

The test consists of 16 multiple choice questions based on two listening passages. Based on the results of the test, participants are divided into advanced level and intermediate level. The current research adopts Graham's (2017) method of dividing skillful and unskillful learners. The advanced participants are the top three students whereas the intermediate participants are the bottom three ones that accessed online on www.examenglish.com/leveltest.com.

Interview

Interview is the main data collective techniques in this research. In order to gain the further information data regarding the live experienced towards the phenomenon, interview considered as the techniques of data collection in phenomenology research. Interview defined as a qualitative research technique which involves conducting individual interviews with a small number of participants to explore their perspectives on particular idea, program or situation. The purpose of this technique is to explore the data deeper (Cresswell, 2014).

In this research, however, the interview is conducted in order to gain the information on how those participants face several barriers in listening comprehension and how they manage its barriers within the strategies they select during the listening test. In this stage however, the interview is conducted in Indonesian. As noted in the earlier section, all interviews and observations are being documented.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Listening comprehension barriers that are confronted by selected students

During the process of listening comprehension, various factors may affect learner listening ability. Lists of general factors have been identified while the role of specific factors has also been examined. Some factors that have been the focus of research include speech rate, lexis phonological features, and background knowledge. Other issues have also been related to listener difficulties. These range from text structure and syntax to personal factors such as insufficient exposure to the target language, and a lack of interest and motivation.

Table 1. *Participants' listening test result*

No	Participants	Test Results	Level
1	Participant 1	C1	Upper Intermediate to Advance
2	Participant 2	C1	Upper Intermediate to Advance

3	Participant 3	C1	Upper Intermediate to Advance
4	Participant 4	B2	Intermediate
5	Participant 5	B2	Intermediate
6	Participant 6	B2	Intermediate

Table 2. *Listening barriers faced by intermediate students*

No	Participants	Test Results	Listening Barriers
1.	Participant 4	B2	1. Accents (P4:Int:I:2-3) 2. Speed (P4:Int:2:3-4)
2.	Participant 5	B2	1. Hardly to focus (P5:Int:I:2-3) 2. Lack of vocabulary (P5:Int:I:3)
3.	Participant 6	B2	1. Speaker didn't describe clearly (P6:Int:I:2-3)

Table 1 and table 2 reveal some listening barriers in English. The data shows that students at lower levels – intermediates have various barriers compared to higher levels – upper intermediates. According on table 1, there are five barriers of listening in English. They are: (1) accent, (2) speed, (3) lack of concentration, (4) unclear statements from speakers, and (5) speakers did not describe clearly.

This is quite different compared to the upper intermediate level which only has two barriers, most of which deal with accents and vocabularies.

Accent
Most students both at the intermediate level and at the upper intermediate level feel that the accent is the main difficulty because they are familiar with other accents that are more familiar, American accents. Accent expressed that too many accented speeches can lead to an important reduction in comprehension. According to Goh (2002), 66% of learners mentioned a speaker's accent as one of the most significant factors that affect listener comprehension. Unfamiliar accents both native and non-native can cause serious problems in listening comprehension and familiarity with an accent helps learners' listening comprehension. Buck (2001) indicated that when listeners hear an unfamiliar accent such as Indian English for the first time after studying only American English will encounter critical difficulties in listening. This will certainly interrupt the whole listening comprehension process and at the same time an unfamiliar accent makes comprehension impossible for the listeners.

> *"Ketika mendengar vocab baru. Apalagi tadi pada test tadi banyak British accent, jadi agak susah, karena aku terbisa dengan dari film atau lagu itu American accent jadi agak susah adaptasi ke british accent. Kadi susah untuk ditebak ini artimya apa."* (Barriers come when I heard new words. In line with the test, it had British accent. So it was hard for me since I get used to American accent which I'm familiar in films or songs. Thus it was difficult for me to be familiar in British accent so it was hard to guess the meaning.) (P1.Up-Int:2-3)
> *"Aksen speaker dan dari kejelasan dari speakernya. Kadang ada yang keceptan juga."* (Speakers' accents and the clearness of the speakers. Speed sometimes.)

Learners should be familiar with the cultural knowledge of language that has a significant effect on the learners' understanding. If the listening task involves completely different cultural materials, then the learners may have critical problems in their comprehension. It is the responsibility of teachers to give background knowledge about the listening activities in advance.

Lack of vocabularies
Listening texts containing familiar words would be very easy for students. If students know the meaning of words this can arouse their interest and motivation and can have a positive impact on the students' listening comprehension ability. A lot of words have more than one meaning and if they are not used appropriately in their appropriate contexts, students will get confused. Unfamiliar words, difficult grammatical structures, and the length of the spoken passages are the most important factors that cause problems for learners' listening comprehension. Clarity, lack of interest, and the demand for complete answers to listening comprehension questions are the serious difficulties of students' listening comprehension. There are four sources for listening comprehension problems. They are the message, the speaker, the listener, and the physical environment. Further, the

listener, speaker, medium, and environment factors are the main components that affect listening comprehension.

> *"Vocab saya itu masih lemah, karena engga semua vocab saya ngerti. Karenga jangankan listening tapi reading aja saya sering mendapatkan kata kata yang tidak paham."* (My vocabularies are still poor – I have not known all vocabularies. I am incapable to comprehend not only in listening but also in reading.)

Speed

The level of students can have a significant role when they listen to long parts and keep all information in their mind. It is very difficult for lower level students to listen more than three minutes long and complete the listening tasks. Short listening passages is an easy listening comprehension for learners and reduce their tiredness. Speed can make listening passage difficult. If the speakers speak too fast, students may have serious problems to understand L2 words. In this situation, listeners are not able to control the speed of speakers and this can create critical problems with listening comprehension.

There are some barriers to effective listening comprehension process. First, listeners cannot control the speed of speech. The biggest problem with listening comprehension is that listeners are not able to control how quickly speakers talk. Second, listeners cannot have words repeated and this can cause critical difficulties for them. Students cannot replay a recording section. Teachers decide what and when to repeat listening texts and it is very difficult for teachers to know whether or not their learners understood what they have heard. Third, listeners do not have rich vocabulary knowledge. Speakers may select words that listeners have not been familiar with.

> *"Aksen speaker dan dari kejelasan dari speakernya. Kadang ada yang keceptan juga."* (Speakers' accents and the clearness of the speakers. Speed sometimes)

Students' problems in listening comprehension and found that the factors which facilitate or hinder listening are speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation. In terms of speaker factor, it is revealed that 'clarity' was the main cause of EFL listening difficulties. As to listener factor, 'lack of interest', 'the demand for full and complete answers to listening comprehension questions'

were the two main difficulties encountered by EFL students. The difficulty of listening comprehension to four sources: the message, the speaker, the listener, and the physical setting. The factors influencing listening comprehension and directly related to EFL listening into four inter-relating categories: listener, speaker, medium, and environment factors.

Five major listening difficulties: speed, a cluster of sounds difficult for segmentation, obsession with the Chinese translation, association of sounds with words and meanings, and idiomatic expressions. Gohh (2010) identified four listening factors, they are listener factors, speaker factors, stimulus factors, and context factors. She indicated that "EFL proficiency" is the most important listener factor for EFL listening problems. It implies that students' difficulties may directly result from their deficient linguistic knowledge. However, Goh (2010) indicated that the most common problem is "quickly forget what is heard (parsing)." Similarly, in the most difficulty in listening for Taiwan's students was "forget the meaning of the word (perception)." Theoretical explanations of listening comprehension provide us with clues about the problems which learners face when they listen to a spoken text.

These insights cannot, however, account for exhaustive explanation of these problems. To locate the sources of listening comprehension, we need to consider the discourse itself in the context of the classroom.

Listening comprehension strategies that are employed by selected students

The listener taps into background knowledge of the topic, the situation or context, the type of text, and the language. This background information activates a set of expectations that assist the listener to interpret what he has heard and anticipate what he will hear next. These are listener based on: (1) practice by using some entertaining medias (books, songs, films, videos), (2) focus, (3) find the keywords, and (4) predicting.

Reading

It is obvious that students differ in their learning styles and ability, therefore, teachers should adopt and adapt listening materials that match their students' interest and background since the listening materials only become stimulating and

motivating them when they are slightly challenging to what they have already known and suit their interest. Providing different kinds of input, such as lectures, radio news, films, TV plays, announcements, daily conversation, interviews, storytelling, English songs, and so on.

Focus

The biggest problem with listening comprehension is that listeners are not able to control how quickly speakers talk. They cannot have words repeated and this can cause critical difficulties for them. Students cannot replay a recording section. Teachers decide what and when to repeat listening texts and it is very difficult for teachers to know whether or not their learners understood what they have heard. Further, listeners do not have rich vocabulary knowledge. Speakers may select words that listeners do not know them.

Find the keywords

When listening, it is also possible to get the 'whole picture' but with one crucial difference: information comes in a sequence. However, in that sequence of information, there are content words (the nouns, adjectives, and verbs) that can help the listener to form that picture. We often call this listening for gist.

Use keywords or key phrases help to understand the general ideas. For instance, the word "New York", "business trip", and "last year" can be assumed that the person is speaking about a business trip to New York last year. This may seem obvious, but remember that understanding the main idea will help to understand the detail as the person continues to speak.

Predicting

Depending on the context – a news report, a university lecture, an exchange in a supermarket – it can be often predicted as the kind of words and style of language the speaker will use. The prior knowledge of the world helps to anticipate the kind of information that likely to hear. Moreover, the prediction topic of a talk or a conversation, all the related vocabulary stored in our brains is 'activated' to help us better understand what we are listening to.

CONCLUSION

Based on the first research question that concerns on listening barriers faced by intermediate and

upper intermediate level, it can be concluded that the intermediate's barriers are: (a) accents, (b) lack of concentration, (c) speed, (d) lack of vocabularies, and (e) unclear speakers' statement. Meanwhile the upper intermediate's barriers are accents and lack of vocabularies.

Moreover, in order to overcome the issues, those students used several strategies that mostly for both intermediate and upper intermediate levels use these strategies such as: (a) reading, (b) focus, (c) predicting, (d) find the keywords.

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