



An Analysis of Students' Strategies in Overcoming Listening Difficulties of English Education First Students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Riau

Putri Nadhira*¹, Esti Raihana², Qonaah Nuryan Arif³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Muhammadiyah Riau, Indonesia

*Email: putrindhra@gmail.com

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Abstract

Listening is a foundational skill in English language learning, yet it is often regarded as one of the most challenging skills for students to master. This research is driven by the difficulties faced by first-semester students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Riau, who struggle with issues such as rapid speech, unfamiliar accents, and limited vocabulary. The purpose of this study is to analyze and identify the specific strategies employed by these students to overcome listening comprehension challenges. A qualitative descriptive design was utilized, involving ten first-semester English Education students as participants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and document analysis of the students' listening notes, then analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that students actively use three main types of strategies: cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective. Cognitive strategies emerged as the most dominant, with students frequently relying on note-taking, identifying keywords, and mental translation to process information. Metacognitive strategies, such as planning before listening and monitoring comprehension during the task, were also identified, though their application was inconsistent when students faced high-speed audio. Additionally, socio-affective strategies, including asking peers for clarification and managing anxiety through breathing techniques, provided essential emotional support. In conclusion, while students employ various strategies to manage listening difficulties, their heavy reliance on translation suggests a need for further development in automaticity. These results suggest that educators should provide more targeted strategy instruction to help students transition from basic adjustment mechanisms to more advanced listening proficiency.

Keywords: Listening difficulties; listening strategies; EFL students; qualitative research; English education.

INTRODUCTION

Listening is one of the four essential skills in English language learning, alongside speaking, reading, and writing. Among these skills, listening plays a fundamental role as it provides the main input for language acquisition and supports the development of other language skills (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021). In academic settings, listening is particularly important because it helps students understand instructional materials and engage in effective communication. However, to develop listening proficiency, students need sufficient exposure to spoken English in meaningful contexts. Without adequate listening practice, learners may struggle to comprehend spoken language and use English effectively.

Despite its importance, listening is often considered one of the most difficult skills for EFL students. Listening requires real-time processing of spoken language, where learners have limited

control over the speed of input and cannot always replay the message (Field, 2021). As a result, students frequently experience difficulties such as limited vocabulary, inability to recognize words, unfamiliar accents, fast speech, and unclear pronunciation. These challenges make it difficult for learners to understand the intended message and follow topic changes during listening activities. Previous studies have also shown that both internal factors, such as lack of vocabulary and poor listening skills, and external factors, such as audio quality and speech rate, contribute significantly to students' listening difficulties (Nainggolan et al., 2024).

In the Indonesian context, several studies have reported similar findings. Students commonly experience difficulties in identifying main ideas, recognizing words, and understanding spoken texts (Putri & Rasyid, 2022; Siregar & Marlina, 2023). To cope with these challenges, students often rely on strategies such as guessing meaning, focusing on key words, repetition, and note-taking (Fachriza et al., 2023). Additionally, the use of media such as YouTube videos has been found to support listening improvement (Hidayah & Gunawan, 2025). These studies indicate that students actively use various strategies; however, their effectiveness may vary depending on how well the strategies are applied.

Although previous research has explored listening difficulties and strategies among EFL learners, there is still a lack of specific studies focusing on first-semester students, particularly in the context of Universitas Muhammadiyah Riau. Most existing studies examine general student populations without highlighting how beginner-level learners manage listening challenges in their early stages of language learning. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the strategies used by first-semester students of the English Education Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Riau in overcoming listening comprehension difficulties.

Previous studies have explored listening difficulties and strategies among EFL learners. Liu and Zhang (2022) found that metacognitive strategies improved learners' listening comprehension and self-regulation. Similarly, Chen and Zhang (2021) reported that cognitive and metacognitive strategies such as note-taking and predicting enhanced academic listening performance. In addition, Wu and Chen (2022) highlighted that socio-affective strategies, including peer collaboration and emotional regulation, helped reduce listening anxiety.

In the Indonesian context, students commonly face difficulties in identifying main ideas and understanding spoken texts (Putri & Rasyid, 2022). They often use strategies such as repetition, guessing, and note-taking to cope with these challenges (Fachriza et al., 2023). However, most studies focus on general student populations rather than first-semester students.

Therefore, there is a gap in research regarding how beginner-level university students use strategies to overcome listening difficulties. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the strategies used by first-semester students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Riau.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore students' strategies in overcoming listening comprehension difficulties. The research was conducted at Universitas Muhammadiyah Riau, involving 12 first-semester students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using structured interviews and documentation. Interviews were conducted to explore students' experiences and strategies, while documentation (students' notes) was used to support the findings. The interview questions were based on cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategy frameworks. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), including data familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation.

Participants

The participants were first-semester students from the English Education Program who had experienced difficulties in listening comprehension.

Instruments

The main instrument was a structured interview guide designed to explore students' strategies. Documentation, such as students' notes, was also used to support the data.

Data collection procedures

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and documentation. Interviews were conducted to gather detailed information about students' experiences.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, including coding, categorizing, and interpreting the data to identify patterns of strategies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that first-semester students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Riau employ various strategies to overcome listening comprehension difficulties. These strategies are categorized into three main types: cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies. Each category is discussed in detail below.

Cognitive Strategies in Overcoming Listening Difficulties

The findings indicate that cognitive strategies are the most frequently used by students. These strategies include note-taking, repetition, translation, and identifying key words. Students reported that writing down important points helped them focus on the main ideas while listening. In addition, repetition was commonly used when students encountered unfamiliar words or unclear pronunciation.

Some students also relied on translation to understand the meaning of spoken texts. For example, one student stated that she mentally translated English sentences into Indonesian to grasp the meaning more easily. While this strategy helped comprehension, it also slowed down the listening process, especially when the speech was fast.

These findings are consistent with previous studies which suggest that cognitive strategies help learners process and understand spoken language effectively (Velasco & Acuña, 2021). However, over-reliance on translation indicates limited vocabulary mastery and lack of automaticity in language processing. Therefore, although cognitive strategies are helpful, they need to be supported by other strategies to achieve better listening comprehension.

Metacognitive Strategies in Managing Listening Process

In addition to cognitive strategies, students also applied metacognitive strategies, although less consistently. These strategies include planning before listening, monitoring comprehension during listening, and evaluating understanding after listening. Some students reported that they tried to predict the topic before listening based on the title or context. During the listening process, they attempted to monitor their understanding by focusing on key information. After listening, a few students reflected on their comprehension by checking answers or replaying the audio. However, not all students applied these strategies effectively. When faced with fast speech or unfamiliar accents, many students lost concentration and failed to monitor their understanding. This indicates that their metacognitive awareness is still developing. This finding supports previous research showing that metacognitive strategies play an important role in improving listening comprehension by helping learners regulate their learning process (Al-Khresheh & Alruwaili, 2023). Therefore, students need more guidance in applying these strategies consistently.

Socio-Affective Strategies in Supporting Listening Comprehension

Socio-affective strategies were also identified as part of students' efforts to overcome listening difficulties. These strategies include asking for clarification, collaborating with peers, and managing emotions such as anxiety. Students reported that they often asked their friends or teachers when they did not understand certain parts of the listening material. Group discussions also helped them share ideas and clarify misunderstandings. In addition, some students mentioned that they tried to stay calm and reduce anxiety when facing difficult listening tasks.

These findings align with previous studies which highlight the importance of socio-affective strategies in reducing anxiety and increasing learners' confidence (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021). Emotional support and collaboration play a significant role in helping students cope with listening challenges.

Discussion of Integrated Strategy Use

Overall, the findings show that students do not rely on a single strategy but rather use a combination of cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies. Cognitive strategies are the most dominant, while metacognitive and socio-affective strategies support the listening process.

However, the imbalance in strategy use indicates that students tend to focus more on immediate problem-solving (e.g., translation and repetition) rather than strategic regulation of their learning. This suggests that students still lack awareness of how to effectively combine different strategies.

These results are consistent with Zhang and Yang (2021), who found that the integration of multiple listening strategies significantly improves comprehension. Therefore, teaching students how to use strategies in a balanced and structured way is essential.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that first-semester students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Riau actively employ a range of strategies to cope with listening comprehension difficulties, particularly cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies. The findings demonstrate that while cognitive strategies such as note-taking, repetition, and translation are the most frequently used, they are often applied as immediate solutions rather than as part of a structured learning process. This indicates that students are still in the early stage of developing strategic awareness in listening.

More importantly, the study reveals that effective listening comprehension is not solely dependent on the use of individual strategies, but on the ability to integrate cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies in a balanced way. Students who attempted to plan, monitor, and evaluate their listening process, as well as manage their emotions and seek support, showed better engagement and understanding. Therefore, the significance of this study lies in emphasizing the need for strategic competence, rather than mere strategy use.

In line with these findings, it is recommended that teachers provide explicit instruction on listening strategies, particularly in developing students' metacognitive awareness and reducing over-reliance on translation. Classroom practices should incorporate guided listening activities that encourage prediction, monitoring, and reflection.

For future research, it is suggested to investigate the effectiveness of strategy-based instruction in improving listening comprehension across different proficiency levels or educational contexts. Further studies may also explore the relationship between listening strategies and other language skills to gain a more comprehensive understanding of language learning processes. The conclusion should not simply restate the data but must articulate the underlying significance of the findings. It should reflect the expectations outlined in the Introduction and align with the interpretations presented in the Findings and Discussion to ensure conceptual coherence. In addition, the conclusion may include suggestions for potential future developments and possibilities for subsequent research based on the study's results and analysis.

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