A PORTRAIT OF EFL LEARNERS' DIFFICULTIES AND STRATEGIES IN ANSWERING LISTENING COMPREHENSION OF TOEFL ITP PREDICTION TEST AT ONLINE ENGLISH COURSE

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Abstract: This study aimed to discover the most common difficulties of listening comprehension for TOEFL ITP prediction test as well as the learners' strategies to overcome their difficulties. This study employed descriptive quantitative method with purposive sampling technique. There were 30 participants were found significantly from Indonesian EFL learners at online English course and 5 out of 30 students who were interviewed. The procedure of the research involved two steps; administering a questionnaire and conducting an interview. The finding of this study showed that the most common EFL learners' difficulties in answering listening comprehension of TOEFL ITP prediction test are the choice of words and foreign terms (M = 4.73), followed by the speaker's speed (M = 4.60), speaker's accent (M = 4.50), speaker's intonation (M = 4.37), and speaker's length of talk (M = 4.30). The learners employed various strategies to overcome each difficulty such as practicing frequently in various learning sources, anticipating the questions, drawing the speaker's conclusion and details of the topic in answering the test, and becoming familiar with American accent by watching YouTube videos, movies, and listening to English songs.

Keywords: Listening Comprehension, TOEFL ITP, Prediction Test

INTRODUCTION

In the presence of global competition, mastering English has become increasingly important for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. It has begun to offer huge chances for international workers in looking for work, continuing study in native or neighboring countries, and requiring job applicants to work on improving their English skills. In order to assess learners' English Proficiency, they use test such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and International English Language Testing System (IELTS) as one of the requirements for scholarship programs and other recruitment processes (Yuyun et al., 2018). According to Clark (2014) TOEFL is the most extensive

applied to assess a person's English competence. In other words, it is also defined as a test used to assess the English ability of non-native English speakers. TOEFL has considered one of the foremost commonly used language proficiency tests. As reported by Educational Testing System (2007), the TOEFL test is the most widely acknowledged English-language test in the world that has already been taken by an estimated 27 million people worldwide over the years (Clark 2014).

In addition, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners may consider that TOEFL is extremely difficult because there are 3 sections to be tested; listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension (Rina & Tiarina, 2021). However, listening comprehension is the most difficult part among three sections. Madina (2016) as cited in Hidayanti et al., (2021) mentioned that there are a few issues that learners frequently face. They struggle to understand lectures, take efficient notes, comprehend long descriptions in English, comprehend spoken language instructions, comprehend informal language, and comprehend the subject matter of a talk. Every so often, learners' capacity to understand the message delivered may be influenced by the native's speaking speech rates, accent, tone and unfamiliar vocabulary.

Nevertheless, inadequate English proficiency is a result of the negative English language's hostile environment (Maharani & Putro, 2021). According to the English First (EF) English Proficiency Index data (2020), Indonesian is 80th place among 112 countries. This low-level data rose in 2022 is possible because it began in 2020, when numerous companies began offering online English courses such as TOEFL preparation program because of Covid-19 pandemic's advent. Therefore, online learning is easier to adopt and can be followed by all EFL learners using online courses. Learners can understand as much as they have desired in a course since the interaction between them and teachers or instructors is more intense.

Regarding that point, the learners inquired about their difficulties in answering daily practice questions from the mock tests, which included a part on listening comprehension. As a result, EFL learners find it difficult and obtain low scores when answering TOEFL questions, and yet some of them could obtain the excellent score. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the learners' experiences in terms of most the common difficulties and

strategies in answering listening comprehension of TOEFL ITP prediction test. The data was gathered from EFL learners who had previously taken the test conducted by Royal English Online English Course.

METHOD

In this study, the researcher employed a descriptive quantitative method. The purposes of using this method are to describe, explain, forecast, or regulate the phenomena in terms of numerical data and descriptive form (Gay et al., 2012).

The researcher used a quantitative method to analyse the descriptive statistics to find the highest mean scores of the students' difficulties for the TOEFL test. The highest mean scores categories represented the most common difficulties encountered by the participants. Moreover, the researcher also examined students' test-taking strategies or potential solutions to overcome the most common difficulties with listening comprehension questions for the TOEFL test.

The current research conducted at Royal English (one of online English courses in Malang city). The researcher chose this institution because during the Covid-19 outbreak, most English institutions' course conducted a TOEFL preparation programs. Furthermore, the qualification of the TOEFL teacher is a Master of English Language Teaching at King's College London, University of London, United Kingdom, who has been certified as a TOEFL, TOEIC, and IELTS Trainer by the British Council.

The subjects of this study were Indonesian EFL learners at online English course who have already taken the TOEFL ITP prediction test in Royal English. The researcher obtained the respondents from a total number of 30 graduate university students from various cities in Indonesia. They come from 20 cities around Indonesia as presented in the following table.

Table 1 Subjects' Cities of Origin

City	Number from Each City	N
Malang and Jakarta	4	8
Tangerang	3	3
Bandung, Palembang, Jayapura	2	6

Mojokerto, Kupang, Sampit, Bekasi, Depok, Ambon, Bengkulu, Semarang, West Pesisir, Pasuruan, Medan, Sleman, Surabaya	1	13
TOTAL		30

Next, the researcher used purposive sampling to interview with participants to observe their strategies in overcoming the most common listening for TOEFL difficulties. According to Arikunto (2010), purposive sampling is the technique of obtaining a sample by taking a subject that is not based on the level of place, but rather on the specific purpose. Therefore, the researcher identified the participants with the highest required TOEFL score of >500 to interview about their strategies in dealing with the most common difficulties in answering the listening comprehension section for the TOEFL ITP prediction test based on their responses of the questionnaire. However, there were only five out of thirty EFL learners who found significantly to be interviewed.

The instruments employed in this study were questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire was developed and adapted from Fitria (2021) which consisted of 21 statements about listening comprehension difficulties in taking TOEFL test. To indicate which propositions they preferred, the researcher applied the Likert scale with a determination score of 1 to 5 (Santoso 2003). The range of the Likert scale consist of 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, and 5=Strongly Disagree. This questionnaire has already been validated by the lecturer who has taught about listening comprehension for the TOEFL test. In collecting the data, the researcher asked the participants to fill out the questionnaire through Google Forms on WhatsApp and instructed them to complete it.

In collecting the data of interview, the researcher applied open-ended questions were used as the interview's instrument in this study. The interview was delivered in the mother tongue (Indonesian language) so the interviewee could express their feelings freely without being limited to vocabulary.

After finish with the data collection, the researcher calculated the mean score of students' responses in the questionnaire by using Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) 20. The interpretation of the mean score can be seen in Table 2.

Table 1 The Interpretation of Mean Score

No	Level of Difficulties	Mean Score
1.	Very Low	1.00-1.80
2.	Low	1.82-2.60
3.	Medium	2.61-3.40
4.	High	3.41-4.20
5.	Very High	4.21-5.00

(Source: Habibi et al., 2017)

The results of the questionnaire were transformed into descriptive statistics. After determining the highest mean of difficulties that represented to be the most common difficulties, all items were analyzed and described based on the table, including, mean, level and rank of difficulties.

In analyzing the data from interview, the data were transcribed into dialogue-written form. Each participant was assigned a number. For instance, the notation 'P1', denoted 'participant 1' and so on. The unnecessary data were set aside, and the important data were gathered. Moreover, the important data were translated and described in English and classified more specifically based on the sequence of the most common difficulties of listening comprehension for TOEFL ITP prediction test. Thus, the analytic conclusions have been drawn to evolve and describe the data more clearly.

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, the researcher presented the findings of the students' data of difficulties through a questionnaire and learner's strategies through an interview. The participants were thirty EFL learners who come from twenty cities in Indonesia and had taken the TOEFL ITP prediction test at online English course.

The results were provided in the form of descriptive statistics after calculating the number of difficulties through SPSS by providing the mean score. The results were reviewed for each item so that the most common difficulties faced by EFL learners could be identified. This study also presented the learners' strategies to overcome their difficulties using an interview. In addition, the strategies are explained based on the most common difficulties of listening comprehension for the TOEFL. The results of learners' difficulties and strategies in answering listening comprehension of TOEFL ITP prediction test were presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Difficulties of Listening Comprehension for TOEFL ITP Prediction Test

No	Difficulties of Listening for TOEFL	Mean	Interpretation	Rank
1.	The choice of words (diction) and foreign terms affects your TOEFL listening skill.	4.73	Very High	1
2.	The speaker's speed affects your TOEFL listening skill.	4.60	Very High	2
3.	The speaker's accent affects your TOEFL listening skill.	4.50	Very High	3
4.	The speakers' intonation/emphasis affects your TOEFL listening skill.	4.37	Very High	4
5.	The speakers' talk is too long so that it affects your TOEFL listening skill.	4.30	Very High	5
6.	I easily distracted by sounds or other things when listening to TOEFL test	4.03	High	6
7.	The sentence structure affects your listening skill	3.87	High	7
8.	I have limited mastery of vocabulary when listening to TOEFL test	3.43	High	8
9.	I feel lack of practice when listening to TOEFL test	3.30	Medium	9
10.	I tend to interpret any foreign vocabulary when listening to TOEFL test	3.30	Medium	10
11.	I have limited time in doing TOEFL listening test	3.27	Medium	11
12.	I have trouble catching or finding keywords when listening to TOEFL test	3.10	Medium	12
13	I have memory limitations when listening to TOEFL test	2.80	Medium	13
14.	The appearance of boredom disturbs when listening to TOEFL test	2.80	Medium	14
15.	I feel lack of motivation and enthusiasm when listening to TOEFL test	2.27	Medium	15
16.	I feel lack of concentration or focus when listening to TOEFL test	2.77	Medium	16
17.	I consider that a lot of listening	2.73	Medium	17

	questions which consist of 50 are too much			
18.	I have hearing impairment when listening to TOEFL test	2.27	Low	18
19.	I feel busy alone with other activities when listening to TOEFL test, for example playing instruments, taking notes, or doing other things	2.10	Low	19
20.	I do not have previous experience doing TOEFL test before	1.70	Very Low	20
21.	Audio interruption makes the audio sounds unclear when you are listening TOEFL test	1.57	Very Low	21

Table 1 presents very high mean scores, which range from 4.30 to 4.73, which indicate the most common difficulties in answering listening comprehension for the TOEFL ITP prediction test. The first rank is the choice of words and foreign terms (M = 4.73), followed by the speaker's speed (M = 4.60), speaker's accent (M = 4.50), speaker's intonation (M = 4.37), and speaker's long talk (M = 4.30). On the other hand, the lowest scores of listening comprehension difficulties for TOEFL ITP prediction test were due to the lack of previous experience doing the TOEFL test (M = 1.70) and audio interruption (M = 1.50).

To put it simply, the researcher classified five statements of difficulty into three statements that indicated to be the most common difficulties. The three statements difficulties were observed to discover how the EFL learners overcome them. There were (1) difficulties related the to the choice of words (diction) and foreign terms, (2) the speed and length of the talk, (3) difficulties related the speaker's accent and intonation.

First, it focused on word choice (diction) and foreign terms, which has a mean score of 4.73 in the listening comprehension difficulties for the TOEFL ITP prediction test. In line with the result of the study written by Fitria (2021) that most students (71%) feel that the choice of words (diction) and foreign terms conveyed by the speaker affects their TOEFL listening skills. Concerning to the rank of difficulty, the choice of words and foreign terms were in the fifth place of the most difficulty in answering listening for TOEFL test.

Next, the problem of speaker's speed (M = 4.60) and length of the talk (M = 30) were also becoming the most common difficulties. In the study by Rina & Tiarina (2021)

also stated, that length and speed of listening are commonly made students feel confused in answering the questions. The reason is they easily forget the information given especially if it given delivered by a native speaker who speaks too fast. The learners' strategies for answering speed and length of listening for TOEFL include focus, guessing, and anticipating the questions as well as the selected answer

Last, it was the problem of speaker's accent (M = 4.50) and intonation (M = 2.37). Learners perceived less grasping on the speaker and it made them be difficult to understand their comprehension when they were answering listening comprehension for TOEFL ITP prediction test which was used to understand the American accent that have various pronunciation and spelling. This finding was similar to Bingol's study (2014) and Fitria (2021) who found that speaker's accent and intonation are the most potential factors that cause for learners' listening comprehension difficulty. Furthermore, this finding is in accordance with Rahmi et al., (2020), they stated that the native speaker's pronunciation is mostly difficult to understand by the participants in answering listening for TOEFL test.

Therefore, to find out the learners' strategies to overcome each of the most common difficulty item, the students utilized various strategies including general strategy such as self-study, join TOEFL course, and applying answering strategies during the test.

To begin with overcoming diction and foreign terms difficulties, the learners usually practice in various of learning media, such as Longman books, online websites such as 4tests.com and TOEFL applications, or create a list of word about synonym, antonym, idioms and slang expressions. The followings are the perceptions from the students.

P1 stated that:

> *It can be overcome by having a lot of sound vocabulary and practicing frequently such as learning idiom and slang. It is because if I practice frequently, I will accumulate a large number of question banks. Therefore, enrich your vocabulary by practicing frequently because there is a phrase "practice makes perfect.*

P4 agreed that:

I often need to do listening practice. I have to look for synonyms for the words we find when practicing because synonyms are frequently asked in the TOEFL listening questions. As a result, I usually create a list of word meanings such as synonyms and antonyms.

P2 added:

Actually, I have a lot of practiced to the listening for TOEFL questions in Longman book.

P1 and P5 explained that:

What I know is that with lots of practice, we have a lot of vocabulary. Because everything is now available online, you may study on any application or website that offers TOEFL practice questions. The listening exercises taught me a lot. I usually learn through website such as 4tests.com. Usually, the vocabulary that I have written will appear on the TOEFL test.

As stated by Higby & Hudon (2014) general strategies for improving listening scores in the TOEFL test are for learners have to become familiar with the different sorts of questions, practice active listening, and take good notes. Furthermore, as supported by Pratiwi (2017), to solve the difficulties of listening for TOEFL test, the researcher discovered that students must study hard to expand their words bank.

Next, the problem of speaker's speed (M = 4.60) and length of the talk (M = 30) were also the most common difficulties. the researcher summarized that the strategies to answer speed and length in the listening for TOEFL are learners have to guess and anticipate the questions and the choice answers. On the other hand, while listening, learners have to make a conclusion and find the details of "what, when, where, who, or how" the topic is about and answer the questions sequentially. In terms of preparation, a student usually trains their listening by watching English movies with English subtitles, so the student can easily grasp the speaker's point of view when listening to TOEFL test questions.

The students' views are described below.

P1, P3 and P5:

At first, we have to guess. For example, if the choice answers are about "spring, winter, summer, autumn", oh, it means that what is being discussed is about the season. So, I have to anticipate answers like "what, when, where, who, or how. Furthermore, if the test-taker answer a long conversation or talk, the answer must be sequential. I am looking for conclusions from the conversation and guessing the details of the conversation.

P2 agreed that:

I usually also anticipate and prepare for what will be asked, then conclude according to what was discussed. Well, if I like to be concerned, usually I close my eyes, then I really listen to what I listen to. If I do not grasp what speaker is being said, I just have to anticipate and guess the questions and answers, because I cannot write it down.

P4 added:

While listening to the long conversation, as much as possible, I marked the answers that might be asked later. So, when I watched the English subtitle while listening, I understood what the actors in the film were saying. In addition, I frequently listen to music and watch movies.

In the study by Rina & Tiarina (2021) also stated that length and speed of listening are commonly made students feel confused in answering the questions. The reason is they easily forget the information given especially if it given delivered by a native speaker who speaks too fast. The learners' strategies for answering speed and length of listening for TOEFL include focus, guessing, and anticipating the questions as well as the selected answer. In addition, to train the listening skill to become familiar with the speed and length spoken by the native speaker, the learner usually watches English movies with English subtitles instead of those without, to easily grasp the speaker's point of view. However, the current result does not confirm the previous related study from (Rahmi et al., 2020). In her research, the learners usually watch movies with and without English Subtitle to improve their listening skills.

Meanwhile, during listening to the test, learners must draw conclusions and determine the details of *"what, when, where, who, or how"* the topic is about, and then answer the questions consecutively. These strategies are similar and connected with the strategies written by Philips (2001) entitled *"Longman Complete Course for the TOEFL Test: Preparation for the Computer and Paper Tests.* Philips stated that the strategies in

answering a long talk are to anticipate the topics, questions, must draw conclusions, and listen to the audio as well as answer in order.

Last, it was the problem of speaker's accent (M = 4.50) and intonation (M = 2.37). Learners perceived less grasping on the speaker and it made them be difficult to understand their comprehension when they were answering listening comprehension for TOEFL ITP prediction test which was used to understand the American accent that have certain pronunciation. The perspectives from the learners are provided below.

PI said that:

> *I have to practice listening to the American accent so that I am familiar with the meaning of the speaker. When I attended a course at Royal English, there were a lot of materials that could be utilized as references, and study materials, to boost our preparation and strategies in overcoming to listening problems.*

P4 agreed that:

> *Because the British accent and the American accent are also different. To overcome this, I often take TOEFL Prediction. Sometimes, the conversations in TOEFL Prediction are similar to the original ones, so I can guess what it means to begin with.*

P2 added:

> *I learned from YouTube. The video showed on the screen instantaneously, precisely the questions were alike when I took the TOEFL test.*

Continued with P3 and P5:

> *Overall, I have to listen to a lot of listening for TOEFL audios that has an American accent. When it comes to listening, I have to get used to listening to audio, such as English song with an American accent. Coincidentally, TOEFL listening uses an American accent, so the point is I have to listen to a lot of American accents.*

This finding was similar to Bingol's study (2014) and Fitria (2021) who found that speaker's accent and intonation are the potential factors that cause for learners' listening comprehension. In line with previous study from Rahmi et al., (2020), the native speaker's pronunciation is mostly difficult to understand by the participants. To overcome the difficulty of the speaker accent and intonation, the learners attend TOEFL course to become familiar with the speaker's accent and intonation. Furthermore, it can be overcome by

listening to TOEFL listening audios, watching YouTube videos and listening to English songs to become familiar with the American accent. These strategies are similar to the study of Rahmi et al., (2020). It was discovered that attending the TOEFL course, watching YouTube, and listening to English song are the TOEFL listening strategies to overcome the their difficulties.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study has been undertaken by identifying EFL learners' difficulties and strategies difficulties in answering listening comprehension of TOEFL ITP prediction test. The researcher had already classified the 21 items as difficulties into three categories, which were considered to be the most common difficulties. Each of them was also investigated in terms of the potential strategies to overcome it.

First, the choice of words (diction) is also to be the most common difficulty. The learners overcame this problem by practicing and using a variety of learning sources, such as Longman books, online websites, TOEFL application, or just making a list of words to recognize the meanings, synonyms, and antonym

. Next, the speaker's speed and long talk was also affected the learners' listening for the TOEFL test. Anticipating the question and signing the expected answer is one of the strategies for overcoming the speaker's speed and length of the talk. Furthermore, while listening, the learners must make inferences and identify the details about "what, when, where, who, or how" of the topic by answering the questions in order.

Last, the speaker's accent and intonation affected the learners' listening for the TOEFL test. To overcome these difficulties, learners must become familiar with the speaker's accent and intonation. By watching YouTube videos and movies, listening to English songs consistently, and enrolling in TOEFL preparation courses and TOEFL prediction, they can gradually develop familiarity with speaker accent and intonation.

Concerning the preceding research findings, the researcher provided several suggestions about the study's findings. The researcher of this study is well aware of the study's limitations. Since the study's population was small and restricted, the findings cannot be properly extended to a much larger population. Moreover, new research findings

related to listening difficulties are expected to be provided into larger populations for future researchers, as well as to strengthen and reinforce theories about listening for TOEFL difficulties created by certain experts or authors who have published TOEFL book. For TOEFL teachers, they can encourage the learners to focus more on the components of the listening comprehension section that appear to be the most difficult and overcome the difficulties by practicing in various learning media and applying test-taking strategies. Furthermore, for the TOEFL learners can acquire strategies for each difficulty connected to the most common difficulties discovered by the researcher in this study.

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