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Students' Perception of The Challenges in Comprehending the English Language Listening Test

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Abstract: Listening is an essential component of the communication process. Of the four primary components of communication skills—reading, listening, speaking, and writing—it is the most crucial one. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate the students' perception of the factors that make it challenging to comprehend the "Listening Test" assessment. Eighteen (18) students from the DNS3B class at Politeknik Balik Pulau who took the "Listening Test" assessment for the course DUE 3012, Communicative English 2 participated in this study. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data collected via a yes-or-no questionnaire. The result showed that a few major factors influenced the students' performance in their "Listening Test" assessment. They are; a) Language proficiency level, b) Listening skills, c) Passage length, d) Speech rate, e) Poor audio projection, and f) Testing Conditions. This paper also recommended several implications for practices based on this study and previous research for curriculum designers, teachers/lecturers/instructors and students.

Keywords: Key factors; Listening skills; Listening test; Second Language Listeners; Students' perception

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INTRODUCTION

When learning a language, there are four skills to be completed to enable communication to take place. The four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—are referred to as this. Students have been exposed to these skills in early childhood education. Listening is a vital part of the communication process, it gives an individual the capacity and the ability to receive and interpret the messages that are being conveyed. The ability to listen is an important skill that is needed by everyone, it is an active method for gathering and understanding information (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

Listening skills are often regarded as passive skills that will develop on their own and it is not given as much importance as the other skills. It examines how phonemes, words, and grammar structures fit into the language. It also examines the listener's expectations, the situation and context, and prior knowledge. (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Achieving effective communication depends widely on listening, if an individual failed to listen properly there is a high chance that their messages can be misinterpreted, causing miscommunication and misunderstanding.

Being second-language listeners, students in Malaysia face difficulties in understanding the spoken English language. Hence, they fail in comprehending what they hear. Apart from that, the teaching of listening skills is not considered significant compared to the rest of the other skills in schools. This is because the listening skill is assumed to be a skill that is acquired naturally when learning a language by teachers. It does not need to go through a specific learning process in the classroom as per the other skills. Thus, the students feel that learning to listen is difficult and are demotivated. Kurita (2012) mentioned that learners might see listening skills as difficult to acquire and that teachers should change their teaching method to an effective one.

As for the teachers, they assume that students can listen and follow instructions when they start schooling. They fail to realise that the students are yet to master the listening strategies and techniques to

enable them to comprehend the spoken English language. Teachers fail to see the connection between speaking skills and listening skills. As Rose (2011) mentioned, listening is interrelated with speaking. Hence, there would not be any communication if there is no listening. It is impossible for students who are having trouble speaking the language to grasp what they hear, and listening comprehension only makes the matter worse. Apart from that, as second-language listeners, their listening performance is also influenced by their mother tongue, family background and their English language proficiency level. They face this daunting situation from early childhood until adulthood.

Referring to Politeknik Balik Pulau, DNS3B students, as the respondents of this study, their English language results in the national examination fall under the average and poor category. This contributes to the problem of understanding the English language and contributes to the difficulties in comprehending the "Listening Test" assessment in the subject DUE 3012 – Communicative English 2. As for the "Listening Test" assessment in DUE 3012, the course learning outcome (CLO) focuses on 'listening and responding to enquiries using appropriate language'. It seeks to give students the knowledge and abilities to ask questions and answer them in tones and styles that are appropriate.

Unfortunately, without any exposure to listening tactics or approaches as described in the syllabus, students are supposed to be able to listen for information and respond to it. Students are only taught the context and exposed to various recordings. The curriculum designers and lecturers assume that the students are well equipped with the skills as they went through the process of learning the language at an early age. They failed to see the problems faced by the students as a second-language listener. This results in the students having a harder time understanding the audio played for the listening assessment.

The absence of considering the factors that contribute to the student's difficulties in comprehending the audio recording for the listening assessment is

unfair to the students. The student's point of view should be taken into consideration by the syllabus designers, "Listening Test" assessment coordinators and lecturers to ensure that the student's performance is not hindered.

Regarding this problem statement, this study is carried out to determine the factors that make it challenging to comprehend the audio recording in the "Listening Test" assessment for the subject DUE3012 – Communicative English 2 from the student's point of view. The researcher feels that it is crucial to know the problem faced by the students as the stakeholders in Politeknik Balik Pulau.

By conducting this study, significant data regarding the factors influencing the student's performance will be obtained. These factors must be taken into consideration by the curriculum designers, teachers, lecturers and educators to help the students in overcoming the struggles faced in the listening component. The research question investigated in this study is as below:

What are the students' perceptions towards the factors that contribute to their difficulties in understanding the listening assessment audio?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of listening.

The act of receiving and perceiving a language using ears to identify and process the sound into words and sentences is called a listening process. In the listening process, an individual will listen and use the ears to pick up on the sound of the letters, stress, rhythm and pauses, the brain is responsible for turning these sounds into messages (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Focus and attention are the important aspects that need to be present while listening.

Listening is a conscious process that involves an active mind, according to Goss (1982), there are five stages of the listening process. The first stage is the ***Receiving Stage***, that serves as the first step in the listening process and involves hearing and paying attention. What happens in this stage is the hearing process where the ears

capture and register the sound waves as it enters the eardrum. For the listening process to happen, an individual need to be able to hear what is being said.

The second stage is the ***Understanding stage***, through the process of decoding, the individual tries to decode and understand the meaning of the words that they are hearing. When the individual that listens can match the message with their interpretations, then the understanding stage takes place. To be able to understand, the listener may ask questions to fill in the gaps for a better understanding of their meaning. During the understanding phase, the listener determines the context and meaning of the words they hear by decoding them. When the listener matches the speaker's message with their interpretation of the words' meanings and context, this is called understanding or comprehension. One way to better understand the speaker's meaning is to probe any unanswered questions in your mental reconstruction of their message.

The third stage is the ***Evaluation stage***, where the listener evaluates the information that is received and can form an opinion about what they heard and starts developing a response based on the evaluation. This happens when the listener has a complete understanding of what the speaker is trying to convey.

The listener can categorize and retain the information that was uttered by the speaker for later access during the ***Fourth Stage, Remembering***. Given the listener's attentiveness, comprehension, and evaluation, there is a good possibility that the information will be preserved in the listener's memory, enabling later recall of details about individuals, things, and events.

The final stage is the ***Responding stage***; the listener uses either short-term or long-term memory to formulate verbal or nonverbal responses. When a listener verbally reacts to what they have heard and remembered, such as by asking a question or making a comment, the roles of speaker and listener are momentarily reversed.

Importance of listening skills.

Listening is an important process of receiving, interpreting and responding to

spoken communication. It is an important process in trying to understand what other people are saying. According to Bingol et al., 2014, the learning process mainly depends on listening, it is stated that all those other skills such as speaking, reading and writing are followed by listening skills. If an individual possesses good listening skills it will make it easier for them to understand and comprehend what is being said and helps in communicating with others. An individual can learn how to correctly pronounce words, use intonation, and where place stresses in sentences and words through listening. Listening helps to improve the ability to solve problems and better understand concepts in a social and professional setting. Improve ability to socialize. Improve ability to empathize with friends and family. Strengthen relationships by making them feel valued. Improve your ability to absorb information (Bonvillain 2019). Diora & Rosa (2020), says that it is crucial to listen to different forms of English regularly in order to be able to converse in the language. This is because listening is a source of input.

Listening and vocabulary go hand in hand. Knowing the definitions of every word a speaker uses will help students retain the information and have a better grasp of it. If the student's family is chatty, there is a good likelihood that the student will have a natural "ear for language," see the value of the excellent structure, and have plenty of experience with a range of listening levels and styles. When the listener is engaged in mental and physical activity, they learn more quickly and accurately about what they hear (Journal et al., 2015).

Student's problem with listening

According to Yilmaz & Yavuz (2015), students learn mainly by using listening skills and poor listening skills affect their learning process, some major problems with listening are regularly faced by students during their learning experience. Lack of control over the speed at which the speakers speak is very common among students that are not familiar with the subject and fail to follow what is being said and eventually will be lost in the subject of discussion. The next problem that students face while listening would be not being able to get things

repeated, sometimes when they couldn't catch up with what is being said, it would be helpful if they can get the speaker to repeat but sometimes it couldn't happen (El-Nahhal, 2018). The listener's limited vocabulary in the language that is being spoken will cause the problem because the student will not be able to interpret what is being said and will not be able to understand the conversation. Followed by the failure to recognize the signals, and having issues with the interpretation which might be related to the limited vocabulary. Students that have concentration issues will face problems with listening as well because listening requires concentration and participation from the listener to understand what is being said.

Factors that make listening difficult.

Several factors make listening difficult for learners while trying to understand what is being said. Students will have difficulty communicating or listening if they are unable to hear it. The students' poor ability to listen indicates that they struggle. The difficulties prevent the learning objective from being fully realized. According to Trismasari et al., n.d., a study was conducted on the factors that contribute to making listening difficult and it focuses mainly on the sources that are involved with the listener, the teacher, the speaker, the listening text and the physical environment. In this study conducted by Trismasari et al., n.d., the factors that make listening difficult were identified and categorized, the listening text is one of the factors when it has unfamiliar vocabulary, slang and expressions that are not familiar, and grammar structure that might be at a level that is not appropriated to the listener, unfamiliar topic, complicated information that is being shared by the speaker which is not relevant to the listener.

The next factor would be the speaker, whereby the conversation involving hesitation and pauses, rate of delivery, using a reduced form that is not familiar, various accents, redundancy, and pronunciation, will lead to misinterpretation by the listener because they will be required to interpret and understand. Listening while learning can be made difficult by another factor as referred to Trismasari et al., n.d., the teacher's skills while conveying the

subject matter, such as the asking skill, reinforcement on the subject, variation in teaching according to the needs and ability of every student, the explanation will make it difficult if the teacher is unaware of the group of learners that she is teaching.

Next, would be the listener's boundaries with lack of background knowledge and topic familiarity, lack of grammar knowledge, lack of listening strategies, and psychological problems as in if they are not ready to listen to what is being said or their attention is elsewhere, physical problem as in if they have any hearing problem will eventually contribute to listening difficulties. The physical environment is also a factor as it involves the physical environment, noise and poor quality and visual clues, these will make listening difficult because it will affect the concentration of the listener.

Supporting Studies on Listening Difficulties

Several studies were conducted to identify the listening difficulties faced by learners in various contexts.

Nuriah (2021) aimed to identify the problems encountered by the respondents when listening to daily situational topics in an English Educational Programme at STKIP Nurul Huda. The respondents were from the second semester. As for the findings, the researcher identified thirty (30) problems and categorised them into three (3) aspects; 1) seven (7) problems in the listening material, 2) fourteen (14) problems in the audience factor, and 3) nine (9) problems in the physical environment.

Nadhira and Warni (2020) carried out a study investigating students' listening difficulties in English as a foreign language. The study was conducted at a secondary school in Indonesia. The respondents had a number of issues, including unfamiliar words, a fast speech rate, an unfamiliar accent, imprecise pronunciation, poor recording quality, and insufficient equipment. Background knowledge of the student, a lack of practice, and background noise were further contributing factors.

Calub et al (2018) , conducted a descriptive study on the common listening comprehension issues the chosen respondents in the College of Education

encountered. Results showed that the physical settings, noise and distortion of the surroundings and faultiness in the listening material/equipment are the massive cause of the respondents listening comprehension difficulties. Besides that, they too face problems with the listening comprehension process and the context of the text that is less severe.

According to El-Nahhal (2018), who studied how difficult it is for young learners to learn listening skills from the teachers' perspectives, the main challenges were: 1) understanding spoken text for the first time, 2) the speed of speech, and 3) the length of the audio. Apart from that, there were no significant differences when considering gender.

Even though several types of research had been carried out, there is still a gap when it comes to the student's perspective. Thus, this study is crucial to identify the factors contributing to the students listening difficulties in the listening test.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research approach was used in this investigation. The data for the analysis is collected via a Google Form online survey. Yes-or-No questions were chosen for this study as they are dichotomous and appropriate for factual reporting. It eliminates all room for doubt in its responses. 18 students from Politeknik Balik Pulau's DNS3B class were handed the questionnaire upon having completed the "Listening Test" exam for the Communicative English 2 course, DUE 3012. It contained twenty (20) yes-or-no questions.

The focus of the questionnaire was on the students' perceptions of the factors that make it challenging for them to comprehend the "Listening Test" assessment questions. To enable the researcher to pinpoint the key factors that influence the student's performance, the questions were grouped into several factors: (a) characteristics of the listener; (b) characteristics of the passage; (c) physical conditions; and (d) characteristics of the testing conditions. A descriptive statistical

analysis, including frequency and percentages, was performed on the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study concluded from the responses to the questionnaire that there are several key factors that significantly influence the performance of Politeknik Balik Pulau DNS3B students on the Listening Test assessment in the course DUE 3012 - Communicative English 2. It offers crucial data for achieving the study goal, which is to identify the factors that make it challenging to comprehend the "Listening Test" assessment.

The first-factor category 'Characteristics of the Listener' analysis revealed that being a second language learner (L2), **the learners' proficiency, experience and listening skills** in a classroom must be considered by the lecturers when designing the Listening Test assessment. Rost (2011) mentioned that the individual listener factor is often neglected when testing the students' listening skills. Several factors associated with prior language exposure influence L2 listeners' listening skills, according to Bloomfield et al (2011).

As for the 'Characteristics of the Passage', the current study revealed that producing **long passages** to test the student's listening skills has imposed a negative impact on low-proficiency students. Listening to long parts and retaining all the information depends greatly on a student's level. Students at lower levels find it difficult to listen for more than three minutes before completing the assigned task (Bingol et al,2014). Calub et al (2018) mentioned that their respondents also had a hard time understanding long-speech texts, especially when the topic was unfamiliar.

In the case of **auditory features; speaker accent, noise and distortion, and speech rate**, it has been discovered that the quality of the audio recording and the speaker's speech rate interrupted the respondents' comprehension of the listening test. Some teachers tend to use recorded materials that are of low quality in the listening assessment. It has been demonstrated that the audio system's quality can affect how well students are able

to understand the material they are hearing (Bingol et al., 2014).

As for the **speaker's accent**, some respondents face difficulties in comprehending the audio due to this factor. Thus, the lecturers must record the listening test audio using an L2 speaker or the lecturer itself to minimize comprehension difficulties faced by the students. This is consistent with the findings of a study conducted by Hamouda (2013), who claimed that their respondents had difficulty understanding listening owing to the wide range of accents. It is common for students to experience this problem because they have become accustomed to their teachers' accents.

Poor equipment interference is another factor that contributes to listening difficulties among students. According to a study by Calub et al. (2018), confusing sounds produced by subpar equipment can impair listening comprehension. This results in hardship in the process of learning to listen better for L2 listeners. Thus, to motivate students to learn listening skills, the lecturer must ensure that this minor factor doesn't contribute to students' comprehension difficulty.

Finally, setting the **testing conditions** for an assessment is very crucial as it determines the students' performance. One should consider the students' proficiency level and background knowledge to set a valid listening assessment for the students. According to Bloomfield et al (2011), an assessment becomes more difficult when a time limit is imposed. As for L2 listeners that are lower-proficiency listeners, when the listening audio is repeated several times, it improves the student's comprehension especially when the passage is difficult due to factors like speech rate.

In order to summarize the findings based on the study's research topic, it can be said that: -

The factors that contribute the most to the respondent's difficulties in comprehending the listening assessment audio are: -

- i. Language proficiency level
- ii. Listening skills

- iii. Passage length
 iv. Speech rate
 v. Poor audio projection
 vi. Testing Conditions
- The factor that contributes the least to the respondent's difficulties in comprehending the listening assessment audio is:-
- i. The condition of the classroom

4.1 Characteristics of the Listener

TABLE 1: Respondents' perception towards their English (L2) proficiency, experience and listening skills.

No	Questions	Yes		No	
		f(x)	%	f(x)	%
1	Do you like the English subject offered in Politeknik Balik Pulau?	18	100	0	0
2	I am not so good at my English.	9	50	9	50
3	I got good grades for my Communicative English 2 listening test.	9	50	9	50
4	Did you find it hard to answer the questions in the listening test paper?	10	55.6	8	44.4
5	I have poor listening skills.	9	50	9	50
8	I was unable to understand some words used in the audio.	18	100	0	0
11	Did you manage to answer all the questions in the listening test?	14	77.8	4	22.2

TABLE 2: Respondents' perception towards their effort.

No	Questions	Yes		No	
		f(x)	%	f(x)	%
9	Did you attempt to do any listening questions before your listening test is conducted?	14	77.8	4	22.2
10	I think lack of practice in the listening component leads to my poor grades in the listening test.	6	33.3	12	66.7

4.2 Characteristics of the Passage

TABLE 3: Respondents' perception towards the passage length.

No	Questions	Yes		No	
		f(x)	%	f(x)	%
13	The text in the audio was too long.	16	88.9	2	11.1
14	I find it difficult to interpret the actual meaning when the audio is long.	9	50	9	50

TABLE 4: Respondents' perception towards the auditory features; speaker accent, noise and distortion, and speech rate.

No	Questions	Yes		No	
		f(x)	%	f(x)	%
7	I could not comprehend the audio because of the speaker's accent.	6	33.3	12	66.7
12	The audio played was too fast.	18	100	0	0
17	The audio was not clear.	9	50	9	50

4.3 Physical Conditions

TABLE 5: Respondents' perception towards the classroom condition.

No	Questions	Yes		No	
		f(x)	%	f(x)	%
15	Was the surrounding convenient to conduct the listening test?	18	100	0	0
16	The condition of the classroom interfered with my listening comprehension.	1	5.6	17	94.4
18	There was a disturbance from the surroundings.	6	33.3	12	66.7
19	The speakers were faulty and resulted in poor audio projection.	18	100	0	0

4.4 Characteristics of the Testing Conditions

TABLE 6: Respondents' perception towards the condition set for the Listening Test assessment.

No	Questions	Yes		No	
		f(x)	%	f(x)	%
20	The audio was only played twice.	18	100	0	0

CONCLUSION

Having reviewed the results and discussion of the study, the researchers reached the following conclusion:

The coordinator for the listening assessment for the course DUE3012 – Communicative English 2 in Politeknik Balik Pulau overlooked the factors that might influence the student's comprehension of the recording played when designing the assessment. This is based on the DNS 3B students' perception towards the factors that contributed to their difficulties in comprehending the listening test assessment.

Several factors had a major influence on the student's performance as per discussed in the discussion section. These factors hindered the students understanding towards the recording. The assumption is that students can listen and follow instructions when they start schooling. They fail to realise that the students are yet to master the listening strategies/ techniques to enable them to comprehend the recording. This is supported by Ahmadi (2016), who stated that the listening element in the English language has been disregarded in second-language teaching despite the importance that has been proven in many studies.

To worsen the situation for these L2 listeners, they come from different backgrounds which leads to different levels of language proficiency. Without the appropriate listening strategies, students will have difficulties comprehending the recording, leading to demotivation in learning the English language (Chaudron 1988).

According to the study's results, lecturers should seriously consider several factors when designing and conducting Listening Test assessments. This is mainly to ease and motivate the students to learn the language specifically L2 learners. Hence, the lecturers' guidance and support are crucial to enable students to perform well in the classroom and also on assessments.

Teaching listening techniques and how to use them in listening tasks is crucial, according to Renukadevi (2014). To assist these L2 listeners, classrooms should implement proper listening practices. To be effective listeners, learners must comprehend what they hear. As they listen to what is being said, they should recall it, relate it to what is next, and modify their understanding of what they heard. This is based on what they had previously learned. (Kanwal 2022).

The researchers believe that the teacher plays a vital role in helping the students develop their listening skills. Appropriate materials and activities should be provided to assist and motivate the students to learn listening skills as it is a part of the English language learning process. A student's ability to deal with actual language challenges can be enhanced through authentic listening materials, as stated by Quoc et. al. (2020). Minimizing the factors contributing to the difficulty in comprehending a recording will eventually decrease the listening anxiety faced by the L2 listeners and motivate them to become independent learners.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Following are a few recommendations for practice based on the findings of this study and related earlier research presented in this paper:

Curriculum Designers

- State the listening techniques that are required to be taught by the teachers.
- Specify the listening outcome required in the syllabus and listening assessment.
- When designing listening assessments, consider the student's proficiency level and the factors that lead to difficulty comprehending the recording. Try to minimize the effect of the factors.

Teachers/ Lecturers / Instructors

- Prepare lesson plans in advance incorporating listening techniques for low-level to advanced-level students. Teaching listening skills is crucial to equip students with adequate listening skills.
- Identify the types of classroom listening performance that are required in the listening activity conducted in the classroom to detect the students' strengths and weaknesses when carrying out a particular listening task.
- Expose students (especially L2 listeners) to a variety of recordings of the target-language speakers to

enable them to understand the spoken English language.

Students

- Self-motivate to develop some level of proficiency in the English language, especially for L2 listeners.
- Conduct self-study lessons to improve listening skills.

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