

Students' Strategies in Answering the TOEFL Listening Test at UIN Datokarama Palu

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the level of listening skill in TOEFL and the strategies used in answering TOEFL listening. Students sometimes struggle to understand spoken English, especially while taking the TOEFL test for the first time. Therefore, it is crucial to identify the strategies they use to overcome these challenges. This study used a mixed method and a sequential explanatory type. The participants were 30 eighth-semester English students from UIN Datokarama Palu. All students took a TOEFL test, and the eight students with the highest listening scores were chosen for interview. Data were collected by using semi-structured interview and analyzed thematically to identify the different types of listening tactics employed. The results showed that students used three primary categories of strategies: social-affective, cognitive, and metacognitive. Students are more likely to employ cognitive and metacognitive techniques than social-affective ones. This study indicates that increasing awareness of listening strategies can help first-time test takers improve their TOEFL scores and reduce anxiety about listening comprehension. The results suggest that students could implement the strategies to enhance their listening scores.

I. Introduction

Listening comprehension involves more than listening to audio, but also understanding context, identifying keywords, and comprehending information. Listening is understanding spoken language, which includes words, speech sounds, and overall meaning [1]. This ability is crucial in determining an individual's ability to understand English in a variety of situations and contexts. As an active process, auditory comprehension involves the listener creating meaning by utilizing clues from prior knowledge and contextual information, as well as using a variety of strategic resources to accomplish the task [2].

Generally, these three types of listening strategies are used: cognitive strategy, metacognitive strategy, and social affective strategy [3]. Metacognitive listening strategies consist of five types of strategies: problem solving, planning and evaluation, mental interpretation, self-knowledge, and deliberate focus [4]. These strategies enable students to recognize and understand how individuals learn and assimilate information, which means thinking about how their minds work in the context of learning. On the other hand, cognitive strategies include mental processes that are active in the execution of tasks, such as practicing and analyzing, which help learners to understand and produce new language in various ways [5]. Applying cognitive strategies, learners can understand the meaning of new words and phrases, such as predicting the content of conversations, noting keywords, and analyzing sentences. The last one, social affective strategies are concerned with how learners interact with other learners. The main components of social affective strategies are students working together to collect information or receive input about the lesson, asking questions to get more detailed explanations from teachers or friends and self-talk to provide confidence that they will succeed and also reduce anxiety [6]. This strategy helps students to manage their anxiety in the high- pressure listening process in exam situations.

There are many ways to determine listening comprehension, including the TOEFL test. TOEFL is a test administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to assess a non-native English speaker's ability to speak English [7]. It consists of three sections: listening, structure, written expression, and

reading. Listening skill in TOEFL is crucial as they demonstrate skills in understanding English in academic contexts and everyday interactions [8]. Although the TOEFL is typically used as a proficiency test for academic and professional purposes, some countries, such as UK, New Zealand, Canada, and Australia, mandate it for university applications and job recruitment [9]. Thus, listening is a skill that is not only necessary for academic or everyday contexts but also for professional advancement.

However, understanding the listening conversation in TOEFL is difficult for test takers. The research of Fitria explained that test-takers must understand spoken English in lectures, academic discussions, and conversations, which are often delivered naturally and with various accents to pass this portion [10]. Students sometimes struggle with this section due to the speech rate, unfamiliar topics, and lack of concentration. Apart from that, the difficulties faced by students were capturing the speaker's ideas, identifying idioms, and maintaining crucial information [11]. The strategies for dealing with listening to TOEFL part A based on Longman books such as listening to negative expressions, listening for expressions of uncertainty and suggestion, drawing the information about who, where, and when from the dialogue [12]. However, previous researchers focused on strategy A for test takers who previously had 3 times experience in the TOEFL test.

Despite several previous studies that have discussed the difficulties and strategies for answering listening questions in the TOEFL, most of them focus on participants who have experienced listening to the TOEFL several times. It leads to limitations in understanding how strategies are used by participants who are facing the TOEFL test for the first time. In addition, previous studies tend to emphasize only certain parts, such as part A. Therefore this research is here to fill this gap by exploring the listening strategies of all parts used by English Education students at UIN Datokarama Palu who are taking the TOEFL test for the first time.

Based on these limitations, this research is focused on identify the level of listening skills in TOEFL and determine the listening comprehension strategies used by first-time TOEFL test takers, especially English Education students at UIN Datokarama Palu when responding to the TOEFL listening section. The findings of this research are expected to help build efficient listening strategies for TOEFL preparation courses and provide information to English language instructors regarding the approaches commonly used by learners. This also aims to be a curriculum development to design more appropriate learning in improving students' readiness for listening exams and students can recognize and choose effective listening strategies to be used in the learning process. Strategies are very important for students to improve their listening comprehension and overcome difficulties based on the challenges above by previous researchers. using effective learning strategies can improve students' proficiency in answering standardized test questions [13].

II. Method

In this research, the researchers used a mixed method to collect and analyze data. Mixed method is a combination of quantitative and qualitative research. Research type in this research was sequential explanatory. Sequential explanatory is an approach that involves quantitative methods in the first stage then followed by qualitative data collection and analysis [14]. In this approach, qualitative research explores the details of the case being researched with reinforcement of the initial quantitative findings. In this research, the researchers aim to explore students' strategies in answering listening comprehension on the TOEFL based on students who have the highest scores on the test.

The participants of this study were 30 students of the 8th semester of Tadris English UIN Datokarama Palu. The criteria used were samples that understood the information from the research. After completing the TOEFL test, eight students had higher scores on the listening section than the others. In this study, researchers used two data collection techniques from quantitative and qualitative, which are tests and interviews. researchers gave the TOEFL Prediction Test to determine students' high scores. As for qualitative, researchers use interview instruments to find out more about students' strategies when answering the TOEFL listening test. Interviews in this study were semi-structured. in analyzing the data, researchers used descriptive statistics. researchers analyzed the TOEFL test using SPSS version 30 to find out the minimum, maximum and mean values. while the data analysis technique for interviews is using three stages: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing [15].

III. Results and Discussion

A. Result

1. Quantitative Result

The results of the 2021 Tadris English students at UIN Datokarama Palu's TOEFL listening prediction test are shown in this section. The participants who scored the highest were chosen for interviews after the data was displayed in a table.

Table 1. TOEFL Prediction Listening Test Result

No	Name	Score
1	LTN	54
2	RAA	49
3	RI	49
4	SNR	49
5	NAKN	48
6	RAY	48
7	WDN	48
8	SLZ	46
9	FZM	45
10	TSS	44
11	DAL	43
12	RA	42
13	RSR	42
14	EF	41
15	NA	41
16	NGS	41
17	NK	41
18	RRA	41
19	YLN	39
20	DL	38
21	MSG	38
22	SMJ	38
23	AH	37
24	MH	37
25	MA	37
26	SZJ	35
27	RBM	33
28	DA	32
29	FB	32
30	SRW	32

The results of the above scores can explain that each student has different abilities in answering the listening TOEFL test. This difference reflects the variation in scores listed in the table, where the highest score is 54 and the lowest is 32, which indicates that most students are able to answer questions with medium to high understanding.

The following are the results of descriptive analysis of the TOEFL listening test related to minimum, maximum and mean scores.

Table 2. TOEFL Prediction Listening Test Result

	N	Minimum	Maximum	mean	Std. Deviation
TOEFL	30	32,00	54,00	41,3333	5,82109
Valid N (listwise)	30				

Based on the table above, it can be concluded that the minimum score of TBI Students batch 2021 in the TOEFL listening test is 32,00, the maximum is 54,00 and the mean is 41,3333. These results identify that the students general listening abilities fall within the middle range, with little fluctuation in their scores. This can be inferred because the standard variation is quite small.

The following CEFR graph presents a mapping of student abilities based on TOEFL test results, in order to identify their level of competence in listening skills. This visualization not only shows the general distribution of abilities, but also helps researchers in determining informants who are suitable for further interviews. Students who were at the highest CEFR level among their peers were selected as interview participants to find out the strategies used.

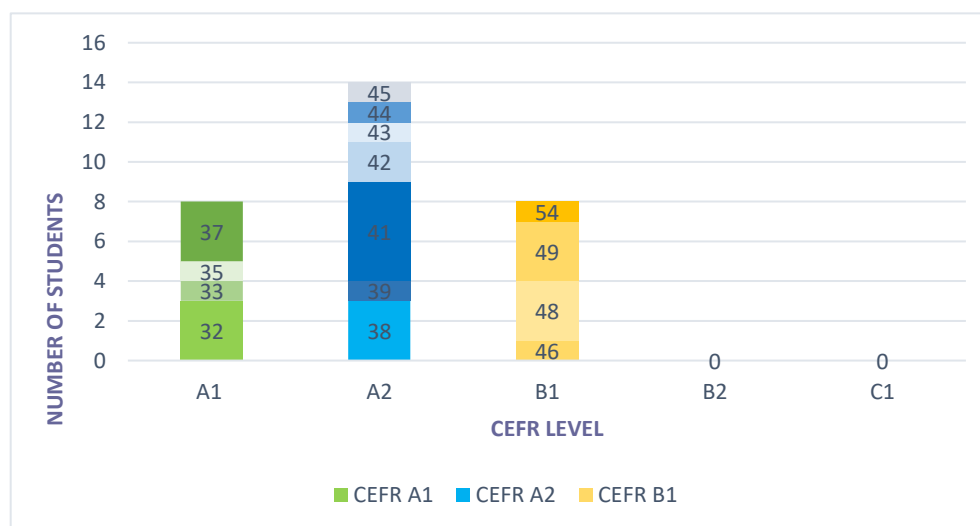


Fig. 1. Students Score Distribution Based on CEFR

The CEFR is a commonly used criterion for describing how well a person learns and uses a language. The CEFR categorizes competency from beginning (A1) to advanced (C2). In this study, students' TOEFL listening scores were compared to CEFR levels to better explain their level of comprehension.

The majority of students were found to be at the A1 or A2 level, indicating that they could only absorb basic or elementary knowledge. Only a small minority achieved the B1 level, indicating that they can understand the major ideas of spoken English and recognize expressions or meanings conveyed in discussion.

2. Qualitative Result

To provide a better understanding of how students approach the listening section of the TOEFL, eight students from the B1 level group were interviewed. Their responses provided insight into the specific strategies they used when answering the test.

The students used a variety of techniques, which may be divided into three primary categories: metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective strategies. Although the students' usage of strategies varied in terms of frequency and type, metacognitive and cognitive techniques were most frequently employed.

a. *Metacognitive strategies*

Metacognitive strategies are high-level executive methods that involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning outcomes. In the TOEFL context, this technique refers to how students manage their time, concentrate, and prepare themselves before the audio is begun. Seven out of eight students read the answer choices before listening to the audio. This allowed them to anticipate the topic and better prepare themselves for what they were about to hear. Respondent 6 explained, *"I read the answer options before the audio plays because I need time to understand the answer options. If I read after the audio start, I will run out of time to understand the answer options"*.

In addition to previewing answer options, numerous students reported utilizing time-management techniques such as avoiding difficult questions. Rather of concentrating on issues that confounded them, individuals preferred to move on and concentrate on questions they could definitely answer. One student explained, *"I do not bother with questions that I find difficult, because I do not want to waste time in a situation that makes me not focus on listening."* Respondent 5 also stated, *"I listen well to the audio and have to be thorough."* This strategy helped them maintain prioritize and maximize the short time available during the listening phase.

Another metacognitive strategy discovered was focusing on the second speaker during short conversations, specifically in Part A of the TOEFL test. Students discovered that the second speaker frequently conveyed the main idea or implicit meaning. As one student mentioned, *"For the short conversation part, I focus on the second speaker."* Another added, *"focus on the second speaker, because mostly the question is 'what does the man or woman mean?' which is after the second person dialog."* Some students also stated that they avoided response choices that were frequent or sounded close to what they had heard because they were aware that these were prevalent distractions on the TOEFL test. This demonstrates a level of test awareness, which allows them to limit down their options and avoid risks.

b. *Cognitive Strategy*

Cognitive strategies are applied directly to incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning which can include knowledge in long-term memory such as inferring, summarizing, deduction, imagery, and transfer. One of the strategies used is taking notes for important information. Six out of eight respondents used this strategy in long conversation and monologue. Respondent 6 said, *"When I take notes, I take important information such as places and main topics in the audio conversation or lecture."* Respondent 1 also stated, *"I take notes when listening to TOEFL, I do it with the five W technique (why, who, when, what, where) and also one H (how), which makes it easier for me to understand the information and answer the questions."* This indicates that students organized important topics while listening by taking notes, which improved their ability to remember specifics on the test.

In addition to taking notes, numerous students reported employing cognitive methods that included comprehending the general context of the listening materials. This method was especially useful when they faced unfamiliar words or were unsure of the proper answer option. Respondent 2 said, *"I comprehend the context, after that I take-notes the unfamiliar vocabulary then I contact with the word I know and the audio."* Respondent 5 also explained, *"I pay attention to key words and try to understand the context of the conversation or monologue by recalling vocabulary that I understand in the monologue or conversation."* In this situation, they would use their understanding based on the context of the conversation and the information they had gained while listening to the audio to estimate the appropriate answer.

In the same way as understanding the general context, some students also apply another strategy, which is identifying keywords in the conversation. This is an important aspect, as it allows students to understand the context and also identify the right answer. Respondent 3 said, *"When listening, there are certainly some words that are key in the question. So, if I could not answer, I will remember the key words that I heard and match them with the most relevant answer."* Respondent 7 also stated, *"I focus on the keywords of each paragraph to help me recall additional details."* This strategy is useful for students to find out important information from the conversation based on the keywords and helps them to remember the information.

c. Social Affective

Social affective strategies are broad grouping strategies that involve interaction with others or have ideational control over the influence. In the TOEFL listening test, many students reported applying these strategies to regulate their emotions and boost concentration before the audio started. Respondent 4 said, *"Before starting listening, I calm myself down by breathing so I do not get nervous, and I give positive affirmations if I can answer listening questions."* Respondent 1 added, *"Before the audio starts, I close my eyes for a moment and breathe to focus."* The statements above show that calming down before the audio starts can help students focus and be ready to listen to the audio.

B. Discussion

Based on the TOEFL prediction test results, the majority of students are at level B1 CEFR with a maximum score of 54.00 and an average of 41.3333. The students with high scores tend to use metacognitive or cognitive strategies. This is in line with previous research by Wicaksono that the learning strategies used by students in improving listening scores are compensation strategies, cognitive strategies, and metacognitive strategies [16]. The frequency of metacognitive strategies, such as reviewing the answer choices before to the audio playing and paying attention to the second speaker, indicates that students actively planned and managed their listening experience. Metacognitive techniques include learning plans, assessing one's comprehension, and evaluating the outcomes [17]. These strategies enable students to anticipate what they will hear and ready their attention in advance. One responder said that avoiding difficult questions helped them stay focused and avoid wasting time on the test. This highlights that metacognitive methods such as planning and self-regulation help to improve learning efficiency [18].

Aside from metacognition, students relied largely on cognitive processes to process listening contents. Cognitive listening strategies involve all abilities and processes connected to knowledge. For instance, inferring, predicting, interpreting, storing, summarizing, categorizing, taking notes, and recalling information [16]. These strategies improve listening comprehension by monitoring and controlling brain processes, identifying interference, and connecting world knowledge to listening content. This is in line with the findings in this study, where students applied strategies such as taking notes, identifying the keywords, and understanding the context.

The last type of strategy identified in this study is the use of social-affective strategies, which mentally prepare before listening begins, as found above, that students apply, such as breathing, closing their eyes, and giving positive affirmations to themselves. These strategies are non-academic in nature and involve stimulating learning by building a level of empathy between instructors and students [19]. These strategies include considering factors such as emotions and attitudes.

Among the three strategies, social affective strategies are the least utilized by students when answering listening tests. It can be caused by the nature of the TOEFL prediction test, which does not put as much pressure as the official exam, so students do not need to manage their anxiety specifically. This shows that students use a lot of metacognitive or cognitive strategies because they need to plan, predict, interpret, store, summarize, categorize, take notes, and recall information during the test to answer questions correctly. It is explained by experts that affective strategies aim to reduce anxiety or increase understanding through interaction, and their use is highly dependent on the learning context or test faced by the students.

The results of this study differ from those of prior studies on listening strategies in the TOEFL test. Previous studies frequently include test takers who have taken the TOEFL test multiple times, allowing them to build and refine strategies over time. In contrast, the individuals in this study were first-time TOEFL test takers, which may have influenced their strategy selection and reliance on more commonly used strategies. This study assessed the strategies employed by first-time TOEFL test takers and classified them into three categories: metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective strategies. This method provides a better understanding of how students plan, process, and control their emotions during the listening process. These strategies were explained to assist participants overcome the TOEFL listening challenge faced by beginners.

IV. Conclusion

As a result of the findings of the research, it can be inferred that UIN Datokarama Palu students employ three methods when completing TOEFL listening test: metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective strategies. Metacognitive and cognitive methods are used more frequently by students than social-affective strategies. These strategies have been shown to improve students' understanding of listening material and their ability to answer questions, even for first-time TOEFL test takers. Thus, using the appropriate strategy is critical in achieving success on the TOEFL test, particularly in the listening section.

Finally, the researchers hope this study can be helpful for students and educators. It is recommended that students practice listening to native speakers more often and use the strategies described to improve their listening skills.

Based on the conclusions reached, various recommendations can be made to Tadris English students at UIN Datokarama Palu, English lecturers, and future researchers. First, Tadris English students at UIN Datokarama Palu should use the appropriate strategies for completing TOEFL listening questions, such as the metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective strategies mentioned in this study. They should also practice adapting their hearing to English by listening to various forms of English audio on a daily basis. Second, it would be helpful that English instructors can arrange training that expressly cover strategies for overcoming with TOEFL questions, particularly the listening segment, so that students are strategically prepared before taking the test. Third, for future researchers, it is recommended to expand the scope of research, not only limited to strategies in the listening section of the TOEFL, but also includes other parts such as reading, structure, or speaking, so as to provide a more comprehensive picture of the strategies used by students in facing the TOEFL as a whole.

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