

STUDENTS' CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN IMPROVING ENGLISH LISTENING SKILLS FOR PROFESSIONAL CONTEXTS

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the challenges faced by students in improving their English listening skills for professional contexts and to identify the strategies they use to overcome these challenges. This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method. Eight students who have completed the Listening and Speaking for Professional Purposes course in the English Education Study Program at Jambi University became research participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The results show that students face linguistic challenges, including high speaking speed, unfamiliar vocabulary, different accents, excessive use of formal language, and professional jargon. In addition, psychological factors such as anxiety, lack of focus, and stress also affect their listening ability. To overcome these challenges, students develop various adaptive strategies such as audio repetition and speed adjustment, recording and translating foreign vocabulary, overcoming excessive formal language, note-taking and keyword highlighting, emotion management, and adaptation to professional jargon. These findings indicate that effective listening and learning depend not only on linguistic aspects but also on students' ability to recognize challenges and develop appropriate strategies.

Keywords: Listening skills, Learning strategy, Linguistic challenges.

INTRODUCTION

In learning a foreign language, especially English, four basic skills must be mastered: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening is a fundamental skill that needs to be mastered first because it plays a crucial role in building the foundation of English communication. Rost & Wilson (2013) define listening skills as an active process that involves real-time information processing, including word recognition, understanding sentence structure, and concluding the contents of the message. In addition, Athoillah (2022) defines listening as a natural precursor to speaking; the early stages of language development in a person's first language depend on their ability to listen. When someone often listens, they will be exposed to more language, and this exposure will be the process of language acquisition (Jahrani & Listia, 2023). In conclusion, the possession of proficient and effective listening skills is widely recognized as a crucial factor in the successful process of second language acquisition.

Alzamil (2021) emphasizes the importance of English listening in language learning, arguing that it provides the necessary input for language acquisition and enables learners to engage in spoken communication. Students must consequently obtain relevant and meaningful input through listening in order to demonstrate intelligible meaning. According to Brown (2020), listening is a

crucial skill in English, particularly for students, because it is an essential component of the language. It means that the relevance of listening can be determined based on students' ability to hear the English language and extract information from what they hear. In line with these views, Hustarna et al. (2025) reported that, considering the importance of listening skills, this skill is taught in four levels of courses over four semesters at one university in Jambi, combined with speaking skills. One of the courses is Listening and Speaking for Professional Purposes, which is offered to third-semester students. In this course, students learn how to understand and respond to communication in professional contexts, such as job interviews, presentations, discussions, and meetings.

However, many students still experience difficulties with listening skills, as evidenced by their scores, which tend to be lower in the listening section compared to the speaking section. Hustarna & Masbirorotni (2023) stated that listening is considered one of the most challenging language skills to teach and learn; therefore, it requires teaching materials that match students' needs and interests. These difficulties are generally caused by the diverse accents of the speakers, the high speed of speech, and a lack of understanding of formal vocabulary. When faced with these difficulties, some students overcome them by taking notes on the main ideas while listening to the audio, so that they can more easily remember and understand the important information being conveyed. Some students still experience difficulties even after identifying and noting down the main ideas during the listening activity due to the density of unfamiliar vocabulary in the audio material, which disrupts their concentration and hinders their overall comprehension during the listening process. Previous research by Aulia (2021), identified several challenges encountered by first-semester students in listening comprehension, including difficulties in understanding the main idea, extracting specific information, making inferences, and evaluating content. While previous research provides an overview of listening comprehension issues among first-semester college students, this study narrows the focus to explore listening challenges in a professional context to provide a more in-depth understanding of how specific listening skills are applied and the barriers learners face in real-world professional scenarios.

This study aims to describe the challenges that students face in improving their listening skills within a professional context and to explain the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. By understanding the challenges they face, it is hoped that effective strategies can be developed to help students improve their listening skills. This research is particularly important for students learning English for professional purposes, as it can help them identify barriers and effective ways to enhance their listening skills. In addition, the results of this study are also useful for lecturers in designing more targeted teaching strategies, especially in the Listening for Professional Purposes course. To guide this research, two research questions were formulated as follows;

1. What challenges do students face in learning listening for professional contexts?
2. What strategies do they employ to enhance their listening skills in professional contexts?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to investigate students' experiences in enhancing their English listening skills for professional contexts. The

research participants consisted of eight students who had completed the "Listening and Speaking for Professional Purposes" course in the English Education Study Program at a university in Jambi, selected using purposive sampling based on their high and low academic achievement categories. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured online interviews, guided by 19 questions adapted from previous research and developed based on information processing theory and cognitive load theory. Data analysis employed the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which involved data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, with consideration of trustworthiness aspects through member checking and audit trail (Miles et al., 2014).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on data analysis from interviews with eight participants, it was found that students face various challenges in improving their listening skills in a professional context. The analysis results yielded two main themes related to the challenges and strategies employed by students.

Challenges Faced by Students

Fast Speech Delivery

The interview results showed that eight participants reported difficulties when the speakers or audio recordings they heard were too fast, causing them to miss important information and experience confusion in understanding the content of conversations. As expressed by one participant below:

"The speed of speech and audio greatly affects how I interpret or understand what is being said in the audio, because the problem is sometimes not only the accent but also the speed of the speaker in the audio. Sometimes the audio speed makes it hard to catch what's being said."

This finding is consistent with Mitsea et al. (2022), who state that speaking speed is one of the external factors that can complicate text comprehension and processing problems in real life. High speaker speed makes it difficult for students to catch words clearly and disrupts the overall understanding process. When speakers speak too quickly, participants have difficulty catching the words clearly, which can lead to uncertainty about what was heard.

Unfamiliar Vocabulary

All participants stated that the use of unfamiliar vocabulary was one of the main problems in listening to English material, as they were often unfamiliar with the words used, which made it difficult to understand the meaning of the sentence as a whole. This forced them to look up the meanings of words or guess from context, which made listening difficult and hindered their overall understanding of the material. One participant expressed

"Especially words that are rarely used in everyday life, professional words, or words with a high level of English context... it interferes with how I understand what is in the video or what I hear in the audio."

This finding supports research that has identified learning materials, including unfamiliar topics and many unfamiliar words, as factors that make it difficult for students to improve their listening skills. The findings revealed that students preferred teaching materials that combine audio and visual elements rather than using audio-only textbooks. Hustarna & Masbirorotni (2023) stated that the presence of unfamiliar vocabulary not only slows down the comprehension process but also reduces the effectiveness of grasping the content of the material being listened to.

Different Accents

The research results showed that differences in English accents, such as those between British and American accents, presented challenges for students. They experienced difficulty adjusting their hearing to pronunciation variations that differed from what they were accustomed to hearing. Someone's accent may pronounce the same word differently, which can confuse them or make it difficult to recognize the word immediately. As stated by one of the participants below:

"Each audio in every video I listen to has a different accent; it can be confusing. I've never heard it before, so it's a bit confusing, so I have to repeat it over and over again."

This finding is consistent with Fadilah et al.'s (2024), which uncovered that unclear and unfamiliar pronunciation, different accents, and speaking speed become inhibiting factors in listening learning. Listeners must be more sensitive and accustomed to pronunciation variations caused by these accent differences, which can be particularly challenging for foreign language learners.

Use of Overly Formal Language

Based on interview results, the use of overly formal language in professional listening materials proved to be an obstacle for many students. Many of them stated that formal sentences use complex structures and vocabulary that are rarely encountered in everyday interactions, making them difficult to understand. One participant explained:

"Of course, it is quite difficult, because in this formal language, on average, English is used at the B1, B2, and C1 levels, and not all vocabulary can be understood."

This suggests that students who are accustomed to using casual English in their daily lives often experience difficulties when listening to material presented in formal English. Elhaili & Batur (2021) argued that listening in academic and professional contexts requires a higher level of comprehension, including the ability to identify technical terms and understand meaning in context. The style of language differed from that used in everyday conversation, which made the process of understanding the material more challenging.

Psychological Factors

The research results revealed that psychological factors such as anxiety, lack of focus, and stress also became significant challenges in listening in a professional context. Several participants reported difficulty maintaining concentration while listening, particularly in situations that triggered psychological stress. This condition prevented them from capturing information

optimally, thereby disrupting their understanding of the material being listened to. As expressed by one participant below:

"I may have anxiety, because when people speak quickly or during the IELTS test, I sometimes immediately feel anxious. I have fairly good listening skills, but when I feel anxious, my listening skills immediately decrease drastically, and my mind goes blank."

This finding is consistent with Schoofs & Claeys's (2021), which found that emotional factors have a significant impact on the effectiveness of verbal communication, including in the context of listening. Anxiety made them feel unprepared and even "lose concentration" when the audio was played, showing that listening is a cognitive process that is greatly influenced by the emotional state of the listener.

Use of English Jargon

Based on interview data, some participants experienced difficulties when listening to technical terms or jargon in English used in a professional context. Such jargon is often something they have never encountered before, which hinders their overall understanding. One participant stated:

"For jargon, it affects, because the context is professional, so maybe we don't only talk about academics that are formal or rigid... sometimes we don't speak English according to grammar, according to English grammar, but every region, such as Singlish or American English, they use jargon that makes it easier for them to communicate with each other."

Professional jargon includes terminology that facilitates communication among native speakers more efficiently and in line with contemporary developments. Therefore, understanding jargon is considered important for better understanding the speaker's message and keeping up with the dynamics of professional language.

Strategies Used by Students

Audio Repetition and Speed Adjustment

One of the primary strategies employed by students to overcome difficulties in listening comprehension was repetition and adjusting the audio speed. This strategy was particularly effective when they encountered challenges in understanding foreign accents or speakers who spoke too quickly. Several participants mentioned that by listening to audio or video material again, they were able to reprocess information that they had not previously grasped properly. One of the participants stated:

"For the speed, I slow it down to 0.5. For the accent, I study it or listen to it repeatedly, to understand the accent."

This strategy shows that students do not rely solely on a single audio presentation, but integrate it

with the process of recording and reflecting on the information they hear. Wala (2025) states that the active learning approach emphasizes the full involvement of students in constructing meaning from verbal input.

Recording and Translating the words

The interview results showed that one strategy used by students when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary in listening activities was to write down the words, then look them up and translate their meanings. This approach not only expanded their vocabulary but also strengthened their understanding of sentence structure in English, particularly as it is used in formal or professional contexts. One participant used grammatical translation methods to translate foreign words into Indonesian with the aim of deepening their understanding, as stated by one of the participants:

"I took notes and translated them into Indonesian... I used the grammar translation method."

The strategy of recording and translating foreign vocabulary shows that students have good linguistic awareness and actively seek solutions to overcome their limitations in understanding new words. This finding corroborates Yunita et al.'s (2020) finding, in which participants in their research often translate while listening. However, this practice was detrimental to the improvement of listening abilities, as it slows down cognitive processes and distracts students' focus, resulting in a reduced understanding of the passages (In'nami et al., 2023).

Overcoming Overly Formal Language by Note-Taking and Keyword Highlighting

Based on the interview data, participants revealed that formal English, which is often used in professional settings, often poses particular difficulties for students due to complex sentence structures and vocabulary that are rarely used in everyday conversation. To overcome this problem, students employed strategies such as simplifying sentence meanings, identifying familiar keywords, and selectively translating sentences into a language that is easier to understand. One participant indicated that they overcame formal language by summarizing sentences and only looking for key points, as stated by one of the participants below:

"Focus on the important points only... when listening, you don't have to listen to everything. You can be selective in finding what is important."

Another strategy employed was to attempt to combine familiar words to understand the overall meaning, using words whose meanings they were familiar with. Based on interview data, active note-taking and keyword highlighting were important approaches used by students to overcome listening challenges, especially when faced with fast-paced English material that is full of technical terms or uses formal language. Through note-taking, students could express their understanding process, allowing information that was not fully understood during the initial listening to be reviewed more calmly and with greater focus. One of the participants explained it below:

"I also take notes, for example, if there are two audios... I fill in what is missing from the first one while listening to the second one."

Taking notes helped students reorganize the content of audio/video material and served as a reflective tool to consolidate the information they had heard. This strategy was particularly useful when students had to record important things in a limited amount of time.

Emotional Management

In addition to linguistic factors, other factors such as anxiety, stress, and nervousness were also considered significant barriers to listening activities. Students often lost focus, had difficulties in understanding the content of the audio, and were unable to grasp important information due to emotional tension. Some students applied simple yet effective techniques, such as deep breathing, regulating their thought patterns, or cultivating positive thoughts. These strategies helped them calm down so that they did not get overwhelmed by the pressure of the situation or worry about making mistakes. This evidence can be found in the following extract.

"I immediately shifted my mindset, like I was convinced that I could do it, and the audio wasn't too difficult, so my anxiety decreased a little and I was able to relax more."

This finding suggests an internal strategy for calming oneself to better prepare for dealing with complex language input or time pressure during listening sessions. It also highlights that managing emotions plays a vital role in shaping students' listening performance. In other words, emotional management can be seen as an ability that supports, and sometimes even determines, the success of listening activities..

Adaptation to Professional Jargon

Based on interviews with participants, the use of jargon or technical terms in English often posed a challenge for students. To overcome this, they searched for meanings through digital platforms such as Google, artificial intelligence (AI) applications, and social media, or by repeating the parts containing the jargon. One participant revealed that they often heard certain technical terms for the first time during the listening process and immediately searched for their meanings using "Google or GPT." Another strategy employed was audio repetition, particularly for sections that included unfamiliar or foreign terms. By listening repeatedly, students tried to grasp the meaning of these terms from the context of the conversation. The findings of this study showed that students were not only passive in receiving information but also actively built understanding by independently utilizing digital resources.

The results of this study support the views of Sujatha & Rajasekaran (2024) and Jeon (2024), who state that oral comprehension is greatly influenced by cognitive load and the complexity of linguistic input received by listeners. Almost all participants in this study reported difficulty when faced with high speaking speed and accents, which often caused them to miss important information and experience confusion in comprehending the full content of the conversation. This difficulty was exacerbated by the use of professional vocabulary and jargon that was not commonly encountered in their daily interactions, which increased the cognitive load in their listening process. In addition to linguistic problems, affective factors also indicated that listening activities were severely hampered, as many students felt anxious, nervous, or under pressure when faced with exams or assignments that were too fast-paced, causing them to lose focus and struggle to absorb information effectively. The findings showed that students actively developed

strategies to address these challenges. Audio repetition, recording speed adjustment, keyword note-taking, foreign vocabulary translation, and jargon search were some of the approaches employed, utilizing technologies such as digital dictionaries or online platforms. In managing independent and adaptive listening learning, students demonstrated metacognitive awareness. According to Goh (2008), applying metacognitive strategies, such as planning, monitoring, and evaluation, during the listening process can significantly enhance the quality of learning. The use of authentic technology and media, such as subtitles, learning applications, and English-language videos, reflected an experiential and contextual approach to learning.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that students face various challenges in improving English listening skills for professional contexts, which include linguistic and psychological challenges. Linguistic challenges include high speaking speed, unfamiliar vocabulary, different accents, excessive use of formal language, and professional jargon. Psychological factors such as anxiety, lack of focus, and stress also affect students' listening abilities. To overcome these challenges, students develop various adaptive strategies that demonstrate good metacognitive awareness, such as audio repetition and speed adjustment, recording and translating foreign vocabulary, note-taking and keyword highlighting, emotion management, and adaptation to professional jargon. These findings indicate that effective listening and learning depend not only on linguistic aspects but also on students' ability to recognize challenges and develop appropriate strategies to overcome them.

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