Students’ Difficulties in Answering the TOEFL Listening Test

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Abstract
The aim of this study was to know the difficulties faced by students in answering the TOEFL listening test at the English Department of the University of Serambi Mekkah, Banda Aceh. The research design used in this study was a descriptive quantitative study. The participants of this study were 25 students who have taken the TOEFL preparation course. In collecting the data, the author distributed a questionnaire, and all the obtained data were analyzed using the percentage formula. The result of the study showed that the student’s difficulties in answering the TOEFL, especially in the listening section are mainly caused by four factors as follows: (1) conversational implicature factor, (2) idiomatic expression factor, (3) lack of vocabulary factor, and (4) lack of practice factor. The most important factor was the first factor or conversational implicatures, which is 76%. Based on the conclusions above, the writer offers some recommendations with regard to the results of the study. Since the implicature factors seem one of the difficult factors for the students in answering the listening section of TOEFL thus the lecturers should encourage students to pay more attention to implicature factors.

Keywords: TOEFL; Listening test; Students’ difficulties
A. Introduction

According to Samani (2001) in a developing country like Indonesia, education is very important to complete because education demands that human resources have critical thinking and better skills. Then he claims that education is a vehicle for improving the character of the nation’s children.

In order to be able to compete globally in a competitive era, English is more important for students since it is a global language which is used all around the world. In response to this challenge, many universities in Indonesia put the TOEFL test as one of the requirements for completing a bachelor's degree. Among the three sections in the TOEFL test, according to Harmer (2007), listening is one of the most difficult sessions to answer TOEFL questions because the vocabulary of native speakers is very difficult to understand. Meanwhile, Saifuddin (2006) says that some university applies TOEFL scores for every prospective undergraduate or prospective master and doctoral student with a score of 450 or 550 depending on the major of interest and University policy.

According to Sugeng (2012), measuring the mastery of English for new students is an important step that should be implemented in every university in Indonesia. Because, according to Sukur (2013), TOEFL is one type of standardized test to measure a person's English language skills as an absolute requirement for continuing education to a higher level in almost all tertiary institutions in the world. Furthermore, according to Philips (2001), the TOEFL test form is divided into three sections tests namely:

1. **Listening Comprehension**
   This test aims to demonstrate the ability to understand English speech, the person being tested must hear various types of speech on a recording and respond by selecting multiple options that have been provided.

2. **Structure and Written Expressions**
   This test aims to demonstrate the ability to recognize grammatically correct English, the person being tested must choose the correct answer to complete the sentence or find errors in the sentence.

3. **Reading Comprehension**
To demonstrate the ability to understand written English, the person being tested must answer multiple-choice questions about the idea and the meaning of the words found in the reading article.

All the stages above are the process of making learning run well so that it can achieve its goals. One of them is to give students inclusivity to answer TOEFL questions. Although TOEFL materials have been taught to the students, however many students still find difficulties in answering the TOEFL test, especially in the listening section. In addition, some previous studies have been conducted by other researchers. First, the research that relates to the TOEFL test was conducted by Lubis and Irmayana (2019) entitled “Analysis of the Difficulties of IPTS Students in Completing the TOEFL Questions”. They stated that the student’s average score in answering the TOEFL test was lower than 400. Furthermore, they found that the listening score was the lowest among the TOEFL test section. Furthermore, Lubis and Irmayana (2019) found that there were some factors that made the difficult to answer the listening section such as idiomatic expressions, metaphors and definitions, and conversational implicatures. Besides, Lubis and Irmayana (2019) found that the other factor that makes the students difficult to answer the listening section in TOEFL was a pronunciation that was different and foreign when native speakers speak.

Another study carried out by Sucahyo (2016) at IAIN Samarinda found that students had problems achieving the TOEFL score and their average score of 397 which was still classified as elementary (SD). This happened because the biggest obstacle for students in doing the TOEFL is in the listening section. The obstacles were the lack of trainers to improve English listening skills both with classmates and with native speakers. The difficulties in answering the TOEFL test were also encountered by the English department students of Serambi Mekkah University. Next, a preliminary study was conducted from March 6th, 2021, to March 7th, 2021; the writer found that mostly the students got difficulties answering the TOEFL test. Their average score was only 375 in answering the TOEFL test. Next, the writer found that the most difficulties countered by the students in answering the TOEFL test were in the listening section. They only could answer 30% to 35% of the listening questions.
Therefore, the writer is interested in conducting about the students' difficulties in the English department of Serambi Mekkah in answering the TOEFL test, especially in the listening section.

B. Method

This study belongs to descriptive quantitative design. Descriptive design is used to gather information about a particular group or phenomenon and to see any causal relationship among variables (Aggarwal & Ranganathan, 2019). Since the aim of this present study is to investigate students' difficulties in answering the listening section, particularly in the TOEFL test, thus, it is believed that descriptive quantitative is an appropriate design that can be used in addressing the research problem. In collecting the data, the writer employed a questionnaire to 25 English Department students who have taken the TOEFL course. The questionnaire consists of four main sections, that cover demographic background, students' general perception of the listening test, students' perception of their TOEFL score, and students' beliefs including challenges in answering the TOEFL test, especially in the listening section. It is hoped that the questionnaire will capture the students' difficulties in answering the listening test from the first sources which will tell the empirical data.

After that, all the obtained data were analyzed by using the percentage formula from Hatch & Farhady (2002). After being known the result of the percentage, it is then narrated and it would be discussed in the discussion chapter. The results questionnaires are drawn by using the following formula:

\[ P = \frac{f}{n} \times 100\% \]  

(Hatch & Farhady, 2002).

Notes:

P = Percentage

f = frequency

n = number of samples

Using the percentage formula above, it will enable the writer in identifying the factors that cause the students' difficulties to answer the TOEFL test in the listening section. Therefore, it is expected that the findings of the study can inform the writer, the lecturers, and the students themselves...
in overcoming the challenges they faced while answering the TOEFL test, particularly in the listening section.

C. Research Findings

Based on the data analysis, the findings of this research showed that most of the students found difficulties in answering the listening section in the TOEFL test. After collecting data from English students at the University of Serambi Mekkah, the writer discussed 4 factors about the difficulties that encountered by the students of the English Department in answering the TOEFL listening section, namely, conversational implicatures, idiomatic expression, lack of vocabulary, and lack of practice. Below is the students’ response of the questionnaire in the present study. The following table is presented the students’ responses regarding the beliefs in answering the listening test in the TOEFL.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire Items</th>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The listening section is the most difficult part of TOEFL</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>60 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. your score in TOEFL satisfying</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Do you still need more knowledge and practice in answering the listening question of TOEFL</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. The Difficulties Faced by the Students in the Listening Skill

English Language Study and Teaching (ELASTE)
From the figure above, it is obvious that most of the students found the difficulties in comprehending conventional implicatures. Then other two difficult aspects in understanding listening test are concerning with idiomatic expression and lack of vocabulary. These two aspects gave the equal contribution that hamper the students to understand the dialogue in the listening section. Lastly, lack of practice also become a determinant factor that give impact towards students' understanding in the listening test.

D. Discussions

Based on the findings above, the respondents believed that the Listening Section of the TOEFL Test is the most difficult part of the test. The respondents' difficulties in answering the TOEFL especially in the listening section are caused by four factors as follows: (1) conversational implicature factor, (2) idiomatic expression factor, (3) lack of vocabulary factor, and (4) lack of practice factor.

The finding of the study is in line with the findings of the study conducted by Sucahyo (2016) which claim that listening is the most difficult part of the TOEFL test. Afterwards, a study conducted by Rina & Tiarina (2020) argues that lack of vocabulary mastery, lack of concentration, length, and speed of listening as well as physical condition are some other factors which triggered students' problems in answering the listening test. Furthermore, the result of a study conducted by Lubis & Irmayana (2019) also confirmed that conventional implicatures become another factor that made students difficult in answering the listening test. Thereby, it is important for the learners to understand some basic Pragmatics theories, such as Grice’s Conversational Implicature Theory since the theory is focusing on expressing the implicit meaning rather than what is being said by the speakers (Wang, 2011). In brief, the results of this present study can give insight to the students in dealing with the listening section by recognizing the factors that hamper their success in the TOEFL test. Moreover, it will also advise the lecturers concerning the students’ difficulties in answering the listening test, thus, they can prepare alternative ways of resolving the problem.

E. Conclusions
Overall, from the discussion above, it can be concluded that the students faced difficulties in answering the TOEFL questions, especially in the listening section. Furthermore, it was caused by mainly four aspects: firstly, because they do not understand conversational implicatures or a dialogue that contains the implicature. Next, the respondents face difficulty to answer the listening section of the TOEFL listening because they do not understand the idiomatic expression. Thirdly, students lack vocabulary mastery and lack of practice.

F. Acknowledgment (if any)

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References

