

## CHALLENGES OF LISTENING SECTION IN TOEFL FACED BY STUDENTS OF ENGLISH EDUCATION PROGRAM IN STAIN MAJENE AND IAIN PALOPO

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### ABSTRACT

Currently, TOEFL becomes a trend in the academic life. Of all types of TOEFL tests, listening is one of the skills that is always tested. Therefore, it is essential to identify the listening section's challenges in TOEFL faced by non-native speakers, so that English teachers can pay attention to the challenges and formulate creative teaching strategies to improve them. This research applied explanatory mixed method. Quantitative method was used to answer which part is the most challenging in listening section of TOEFL, while qualitative method was used to answer what factors influencing the challenges based on the characteristics of the questions in each part. There were 30 students from English study program who engaged in this research, 50% from IAIN Palopo and 50% from STAIN Majene. They were selected by using convenience technique. The quantitative data were collected by using listening test of TOEFL and analysed by employing descriptive statistics which emphasized on central tendency. In contrast, qualitative data were collected by using unstructured interview and analysed by utilizing Miles and Huberman model. The results showed that the students from both universities encountered similar challenges. The most challenging part of the TOEFL listening test was the part A which is short conversation; the second was the part C, long talks, and the easiest one was the part B, long conversation. One of the factors that makes part A difficult is the type of question in the form of restatement.

**Keywords:** Challenges, Difficulties, Listening, TOEFL

### 1) INTRODUCTION

Foreign language proficiency such as English in Indonesia has been trends in many aspects of life (Pasaribu & Iswandari, 2019). To measure this proficiency, an appropriate instrument is required. A test becomes one of traditionally popular instruments to demonstrate someone's language proficiency (Saragih, 2016). There are various well-known tests used as English standardized tests such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and Test of

English for International Communication (TOEIC). Those tests are widely-used in many countries for different purposes.

Specifically, an English test has been a demand in the academic world (Raharjo, 2020). Some universities determine TOEFL as one of admission requirement, and some scholarship organizers like 'Fulbright' also require TOEFL as a ticket. To meet their needs, students have to strive to get TOEFL score which meets the conditions that have been set. A number of students sometimes have to bury their dreams because they do not have adequate language test results; therefore, it is important for students as a part of academic community to hone their English skills and take standardized English tests.

TOEFL is a very popular test in Indonesia (Dwinaya et al., 2022). TOEFL issued by English Testing Service (ETS) consists of three types. They are Paper-Based Test (PBT), Computer-Based Test (CBT), and Internet-Based Test (iBT). Albeit mostly the implementation of learning and testing has been migrated to the virtual world, TOEFL PBT is still commonly used in Indonesia among those three types of TOEFL (Susyla et al., 2021). It might be because the price is more affordable than other tests.

Those types of TOEFL have different materials to test and scoring systems. TOEFL PBT measures three parts of English proficiency, namely listening comprehension, structure and written expression, as well as reading comprehension; TOEFL CBT tests not only those three parts, but also writing; and TOEFL iBT examines receptive and productive language skills, namely listening, reading, speaking and writing. In addition, TOEFL PBT, CBT, and iBT score ranges are 310-667, 0-300, and 0-120 respectively (Philip, 2001).

All the types of TOEFL put listening to the test. It means that listening should be a concern for non-native learners or speakers who would like to take TOEFL tests. However, listening is assumed as the most demanding language skill to learn, since it requires concentration. Fitria (2021) even mentioned that listening is the most difficult section in TOEFL. On top of that, inconsistency of English pronunciation makes people difficult to guess what words are spoken by the speaker (Syadiah, 2016; Darti & Asmawati, 2017). For instance, the letter U sometimes sounds /ju/ and sometimes sounds /ʌ/. Here are the specific examples: "Unique" sounds /ju:'ni:k/, and "Up" sounds /ʌp/. Alzamil (2021) concluded that listening is urgent, yet difficult to learn.

Listening challenges do not only occur in daily communication, but also in answering questions on the tests. As illustration, when the tempo of audio is rapid (Rina & Tiarina, 2021); there is no repetition for the audio ; and the duration to answer the test is very short. Physical and mental conditions which are not principal also potentially become a challenge for test takers. Challenge identification of listening in TOEFL from various aspects is necessary so that test takers and teachers or lecturers can think of solutions.

Till now, STAIN Majene has not implemented the TOEFL as one of requirement to graduate from the institution. However, there has been a discussion to include it in the latest revision of educational guidelines. Students must take the TOEFL to complete their studies. In contrast, at IAIN Palopo, English students are required to take the TOEFL test if they want to register for a research seminar. The minimum score that must be obtained is 400 of the three-section average. Therefore, it is important to identify the challenges of listening section of TOEFL faced by English education students at the two institutions in order to become a reference for lecturers in teaching listening courses.

A number of researchers have been discussed about students' problems in listening of TOEFL tests from various perspectives. Silvianti (2017) found that in listening section of the TOEFL, English department students in Syiah Kuala University mostly encountered difficulties on three sub materials, namely listening for double negative expression, listening to English Idioms and listening for synonyms. She concerned on kinds of sub materials which is available in listening TOEFL.

Fitria (2021) found that speakers' accent, speed, intonation, pauses, word choice, complexity of sentence structure, and audio interruption were external factors influencing students' difficulty in doing listening section of TOEFL. Meanwhile, lack of previous experience, limited duration, too many questions, hearing impairment, low memory, lack of motivation and concentration, limited vocabulary, and distraction were the internal factors. Her research focused on two main problems faced by the students.

Other feature that researched by Rainy et al (2014) was the most difficult part in listening and the problematic materials by students of English education study program in Tanjungpura University. They found that Part A in the form of short dialogue was the most difficult part for students. In that part, the problematic materials faced by the students were drawing conclusion

about who, what and where; idioms; emphatic expression of surprise; negative with comparatives; double negative expression; wishes; negative expression; and synonyms.

However, this study concerned on identifying which part of listening section in TOEFL become the most challenging for students in two state Islamic universities, namely STAIN Majene and IAIN Palopo. This study also explored what factors influencing it regarding characteristics of the questions in each part.

## **2) METHOD**

This study applied explanatory mixed method in which qualitative method followed quantitative method. Quantitative method was used to answer which part is the most challenging in listening section of TOEFL, while qualitative method was used to answer what factors influencing the challenges.

The participants of this research were students of English education study program in STAIN Majene and IAIN Palopo in sophomore level. Students in this level had completed listening course for three levels. It means, they had been ready for TOEFL. They also would need TOEFL for graduation requirements, further studies or job application. Among 98 students as population, there were 30 students from English education study program who engaged as samples. 50% were from STAIN Majene, and the rests were from IAIN Palopo. They were selected based on their availability to participate in this research. In other words, the samples were taken by using convenience technique sampling.

To collect the data, the researchers used two instruments, namely listening test and unstructured interview. The listening test was predictive TOEFL PBT which was taken from Longman TOEFL Preparation book by Deborah Philip. The test consisted of three parts, namely part A (short dialogues), part B (long conversations), and part C (talks). Total number of the test items was 50 in the form of multiple choices with four options. Besides that, the researchers used no specific guidance for interview because they would like to gain deep information about factors influencing students' challenges in listening test of TOEFL. There were 4 students who got interviewed. They were chosen by considering their answer. They were also representations from each university.

Quantitative data from the test were analysed by using descriptive statistics which emphasized on central tendency, while qualitative data from interview were analysed by using

Miles and Huberman model. In initial step of qualitative data analysis, data reduction was used to simplify or to screen which information was needed and which was not. After that, data was displayed in the form of dialogue transcription in order that the readers easily gained information from the research. The last step was drawing conclusion, so that the readers were able to find main idea of the research.

### 3) RESULTS

This section presents the results of data analysis related to the following two main data which became the focus of this study:

#### The Most Challenging Part of TOEFL Listening Section

After giving a listening test of TOEFL to the students, the researchers tabulated the results of the correct answers in the following table.

**Table 1. The Number of Students' Correct Answers in the Listening Session**

Students from STAIN Majene	Correct Answers in Every Part			Total of Correct Answers	Students from IAIN Palopo	Correct Answers in Every Part			Total of Correct Answers
	A	B	C			A	B	C	
	Question 1-30	Question 31-38	Question 39-50			Question 1-30	Question 31-38	Question 39-50	
Student 1	10	3	6	19	Student 16	8	3	4	15
Student 2	20	5	10	35	Student 17	9	5	4	18
Student 3	23	7	9	39	Student 18	9	3	1	13
Student 4	6	2	6	14	Student 19	15	6	2	23
Student 5	12	6	7	25	Student 20	8	1	8	17
Student 6	2	3	1	6	Student 21	14	5	6	25
Student 7	18	4	6	28	Student 22	3	6	6	15
Student 8	11	7	6	24	Student 23	8	0	4	12
Student 9	21	7	11	39	Student 24	10	6	5	21
Student 10	15	3	2	20	Student 25	14	7	8	29
Student 11	27	7	11	45	Student 26	4	2	3	9
Student 12	14	6	5	25	Student 27	3	4	3	10
Student 13	10	2	2	14	Student 28	22	6	2	30
Student 14	2	3	3	8	Student 29	14	4	7	25
Student 15	2	2	4	8	Student 30	8	6	7	21
<b>TOTAL</b>	193	67	89		<b>TOTAL</b>	149	64	70	
<b>Percentage of Correct Answer</b>	42.89	55.83	49.44		<b>Percentage of Correct Answer</b>	33.12	53.33	38.89	

<b>Percentage of Incorrect Answer</b>	57.11	44.167	50.56	<b>Percentage of Incorrect Answer</b>	66.88	46.67	61.11
<b>Total Percentage</b>	100	100	100		100	100	100

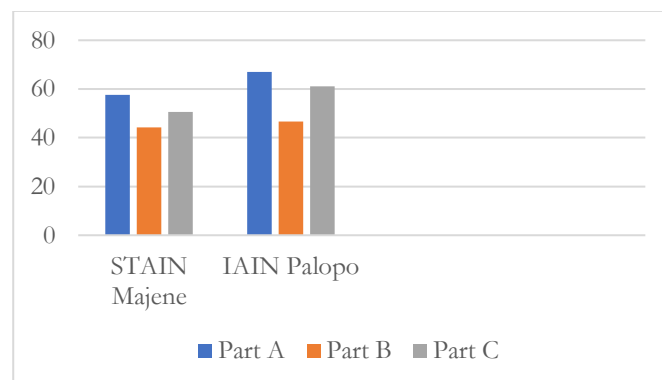
The table above depicts information about how many correct answers that students from STAIN Majene and IAIN Palopo gained when they answered listening test of TOEFL prediction which consisted of three parts, namely A (short dialogue questions) , B (long conversation questions), and C (long talks).

At STAIN Majene, English Education students demonstrated their greatest performance in Part B. The majority of students were able to answer part B correctly. Its percentage reached 55.58%. The lowest performance was shown by students in Part A in which it gained approximately 43%. As for their performance progress in answering part C, there is a difference of about 7% higher than part A.

At IAIN Palopo, Students from English Education Study Program also showed their best performance in Part B. There were approximately 53% students who answered part B correctly. The same as students at STAIN Majene, students at IAIN Palopo also presented the worst performance when answering Part A. There were only about 33% of students who could respond to questions with correct answers. The percentage of students who gave correct answer in part C was 38.8%.

Considering the percentage of students' correct answers above, students in both universities showed the same trend in terms of the difficulties they experienced when answering the TOEFL listening. The trend is reflected in the following diagram.

**Figure 1. Percentage of Students' Difficulty Level in the TOEFL Listening Section**



The diagram above illustrates students' difficulties from different universities in answering each part of the TOEFL listening. Overall, students at the two universities encountered similar difficulties or challenges. The most difficult or challenging part for students was Part A, and then followed by Part C. The easiest part for students is Part B.

### **The Causes of Challenges**

After finding out the most challenging part in listening, the researchers interviewed four students in each university. Two of them were from STAIN Majene and the others were from IAIN Palopo.

- R1 : What did you consider when answering the TOEFL questions?  
S6 : If I could not listen carefully to what the speaker said on the recoding, then I answered the questions by relying on the similar sound that I listened.  
S14 : Mostly I answered choices which had the same words as the words I listened when the speaker spoke.  
R1 : Did you apply it in all parts of the TOEFL listening?  
S6 : Yes, I did.  
S14 : Yes  
R1 : Based on the results of your answers, you had difficulty in answering part A. When listening to part A, did you focus on the first or second speaker?  
S6 : Initially focused on the first speaker, but if I missed it, I focused on the second speaker.  
S14 : Depends on which speaker I could understand what he/ she was saying

Based on the interview above, it was found that the main reasons why students faced difficulties in Part A because they chose the answers according to the similar words and sounds they listened from the speaker. They used this way of answering when they answered all parts in the TOEFL listening, even though the characteristics of Part A, Part B and Part C are very different particularly the way to answer them.

- R2 : What did you consider when answering the TOEFL questions?  
S27 : I chose the one that looked negative statement.  
S26 : I listened the audio then chose the answer which was mostly similar with the answer choices.  
R2 : Did you apply it in all parts of the TOEFL listening?  
S27 : Yes, I did, and I thought it worked, because I could answer some questions correctly.  
S26 : Yes, I did.

- R1 : Based on the results of your answers, you had difficulty in answering part A. When listening to part A, did you focus on the first or second speaker?
- S27 : I try to focus on both speakers and chose the negative statement in the answer choice.
- S26 : I focused on both speakers and chose the answer that had similar sound with the answer choices.

The character of Part A is restatement which can appear in different forms, so that the sounds and words in the answer choices will be different from those spoken by the speakers in the questions. For instance, when the speaker conveyed a statement in a positive form, then the answer could appear in a negative sentence. The sentence looked different but had the similar meaning as spoken by the speaker.

In Part A, there is always a pair of speakers. If the first speaker is male, then the second speaker is female, and vice versa. Example:

- Man : Jack looked different yesterday
- Women : He is not young anymore.
- Narrator : What does the woman imply?

In this research, students did not really focus on the second speaker, whereas the narrator often asked the meaning of what was conveyed by the second speaker.

#### 4) DISCUSSION

The study's findings showed that both campuses confront the same problem. The part A, short dialogue section, of the listening test is the most challenging in terms of answering the questions. There are various types of questions in section A. According to Philip (2001), the questions are about making inferences about who, what, and where as well as regarding negatives, functions, opposing meanings, and idiomatic expressions. Most Indonesian students consider the questions to be difficult and hard. This is confirmed by Soali & Pujiani (2020). They reported that the students found questions in section A on synonyms, double negatives, and idioms to be challenging

Additionally, this discovery reinforces with earlier study by other researchers. Part A, which is a brief dialogue, is the most challenging because the majority of the responses to the items are implied, as Rainy et al. (2014) noted. As a result, the students are expected to listen intently



and draw conclusions. Here is an example of a dialogue from section A (short dialogues) to help illustrate this:

- (woman) : Are you enjoying your coffee?  
(man) : It tastes extremely bitter this morning!  
(narrator) : WHAT DOES THE MAN MEAN?

The answer choices:

- (A) The coffee is much better this morning.  
(B) The coffee tastes extremely good.  
(C) The coffee isn't very good.  
(D) This morning he definitely wants some coffee.

One of the students claimed that she used the negative statement to answer questions of this type on the listening test. Any query could have a negative statement as a response. The understanding is obviously incorrect, but for this kind of inquiry her response might be appropriate as the answer to the question is (C), which is also a negative statement about the quality of the coffee. However, for other questions, it could lead to misunderstandings and a low TOEFL score.

In addition, it was revealed that part A is the hardest to complete since the students select an answer that has a similar sound to the dialogues in the question. The fact that pupils do not choose the synonym and distracting possibilities, such as similar sound, was also noted by Silviyanti et al. (2020).

Moreover, it is shown that the main reasons why students struggled with Part A were because they chose their answers based on the same words and sounds that the speaker used. Even though the TOEFL listening Parts A, B, and C have a wide range of features, including the methodology for answering them, they used this methodology when they took all of the parts.

In addition, the other section is addressed. Parts B and C's sections resemble one another somewhat. Topic, thought arrangement, declared detail, unstated detail, and referents make up this group (Philip, 2001). The difference between both is in the speakers. There are two speakers in section B (long dialogues). The conversation is also longer than the conversation in part A. For a single dialogue, there are multiple questions. The students are expected to retain both the theme and some specific details from the dialogue in this section. However, part C is a monologue because it only has one speaker. In individual interviews, the students admitted that

they used the same tactics to respond to this section's questions as they did to parts B and C, where they had to recall the subject and the details included in the questions.

Contrarily, the results of this study showed that section C, which involves lengthy discussions, is not the most challenging. It contradicts the findings of Rina & Tiarina (2021) study that section three of the listening test—the long talks—is the most challenging. This section is hard because of the quick delivery and little vocabulary. Also, the most challenging sections of the listening test, according to Silviyanti et al. (2017) are Part B (extended dialogues) and Part C. (monologues). These sections offer lengthy conversations about uncommon topics.

Additionally challenging is the listening test's emphasis on listening comprehension rather than literal listening. This literal listening includes ignoring the relationship level of meaning and focusing just on the information. The TOEFL test types, which assess listening comprehension as well as grasping the relationship level of meaning, are used in this situation.

Likewise, brief exchanges are limited to two lines. Students will lose the entire notion if they misspell even one word because the content is intimately related. However, in the section on conversations and talks, pupils can successfully fill in any knowledge gaps by listening to the lines after them. The pupils may find it more difficult than in other parts to succeed in this section due to these problems.

## 5) CONCLUSION

The challenge of answering the listening test is in the part A, short dialogue, section which becomes the most difficult part of the test long dialogues in section B are the easiest. The hardest component of the exercise is part A for a number of reasons. It offers a variety of questions, to start. Drawing inferences regarding who, what, where, negatives, functions, opposite meanings, and idiomatic languages are all part of the inquiries. Second, the majority of the queries are implied. The students then respond by selecting a sound that is comparable to the conversations. The rest of parts B and C share a lot of similarities. Topic, thought organization, declared detail, unstated detail, and referents are all parts of them. Parts B and C appear to be easier for the students to answer than Part A. English teachers could consider the results in order that students in the future can deal with the types of those questions.

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