

STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN UNDERSTANDING NUMERICAL INFORMATION IN ENGLISH LISTENING

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate EFL students' difficulties in understanding numerical information in English listening activities. Many English learners experience difficulties in distinguishing similar numerical sounds, particularly the -teen and -ty forms, which may affect their listening comprehension. This study employs a qualitative approach. The participants consist of seven fourth-semester students of the English Education Department at UIN Alauddin Makassar, selected through purposive sampling based on their experiences of difficulty in understanding numerical information during English listening activities. Data were collected through in-depth interviews to explore students' experiences and the underlying factors causing these difficulties. The findings are expected to provide deeper insights into students' listening challenges and contribute to the development of more targeted listening instruction, particularly in addressing numerical sound discrimination in English.

Keywords: EFL Listening; Numerical Information; Sound Discrimination; -Teen And -Ty; Bottom-Up Processing

INTRODUCTION

Listening is widely recognized as one of the most fundamental skills in English language learning. Among the four language skills, listening plays a critical role in communication and language acquisition, as it serves as the primary channel through which learners receive and process spoken input (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Despite its importance, listening is consistently identified as the most challenging skill for EFL learners, as it demands real-time processing of spoken language under various conditions (Alzamil, 2021). Yet it remains one of the most neglected skills in EFL classrooms, where greater attention is often given to reading, writing, and vocabulary (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

Research has consistently shown that EFL learners encounter various difficulties during listening activities. Rost (2016) argues that listening is a complex, multi-layered process that requires the simultaneous activation of phonological, lexical, and syntactic knowledge. Asep, Mutia, and Sigit (2021) found that accent, pronunciation, speed of speech, and insufficient vocabulary were among the major listening comprehension difficulties experienced by EFL students. Similarly, Ramadhianti and Somba (2022) found that the most common listening issues faced by Indonesian EFL students include the speaking speed of the speaker, variety of accents, and lengthy listening texts. Lengkoan, Andries, and Tatipang (2022) further confirmed that students in higher education face persistent listening

problems related to phonological processing and limited exposure to authentic English input. These difficulties are compounded by weak bottom-up processing skills, the ability to decode sounds and linguistic features at the phonemic level, which Jose (2022) and Field (2008) both identify as a frequently overlooked dimension of listening instruction.

Among the various listening challenges, understanding numerical information poses a particular difficulty for EFL learners. Numbers appear frequently in academic, professional, and daily communication contexts, making accurate comprehension essential. However, specific numerical sounds in English, particularly the -teen and -ty suffixes, as in thirteen and thirty, are acoustically similar and easily confused, especially for learners whose first language does not carry equivalent phonological distinctions. As Hentasmaka et al. (2022) highlight, phonological awareness is closely tied to listening skill, and EFL learners who lack explicit training in distinguishing minimal pairs and similar sound patterns are particularly vulnerable to such errors. Furthermore, Chiu and Chen (2023) found that fast speech rate significantly impairs EFL learners' ability to process spoken input accurately, a factor especially critical when processing numerically dense content.

Despite the growing body of research on EFL listening difficulties, studies specifically addressing students' challenges in comprehending numerical information remain limited. Permatasari, Syam, and Sastrawati (2023) found that students in the English Education Department at Muhammadiyah University of Makassar continue to face significant listening comprehension challenges, yet no study has specifically investigated numerical sound discrimination in this context. Meng, Wang, and Zhao (2023) further note that while phonological barriers in listening have been broadly documented, their manifestation in specific linguistic forms such as numerals has not been sufficiently explored. This gap highlights the need for targeted investigation. Therefore, this study aims to identify students' difficulties in understanding numerical information, explore the underlying factors causing these difficulties, and investigate students' experiences with -teen and -ty sound discrimination among fourth-semester students of the English Education Department at UIN Alauddin Makassar.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach as its research design. Specifically, a descriptive qualitative study design is used to explore students' experiences and difficulties in understanding numerical information during English listening activities. This approach is appropriate as it allows for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences without manipulating variables, making it suitable for understanding naturally occurring challenges in language learning (Creswell, 2014).

The participants of this study were seven fourth-semester students of the English Education Department at UIN Alauddin Makassar. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on the criterion that they had personally experienced difficulties in understanding numerical information during English listening activities. This selection technique ensured that the data obtained were relevant and representative of the phenomenon being investigated.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews consisting of seven open-ended questions. The questions were designed to explore three key areas: participants' general listening difficulties, the factors causing challenges in understanding numerical information,

and their personal experiences in distinguishing numerical sounds, particularly the -teen and -ty forms in English.

The interview data were analysed using Miles and Huberman's (2014) framework, consisting of three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data condensation, relevant information from the interview responses was selected and organized based on recurring themes. The organized data were then displayed in descriptive summaries. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on patterns emerging from participants' responses across all three research objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are presented based on three research objectives: identifying students' difficulties, exploring the contributing factors, and investigating students' experiences with -teen and -ty sound discrimination.

Students' Difficulties in Understanding Numerical Information

The interview findings reveal that all seven participants experienced difficulties in understanding numerical information during English listening activities. The most consistently reported challenge was the speed of speech, with six out of seven participants stating that fast-talking speakers made it difficult to catch numbers accurately. One participant stated:

"I still often miss things, especially when the speaker talks fast."

Another participant provided a more elaborate account:

"Numbers in English are often harder to hear than regular words because many sound similar, are spoken quickly, and must be understood precisely. If even one number is misheard, the meaning can change immediately."

This finding is in line with Dong (2022), who found that EFL students frequently struggle with listening comprehension tasks when speech is delivered at natural speed. Similarly, Asep, Mutia, and Sigit (2021) and Lengkoan, Andries, and Tatipang (2022) identified speed of speech as one of the most prominent factors disrupting EFL learners' listening comprehension in classroom settings. Meng, Wang, and Zhao (2023) further identified phonological decoding under time pressure as a core barrier in EFL listening comprehension.

All participants also confirmed having experienced miscomprehension of numbers that led to significant changes in meaning. As one participant specifically recalled:

"I heard fifteen when it was actually fifty."

This aligns with Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), who identified rapid speech delivery as one of the primary obstacles in EFL listening comprehension, and with Rost (2016), who argues that any disruption in phonological decoding at the input stage can cascade into broader comprehension failure.

Factors Causing Difficulties in Understanding Numerical Information

Three dominant factors emerged from the interview data. First, the phonological similarity between numbers was identified as the most significant factor. Participants consistently described numbers as more difficult to comprehend than regular words due to their similar sound patterns. As one participant noted:

"Numbers are harder than regular words because some have almost the same pronunciation, especially when they go into the thousands."

Another participant added:

"Because some numbers sound almost the same, they are easy to mix up."

This supports Nushi and Orouji (2020), who found that pronunciation-based difficulties represent the most frequently reported listening challenges among EFL learners. Hentasmaka et al. (2022) further affirm that without explicit phonological awareness training, EFL learners remain underprepared to distinguish minimal phonological contrasts in spoken English. Maharani (2023) similarly found that Indonesian EFL students are significantly affected by accent and pronunciation variations in listening comprehension, which directly impacts their ability to distinguish acoustically similar forms.

Second, the speed of speech delivery was highlighted as a compounding factor. Chiu and Chen (2023) demonstrated that fast speech rates significantly reduce EFL learners' comprehension accuracy, particularly when processing specific linguistic forms that require precise phonological discrimination. Third, insufficient practice with number-specific listening was identified as a contributing factor. Adi, Nasrullah, and Rosalina (2022) found that inadequate exposure to targeted listening materials is a recurring cause of comprehension difficulties among EFL students, while Permatasari, Syam, and Sastrawati (2023) specifically noted that students in the English Education Department in Makassar lack sufficient practice in specialized listening tasks. As one participant reflected:

"I still need more listening practice focused specifically on numbers in English."

These findings are further consistent with Jose (2022) and Field (2008), who argue that inadequate bottom-up processing skills significantly hinder EFL learners' listening comprehension, especially when encountering acoustically similar linguistic forms in the absence of systematic instruction.

Students' Experiences with -teen and -ty Sound Discrimination

All seven participants confirmed having experienced confusion when attempting to distinguish -teen and -ty numerical forms, such as thirteen and thirty. This confusion most commonly occurred during classroom listening exercises and when watching English-language videos without subtitles. One participant stated:

"Usually when listening to English audio or watching videos without subtitles, because the pronunciation is similar and they are often spoken fast."

Regarding strategies, several participants reported paying attention to syllable stress as a key approach. One participant specifically articulated:

"thirTEEN has stress at the end, while THIRty has stress at the beginning."

Another participant described their strategy:

"I focus more on the stress pattern to help me guess."

However, the majority of participants reported relying on contextual guessing as their primary fallback strategy when unable to distinguish the sounds. These findings suggest that while some students have independently developed informal phonological awareness strategies, systematic training in this area remains largely absent. As Sa'adah, Anam, and Hentasmaka (2023) found in an Indonesian EFL context, learners who engage more frequently with English outside the classroom tend to develop stronger phonological awareness, implying that in-class instruction alone is insufficient for developing robust

sound discrimination skills. This underscores the need for targeted listening instruction that explicitly addresses the phonological contrasts inherent in English numerical forms.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the difficulties experienced by fourth-semester EFL students at UIN Alauddin Makassar in understanding numerical information during English listening activities. The findings reveal that all participants encountered significant challenges, particularly when speakers delivered numbers at a rapid pace. The primary factors contributing to these difficulties include the phonological similarity between numerical forms, fast speech rate, and insufficient exposure to number-specific listening practice.

The -teen and -ty sound discrimination emerged as a particularly challenging area, with all participants having experienced confusion between forms such as thirteen and thirty. While some students had independently developed strategies such as attending to syllable stress patterns, these strategies were largely informal and unsystematic, highlighting a gap in current listening instruction.

These findings suggest that EFL listening instruction should incorporate more targeted practice in numerical sound discrimination, particularly through activities that develop bottom-up processing skills at the phonemic level. Educators are encouraged to design explicit phonological awareness activities that help learners distinguish acoustically similar numerical forms. Future research may explore the effectiveness of specific instructional interventions designed to address this gap, contributing to the broader development of listening pedagogy in EFL contexts.

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