Article

A Study on Difficulties and Solutions in Listening Comprehension Among EFL Learners

https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v%25vi%25i.1799

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A B S T R A C T

Listening was acknowledged as a foundational skill for EFL students' language acquisition. Despite the importance of listening comprehension, many EFL students still struggled to comprehend effectively due to various difficulties. This research investigated the listening comprehension difficulties and additional solutions experienced by twelfth-grade EFL students and teachers from SMA Nasional Malang. This study used a mixed-method sequential explanatory design, with the population consisted of 31 twelfth-grade students and two English teachers who taught them. The findings indicated five significant difficulties that emerged such as unfamiliar accents, unfamiliar words, distraction from comprehension gaps, distractions, and fast speech. Several solutions were also proposed to minimize these difficulties. Teachers and students emphasized additional solutions such as authentic media, subtitle support, vocabulary enrichment, authentic exposure, gradual and interactive listening activities, self-regulated learning, students' positive mindset and motivation building, learning style integration, and Project-Based Learning (PJBL).

Keywords: *Difficulty, EFL, Listening Comprehension, Solution*

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INTRODUCTION

Listening is acknowledged as a foundational skill that impacts overall language acquisition for EFL students. To begin with, Alzamil (2021) argues that effective listening skills enhance other language competencies such as writing, reading, and speaking. In addition, through listening activities, students are exposed to linguistic elements that serve as the foundation for language acquisition (Hsu, 2024). Moreover, listening is an interactive learning process where the students construct meaning by connecting the information they hear with their prior knowledge (Blancaflor et al., 2021). Therefore, listening comprehension plays a key role in language acquisition for EFL students.

Listening comprehension is defined as the process of comprehending spoken language that requires the ability to identify sounds, words, and sentences while simultaneously understanding the meaning (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). In relation to this, Díaz-Galaz (2020) states that listening comprehension is influenced by cognitive processes encompassing elements such as linguistic ability, memory capacity, and prior knowledge. Moreover, listening uses a variety of cognitive processes and combines with background knowledge to comprehend the overall meaning effectively (Zhai & Aryadoust, 2022). Therefore, as students are exposed to natural language patterns through listening activities both inside and outside the classroom, they gradually improve their ability to comprehend the listening text.

Despite the significance of listening for language acquisition, EFL students often face difficulties in developing their listening skills. According to Solihah et al. (2022), students struggle in listening classes due to a lack of exposure to native English speakers. Likewise,

Hein et al. (2023) state that EFL learners often face issues such as unfamiliar vocabulary and accents. Additionally, fast speech and complex sentences can overwhelm students (Apriyanti et al., 2024). Moreover, without understanding the background knowledge of the material, students find it hard to comprehend the audio in listening classes (Wahab & Tanasy, 2022). It is important for educators to recognize students' listening difficulties and design listening instruction based on students' needs, in order to improve students' listening comprehension. When educators do not recognize these difficulties, they may create a listening activity without considering the students' needs. Thus, understanding students' difficulties is essential for educators in order to create an effective instructional approach in the class and ultimately improve their students' listening ability.

Furthermore, Underwood (1989) identifies several listening comprehension difficulties of English learners as follows. First, students are unable to understand what they hear because they can't control the speed of speech from the speaker, and this situation tends to make students bored and frustrated because they feel that the message from the speaker is gone or not delivered to them. Second, just like listening to TV and radio, students cannot have the opportunity to clarify and repeat the message by the speaker, and have to understand it as it is. Third, students with low vocabulary knowledge are unable to understand the overall message from the speaker, and this situation also tends to make students frustrated and bored. Fourth, students are unable to identify and understand the "sign" from the speaker, which can make students misinterpret the message from the speaker. Fifth, errors in the interpretation of the received message cause the students to receive or understand different message content. Sixth, students are unable to concentrate in the listening class due to physical fatigue, unattractive topics, a noisy environment, etc. Lastly, there is concern about the material that the teacher taught being different from the material that students hear through audio or directly from the individual who speaks English as their first language.

In the realm of EFL students or English as a second language, Adi et al. (2021) found that there are four significant difficulties for EFL students, such as unfamiliar words, memory retention, speech rate, and accent variety. First, unfamiliar vocabulary causes significant obstacles for students in listening comprehension, and this obstacle hinders their ability to understand the overall meaning. Similarly, Wahab and Tanasy (2022) also emphasized that unfamiliar words are a major challenge for EFL students, and this issue tends to cause missed information in ongoing listening. Second, students often struggle to recall words and phrases that they have just heard, especially in longer spoken text, and memory retention plays a crucial role in effective listening comprehension. According to Wallace and Lee (2020), memory limitation can cause EFL students to have difficulty in understanding spoken language because they can lose key information before the speaker finishes the message. Third, when the speaker speaks at a high pace, students tend to have difficulty keeping pace. Ngọc (2022) also said that speech speed is a prior difficulty for EFL students with unfamiliar vocabulary and accents being other factors. Finally, students tend to be exposed to an American English accent and face difficulty when they encounter another accent, like a British or Australian accent. Similarly, Miao (2023) stated that students with limited exposure to various accents experience difficulty comprehending spoken language, whereas accent familiarity significantly improves students' comprehension.

Several previous studies have been conducted to identify listening difficulties faced by EFL students. The first study by Hardiyanto et al. (2021) found that six students at University Muhammadiyah Kotabumi with low, moderate, and high abilities in listening comprehension had a variety of listening difficulties. Low-level listening comprehension skills have difficulties such as unknown words, the fast pace of spoken language, and insufficient vocabulary knowledge. Moderate-level listening comprehension skill have difficulties with the speed of speech and environmental noise. Lastly, high-level listening comprehension skills have difficulties with long-spoken material, a variety of accents, and environmental noise. The second study from Erzad (2020), who conducted the study at IAIN Kudus University, stated that students face difficulties such as unfamiliar accents, speed of speech, environmental noise, unfamiliar vocabulary, and facilities. The researcher also gives suggestions that students

should be more focused, practice, memorize unfamiliar vocabulary, and prepare the laboratory before the listening class. The last study by Lengkoan et al. (2022) conducted a study of listening comprehension difficulties among English education students who took a TOEFL-like test at Manado State University. They found that students face difficulties on various sides, such as the student side, the organizer side, the material, the equipment, and other things related to TOEFL activity in listening skills. They also suggest solutions to improve students' listening skills by using media such as listening to music, watching YouTube, and listening to podcasts.

However, those previous studies have mostly focused on listening comprehension difficulties from students' viewpoints, the result of this study will be obtained from both teachers' and students' viewpoints. Furthermore, the three studies above were conducted at a higher level/university. Meanwhile, this study will be conducted at SMA Nasional Malang / high school level to fill a gap in the literature, particularly for 12th-grade students who have more experience in listening class, in order to get more in-depth data than lower classes. The result of this research can give new insight to help educators design effective listening classes based on students' needs. Lastly, this study will give alternative solutions for students' difficulties from both students' and teachers' viewpoints. The results of this study are expected to be valuable and can be implemented by educators and students in listening classes. Therefore, this research was carried out to address the research questions as follows: (1) What are the significant difficulties that EFL high school students from SMA Nasional Malang experience in listening comprehension? (2) What are the factors that influence these difficulties of students from SMA Nasional Malang? (3) What solutions can help the students overcome their difficulties in listening comprehension?

METHOD

The researchers conducted this research by adopting a mixed-methods research design. According to Creswell and Clark (2017), combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies or mixed methods is an approach that can offer more comprehensive data than using either one separately. In this particular research, the researchers employed a sequential explanatory design. A sequential explanatory design represents a research strategy integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection, with the quantitative phase as the first step and the qualitative phase as the second step (Sugiyono, 2015).

The researchers conducted this study at SMA Nasional Malang. The population consisted of twelfth-grade students with a total of 156 students. To determine the sample size the researchers used probability sampling technique and non-probability sampling technique to determine the sample size (Sugiyono, 2015). For the quantitative phase, 31 students were selected through simple random sampling as a probability sampling technique to answer the questionnaire. This number was considered sufficient to represent the population and ensured that every student had an equal chance of being selected, thereby minimizing sampling bias. For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling as a non-probability sampling technique was used to obtain participants who could provide a deeper and more relevant point of view about listening difficulties factors and solutions. Four students were selected based on different levels of overall English achievement (low, lower-middle, upper-middle, and high), as recommended by their English teachers, and two English teachers were chosen because they directly taught twelfth-grade students and possessed firsthand insight into their students' listening difficulties factors, and gave their additional solutions. Through this sampling strategy, the study ensured both representative quantitative data and rich qualitative perspectives.

There were three instruments used in this research, which were close-ended questionnaires, interviews for students, and interviews for teachers. The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions in a Likert scale format adapted from Hamouda (2013) and was distributed to 31 students. To ensure its validity, the expert lecturer validated the questionnaire, and the reliability of each question was measured using Cronbach's Alpha. The

researchers selected four students who had already answered close-ended questionnaires and two English teachers from SMA Nasional Malang, who were interviewed using a semi-structured interview. The interviews focused on the factors that contributed to five significant difficulties based on questionnaire results, which were categorized into five significant difficulties and possible solutions to listening comprehension difficulties from both students' and teachers' viewpoints
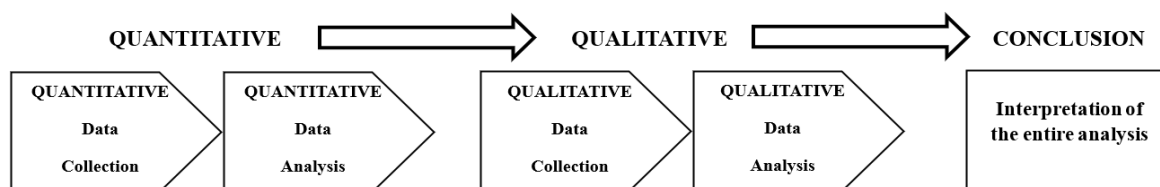

Figure 1. Research procedure

The basic procedure in this study was that the researchers first gathered quantitative data to identify the significant difficulties encountered by EFL students in listening comprehension. For further analysis, qualitative data were used to gain a deeper understanding of these significant difficulty factors, as well as solutions to listening comprehension difficulties from both students' and teachers' viewpoints.

The data analysis technique for the questionnaire was presented in percentages using the formula from Sudjana and Ibrahim (2007) and was classified into the five most significant listening comprehension difficulties, such as content/material, linguistic features, psychological characteristics, related to students, and physical setting. After understanding the five most significant listening comprehension difficulties from the questionnaires, the researchers obtained qualitative data from students and teachers based on semi-structured interviews, which were the audio recorded. The audio recordings were then transcribed and analyzed in six stages of thematic analysis using QDA Miner software, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), These stages included becoming acquainted with the data, developing preliminary codes, searching for patterns, examining and refining themes, clearly defining and naming them, and compiling the report.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Findings

Based on the collected data from the quantitative phase and qualitative phase, five significant difficulties and factors emerged that students faced in listening comprehension, along with additional solutions to help EFL students minimize these difficulties and improve their listening comprehension. The findings of this study were explained by first displaying the listening comprehension difficulties data based on the questionnaire result. And then the interpretation was explained to answer the research question (1) by identifying the significant listening comprehension difficulties, followed by combining qualitative data to interpret the factors of each significant difficulty (2) and then providing additional solutions to address research questions (3).

Table 1 Students Listening Comprehension Difficulties

No	Difficulties	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	Unfamiliar words	3.2%	12.9%	38.7%	45.2%
2	Complex grammatical structures	3.2%	32.3%	48.4%	16.1%
3	Long spoken text	9.7%	29%	45.2%	16.1%
4	Unfamiliar topic	12.9%	22.6%	41.9%	22.6%
5	Unfamiliar accents	6.5%	6.5%	54.8%	32.3%
6	Fast Speech	12.9%	12.9%	48.4%	25.8%
7	Informal language & slang	12.9%	29%	41.9%	16.1%
8	Reduced forms	19.4%	41.9%	25.8%	12.9%

9	Discourse signals	6.5%	35.5%	41.9%	16.1%
10	Inferring meaning from context	9.7%	29%	35.5%	25.8%
11	Understanding the speaker's signs	6.5%	45.2%	38.7%	9.7%
12	Listening anxiety	12.9%	29%	48.4%	9.7%
13	Lack of confidence	19.4%	38.7%	29%	12.9%
14	Distraction from comprehension gaps	3.2%	19.4%	48.4%	29%
15	Worry about material inconsistency	16.1%	54.8%	19.4%	9.7%
16	Anticipating information	9.7%	25.8%	48.4%	16.1%
17	Memory recall	6.5%	25.8%	38.7%	29%
18	Misinterpretation	16.1%	22.6%	45.2%	16.1%
19	Word-for-word translation	9.7%	19.4%	48.4%	22.6%
20	Noise interference	12.9%	35.5%	45.2%	6.5%
21	Speaker distance	6.5%	41.9%	38.7%	12.9%
22	Audio clarity	12.9%	22.6%	41.9%	22.6%
23	Distractions	9.7%	12.9%	54.8%	22.6%
24	Physical fatigue	9.7%	38.7%	38.7%	12.9%
25	No opportunity to listen again	12.9%	48.4%	32.3%	6.5%

Based on the quantitative data collected from the questionnaires presented in Table 1 above, the researchers identified five significant difficulties that EFL students at SMA Nasional Malang faced in listening comprehension. These difficulties were determined based on the highest combined percentages of "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" responses. To further explain the quantitative findings, qualitative data from interviews were incorporated to identify the influencing factors that contributed to students' significant listening comprehension difficulties. The primary significant difficulties and the influencing factors were identified as follows:

Unfamiliar Accents

Firstly, most students (87.1%) reported unfamiliar accents as the first significant difficulty they faced in listening comprehension. About 54.8% agreed, and 32.3% strongly agreed, that their primary challenge in listening comprehension was dealing with a variety of accents. They were not used to hearing accents such as British, Indian, and Australian.

Limited Exposure to Accent Variety

Both teachers highlighted that their students had limited exposure to accent variety other than the American accent. Lack of experience with different pronunciation, consonants, rhythm, and intonation made it difficult for them, causing comprehension breakdown.

Pronunciation Differences

All students explained that differences in pronunciation and writing made it difficult for them to comprehend the listening text. Variations in accents and phonological features further burdened the decoding process, especially when the speaker spoke quickly.

Low Motivation to Engage with the English Language

One teacher argued that their students had low motivation to engage with English other than in class. This lack of intrinsic motivation decreased their adaptability to diverse accents.

Unfamiliar Words

Secondly, the results showed that 83.9% of students faced unfamiliar words as their second significant difficulty in listening comprehension. A total of 38.7% agreed, and 45.2% strongly agreed, that they could not understand the overall meaning due to unfamiliar words. This difficulty indicated that limited vocabulary knowledge or an inability to hear correctly hindered students from comprehending the overall meaning of the listening text.

Limited Vocabulary Knowledge

One teacher mentioned that students with limited vocabulary knowledge were the main factor behind unfamiliar words. Students who had limited vocabulary knowledge tended to have difficulty recognizing words and understanding the overall meaning.

Ineffective Listening Strategies

Both teachers and one student reported that ineffective listening strategies, such as word-for-word translation, hindered students from understanding the overall meaning. Focusing on literal meaning rather than grasping meaning in context and keywords made students dependent and over-reliant on a wrong listening strategy.

Lack of Exposure to English Input

One teacher and one student claimed that a lack of exposure to English made students struggle to remember and recognize words while listening. Lack of use outside of class and a negative attitude towards English also reduced their willingness to engage actively in the listening activity.

Fast Speech

Two students claimed that they struggled to recognize words in the listening text due to fast speech. Fast speech made the words seem blended and led them to struggle with distinguishing words and often miss key information.

Low Learning Motivation

One student stated that low learning motivation and rarely practicing listening independently made students unable to improve their vocabulary mastery. This condition weakened their ability to recognize and understand words in the listening activity.

Distraction From Comprehension Gaps.

Thirdly, the results showed that 77.4% of students experienced difficulty due to distraction from comprehension gaps. A total of 48.4% agreed, and 29% strongly agreed that missing some of the message hindered students' concentration to comprehend the overall meaning of the listening text. This result also showed that students were often distracted and lost concentration when they could not catch certain words or sentences, which led them to fail to comprehend the listening text.

Ineffective Listening Strategies

Both the teacher and one student reported that the use of word-for-word translation rather than the overall meaning was the main factor in this difficulty. Missing a single word tended to make student get distracted and struggle to keep their focus while listening to the text.

Cognitive Overload and Limited Working Memory Capacity

One student and one teacher claimed that when the input was too rapid, complex, and sequential, it exceeded students' short-term memory and overburdened them. This condition caused students to experience cognitive overload and triggered cumulative distraction.

Limited Vocabulary Knowledge

One student stated that Limited vocabulary knowledge caused students to fail to recognize key words and stop processing the listening input. This factor widened the comprehension gap and increased distractions during the listening activity.

Low Motivation

One student stated that motivation made students give up quickly and not attempt to recover when they missed the meaning of a word. This attitude widened the comprehension gaps and reduced the effectiveness of the listening comprehension.

Limited Exposure to English Input

The teacher mentioned that a Lack of exposure to English input outside of the classroom increased the possibility of comprehension gaps occurring. Students who were not accustomed to the speed, vocabulary, and intonation patterns of the target language were easily distracted when receiving listening input.

General Weakness in Language Skills

The teacher mentioned that weakness in general language skills, particularly in reading, speaking, and writing, hindered the ability to associate listening input with familiar language structures. As a result, students were more likely to lose focus while listening.

Distractions

Fourthly, 77.4% of students showed that distractions hindered them from listening properly in the listening activity. About 54.8% agreed, and 22.6% strongly agreed, that distraction negatively influenced their listening ability. This difficulty affected students' concentration while they had to keep up with the listening text.

Internal Distraction

Both groups reported that internal distractions such as fatigue, high workloads, low motivation, boredom, and unclear speech triggered cognitive confusion and decreased the effectiveness of students' listening comprehension.

External Distraction

Both groups also reported that external distractions, such as noisy environments, sounds from outside the room, and disturbances from peers who were talking during the listening process, hindered students' listening comprehension. These conditions reduced focus and led to the loss of important information for the students.

Fast Speech

Lastly, 74.2% of students reported that fast speech was their difficulty in understanding spoken language effectively. A total of 48.4% agreed, and 25.8% strongly agreed, that they felt overwhelmed by the speaker or audio when it was too fast, while at the same time they had to comprehend the overall meaning of the listening text.

Cognitive Overload

Three students and one teacher reported that fast speech could overload students' working memory and cause them to lose the overall meaning. This condition was exacerbated when combined with environmental noise and limited processing capacity, especially for EFL students.

Limited Exposure to Authentic Spoken Input

One student and one teacher reported that a Lack of listening exposure resulted in students being familiar with a variety of speech speeds. This unfamiliarity created listening shock when faced with native speakers who spoke fast.

Accents Variation

One student stated that accent variation in fast speech exacerbated students' difficulty recognizing words, primarily because word boundaries became blurred. The combination of a foreign accent and high speed impeded the process of decoding meaning.

Limited Vocabulary Knowledge

One student stated that vocabulary limitations prevented students from recognizing words in fast speech, even if they were familiar with them in written form. This inability to recognize words led to a loss of overall meaning.

Overreliance On Word-For-Word Translation

One teacher argued that word-for-word translation made their students fall behind in the flow of conversation in fast speech, so subsequent information was not processed optimally. Excessive focus on literal meaning hindered understanding, leading to a loss of overall meaning.

Negative Mindset Towards English

One teacher also argued that a negative mindset toward English reduced students' motivation to adapt to fast speech and made them give up quickly when they encountered difficulties.

Additional Solutions

Based on the semi-structured interview with both students and the teacher. There were several solutions that they proposed in order to minimize those significant difficulties and enhance students' listening comprehension.

Authentic Media-Based

Students were able to grow more easily accustomed to English accents, pronunciation, and structures by using real media such as music, TikTok, YouTube, movies, podcasts, and audio games. To make studying more relevant and interesting, teachers adjusted their media selections based on the interests of their students.

Subtitle Support Strategy

Subtitles helped students grasp what they were hearing and the words they were reading. Teachers used them to help students learn how to map sounds to words and understand what they were hearing.

Vocabulary Enrichment

Vocabulary enrichment was carried out through dictionaries, weekly vocabulary collections without translation, and vocabulary targets based on listening materials. A strong vocabulary mastery accelerated the process of understanding listening text.

Authentic Exposure Activities

Authentic listening exposure, such as storytelling, alumni/proficient speakers, and heritage visits, provided the experience of hearing English in authentic contexts that improved students' ability to understand accents and rhythm.

Gradual And Interactive Listening Activities

Listening input was provided gradually, starting from slowed speech rates, additional explanations from the teacher, and direct interaction. This approach prevented cognitive overload for students and improved their speech rate comprehension.

Self-Regulated Learning

Students independently sought additional listening materials through digital platforms, driven by curiosity about the meaning of the text. This strategy demonstrated autonomy in listening practice outside of the classroom.

Positive Mindset and Motivation

Positive motivation was fostered through games (Quizizz and Kahoot!), engaging videos, and engaging activities, as motivation was considered the primary foundation for improve listening comprehension.

Learning Style Integration Strategy

Listening instruction accommodated visual, auditory, and kinesthetic students' learning styles, which help students enhance their listening comprehension.

Project-Based Learning (PJBL)

Students investigated, debated, and solved problems in a listening context using strategies from both video-based and subtitle-based activities. This strategy fostered active participation while improving students' listening comprehension in real situations.

Discussion

Based on the findings presented above, the discussion was focused on discussing significant listening difficulties factors and additional solutions that helped students minimize significant difficulties and improve their listening comprehension.

Unfamiliar accents

The first significant listening difficulty identified through the questionnaire was unfamiliar accents, as reported by most students 87.1%, who agreed that unfamiliar accents were their first significant difficulty in listening comprehension. There were three factors that contributed to this difficulty based on qualitative data such as limited exposure to accent variety, pronunciation differences, and low motivation to engage with the English language. All teachers highlighted that the students were only exposed to American accent input and teachers' accents during classroom activities. In alignment with teachers' perceptions, all students agreed that different pronunciations caused them to fail to recognize words that they already knew in written form. One teacher also emphasized that students' low motivation to engage with English outside the classroom decreased their adaptability to accent diversity. These findings were consistent with Miao (2023), who stated that exposure to various accents helps students develop phonological adaptability, and which was further supported by Solihah et al. (2022), who noted that there is a strong relationship between accent familiarity and listening comprehension success. Pedagogically, integrating a variety of accent inputs by educators in the classroom through podcasts, films, and interactions with native speakers could improve students' listening comprehension, while adapting teaching strategies based on students' needs could support students' listening development.

Unfamiliar words

The second significant difficulty that students experienced in listening was unfamiliar words, the results showed that 83.9% of students faced unfamiliar words as their difficulty in listening comprehension. There were several factors that hindered students during the listening activities based on qualitative data related to unfamiliar words, such as limited vocabulary knowledge, ineffective listening strategies, lack of exposure to English input, fast

speech, and low learning motivation. The teachers frequently highlighted that students' limited vocabulary knowledge often led them to fail to recognize words, resulting in comprehension gaps. Their ineffective listening strategies, for example, translating word-for-word, overburdened students' cognitive capacity, while limited exposure to English, combined with a fast speech rate, further complicated their ability to comprehend the overall meaning of the listening texts. These findings aligned with Hardiyanto et al. (2021), who stated that there is a minimum vocabulary mastery threshold required for students to succeed in listening comprehension. Hang (2024) also emphasized that when the students experienced cognitive overload during the listening activity, their listening comprehension could be significantly impaired. Similarly, Lengkoan et al. (2022) highlighted that vocabulary proficiency strongly predicted students' listening comprehension success. Therefore, students' vocabulary development, providing greater exposure to English input, and encouraging them to shift from ineffective to effective strategies were considered essential steps for educators in implementing engaging listening activities.

Distraction from comprehension gaps

The third significant difficulty that students experienced in listening was distraction from comprehension gaps, the results showed that 77.4% of students encountered this difficulty. Based on qualitative data, this difficulty was influenced by several factors such as ineffective listening strategies, cognitive overload and limited working memory capacity, limited vocabulary knowledge, low motivation, limited exposure to English input, and general weakness in language skills. Students who relied on word-for-word translation as their listening strategy were vulnerable to facing this difficulty, because when they missed a few words, their ability to comprehend the overall meaning was disrupted. These findings were in agreement with Wahab and Tanasy (2022), who pointed out the important role of background knowledge and linguistic decoding for listening comprehension success. Teng (2024) also explained that when students were trying to recover missed words or information, it placed extra pressure on students' working memory, and made it harder to process the remaining information. Similarly, Hardiyanto et al. (2021) argued that too much information could overwhelm students' cognitive capacity, leading to distraction and comprehension breakdown. Adi et al. (2021) likewise observed that limited exposure and weak language proficiency made it difficult for students to stay focused and comprehend the entire listening text. Therefore, helping students develop efficient listening strategies could prevent them from facing distraction from comprehension gaps difficulty, and providing consistent English exposure was considered essential for gradually increasing their overall language proficiency.

Distraction

The fourth significant difficulty identified in this study was distraction, which negatively affected students' comprehension and attention during listening activities. The results showed that 77.4% of the students reported that this difficulty hindered them from listening properly during the listening activities. Based on qualitative data, this difficulty was identified from two factors, which were internal and external factors. External distractions such as classroom noise, peer noise, and infrastructure interfered with students' ability to focus on listening to the text. Internal distractions stemmed from fatigue, stress, boredom, and low motivation. These two factors significantly affected students' concentration, causing them to miss key information and making it more difficult to process listening input. These findings were aligned with Alzamil (2021), who emphasized that listening comprehension success depends on students' ability to allocate and maintain their focus on the listening input. Affective factors also play a crucial role as barriers to students' listening comprehension. Similarly, Hein et al. (2023) highlighted the influence of environmental and psychological factors on students' listening success. These findings suggested that facilitating students with language labs or a quiet environment could help minimize external distractions, while implementing engaging teaching strategies could improve internal factors for more effective listening activities.

Fast speech

Lastly, the fifth significant difficulty was fast speech, which significantly increased students' listening comprehension challenges. The results indicated that 74.2% of students

reported that fast speech challenged their ability to understand spoken language effectively. Based on qualitative data, there were several factors influenced this difficulty such as cognitive overload, limited exposure to authentic spoken input, accents variation, limited vocabulary knowledge, overreliance on word-for-word translation, and negative mindset toward English which significantly hindered students' listening comprehension. Fast speech listening texts often overwhelmed students' working memory, reducing their ability to recognize words. When combined with unfamiliar accents and limited vocabulary, it made students' ability to comprehend listening texts worse. According to Hang (2024), a fast speech rate increases students' cognitive processing demands, burdening their working memory and decreasing listening performance. Similarly, Adi et al. (2021) highlighted that when unfamiliar accents were paired with phonetic processing demands in rapid speech, it hindered students' ability to adapt and recognize words accurately. Hein et al. (2023) further validated that fast speech significantly hindered students' listening comprehension. These findings indicated that gradual exposure to various speech rates variations and accents, along with top-down and bottom-up strategies, could help students adapt effectively to spoken language while sustaining their comprehension of listening texts.

Additional solutions from students and teachers.

There were several additional solutions based on the qualitative data that researchers found in this study that could help students minimize the significant difficulties while improving their listening comprehension. Three categories of additional solutions that were emphasized by both groups, students themselves and teachers themselves.

There were four additional solutions that both teachers and students emphasized to minimize the significant difficulties and improve students' listening comprehension. First, both groups highlighted authentic media-based listening practices such as TikTok, films, anime, and podcasts. This authentic media could provide students with meaningful, engaging, and natural language input that helps them become familiar with diverse accents, rhythms, and pronunciation. This solution aligned with the multimedia learning theory by Mayer (2009), which highlighted that the use of audio, visual, and text simultaneously in learning materials was more effective because the human brain integrates and processes multimodal input more efficiently. Second, subtitle support was also emphasized by both groups. Subtitle support helped students differentiate between spoken and written forms of language and, at the same time, facilitated phonological mapping and semantic comprehension. A previous study from Nilawati and Lutviana (2022) confirmed that the use of English subtitles improved students' listening comprehension outcomes. Third, both groups agreed that vocabulary enrichment was a solution that students should implement in order to process listening text effectively. This finding aligned with the lexical processing theory by Field (2009), who highlighted vocabulary mastery as a key factor for listening comprehension success. Lastly, authentic exposure, such as interaction with native speakers, video, storytelling, and outdoor learning, provided opportunities for students to improve their adaptability to various accents and speech rates. This finding was supported by Wahab and Tanasy (2022), who highlighted the importance of authentic exposure input in increasing students' listening skills.

In addition, students also provided their own solutions that indicated their engagement in the listening process. First, gradual and interactive listening activities were mentioned by students. They explained that a slower speech rate, extended explanation, and interactive listening activity provided a gradual and interactive listening activity that did not overburden their cognitive abilities and at the same time improved their listening comprehension. Similarly, a previous study by Hang (2024), which highlighted that decreasing the complexity of listening texts lightened the processing demand on students' working memory, was supported by Yuliarini (2022), who emphasized that listening comprehension and learner engagement could be achieved by implementing interactive teaching activities. Second, students also proposed self-regulated learning based on their initiative and curiosity to improve their listening comprehension outside the classroom by using songs, online videos, and other media to avoid difficulties. Students' independence indicated intrinsic motivation and personal investment in language learning. This aligned with self-regulated learning

theory by Zimmerman (2002), who highlighted the interaction between good learning outcomes and how students regulated their learning process. Similarly, Adi et al. (2021) emphasized that students' learning motivation played a crucial role in improving learning outcomes.

On the other hand, teachers also provided solutions based on pedagogical approaches to create a supportive learning environment for students. First, a positive mindset and motivation were proposed, showing how gamified tools, movies, videos, and music helped create a more engaging and relaxed learning environment, reduced students' anxiety, built confidence, and encouraged motivation towards listening activities. Similarly, Yuliarini (2022) highlighted the significant impact of motivation and mindset on students' learning outcomes. Second, the learning style integration strategy, also proposed by the teacher, referred to the value of accommodating auditory, visual, and kinesthetic students' learning styles to strengthen students' learning outcomes. This solution aligned with Sapan and Mede (2022), who emphasized that integrating learning styles could increase students' language achievements as well as their motivation towards foreign languages. Lastly, Project-Based Learning (PJBL) illustrated how student-centered learning activities involving active listening and problem solving gave deeper comprehension and engagement towards authentic language. This aligned with Waloyo (2024), who suggested that students construct knowledge from authentic interaction and experiences for effective outcomes. Collectively, these pedagogical solutions could be implemented by educators together with student initiatives. Teachers and students could collaboratively implement comprehensive and integrative learning activities for listening that combine cognitive, linguistic, and affective factors.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, based on the findings and discussion of this research indicated that EFL high school students in SMA Nasional Malang faced five significant difficulties in listening comprehension, such as unfamiliar accents, unfamiliar words, distraction from comprehension gaps, distraction, and fast speech. These five significant listening difficulties were generally influenced by linguistic limitations, cognitive overload, insufficient exposure, affective factors, and environmental factors. Both students and teachers also proposed several additional solutions that help minimize these significant difficulties and improve students' listening comprehension, such as authentic media, subtitle support, vocabulary enrichment, authentic exposure, gradual and interactive listening activities, self-regulated learning, building students' positive mindset and motivation toward English, learning style integration, and project-based learning. Despite this research using a mixed-method design, this study had several limitations that future research could address comprehensively. First, the number of respondents for the quantitative data in this research was 31 students and was limited to one grade level only, making the results not generalizable to the difficulties that high school students face in listening comprehension. Second, the solution data obtained in this research did not focus on a specific solution for each difficulty and did not empirically test the effectiveness of these solutions on students' listening comprehension difficulties. Lastly, the qualitative data were collected from four students based on teacher recommendations and two teachers who taught English to twelfth graders, so the results may have reduced the depth, diversity, and richness of qualitative data from different students and teachers across all grades. Therefore, future research should include a larger sample, especially from all grade levels and teachers, to obtain generalizable data on the significant difficulties and their factors that high school students face in listening comprehension. Future research could also examine the effectiveness of these solutions to measure their impact on student listening comprehension and obtain stronger pedagogical evidence.

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