

## **The Students ' Challenges in Mastering TOEFL Listening Comprehension**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Listening comprehension is the hardest section for many TOEFL students. Students struggle with fast speaking, various English dialects, and advanced academic discourse, even with many digital tools. Their perspectives, past experiences, and learning styles affect how well they improve TOEFL listening comprehension. This study aims to identify the main obstacles students face in achieving TOEFL Listening Comprehension proficiency. This study used quantitative descriptive methods to collect and analyze data. Fifty college students who had undergone TOEFL preparation classes complained about the hearing section. Data was collected from five student interviews and a twenty-question structured questionnaire. The examination examined pupils' perspectives and unusual listening challenges. The study found that students with systematic practice and real content exposure had strong hearing awareness and adaptive skills. Students acknowledged the benefits of podcasts, listening apps, and other technological tools, yet some struggled to stay engaged. The study found that consistent listening practice, guided note-taking, and customized technological interventions can improve TOEFL listening section performance. To meet each student's needs, future lessons should include individualized listening activities and constant exposure to diverse English dialects.

**Keywords:** listening, students challenges, TOEFL test

### **INTRODUCTION**

The field of language expertise testing plays such a major role in both academic and also professional success, especially for non-native English speakers. The rapid evolution of testing methods, spurred by improvements in linguistic research along with technology, has greatly affected the procedural way students prepare for standardized exams (Zur, 2020).

Aryadoust stated in 2019 that listening comprehension represents one of the most difficult aspects of tests assessing English language skills, as test takers must understand spoken English. TOEFL, the Test of English as a Foreign Language, is known as a standard for judging English listening skills in academic contexts (Putra et al., 2021). Educational Testing Service (ETS) 2021. Truly one of the single most demanding components of the TOEFL is actually the Listening Comprehension section, and it requires students in order to engage with fairly diverse English accents, specific academic discussions, and also spontaneous speech patterns (Zewitra & Purnamasari, 2024). Given the growing necessity of English expertise for global education as well as career improvement, mastering listening comprehension has become a priority for students worldwide (Fanani, 2023). However, despite the increasing accessibility to digital learning resources, many students still encounter greatly meaningful challenges. They encounter these challenges in improving their TOEFL Listening Comprehension skills (Mulyadi, 2022).

Listening comprehension is an important skill in language acquisition (Mandiri et al., 2022). Nevertheless, it remains a common hurdle for most TOEFL test takers. Innumerable studies have identified particular key challenges that students face in preparing for the TOEFL Listening Comprehension section (Sari, 2019). One primary issue exists as the rapid speech rate used in TOEFL recordings, which often overwhelms students who are accustomed to slower, more structured classroom dialogues. Renandya and Farrell 2019.

The fast-paced nature of spoken English in the test makes it difficult for learners to process and retain key information (Lubis et al., 2021). Additionally, TOEFL incorporates multiple English accents, including American, British, and Australian, creating further difficulties for students who have primarily been exposed to a single accent in their learning environments (Wahab, 2022). Many learners struggle with differentiating pronunciation variations, intonation, and connected speech patterns, which can lead to misunderstandings. Furthermore, the need for multitasking—listening while taking effective notes—is another challenge that many students find difficult to master (Serraj, 2023). The ability to extract main ideas, recognize supporting details, and predict information while listening in real time requires extensive practice and strategic training (Ramadhana, 2023). These factors collectively contribute to students' struggles in achieving high scores in the TOEFL Listening Comprehension section.

### 1. Students' Perception

Students' perception is accountable for their attitude towards learning to perform well in TOEFL Listening Comprehension. Perception challenges and experiences faced while learning that affect their study habit and motivation (Nushi, 2023). Schunk and DiBenedetto (2020) argue that perception influences learners' self-regulated learning strategies and ability to adapt to hearing challenges. During TOEFL preparation, students either have a positive or negative perception of their listening ability based on their previous experience with exposure to English. Some students are confident listeners, whereas others become anxious and frustrated because they cannot comprehend spoken English (Nurhayati, 2024). Students' attitudes towards TOEFL Listening Comprehension rely on exposure to authentic English materials, self-confidence, and individual learning styles. Learning the perceptions of students is important in determining whether current learning methods are effective and devising more specific methods for assisting students in overcoming listening issues. Mulyadi 2021. If teachers investigate students' opinions, they can identify more clearly the particular listening hurdles that face students and adopt solutions that work best for them (Batubara, 2023).

## 2. The Impact of Technology on Students' Listening Understanding

Technology advances have transformed the landscape of language learning, providing language learners with new means of enhancing their listening capabilities (Hubbrad, 2021). The use of digital resources in the form of podcasts, interactive listening exercises, and AI-driven speech recognition software has turned out to be an essential component of TOEFL preparation (Chappele, 2020). Research indicates that students who employ technology-driven learning material possess stronger listening skills compared to learners who rely on classroom instruction. Online education platforms in the form of TED Talks, YouTube tutorials, and TOEFL-specific listening apps expose learners to various patterns of speech and common conversational contexts to enable them to get familiar with the traps of TOEFL Listening Comprehension (Fakhrudin, 2024). But while technology offers immense benefits, its usefulness depends on the way the students employ these facilities. Therefore, without proper guidance, a number of the students will be lost to capitalize on the full potential of digital devices, leading to passive listening and not active engagement with verbal English. Therefore, it is important to clarify the role of technology in the students' listening acquisition for optimizing TOEFL Listening preparation.

## 3. Challenges in Mastering TOEFL Listening Comprehension

To excel in TOEFL Listening Comprehension, one must overcome some great challenges that impact students' performance (Yavuz et al., 2015). Test anxiety is one such great challenge faced by most students and interferes with their focus and capacity to process auditory information well (Cheng, 2019). Anxiety has a tendency to lead to cognitive overload and interfere with students' capacity to remember important details from listening passages. Another challenge is unfamiliarity with academic vocabulary generally employed in TOEFL discussions and lectures (Nation, 2020). It is hard for most students to grasp subject-specific words and idiomatic expressions that could influence their ability to understand oral content accurately. Additionally, the mental load of multitasking, note-taking, and processing information simultaneously proves to be an obstacle for untrained students on effective note-taking skills (Goh, 2018). These challenges need to be overcome through exposure to deliberate practice in several listening materials as well as by setting systematic strategies for listening that are necessary in order to facilitate students' improvement in TOEFL Listening Comprehension.

The following questions have been posited to guide this study.

1. What are the major issues students face in obtaining TOEFL Listening Comprehension?
2. How students define their TOEFL Listening Comprehension issues
3. What needs to be done in order to improve students' TOEFL Listening?

## METHOD

This research uses a quantitative descriptive method. The subjects of the research were fifty college students who had taken the TOEFL test and experienced challenges in Mastering TOEFL Listening Comprehension. The research utilized questionnaires and interviews as data collection instruments. The questionnaire, consisting of 12 questions under two main indicators, was created using Google Forms and distributed to fifty students to analyze their perceptions and difficulties in TOEFL Listening Comprehension. The collected data were then analyzed quantitatively.

Additionally, interviews were conducted with five students to gain deeper insights into their problems and experiences when preparing for the TOEFL Listening Comprehension section. The interview consisted of six open-ended questions, allowing the researcher to explore students' challenges, strategies, and learning approaches in detail.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaire consisted of 12 closed-ended questions divided into two indicators: the first one focused on the challenges students face during the TOEFL Listening section, while the second one explored the strategies they use to overcome those challenges. Responses were gathered from 50 students who have experienced TOEFL Listening practices or actual tests. The response scale followed a four-point Likert format: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. The results reflect a balanced view of students' cognitive and emotional responses to TOEFL Listening tasks.

The first six questions focused on identifying the specific obstacles students commonly encounter during TOEFL Listening comprehension. The results are summarized in table 1.

Table 1:  
Percentages of Students' Challenges in TOEFL Listening

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
1. I find it hard to understand native speaker speed in TOEFL audio	50%	34%	10%	4%	2%	100%
2. I often lose focus during long listening passages	38%	40%	14%	6%	2%	100%
3. I struggle to recognize key information when listening.	42%	36%	14%	6%	2%	100%
4. I get confused by unfamiliar	34%	40%	16%	6%	4%	100%

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vocabulary in the audio.							
5. I have	30%	38%	20%	8%	4%	10	
difficulty						0	
understanding						%	
different							
accents in							
TOEFL							
Listening.							
6. I feel anxious	28%	32%	26%	8%	2%	10	
or nervous						0	
during TOEFL						%	
Listening							
sections							

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The data shows that the most prominent issue is the fast pace of native speaker speech, with 84% of students expressing agreement. This reflects a common struggle in bottom-up processing, where learners find it hard to decode rapid and fluent spoken input. Following this, loss of focus during extended listening tasks (78%) is a widespread issue that may stem from limited attention span or unfamiliarity with long academic dialogues.

Moreover, recognizing key information is also a challenge for 78% of students, indicating that they may lack the skills to distinguish essential content from supporting details. This is critical in TOEFL Listening, where questions often hinge on understanding purpose, inference, or speaker attitude. Vocabulary gaps (74%) and exposure to multiple English accents (68%) further hinder comprehension, revealing the necessity for greater input variety during preparation. Finally, test anxiety affects over half of the students, suggesting that psychological readiness plays a pivotal role in test performance.

The results of the second indicator, namely the strategies to overcome listening challenges, will be presented in Table 2.

Table 2.  
Percentages of Students' Strategies to Overcome Listening Challenges

Question	Strongly Agree	Angree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
7. I practice listening to English audio materials regularly	28%	46%	16%	6%	4%	100%
8. I take notes while listening to improve understanding	30%	44%	18%	6%	2%	100%
9. I replay difficult listening sections during practice.	36%	46%	12%	4%	2%	100%
10. I use English subtitles when watching English videos	40%	36%	16%	6%	2%	100%
11. I expand my vocabulary to help understand TOEFL Listening	38%	44%	12%	4%	2%	100%
12. I learn to identify key words and transitions during listening	30%	46%	18%	4%	0%	100%

In response to these challenges, the majority of students reported engaging in self-regulated learning strategies. Notably, 82% replay difficult

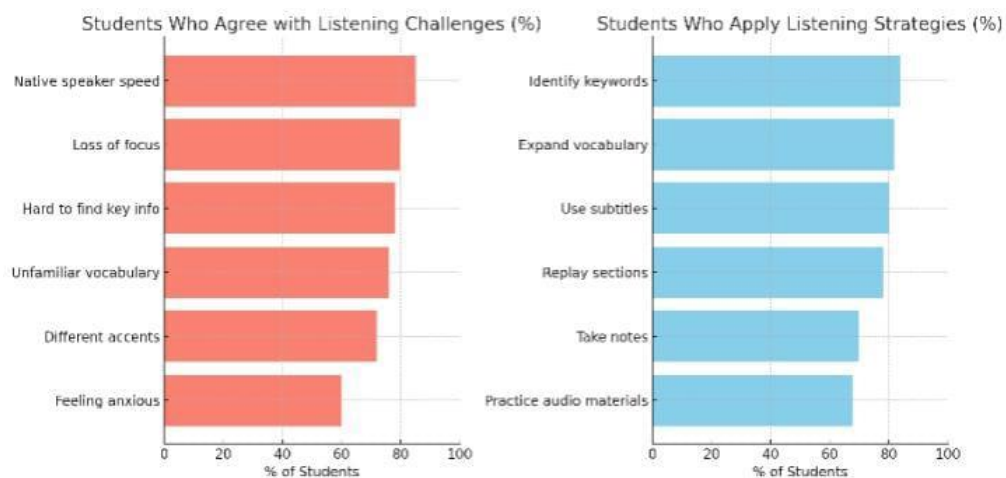
audio sections during practice, suggesting a metacognitive approach to comprehension breakdowns. According to Graham (2017), repeated listening supports memory retention and promotes deeper linguistic processing. Subtitling was used by 76% of students, aligning with findings by Sokoli and Zabalbeascoa (2020), who found that subtitles support vocabulary retention and facilitate parallel text-audio mapping in early stages of listening acquisition.

Vocabulary building and notetaking were also frequently employed, reported by 82% and 74% respectively. These strategies reflect both cognitive (e.g., increasing mental lexicon) and metacognitive (e.g., focusing attention, monitoring understanding) approaches. However, although students are aware of such strategies, research by Teng (2021) warns that many learners fail to apply them consistently or effectively without scaffolding and feedback.

This gap between strategy awareness and strategy application reveals that learners often depend on passive listening rather than deliberate practice. The implication is that instructors must emphasize strategy instruction, not just exposure to materials.

The 12 questions focused Students' Listening Challenges and Strategies in TOEFL Listening Comprehension. The results are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1.  
Students' Listening Challenges and Strategies in TOEFL Listening Comprehension





To visually support the percentage data described earlier, the following figure presents a comparison between students' reported challenges and the strategies they employ to overcome them. As seen in the left chart, the top three difficulties; related to speech speed, concentration, and information recognition stand out with the highest agreement rates. This aligns with earlier observations regarding cognitive load and processing speed in listening tasks.

Meanwhile, the right chart highlights how students attempt to respond to these challenges. Replay practices and the use of subtitles emerge as the most widely used strategies, suggesting that students are aware of their limitations and actively seek ways to mitigate them. Interestingly, the consistency between strategy use and reported challenges implies that students are not only aware of their listening weaknesses but are also taking initiative to improve, particularly in areas requiring repeated exposure and enhanced lexical knowledge. This graphical summary reinforces the quantitative trends and indicates a positive orientation among learners toward self-regulated listening practice in TOEFL preparation.

The following data is the result of the interview. In collecting this data, researchers selected five students who had undergone TOEFL preparation classes complained about the hearing section. This interview consists of 6 questions regarding students' experiences in the test TOEFL in listening comprehension. In this interview, we were also asked about the advantages and disadvantages when listening for TOEL comprehension test. The following data results from the interview will be presented in Table 3.

Table 3.  
Interview Result

Students	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6
S.1	Yes, especially with long lectures.	I find it hard to catch specific details when speakers talk fast.	I try to practice more using TOEFL mock tests.	Yes, it really measures listening and concentration skills.	The advantage is building real listening skills; the disadvantage is it can be stressful.	It pushes me to improve my listening and note-taking skills.
S.2	Yes, I often feel lost during conversations in TOEFL Listening.	I can't follow when the topic changes suddenly or speakers speak too quickly.	I pause and replay the recording when practicing.	Yes, but it needs a calm mind to be effective.	The benefit is exposure to academic listening; the downside is high pressure during the test.	It trains me to listen more critically and identify main ideas.
S.3	Yes, especially when there are multiple speakers.	Recognizing who is speaking and understanding their accent	I listen to podcasts with various accents.	Yes, TOEFL Listening is realistic and challenging.	The positive is better English comprehension; negative is mental fatigue.	It motivates me to listen to authentic materials more often.

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S.4	Yes, especially during the lecture-style parts.	The vocabulary is sometimes too academic or technical.	I improve my vocabulary and read academic texts.	Yes, because it simulates university situation.	Advantage: improves academic listening; disadvantage: too fast and dense.	It helps me prepare for studying in an English-speaking environment.
S.5	Yes, I get nervous and miss key information.	I press ure make me lose focus easily.	I try breathing techniques and more timed practice.	Yes, but it would be better with clearer audio sometimes.	Advantage: builds focus; disadvantage: difficult to rewind or double-check in real time.	It encourages me to be more disciplined and manage stress during listening.

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The interview results provide deeper insight into students' real experiences and challenges in TOEFL Listening Comprehension. All five students confirmed that they often face difficulties when engaging with TOEFL Listening tasks, though the nature of their struggles varied. One of the most common issues raised was the difficulty in keeping up with fast native speaker speech, especially during longer or more complex passages. Student 1 (S.1) expressed that longer lectures in TOEFL Listening tend to make it harder to retain key information, especially when the speaker talks too quickly. Similarly, Student 2 (S.2) highlighted that sudden changes in topic and fast delivery make it difficult to stay focused.

Another recurring issue was dealing with multiple speakers, as noted by Student 3 (S.3). The switching of speakers with different accents caused confusion and made it harder to track who was saying what. This aligns with common challenges in real-life English academic listening, where distinguishing speaker roles is crucial. On the other hand, Student 4

(S.4) emphasized the difficulty of unfamiliar academic vocabulary that appears in lecture-style passages. This lexical barrier often causes students to miss the meaning of whole sentences or even entire parts of the recording.

Regarding coping strategies, the students revealed several effective methods. For example, S.1 and S.2 both rely on repetitive practice using TOEFL mock tests or by replaying recordings. Student 3 listens to English podcasts with varied accents, while S.4 actively works on expanding academic vocabulary to better comprehend the audio. Student 5 (S.5), who mentioned often feeling nervous during listening, shared that they use breathing exercises and time-limited practice to better manage test pressure and improve focus.

All interviewees agreed that TOEFL Listening is effective in evaluating English comprehension skills, particularly in academic contexts. However, they also admitted that the format and pressure of the test can sometimes cause unnecessary stress. S.2 and S.5 pointed out that a calm and focused mindset is essential to succeed in the Listening section, indicating the role of psychological readiness in TOEFL performance.

In terms of perceived advantages and disadvantages, all students acknowledged that TOEFL Listening helps build their listening comprehension and vocabulary. S.1 and S.3 mentioned how the test environment pushes them to concentrate and develop their note-taking skills. Meanwhile, S.4 appreciated the exposure to academic English as preparation for real university scenarios. However, all students also recognized certain downsides, such as the audio being too fast, lack of rewind features in the real test, or the cognitive fatigue from long listening tasks.

The impact of TOEFL Listening on students' overall English learning is mostly positive. Several students reported increased motivation to engage with authentic English materials like podcasts, lectures, and videos. It also made them more conscious about their listening skills and how to improve them strategically. Student 5 summarized it well, saying that TOEFL Listening encouraged them to be more disciplined and emotionally resilient during listening activities.

Overall, the interview findings support the data gathered from the questionnaire. Students face real and varied challenges in TOEFL Listening Comprehension, but they are also developing practical strategies to overcome them. The test, though demanding, is seen as a useful tool for measuring and improving listening ability in academic English contexts.

## CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that students commonly face challenges in TOEFL Listening, particularly in understanding fast-paced speech, maintaining focus during long passages, and dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary or accents. These difficulties are often intensified by test anxiety, which affects their concentration and overall performance. However, students are not passive in the face of these obstacles; many have adopted effective strategies such as repeated listening, note-taking, using subtitles, and practicing with real-life audio materials.

Overall, TOEFL Listening is perceived as both demanding and beneficial. While it tests multiple language skills under pressure, it also motivates students to improve their listening comprehension in meaningful ways. The challenges they experience serve as valuable feedback that pushes them toward better preparation and more strategic learning habits, ultimately supporting their development in academic English.

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