

Exploring English Listening Challenges, Strategies, and Technology Use Among EFL Learners

**Nikmatuzzakiah,
Anjar Setiawan**

Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang
Jl. Kedungmundu Raya No. 18 Semarang
anjar17@unimus.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Listening is an essential but challenging skill in English language learning. Many EFL learners face difficulties in understanding natural speech, different accents, and authentic English materials. This study aimed to explore learners' perceptions, challenges, strategies, and practices related to English listening. A qualitative approach was employed involving 13 participants who completed a structured questionnaire. The findings showed that fast speech from native speakers (84.6%) and accent variation (53.8%) were the main listening challenges. Most participants regularly practiced listening through English songs (84.6%) and films or TV series (46.2%). Repetition of words or phrases was the most frequently used strategy (92.3%), while technology such as applications and online platforms was considered helpful by most learners (76.9%). However, opportunities to interact with native speakers were limited, with 84.6% of participants only occasionally engaging in such interactions. The study concludes that learners are motivated to improve their listening skills but need more opportunities for authentic communication. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to combine technology-based learning resources with meaningful communicative activities to enhance listening competence.

Keywords: listening skills, EFL learners, listening strategies, technology, authentic communication.

INTRODUCTION

Listening is one of the four fundamental skills in English language learning, yet it is often considered the most difficult to master for non-native speakers. Unlike reading, which allows learners

to process text at their own pace, listening demands real-time processing of auditory input, requiring learners to decode sounds, understand vocabulary, and interpret meaning almost simultaneously. This inherently complex cognitive process becomes even more demanding when learners are exposed to natural speech, which is often fast, informal, and laden with cultural nuances. Arkhasa et al. (2025) emphasizes listening is not merely a passive act of receiving sounds, but an active cognitive process that plays a foundational role in overall language acquisition and communication competence. Without strong listening skills, learners face significant barriers in both academic and professional English contexts.

The challenges associated with English listening are particularly pronounced for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners who have limited access to authentic language use in their daily environments. In countries like Indonesia, English is primarily encountered in academic settings, which often prioritize grammar and reading over authentic oral communication. Bimantara et al. (2026) highlighted that accent variation and informal language features pose considerable difficulties for non-native learners, especially those accustomed to a single variety of English. The gap between the controlled language of textbooks and the spontaneous, varied nature of authentic spoken English can be discouraging for learners, even those who have studied the language for several years. This disconnect between classroom learning and real-world communication is a widely documented challenge in English language education (Müller et al., 2023).

In recent years, the proliferation of digital media has significantly transformed the landscape of English listening practice. Learners now have unprecedented access to a vast array of authentic materials, including films, television series, podcasts, music, and online educational platforms. These resources provide exposure to diverse accents, speech rates, and discourse types that are essential for developing flexible and adaptive listening skills. notes that technological integration in English language teaching has opened new pathways for self-directed learning, allowing students to practice at their own pace and according to their personal interests. Furthermore, entertainment-based materials such as songs and films not only expose learners to authentic language use but also enhance motivation by combining language learning with enjoyment (Kristianti et al., 2023).

Despite the availability of these resources, many learners still struggle to translate their passive listening practice into effective real-world communication skills. The frustration experienced when

encountering native speakers in authentic conversational settings suggests that exposure alone is insufficient without the incorporation of active listening strategies. Novayanti et al. (2018) argue that learners must develop metacognitive awareness about their own listening processes and employ deliberate strategies such as prediction, keyword identification, and repetition to maximize comprehension. Furthermore, Husna (2021) emphasizes that metacognitive strategy instruction significantly improves both listening performance and learners' confidence in handling authentic language input. Therefore, understanding how learners perceive their challenges and what strategies they employ is crucial for designing effective listening instruction.

This study seeks to contribute to the growing body of research on EFL listening by examining the specific challenges, practices, and perceptions of a group of Indonesian English language learners. By gathering data through a structured questionnaire, the study aims to identify patterns in learners' listening habits, preferred materials, strategy use, and attitudes toward technology as a learning tool. The findings are intended to inform language educators and curriculum designers about the needs and practices of contemporary EFL learners, providing evidence-based recommendations for improving listening instruction. Octaviana (2017) suggest, integrating an understanding of learners' digital habits and strategic approaches is essential for developing English language pedagogy that is both relevant and effective in the 21st century.

Listening comprehension is widely regarded as the cornerstone of language acquisition and communication, forming the basis upon which other language skills are developed. Scholars have consistently argued that listening provides the primary input from which learners extract linguistic patterns, vocabulary, and pragmatic conventions necessary for effective language use (Ambarita et al., 2023). Unlike productive skills such as speaking and writing, listening is a receptive process that operates largely below conscious awareness, requiring the brain to rapidly decode acoustic signals, recognize words, and construct meaning from continuous streams of speech. This complexity makes listening particularly demanding for EFL learners, who must simultaneously manage linguistic decoding and meaning construction in a language that is not their primary mode of communication. The integrative nature of listening with other skills further underscores its centrality in holistic language development.

Research has consistently demonstrated that high-quality listening input contributes significantly to improvements in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammatical awareness. Lynch (2003)

found that targeted listening instruction focusing on both segmental and suprasegmental features of English significantly enhanced learners' listening comprehension and pronunciation accuracy. This finding highlights the bidirectional relationship between listening and speaking, where exposure to authentic spoken language models informs and refines learners' own speech production. Similarly, Widodo (2022) demonstrated that repeated exposure to vocabulary in listening contexts enhances retention and understanding, particularly when combined with explicit attention to word forms and meanings. These studies collectively affirm that listening is not an isolated skill but a dynamic process that actively supports the development of overall language proficiency.

The development of effective listening skills requires the deliberate application of cognitive and metacognitive strategies that extend beyond passive exposure. Djumadin et al. (2023) emphasize that metacognitive strategies, including planning before listening, monitoring comprehension during the listening process, and evaluating understanding afterward, are particularly effective in improving listening outcomes. Learners who engage in pre-listening activities such as predicting content, activating relevant background knowledge, and setting comprehension goals tend to perform significantly better than those who approach listening tasks without strategic preparation. This planning dimension is especially important in academic and professional settings where listeners must quickly orient themselves to unfamiliar topics and discourse structures. The deliberate use of metacognitive strategies transforms listening from a passive reception task into an active, goal-directed cognitive activity.

During-listening strategies such as note-taking, keyword identification, and repetition have also been shown to significantly enhance comprehension and retention. Sasstos (2020) demonstrated that learners who practiced repeating and rehearsing newly encountered vocabulary and phrases from listening texts showed markedly greater retention compared to those who engaged in a single-exposure listening without active processing. The integration of these complementary approaches allows learners to develop both bottom-up processing skills, such as phoneme recognition and word decoding, and top-down skills, such as schema activation and contextual inference. This dual-processing competence is essential for handling the full range of authentic listening situations that learners encounter in real-world communication.

The role of authentic materials in strategy development and motivational engagement has received considerable scholarly

attention in recent years. When learners engage with materials that reflect their personal interests and cultural preferences, they are more likely to sustain attention, persist through comprehension difficulties, and seek out additional listening practice independently. The combination of strategic listening practices with personally meaningful and authentic materials therefore, represents a powerful approach to fostering long-term listening development and autonomous learning habits (Ambarita et al., 2023).

The rapid advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the possibilities for English listening practice, providing learners with unprecedented access to diverse and authentic language input. Features such as adjustable playback speed, interactive subtitles, vocabulary glosses, and instant replay allow learners to engage with challenging listening materials in ways that support comprehension without undermining the development of authentic processing skills. Research on the effectiveness of technology-enhanced listening instruction has consistently demonstrated positive outcomes across various learner populations and educational settings. This breadth of exposure is particularly valuable for developing the flexible listening competence needed to function effectively across different communicative contexts and registers (Novayanti et al., 2018).

Despite the well-documented benefits of technology-enhanced listening practice, scholars have also identified important limitations that must be addressed in instructional design. The spontaneous repairs, hesitations, and contextually embedded meanings that characterize authentic spoken interaction require a level of interpretive flexibility that goes beyond what most digital listening materials can provide (Hakim, 2019). Therefore, effective listening instruction must balance technology-mediated input with opportunities for genuine interactive practice, ensuring that learners develop both the processing efficiency needed for media consumption and the communicative agility required for real-world conversation.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the perceptions, habits, and practices of EFL learners related to English listening performance. The qualitative approach adopted in this study prioritizes depth of understanding over statistical generalization, allowing for the identification of meaningful patterns and themes within participants' responses. This methodological orientation aligns with the interpretivist philosophical tradition, which views knowledge as contextually situated and constructed through

individual experience and social interaction. The research design was therefore structured to elicit rich, descriptive data that accurately reflects the diversity of learners' listening experiences and challenges.

The study involved 13 participants who were actively engaged in English language learning at the time of data collection. The participant group consisted of a predominantly female cohort aged approximately 18 to 20 years, representing learners at the tertiary education level or early career stage, where English listening proficiency becomes increasingly important for academic and professional purposes. Participants were selected based on their demonstrated interest and active involvement in English language learning, ensuring that the data collected would reflect genuine engagement with listening practices rather than incidental or superficial exposure. The relatively small sample size is consistent with qualitative research norms, where depth and richness of data are prioritized over statistical representativeness.

Data collection was conducted through a structured questionnaire that incorporated both closed and open-ended questions designed to capture the breadth and depth of participants' listening experiences. The questionnaire was organized around four thematic areas: the challenges participants face when listening to English, the types of materials and platforms they use for listening practice, the strategies they employ to improve comprehension, and their perceptions of technology as a learning support tool. Additionally, questions explored the frequency of participants' listening practice, their interactions with native speakers, and their emotional responses, including frustration, when encountering difficulties in authentic listening situations. This comprehensive design ensured that data collection captured multiple dimensions of the listening learning experience.

The questionnaire was administered with a clear explanation of the research purpose and explicit assurances regarding the confidentiality of participants' identities and responses. Participants were encouraged to complete the instrument at their own pace and in conditions conducive to reflective thought, without imposed time constraints. The data collected were subsequently organized and analyzed thematically, with patterns and recurring themes identified across participants' responses. Thematic analysis is a well-established method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting meaningful patterns within qualitative data, providing a structured yet flexible framework for interpreting complex experiential data. The findings were then interpreted in relation to existing theoretical frameworks and empirical research on EFL listening skill development.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The first objective of this study was to identify the challenges experienced by EFL learners in English listening activities. The findings indicate that listening remains a demanding skill for most participants, particularly when they are exposed to authentic spoken English. Table 1 presents the major challenges reported by the participants.

Table 1. Listening Challenges Experienced by Participants (N = 13)

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Fast speaking speed of native speakers	11	84.6
Different English accents	7	53.8
Unfamiliar vocabulary	5	38.5
Difficulty understanding idioms/slang	4	30.8
Lack of concentration	3	23.1

The quantitative findings reveal that the most significant challenge was the fast-speaking speed of native speakers, reported by 84.6% of participants. More than half of the respondents (53.8%) also identified accent variation as a major obstacle. These findings suggest that learners experience difficulties not only in linguistic processing but also in adapting to different phonological patterns used by English speakers from various regions.

The qualitative responses further illustrate these difficulties. One participant stated, *"I often understand English words individually, but when native speakers talk too fast, I cannot catch the complete meaning."* Another respondent explained, *"British and American accents sound very different to me, and sometimes I need subtitles to understand them."* These comments indicate that learners struggle to process spoken language in real time, especially when exposed to unfamiliar accents.

These findings are consistent with Mazlan et al. (2025), who argue that the natural speaking rate of native speakers often exceeds the processing capacity of EFL learners. Therefore, listening instruction should incorporate materials representing diverse accents and varying speech rates to better prepare learners for authentic communication.

Listening Practice Habits and Learning Resources

The questionnaire also explored how participants practice their listening skills and the types of materials they frequently use. The findings suggest that learners actively engage with English media outside the classroom.

Table 2. Listening Practice Habits and Preferred Materials

Listening Activity	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Listening to English songs	11	84.6
Watching films/TV series	6	46.2
Watching YouTube videos	5	38.5
Listening to podcasts	3	23.1
Participating in online conversations	2	15.4

The results indicate that English songs were the most popular listening resource, used by 84.6% of participants. Films and television series ranked second (46.2%), followed by YouTube videos (38.5%). The relatively low use of podcasts and online conversations suggests that learners tend to prefer entertainment-oriented listening materials over more interactive or academic listening resources.

The qualitative data support this finding. Several participants mentioned that songs help them learn English in an enjoyable manner. One participant commented, *"I learn many new words from songs because I listen to them every day."* Another respondent stated, *"Watching movies helps me understand how English is used in real situations."* These responses demonstrate that learners value materials that combine language exposure with entertainment.

The findings align with Romadhoni et al. (2022), who argue that authentic materials increase learner motivation and engagement. Songs and films provide meaningful contextualized input, making listening practice more enjoyable and sustainable. Moreover, the popularity of these resources reflects the growing role of informal learning environments in language acquisition. Teachers may therefore consider integrating popular media into classroom instruction to bridge the gap between formal and informal learning experiences.

Listening Strategies Employed by EFL Learners

The study also investigated the strategies participants use to improve their listening comprehension. Understanding these strategies is important because successful listening often requires active cognitive and metacognitive engagement.

Table 3. Listening Strategies Used by Participants

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Repeating phrases or keywords	12	92.3
Using subtitles	8	61.5
Guessing meaning from context	7	53.8
Taking notes while listening	3	23.1
Predicting content before listening	2	15.4

As shown in Table 3, repetition emerged as the most frequently used strategy, reported by 92.3% of participants. Many learners repeatedly listened to difficult segments until they understood the content. More than half of the respondents also relied on subtitles and contextual guessing to facilitate comprehension.

The open-ended responses reveal that repetition serves as an important self-regulation strategy. One participant explained, *"When I do not understand a sentence, I replay it several times until I can catch the words."* Another stated, *"I usually turn on subtitles first and then watch again without subtitles."* Such responses indicate that learners actively monitor their comprehension and employ strategies to overcome listening difficulties.

These findings support the work of Sari et al. (2021), who emphasize the importance of metacognitive strategies in listening development. The extensive use of repetition suggests that learners recognize the value of repeated exposure for improving comprehension. However, the relatively low use of note-taking and prediction strategies indicates that learners may benefit from explicit instruction in a broader range of listening strategies.

The Role of Technology in Listening Development

The final aspect explored in this study was learners' perceptions of technology as a tool for improving listening skills. Given the increasing availability of digital resources, understanding learners' experiences with technology is particularly relevant.

Table 4. Perceptions of Technology and Interaction Opportunities

Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Technology is very helpful for listening improvement	10	76.9
Technology is moderately helpful	3	23.1
Frequently interact with native speakers	0	0
Occasionally interact with native speakers	11	84.6
Never interact with native speakers	2	15.4

The findings demonstrate overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward technology. A large majority (76.9%) considered digital tools highly beneficial for improving listening skills. Participants reported using applications, streaming platforms, social media content, and online videos to access authentic English input. Nevertheless, opportunities for direct communication with native speakers remained limited.

The qualitative responses illustrate this contrast. One participant noted, *"Technology helps me practice anytime and anywhere."* Another respondent explained, *"I can understand movies and videos better now, but I still feel nervous when talking with native speakers."* These comments suggest that while technology provides abundant exposure to authentic language, it does not fully replace the experience of real-time interaction.

The findings on the effectiveness of technology-enhanced listening instruction. Digital platforms offer flexibility, accessibility, and exposure to diverse language varieties. However, the limited interaction with native speakers confirms that technology-mediated learning cannot entirely replicate the spontaneous and unpredictable nature of authentic communication. Therefore, language programs should combine digital listening resources with opportunities for interactive communication, such as online language exchanges, virtual conversations, or collaborative international projects.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the listening challenges, learning practices, strategies, and technology use among EFL learners and revealed several important findings. The results showed that fast speech and accent variation were the most significant obstacles affecting listening comprehension. Despite these challenges, learners demonstrated a high level of motivation by regularly engaging in listening activities, particularly through English songs, films, and other authentic media. Repetition emerged as the most commonly employed strategy for improving understanding, while technology was widely perceived as an effective tool for facilitating listening practice and access to authentic language input. However, opportunities for direct interaction with native speakers remained limited, which may hinder learners' ability to transfer listening skills to real communicative situations. Overall, the findings suggest that successful listening development requires a balanced combination of authentic exposure, strategic listening instruction, technology-enhanced learning, and meaningful communicative interaction. Therefore, English language educators should design learning environments that not only leverage

digital resources but also provide learners with opportunities to engage in authentic spoken communication, thereby fostering more comprehensive and adaptive listening competence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Humanities, Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang, for the support and financial assistance provided for this research. Their contribution was instrumental in enabling the implementation and completion of the study. The authors also wish to acknowledge all colleagues, participants, and other individuals who offered valuable support, encouragement, and insights throughout the research process. Their contributions have greatly enhanced the quality and completion of this work.

REFERENCES

- Ambarita, C. S., Siahaan, J., Purba, R., & Daulay, I. K. (2023). Improving students' speaking skills by story telling Caroline. *INTERACTION: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa*, 10(7), 1–23.
- Arkhasa, C., Mazlan, N., Yusran, M., Yusoff, M., Safian, A. R., Noor, A. R., Sadykova, S. A., & Sub, F. (2025). *The Evolution of Modern Learning : A Dual Systematic Review of Emerging Trends and Challenges*. 21(3).
- Bimantara, A. D., Adiwinoto, B., & Informasi, S. (2026). *Analisis Sentimen Ulasan IKD Berbasis Lexicon dan SMOTE pada Naive Bayes , SVM , dan Random Forest*. 15.
- Djumadin, Z., Soleman, M., & Muhammad, F. (2023). *Inggris di Desa Ngawis Kecamatan Karangmojo Kabupaten Gunungkidul Tahun 2022*. 8, 173–178.
- Hakim, M. A. R. R. (2019). Strategi pengajaran speaking bagi para pembelajar Bahasa Inggris berkarakteristik introvert. *Jurnal Pendidikan (Teori Dan Praktik)*, 4(1), 49. <https://doi.org/10.26740/jp.v4n1.p49-58>
- Husna, H. A. U. (2021). The relationship between the students English speaking skills and their closeness to English. *Language Circle: Journal of Language and Literature*, 15(2), 229–240. <https://doi.org/10.15294/lc.v15i2.28581>

- Kristianti, T., Novianto, H. D., & Asad, M. M. (2023). Enhancing engineering students' skill through project-based learning in ESP class. *Jurnal Pendidikan Teknik Sipil*, 5(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.21831/jpts.v5i1.59689>
- Lynch, R. (2003). Authentic, performance-based assessment in ESL/EFL reading instruction. *Asian EFL Journal*, 5(4), Pp.1-28., 5(4), 1–28.
- Mazlan, R., Mahamod, Z., Jamaludin, K. A., & Info, A. (2025). *Comprehensive structured review of implementing flipped classroom approaches in education*. 19(3), 1651–1661. <https://doi.org/10.11591/edulearn.v19i3.22655>
- Müller, C., Mildenberger, T., & Steingruber, D. (2023). Learning effectiveness of a flexible learning study programme in a blended learning design: why are some courses more effective than others? *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-022-00379-x>
- Novayanti, N. N. A., Shinta, M. N., Mursalim, M., & Jaya, A. (2018). The effect of using English videos on vocabulary achievement at the fifth grade of elementary school. *Poasia*, 12–14. <https://doi.org/10.2991/amca-18.2018.4>
- Octaviana, D. W. (2017). Teaching English to young learners. *English Education: Journal of English Teaching and Research*, 2(2), 124. <https://doi.org/10.29407/jetar.v2i2.808>
- Pusparini, R., & Kurniasih, E. (2020). *Learning Journal : A Tool to Help Students Grasp the Course Content*. 491(Ijcah), 784–788.
- Romadhoni, M., Ruqoyyah Amilia Andania, & Ai-Chun Yen. (2022). Students' critical thinking on argumentative essay writing through cooperative learning. *Education and Human Development Journal*, 7(2), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.33086/ehdj.v7i2.2941>
- Sari, D. K., Sufiana, J. M., Wancik, K. A., & Haryani, M. E. (2021). Development of authentic assessment based on creative thinking skills in a carbohydrates qualitative analysis project-based using local material. *JKPK (Jurnal Kimia Dan Pendidikan Kimia)*, 6(2), 173. <https://doi.org/10.20961/jkpk.v6i2.52860>
- Sasstos, L. M. Dos. (2020). The discussion of communicative language teaching approach hi language classrooms. *Journal of Education*

and E-Learning Research, 7(2), 104–109.
<https://doi.org/10.20448/journal.509.2020.72.104.109>

Widodo, A. (2022). Promoting higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) for young learners in a bilingual classroom. *International Journal of Business, Humanities, Education and Social Sciences (IJBHES)*, 4(2), 96–102. <https://doi.org/10.46923/ijbhes.v4i2.208>