



STUDENT DIFFICULTIES IN ANSWERING THE LISTENING QUESTIONS OF TOEIC: ACASE STUDY IN A VOCATIONAL SCHOOL

Edwar Kemal*, Herfyna Asty, Suharni
Universitas PGRI Sumatera Barat

*E-mail: edwarkemal@gmail.com, astyherfyna@gmail.com, suharnithalib5@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The industrial world or company requires their employee to be able to communicate in English. One of the ways to see the ability is towards their TOEIC scores. During the test, It is found that there are many difficulties faced by students in Listening Questions. This research was to find out student difficulties in answering the listening question of TOEIC. This research used qualitative research by using case study design. Data were collected by using semi-structured interviews. Then, it was analyzed by using content analysis. The research shows that there are several difficulties faced by the student in answering the Listening questions of TOEIC. They are *accents* and *pronunciation*, *fast pace of speech*, *vocabulary limitations*, *distracting information*, and *understanding the context*. By conducting this research, it is expected the students comprehend their difficulties in TOEIC listening questions. This research was limited to students of vocational school in Padang West Sumatera.

Keywords: Listening Questions, Student Difficulties, TOEIC, Vocational School

ABSTRAK

Dunia industri dan perusahaan mengharuskan karyawannya untuk dapat berkomunikasi dalam bahasa Inggris. Salah satu cara untuk menilai kemampuan tersebut adalah melalui skor TOEIC mereka. Namun, selama tes berlangsung, ditemukan banyak kesulitan yang dihadapi oleh siswa dalam menjawab pertanyaan listening. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi kesulitan yang dialami siswa dalam menjawab soal listening TOEIC. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis konten. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa terdapat beberapa kesulitan yang dihadapi siswa dalam menjawab pertanyaan listening TOEIC, yaitu aksen dan pengucapan, kecepatan berbicara yang tinggi, keterbatasan kosakata, informasi yang mengganggu, serta pemahaman konteks. Melalui penelitian ini, diharapkan siswa dapat memahami kesulitan mereka dalam menjawab pertanyaan listening TOEIC. Penelitian ini terbatas pada siswa sekolah kejuruan di Padang, Sumatera Barat.

Kata Kunci: Pertanyaan Menyenak, Kesulitan Siswa, TOEIC, SMK

INTRODUCTION

English has become an increasingly important factor in today's world, influencing various aspects of life, from education and business to technology and entertainment. Kemal, (2020) informs that as the global lingua franca, it serves as a bridge for communication between people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Proficiency in English opens up numerous opportunities, such as accessing a wealth of information online, pursuing international studies, or advancing in a career that requires interaction with global markets. Moreover, English plays a vital role in fostering cultural exchange and collaboration, allowing individuals to share ideas and learn from one another. In an interconnected world where effective communication is key, the importance of English cannot be overstated(Jaber & Daana, 2020).

Then, English is also crucial for companies and industries, particularly in an era of globalization where businesses frequently operate across borders. It is the common language for international trade, enabling companies to communicate effectively with clients, partners, and suppliers from different countries. Many multinational corporations require employees to have a strong command of English, as it is often the primary language used in business meetings, negotiations, and documentation. Additionally, industries such as technology, tourism, and finance



heavily rely on English to stay competitive and expand their reach in the global market. By adopting English as a key skill, companies can enhance their brand's visibility, foster stronger relationships with international stakeholders, and access a broader pool of talent and resources (Muliayah & Aminatun, 2020).

One widely recognized way to assess someone's English proficiency is through the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). Miqawati et al., (2021) state that this standardized test measures an individual's ability to use English in professional and real-world settings, making it particularly relevant for workplaces and industries. TOEIC evaluates key language skills such as listening, reading, speaking, and writing, providing a comprehensive assessment of a person's English capabilities. L, (2021) argued that many companies use TOEIC scores as part of their recruitment process or employee development programs to ensure their staff can effectively communicate in English with international clients and colleagues. With its focus on practical language use, TOEIC serves as a reliable benchmark for both job seekers and employers in a competitive global market.

The TOEIC primarily consists of the Listening Test and the Reading Test. The Listening Test evaluates a candidate's ability to understand spoken English in various workplace and real-life scenarios, such as conversations, announcements, and instructions. On the other hand, the Reading Test assesses comprehension skills through tasks like reading emails, reports, or articles and answering questions about them. These two sections are designed to measure practical English usage, focusing on the skills required in professional environments. Together, they provide a well-rounded evaluation of an individual's English proficiency, making TOEIC a widely respected tool for assessing language skills in the global job market (Dari & Zasrianita, 2021).

TOEIC is often included in the curriculum of vocational schools, as it aligns with the practical language skills required for students to succeed in the workforce. These schools emphasize preparing students for specific careers, and English proficiency, particularly in professional and workplace settings, is a valuable asset (Wijayanti et al., 2022). By learning TOEIC, students can develop their listening and reading skills while becoming familiar with the type of English they are likely to encounter in real-world situations, such as writing emails, attending meetings, or understanding job-related instructions. Additionally, achieving a good TOEIC score can enhance students' employability, as many companies recognize it as a standard measure of English proficiency. Vocational schools often integrate TOEIC preparation into their programs to ensure their graduates are well-equipped to compete in the global job market.

There are previous studies analyzing the TOEIC phenomenon. First is Ristra et al., (2023) who investigated the problem faced by the final year students while listening through TOEIC application in the TOEIC intensive class. The participants of the study were 43 Civil Engineering students of the State Polytechnic of Bengkalis. The study used a qualitative method. The research instrument was a questionnaire consisting of 20 questions. The research shows that the TOEIC Test Prep application was proved that it was one of the applications to make the students familiar with the topic, pronunciation, and vocabulary in the TOEIC test. Moreover, the students faced time management and self-control management while using the TOEIC Test Prep application.

Second is Park et al., (2020) conducting research to find the distribution patterns of the reading comprehension (RC) and the listening comprehension (LC) scores with respect to the different levels of the students. This research used quantitative research by using descriptive statistics design. In this study, 11328 TOEIC test scores were analyzed, and four results are presented. The next finding revealed the necessity to implement tailored instruction for the higher levels. After that, it was determined that focusing on the RC would be a worthwhile measure in order to assist the lower level students in increasing their overall TOEIC scores. The final result revealed that when the students were grouped in larger score bands, both the RC and the LC should be taught.

Third is Damayanti & Gafur, (2020) studying about the student's English proficiency towards the TOEIC scores. This analysis can be used as a reference for English lecturers in providing relevant learning materials according to the needs of the students and the industrial world. The research

method used is qualitative-quantitative. The researchers analyzed the TOEIC scores as the data and explained them descriptively. The data used in this analysis are TOEIC scores from 291 students. The scores were mapped into 6 levels of English proficiency. The results of this study describe the level of English proficiency and the comparison between mastering Listening and Reading Comprehension by the students at Politeknik Negeri Balikpapan.

From the research above, there are some of the research gaps that can be highlighted. Most of the research used quantitative research by using a questionnaire and a test. Meanwhile, for this research, this research used qualitative research by using a case study design. Then, the research instrument was an interview question. Next, all of the research was conducted on the university or polytechnic students. However, in this research, the researchers used vocational school students as the population and sample of the research. Third, all of the previous studies used statistics analysis for the data analysis but for this research, the researchers used content analysis for the data analysis. Furthermore, this research question was "What are the student difficulties in answering the listening questions of TOEIC? By conducting this research, it is expected that the students know about their difficulties in answering the listening questions of the TOEIC test. Then, for the teachers, it will help them to identify and categorize the students as well as the TOEIC materials given to the students.



Figure 1. A Community Service Team Explaining the Listening Questions of TOEIC to the Students
Method

METHOD

To analyse the phenomenon of TOEIC, researchers often employ descriptive qualitative research methods. This approach allows them to explore the various aspects of TOEIC, such as its implementation, effectiveness, and impact on students' English proficiency and career readiness. Descriptive qualitative research focuses on gathering detailed information through observations, interviews, and document analysis, providing insights into participants' experiences and perspectives (Indah & Rohmah, 2022). By using this method, researchers can examine how TOEIC is integrated into educational settings, such as vocational schools, and how it influences teaching practices, learning outcomes, and students' confidence in using English. This qualitative approach is particularly effective for understanding the broader implications of TOEIC as a tool for measuring English proficiency in professional contexts.

The researchers adopted a case study design to analyze the TOEIC phenomenon, allowing for an in-depth exploration of its implementation and impact within a specific context. Case study design



is particularly suitable for examining complex phenomena, as it enables a comprehensive investigation of real-life settings through multiple sources of evidence. In this study, the researchers focused on a particular group, such as vocational school students or educators, to understand their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to TOEIC. By using this approach, the researchers were able to provide a detailed account of how TOEIC is integrated into the curriculum, its role in skill development, and its implications for students' future career opportunities. The case study design also facilitated the identification of patterns and insights that could inform improvements in TOEIC preparation and application in educational contexts (Pateliya et al., 2013; Jarudin et al., 2022).

In this research, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, utilizing a set of guided interview questions. This method provided the flexibility to explore participants' insights while maintaining a consistent framework for data collection. Muthusamy et al., (2020) informs that semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to delve deeper into the participants' experiences and perceptions related to TOEIC, including its role in their education and its impact on their professional aspirations. The open-ended nature of the questions encouraged participants to elaborate on their thoughts, providing rich, qualitative data. This approach ensured that the researchers could gather detailed and nuanced information, capturing the complexity of the TOEIC phenomenon in educational and workplace contexts.

Population of the research was all of the SMKS DEK Business School located in Padang, West Sumatera. Sample of the research was 43 students taking the TOEIC test. The research utilized random sampling as its methodology for selecting participants. This approach ensured that every individual in the target population had an equal chance of being included in the study, minimizing selection bias. By employing random sampling, the research aimed to achieve a representative sample, enhancing the reliability and generalizability of the findings. This method is particularly effective in reducing systematic errors and providing a robust foundation for drawing conclusions about the broader population.

The data collected in this study were analyzed using content analysis, a method that enables researchers to systematically interpret textual or qualitative data (Shava et al., 2021). Through this approach, the researchers examined the responses from semi-structured interviews to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights related to the TOEIC phenomenon. The content analysis allowed the researchers to categorize and organize the data, making it possible to explore key aspects such as participants' perceptions of TOEIC, its effectiveness in enhancing English proficiency, and its relevance to career readiness. By coding and analysing the data, the researchers could draw meaningful conclusions about the role of TOEIC in vocational education and its broader implications for students and educators. This method ensured a structured yet flexible way of interpreting complex qualitative data.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

After conducting the research, it is found that there are several difficulties faced by the student in answering the Listening questions of TOEIC. They are Accents and Pronunciation, Fast Pace of Speech, Vocabulary Limitations, Distracting information, and understanding the context.

Accents and Pronunciation

The variety of English accents in the TOEIC listening section, including American, British, Australian, and Canadian, can pose significant challenges for students who are not familiar with these accents. Each accent has distinct pronunciation patterns, intonation, and vowel sounds, which may cause students to misinterpret or miss key information. For example, words that sound similar in one accent may be pronounced very differently in another, making it difficult for students to recognize them correctly. Additionally, regional vocabulary and colloquialisms used in different accents can further complicate comprehension. To address these challenges, students can improve their listening skills by exposing themselves to a range of English accents through media such as podcasts, movies,



and news broadcasts. Regular practice with diverse audio materials can help students become more comfortable with the variety of pronunciations they may encounter on the test. Additionally, focusing on context clues, such as tone and speech patterns, can help students infer the meaning of unfamiliar words or phrases.

The information above is supported by some information from the students. One of the students commented that the *“accent of the speaker was very difficult to understand”*. Another student also described that *“we could not figure out what they say clearly because of their pronunciation”*. Then, other student said that *“we miss some questions to fill out because we don’t know what they say clearly in their conversation”*. From the data above, it is seen that all participants agree that accents and pronunciation of the TOEIC become one of the students difficulties.

Fast Pace of Speech

The speakers in the audio often communicate at a natural speed, which can be particularly challenging for students who are not accustomed to processing English quickly. For many learners, especially those still building their listening skills, the rapid pace can make it difficult to follow what is being said. This can result in gaps in understanding and create a sense of frustration, as students may struggle to keep up with the flow of the conversation or miss key details entirely. To address this issue, it is important to provide students with strategies and practice to help them adapt to natural speech patterns in English. Gradual exposure to authentic audio, combined with targeted exercises such as listening for key phrases or summarizing main points, can be effective in building their confidence and skills. At the same time, offering scaffolding, such as transcripts or slower-paced recordings, can serve as a bridge to help students transition to more demanding real-time listening tasks. This balanced approach ensures that learners are supported while they develop the ability to process English at a natural speed.

The information is enhanced by student’s information. One of the participants said *“we could not listen to the conversation because the conversation is quite fast for us”*. Another student also confirmed that *“because of the speed of the way they talk, sometimes, we miss what they say”*. Then, the other student commented that *“to catch the idea or content of the conversation, we need to get clear information but considering the conversation speed of the TOEIC, we could not get listen well”*. From the comments above, it is seen that all of the students have difficulty about the speed or fast conversation in the TOEIC.

Vocabulary Limitations

The listening section often incorporates workplace-specific vocabulary, idioms, and phrases, which can pose a significant challenge for students with a limited vocabulary. These specialized terms and expressions may be unfamiliar, making it difficult for learners to fully grasp the meaning of sentences or follow the context of the audio. As a result, they may struggle to interpret key information or understand the nuances needed to respond accurately. This vocabulary gap can also affect students’ ability to identify the correct answers during the listening tasks. Without a strong foundation in workplace-related language, learners may miss important details or fail to connect ideas within the audio. To overcome this, targeted vocabulary building and contextual practice can help students become more familiar with these terms, enabling them to improve both their comprehension and performance in the listening section.

This information also gets some comments from the students. One of the students said, *“vocabulary is a big problem for us if we have an English Test”*. Another student also argued that *“how can we answer the questions, while we don’t know about their vocabularies”*. Then, one of them also commented *“it is very difficult for us to the flow of conversation because we have a lack of vocabulary”*. From the information above, it can be seen that all of the participants have problems with the vocabulary used on the TOEIC.



Distracting Information

The TOEIC listening section often includes irrelevant or misleading information within the audio, which can create additional challenges for students. This intentional inclusion of extraneous details is designed to test their ability to focus and discern the key points needed to answer the questions accurately. However, many students may find it difficult to filter out this information, especially if they lack strategies for identifying what is essential. As a result, students may become distracted by the irrelevant details and lose track of the main ideas or important cues. This can lead to confusion and mistakes when selecting the correct answers. To address this, students can benefit from practicing active listening techniques, such as identifying keywords, anticipating the information needed for specific questions, and summarizing main ideas. With regular practice, they can develop the skills to confidently navigate the audio and focus on the key points required to succeed in the test.

The informant of the research also supports the information. One of them said *“Our understanding is easily distracted by the information from the questions.* Another student also informed us that *“ we selected the wrong answer because the vocabularies of the text misled us.* Then, another participant also described that *“we sometimes get difficulties to mismatch the question and conversation of the listening”.* From the information above, it is seen that distracting information is one of the student's difficulties in answering the listening questions of TOEIC.

Short Memory Retention

In the TOEIC listening section, questions are based on audio clips that are played only once, which can be particularly challenging for students with weak auditory memory. The one-time playback format requires listeners to retain details and process information quickly, leaving little room for error. For those who struggle to hold auditory information in their memory, this can lead to difficulties in recalling key points and answering questions accurately. This challenge underscores the importance of developing strategies to improve auditory memory and listening focus. Techniques such as taking brief notes, listening for specific keywords, and practicing memory retention exercises can help students better manage the test demands. With consistent practice, learners can enhance their ability to capture and recall critical information, even under the pressure of a single playback.

From the information above, some students give similar opinions. One of them commented that *“the time limit for the audio play is very short and even the conversation is quite fast”.* Another student also commented that *“we get difficult to get the point because it is played one only.* Then, another informant described that *the distance between question and answer is very short. We can't memorize it well.* This information indicates that short memory retention is difficult for them in TOEIC Listening questions.

Understanding Context

Some students may find it challenging to interpret the context of conversations or monologues in the TOEIC listening section. Without a clear understanding of the setting or purpose of the dialogue, they may struggle to infer the intended meaning behind the speakers' words. This lack of contextual awareness can lead to confusion and make it harder to identify the correct response. To overcome this issue, students can benefit from practicing context analysis techniques. This includes paying attention to details such as the tone of voice, the relationship between speakers, and any situational cues provided in the audio. By improving their ability to recognize context, learners can enhance their comprehension and make more accurate inferences, ultimately improving their performance on the test.

From the information above, some students support the ideas. One of the students said that *“sometimes although the conversation is clear without knowing the context, we also answer the questions wrong.* Another student also informed that *“ without knowing a clear context, we will never know about the message”.* Another student also said *“for some questions of the listening, we don't know about the context so that we don't answer it or we just guess the answers.* It can be



inferred that context plays an important role for the students to answer the listening questions. If they don't know it, it will give them difficulties.

Time Management

The fast-paced nature of the TOEIC listening section adds another layer of difficulty for students. The test moves quickly from one question to the next, leaving little time to review or reconsider answers. This rapid progression can increase pressure on students, especially those who need extra time to process what they hear and make decisions. The limited time can cause anxiety, which may further hinder students' ability to focus and respond accurately. To address this challenge, learners can benefit from strategies such as active listening, predicting potential answers before the audio begins, and practicing time management under timed conditions. By becoming more accustomed to the pace of the test, students can build the confidence and skills needed to perform effectively, even under time constraints.

The information above is supported by the comments from some participants. One of the students said that “ *answering the listening questions is very difficult because sometimes the questions are long and we could not manage our time well.* Another student said that “*the time to answer the listening questions is very short*”. Next, another student also explained that “*by having a fast time to answer, our anxiety or nervousness is increasing from time to time and it makes us difficult to answer the listening questions*”. From the information above, it is seen that time management for answering the listening questions becomes a difficulty for the student.

DISCUSSIONS

Conducting research on students' difficulties in answering the listening questions of the TOEIC has already revealed significant insights, particularly through the analysis of their interview responses. The data collected from these interviews highlight specific difficulties that students face such as *accents and pronunciation, fast pace of speech, vocabulary limitations, distracting information, understanding the context, and time management*.

The accent and pronunciation used by the speakers in the listening questions of the TOEIC pose significant challenges for students attempting to answer the questions accurately. It is also in line with the vocabulary limitations faced by the students in taking the test. Many students struggle to understand different English accents, especially those that differ from the standard pronunciation they are accustomed to in their learning environment. Variations in intonation, stress, and connected speech often make it difficult for students to distinguish words and phrases clearly. Additionally, the presence of unfamiliar pronunciation patterns can lead to misunderstandings, causing students to select incorrect answers. These difficulties highlight the importance of exposing students to a wide range of English accents and speech patterns during their TOEIC preparation. By incorporating diverse listening materials, practicing with real-world conversations, and focusing on pronunciation training, educators can help students improve their listening comprehension and boost their confidence in handling TOEIC listening questions more effectively. Rutamornchai et al., (2024) informs that there are several pedagogical suggestions for TOEIC teachers and test takers, including an explicit focus on phonological knowledge, paraphrasing skills, automaticity, established vocabulary lists, and extensive listening practice. By stressing phonological knowledge and vocabulary list, it is seen that the previous research supports the researchers' findings about the students' difficulty in accent and pronunciation of the listening question of TOEIC.

Many students struggle with the fast pace of speech in the listening section of the TOEIC test. This can make it difficult for them to catch key details, understand the overall meaning, and respond accurately to the questions. The rapid delivery of spoken English, combined with unfamiliar accents or complex sentence structures, can be overwhelming, especially for learners who are not used to listening to native speakers at natural speeds. As a result, they may miss important information or feel anxious during the test, which can further impact their performance. To overcome this challenge, students can practice active listening techniques, expose themselves to various English



accents, and gradually increase the speed of the audio materials they use for practice. Developing these skills over time can help improve their comprehension and boost their confidence in handling TOEIC listening questions more effectively. Hardiyanto et al., (2021) also support these findings where students who have low levels face difficulties with unfamiliar words (message content), speed of speech (speaker), and lack of vocabulary (listener). Then at a moderate level, students felt difficulty in the speed of speech (speaker) and noises (physical settings). It can be concluded that the listening comprehension difficulties encountered by the students at the tertiary level are different depending on their proficiency in English. Therefore, the current study implies that the lecturer needs to consider the information revealed in this study to be able to overcome the difficulties faced by the students.

Many students find it challenging to focus during the listening section of the TOEIC test because they often encounter distracting information. In some cases, the speakers include extra details, synonyms, or unnecessary background information that can mislead test-takers. Additionally, the presence of similar-sounding words or phrases that do not directly answer the question can confuse. This distraction makes it difficult for students to identify the key points needed to select the correct answer. As a result, they may waste time processing irrelevant details and miss crucial information. To overcome this difficulty, students should practice identifying keywords, predicting possible answers before listening and training themselves to filter out unnecessary details. Developing strong concentration and strategic listening skills can help them stay focused and improve their performance on the test. Rojak, (2022) agree that during the English test, the duration of meetings to study and time management is important for students to overcome the given questions. Then, Paramarta & Adijaya, (2020) also confirm in their research that there is a tendency that they had more problems in answering complex parts of the listening and reading sections. Besides, they admitted that the TOEIC test was not an easy test due to several reasons ranging from linguistic and technical problems.

CONCLUSION

Many companies and industries now require their employees to have a strong command of English for effective communication in the workplace. To meet this challenge, SMKS DEK Business School equips its students with the necessary language skills by preparing them for the TOEIC test. This training helps ensure that graduates are ready to meet professional expectations and compete in the global job market. However, during the TOEIC listening test, students often encounter several difficulties. Some struggle with the fast pace of speech, making it hard to catch key details and understand the overall meaning of conversations. Others find it challenging to filter out distracting information, as some parts of the dialogue may contain extra details that do not directly answer the question. These difficulties can affect their performance and confidence in the test. To address these issues, students need to develop strong listening strategies, such as identifying keywords, improving concentration, and practicing with various English accents. By strengthening their listening skills, they can improve their TOEIC scores and enhance their ability to communicate effectively in professional settings.

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