

# ANALYZING STUDENTS' TOEFL LISTENING COMPREHENSION TEST PERFORMANCE

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this research is to find out the most difficult part of the TOEFL listening comprehension (short dialogues, conversations, or talks) and to find out the aspects which are problematic and are mastered by 22 students of the fourth semester of English Education Study Program FKIP Tanjungpura University. The method applied is the descriptive study. It was revealed that the most difficult part of the TOEFL listening comprehension test is short dialogues with 51.67%. There are eight problematic aspects (who, what, where, emphatic expression of surprise, idioms, negative with comparatives, "almost negative" expression, wishes, synonyms, and double negative expression) and eight mastered aspects (passives, untrue conditions, two- and three-part verbs, expressions of uncertainty and suggestion, similar sounds, multiple nouns, expressions of agreement, negative expressions) in short dialogues. The most problematic aspect is *double negative expressions* (23%), while the most mastered aspect is *passive* with (77%). In conversations and talks, the most problematic aspect is *topic* and the mastered aspect is *detailed information*.

**Keywords:** *TOEFL, listening comprehension, TOEFL aspects*

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui bagian tersulit dari TOEFL listening comprehension (short dialogues, conversations, atau talks) dan untuk mengetahui aspek yang dikuasai yang kurang dikuasai oleh 22 mahasiswa semester empat Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris FKIP Universitas Tanjungpura. Metode yang digunakan adalah deskriptif (descriptive study). Dari penelitian ini ditemukan bahwa bagian yang tersulit adalah short dialogues dengan 51,67%. Di short dialogues, terdapat delapan aspek yang kurang dikuasai (who, what, where, emphatic expression of surprise, idioms, negative with comparatives, "almost negative" expression, wishes, synonyms, and double negative expression) dan delapan aspek yang dikuasai (passives, untrue conditions, two- and three-part verbs, expressions of uncertainty and suggestion, similar sounds, multiple nouns, expressions of agreement, negative expressions) dalam short dialogues. Aspek yang paling kurang dikuasai adalah *double negative expressions* (23%), sedangkan aspek yang paling dikuasai adalah *passive* (77%). Untuk conversations dan talks, aspek yang kurang dikuasai adalah *topic* dan yang dikuasai adalah *detailed information*.

**Kata kunci:** *TOEFL, listening comprehension, aspek TOEFL*

TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is a test to measure the proficiency of English for non-native English speakers. This test is composed of academic questions and tasks which many universities consider it an appropriate test for admissions decisions. It is commonly used by people who are going to apply for certain jobs or attend an education institution which mainly uses English as the medium language. It is also important for people who are going to study abroad. Based on the official website of Educational Testing Service (2013) or known as ETS, there are approximately more than 9,000 universities and colleges in over 130 countries which accept TOEFL scores. ETS (2013) stated, "Agencies and institutions rely on TOEFL scores as well; immigration departments use them to issue residential and work visas, medical and licensing agencies use them for professional certification purposes, individuals use them to measure their progress in learning English."

As a part of an education institution, the English Education study program of Tanjungpura University is responsible for developing the students' mastery and skills in English. Therefore, students are required to take TOEFL in order to obtain information about the level of their mastery of English, especially before they attain to the thesis examination. Not only the English students, but also the students from other faculty have a requirement to pass TOEFL before facing their thesis examination. Each faculty and department varies on the minimum score they determine for the students. But since English Education Study Program students' uses English as the medium language in the teaching and learning process, the department determined English students to have higher score compared to other study programs, which is above 480. Students have to pass the minimum score the department has determined.

The English proficiency test which is commonly used in UPT Bahasa in Tanjungpura University is TUTEP (Tanjungpura University Test of English Proficiency). TUTEP is designed in reference to the paper-based TOEFL test. TOEFL itself is officially administrated by ETS. Furthermore, TOEFL is divided into three sections; Listening Comprehension (Section I), Structure and Written Expression (Section II), and Reading Comprehension (Section III) in which are also covered in TUTEP.

Students may encounter difficulties in TOEFL which influences the result of the test. In order to know which part of TOEFL students find hard to face, the writer did a pre-research on the fourth semester students of the English Study Program Tanjungpura University. Based on the pre-research, the writer found out that some students find it difficult to do listening comprehension section compared to the other sections. Due to the fact, this research concerns on the listening comprehension section. Moreover, the writer found out that they find it hard to convey the meaning of the speaker, because they are lack of vocabularies. They also believe that the speaker speaks too fast. And because of that, it makes them hard to understand the information from the speaker.

There are several researches about TOEFL listening comprehension that was conducted earlier. Handri (2013) did a research before on "An Analysis of the Fourth Year Students' Ability in Comprehending Sample Listening Test from Barron's TOEFL Book at The English Department FKIP Bung Hatta University."

In Tanjungpura University Pontianak, Paulus (2002) did a research with the thesis title "The Students' Listening Proficiency in TOEFL".

What differs this research from previous studies is that the writer analyzes the students' answers in the listening comprehension section which will reveal the most difficult part of listening comprehension the students encounter. The writer also analyzes the aspects of listening comprehension which are problematic and are mastered by the students. An aspect is considered problematic if the amount of incorrect answers is higher than the correct answers. Conversely, the aspect is considered mastered by the students if the amount of correct answers is higher than the incorrect answers. The TOEFL test in this research is used as a diagnostic test. The function of a diagnostic test is to identify the problems that the students have in a certain field of language. As Field (2009) has mentioned that diagnostic gives information where understanding has broken down, which then can be followed up with a small-scale remedial exercises that aim to prevent from the errors to be occurred again. The students can build their small-scale remedial test by themselves from this test because the recording and test has been given to the students. The result of the test has also been given back to the students in order to give information and make students know their own needs to improve and develop their listening skill.

## **METHOD**

In order to achieve the purpose of this research, descriptive research is applied. Descriptive research is a research which describes and interprets the data and the characteristics of the phenomenon being studied. It gives a general overview and a wide range context of the phenomenon. According to Collis & Hussey (2008), descriptive research is conducted to describe phenomena as they exist. It is used to identify and obtain information on the characteristics of a particular problem or issue. Nazir (2011) stated that the descriptive research is defined as a study to figure out facts with appropriate interpretation. This method of research has two purposes. First, this study defines the characteristics from a group or individual accurately. Second, this study determines the frequency of a phenomenon to minimize refraction and to maximize reliability.

The purpose of this research is to analyze the section in listening comprehension in which the students are most difficult to face. By using the descriptive method, the writer describes the result of the test. The data will bring on a conclusion on what aspects the students are problematic and are mastered in. The aspect is considered problematic when the incorrect answer is higher than the amount of correct answer. And an aspect is considered mastered if the amount of correct answers is more than the amount of incorrect answers.

From the result of the pre-research, the writer decided to take Class A as the sample of the research, because the class is more suitable compared to Class B, with the amount of students who have not taken TOEFL and TOEFL training more than Class B. The amount of the sample is 22 students from Class A.

The test used is "Complete Test (Paper)" from the book by Phillips (2003) entitled "Longman Complete Course for the TOEFL Test". The test is divided into three parts; Part A (short dialogues), Part B (conversations) and Part

C (talks). Part A consists of thirty questions, Part B consists of eight questions, and Part C consists of twelve questions with the time approximately 35 minutes for the whole listening section. The CD was played once; therefore, there was no repetition.

Adapting from the book, the aspects that will be analyzed in this test are synonyms, similar sounds, identifying location, speaker and activity, passives, multiple nouns, negative expressions, double negative expressions, “almost negative” expressions, negative with comparatives, expressions of agreement, expressions of uncertainty and suggestion, empathic expressions of surprise, wishes, untrue conditions, two- and three-part verbs, idioms, topic, organization of ideas, stated details, unstated details and referents (Phillips, 2003).

After the writer received the data of the test, the writer checked the students’ answers, whether it is correct or incorrect. Then, the writer will input the answers into the table below.

**Table 1**  
**Result of Test**

No	Result of Test								TIA	TCA
	1	2	3	4	5	...	22			
Q1										
Q2										
Q3										
⋮										
Q50										

Note:

TIA : Total of incorrect answers

TCA : Total of correct answers

To find out which listening comprehension section which is the most difficult for the students, the writer will show the result in percentage by using the follow formula.

$$\text{Percentage per section} = \frac{\sum CA}{(t \times n)} \times 100\%$$

Note:

$\sum CA$  : The accumulation of correct answers

t : The number of test items in the section

n : The number of students

In order to know the problematic and the mastered aspects, the writer will calculate and present it in percentage to show the level of mastery of students. The incorrect and correct answers from the same aspect will be summed up. Furthermore, the writer then uses the formula to calculate the percentage of correct answers from each aspect.

$$\text{Percentage} = \frac{\sum C A S A}{(T \times n)} \times 100\%$$

Note:

$\sum I A S A$ : The accumulation of correct answers from the same aspect

T : The number of test items from the same aspect

n : The total number of students

This will show the percentage of the problematic and mastered aspect by the students. An aspect will be considered a problematic aspect if the result from the formula is less than 50%, because it has been proved that the amount of incorrect answers are higher than the correct answers. Conversely, an aspect will be considered be mastered by the students if the result of the formula is more than 50%, because the correct answers are higher than the incorrect answers.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Analyzing the students' answer per section

The findings of this study affirmed that the level of mastery of the students in Part A (short dialogues) is 51.67%, Part B (conversations) is 64.77%, and Part C (talks) is 53.79%. From this result, it can be concluded that the most difficult part of TOEFL listening comprehension encountered by the students is short dialogues, because it has the lowest percentage with the level of mastery of 51.67%.

These three sections in listening comprehension each have different aspects. The first section of listening comprehension is short dialogues which consists of sixteen aspects (synonyms, similar sounds, identifying location, speaker and activity, passives, multiple nouns, negative expressions, double negative expressions, "almost negative" expressions, negative with comparatives, expressions of agreement, expressions of uncertainty and suggestion, empathic expressions of surprise, wishes, untrue conditions, two- and three-part verbs, idioms). This section is in contrast with conversations and talks, where these two sections have five aspects (topic, organization of ideas, stated detail, unstated detail, and referents). The difference of conversations and talks is in the speakers, whereas conversations have two speakers (dialogue) and talks contain only one (monologue).

Why are the short dialogues the most difficult section compared to the other sections according to the result of this research? In this section, most of the answers of the items are stated implicitly rather than stated. Therefore, the students are required to listen carefully and make inferences based on the dialogues they hear. To make this clearer, here is an example of a dialogue from part A (short dialogues):

(man) Here's a small gift for your birthday. It's something I know you like.

(woman) So you did remember my birthday! Thank you so much!  
 (narrator) WHAT HAD THE WOMAN ASSUMED?

The woman made a firm intonation on *did*. She thought that the man forgotten her birthday and didn't expect to receive a birthday from him. From this dialogue, the correct answer was not clearly stated but it was implicitly stated. To know what the speakers really meant, the students need to "listen between the lines" (Brown, 2006). What Brown (2006) suggested is that students need to focus on the speakers carefully because speakers do not always say exactly what they mean. That is, important aspects of meaning are sometimes implied rather than stated.

Moreover, short dialogues only consist of two lines. If students lose a word, then they will lose the whole idea because the information is dense into the lines. On the other hand, in the conversation and talks section, students may recall the lost information by listening to the next lines and may conclude the lost information successfully. These problems may cause the students to have difficulties in this particular section compared to other sections.

### Analyzing aspects of TOEFL listening comprehension

#### a. Short dialogues

The following table shows the percentage of incorrect answers of the aspects in short dialogues.

**Table 2**  
**Percentages of Aspects in Short Dialogues**

Aspect	Item Number	Percentage
Synonyms	1, 9	31%
Similar sounds	3	68%
Who, what, where	7, 21	45%
Passives	5, 14	77%
Multiple nouns	8	68%
Negative expressions	2, 10, 15	58%
Double negative expressions	6, 25	23%
"Almost negative" expressions	18, 28	38%
Negative with comparatives	16, 17, 27	43%
Expressions of agreement	11	59%
Expressions of uncertainty and suggestion	4, 23	72%
Empathic expressions of surprise	20, 30	45%
Wishes	19, 29	38%
Untrue conditions	22	73%
Two- and three-part verbs	12, 24	73%
Idioms	13, 26	45%

As shown in the chart, there are eight aspects which were mastered by the students and there were also eight aspects which were problematic. The most mastered aspect for the students is *passives*, because it is the highest percentage compared to others with the total of 77% correct answers. The second and third

mastered aspects are *untrue conditions* and *two- and three-part verbs*, both with the total of 73% correct answers. *Expressions of uncertainty and suggestion* is the fourth mastered aspect with 72%, and then comes *similar sounds* and *multiple nouns* with 68%. *Expressions of agreement* have the percentage of 59% correct answers. The last mastered aspect is *negative expressions* with 58%.

The aspects which are below 50% are considered problematic by the students because it had more incorrect answers than the correct answers. To start off, three aspects with 45% of correct answers are *who, what, where, emphatic expressions of surprise* and *idioms*. *Negative with comparatives* is 43%, “*almost negative*” expression and *wishes* with 38%, and *synonyms* with 31%. The most problematic aspect in Part A is *double negative expression* with 23% of correct answers.

It has been shown that in Part A, the most mastered aspect for the students is *passives*, because it is the highest percentage compared to others with the total of 77% correct answers. There were two questions for this aspect. In Q5, the students were required to listen to a conversation stated in a passive voice, as the second speaker said, “It was not good news. The rent has been raised.” Now, what does the speaker mean? The correct answer to this question was stated in an active voice, “The landlord has raised the rent.” Fischer (2007) reckoned that the problem with passive voice is that it is more vague rather than active voice because no actor/agent is defined. This is the purpose of this question. This test would like to figure out whether the students are able to listen to passive voice and change it into an active form. The result showed that the students have mastered passive voice and active voice very well because they were able to answer the questions correctly.

The second and third mastered aspects are *untrue conditions* and *two- and three-part verbs* with 73% each. The former has one question for the aspect. In this question the woman asked the man if their team won the game. The man answered that if the runner hadn’t fallen, then their team would’ve won. It means that the runner fell down and the loss was the runner’s fault. Furthermore, the latter has two questions for the aspect. Both of these aspects were answered correctly by some students, which means that overall they have mastered the two aspects.

The most problematic aspect in Part A is double negative expression with 23% of correct answers. There were two questions for this aspect. In Q6, the man said that he had to work way too many hours for the last two weeks. The woman said that his efforts have not been unappreciated. This statement has a double negative expression; have *not* and *unappreciated*, which means that the man’s efforts were appreciated. If there were double negatives, the statement is positive. The students weren’t aware with the double negatives, and needs to pay attention more to this aspect.

From the result of the test, it has been acknowledged that in Part A (short dialogues), Q7 is the question with the highest amount of incorrect answers which is 19 from 22. In this question, the narrator is asking what the man and woman most likely doing. The man and woman on the recording are going to make a salad because the woman said that she will was the lettuce and told the man to

make the dressing. The students are not aware of the keywords, which are *lettuce* and *dressing*. They are mistaken with the word *dressing* which in this context means the topping for the salad. According to Klepousniotou (2002), a single string of words (i.e., an utterance) may lead to more than one interpretation simply because one of the words has more than one meaning. Often by means, in this case the word *dressing* is a homonym, in which a lexical item accidentally carries two (or more) distinct and unrelated meanings (Klepousniotou, 2002). The students are mistaken by the word *dressing* in which is the topping for the salad, not to put clothes on. This question is included in who, what, where aspect, because the students are expected to determine what the man and woman are doing.

b. Conversations and Talks

The following table shows the percentage of incorrect answers of the aspects in conversations.

**Table 3**  
**Percentages of Aspects in Conversations**

Aspect	Item Number	Percentage
Topic	35	55%
Detailed information	31, 32, 33, 34, 36, 37, 38	66%

In Part B, the students have problem more in understanding the topic, which is 55%, rather than detailed information with 66%.

The following table shows the percentage of incorrect answers of the aspects in talks.

**Table 4**  
**Percentages of Aspects in Talks**

Aspect	Item Number	Percentage
Topic	47	32%
Detailed information	39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 48, 49, 50	56%

In Part B and C, the students has problems when determining the topic. It is because the topic is stated implicitly. Students have to listening clearly to the keywords in the recording, and then they need to draw their own conclusion about the topic. It is different when listening to specific information. Often the answers are clearly stated.

In talks, students need to be able to draw their own inferences about what is stated. A second language listener is fully capable of drawing inferences in L1; but, faced with the demands of unfamiliar sounds and vocabulary, students has to commit greater attention to decoding and to meaning at sentence level than they would normally. The result might be that the students fail to make all the inferences that she would in her first language (Field, 2009).

To conclude, there are a few problems students' faces in listening comprehension. The first is inference. The students need to be able to draw their



own conclusion of a certain conversation or talks by grasping the keywords. By knowing the keywords to a certain conversation, it will be easier for the students to conclude the meaning of the conversation. Secondly, students have limited vocabulary. The speaker may choose words the listener does not know. Listeners sometimes encounter an unknown word which may cause them to stop and think about the meaning of that word and thus cause them to miss the next part of the speech (Gilakjani, 2011). The third is listeners may fail to recognize the signals which indicate that the speaker is moving from one point to another, giving an example, or repeating a point.

There are other potential listening comprehension problems that the students might face suggested by Gilakjani (2011). The first is the listeners cannot control the speed of delivery. Many English language learners believe that the greatest difficulty with listening comprehension is that the listener cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks. That is why the students say that the speaker speaks too fast, and it is hard for them to convey the message. Second, listeners cannot always have words repeated. Different from reading, where students can look back to certain information, in listening, the students can only recall what they heard in their memory. Third, it can be difficult for listeners to concentrate in a foreign language. In listening comprehension, even the shortest break in attention can seriously impair comprehension. Conversation is easier when students find the topic of the listening passage interesting; however, students sometimes feel listening is very tiring even if they are interested because it requires an enormous amount of effort to follow the meaning (Gilakjani, 2011).

It is important for the students to know in which questions and aspects they are incorrect. Therefore, they will be able to focus on the specific aspect to achieve a higher score in TOEFL listening comprehension. To overcome the problematic aspects, students should listen more about conversations and talks in English and try to convey the words the speaker say to be a better listener. Students should also practice and read preparation books of TOEFL before the test in order to maximize their preparation.

## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

### **Conclusion**

Divulged from this research, the most difficult part the students encounter is part A (short dialogues). In this part, the students have eight mastered aspects which are passives, untrue conditions, two- and three-part verbs, expressions of uncertainty and suggestion, similar sounds, multiple nouns, expressions of agreement and negative expressions. The most mastered aspect is passives with the highest percentage of 77% correct answers. Moreover, there are also eight aspects that is considered problematic by the students, which are who, what, where, emphatic expression of surprise, idioms, negative with comparatives, “almost negative” expression, wishes, synonyms, and double negative expression. The most problematic aspect is double negative expressions because it has the lowest percentage of correct answers which is 23%.

In Part B (conversations), the students have problem in determining the topic, rather than understanding detailed information. In detailed information, the students achieved 66%, and achieved 55% in topic aspect. In Part C (talks), students are also more mastered in understanding detailed information rather than determining the topic. In understanding the detailed information, the students achieved 56% incorrect answers and 32% for determining the topic.

### **Suggestion**

In order to improve the students' listening skill in TOEFL listening comprehension, the students may need to pay more attention to the aspects which are problematic (who, what, where, emphatic expression of surprise, idioms, negative with comparatives, "almost negative" expression, wishes, synonyms, and double negative expression) by practicing more on listening comprehension. They will need to focus on double negative expressions more since it is the most problematic aspect. They will also need to learn to listen and make inferences because answers tend to be stated implicitly. By making inferences while listening, it will lead them to the right conclusion afterwards.

TOEFL tutors may focus more on the problematic aspects which are who, what, where, emphatic expression of surprise, idioms, negative with comparatives, "almost negative" expression, wishes, synonyms, and double negative expression when tutoring students on TOEFL listening comprehension.

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