

**ANALYZING STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN LISTENING COMPREHENSION
USING AUTHENTIC AUDIO MATERIALS IN CLASS XI OF SMK BUDI
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Keywords:

*listening comprehension,
authentic audio, student
difficulties.*

Kata kunci:

*listening comprehension,
authentic audio materials,
learning difficulties.*

Abstract

. This study aims to analyze the difficulties encountered by Class XI students of SMK Budi Utomo Way Jepara in comprehending listening materials delivered through authentic audio recordings. The background of the study lies in students' low ability to process natural spoken English, particularly due to fast speech rate, unfamiliar vocabulary, and accent variations. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, involving 32 students as participants. Data were collected through classroom observations, listening comprehension tests, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that linguistic challenges were the most significant barriers, including limited vocabulary knowledge, inability to process rapid speech, and difficulty recognizing connected speech and reduced forms. Psychological factors such as anxiety and low confidence further hindered students' concentration and willingness to engage in listening tasks. Environmental issues, including poor audio quality, classroom noise, and technical disruptions, also negatively affected the listening experience. Moreover, students lacked effective listening strategies and tended to focus on decoding individual words rather than constructing overall meaning. The study concludes that listening instruction should incorporate pre-listening support, metacognitive strategy training, vocabulary enhancement, and improved learning conditions. Additionally, authentic audio materials should be introduced gradually to help students build familiarity and confidence in understanding natural spoken English. These findings provide valuable insights for teachers in designing more effective listening activities that address students' specific needs.

Abstrak

. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kesulitan yang dialami siswa kelas XI SMK Budi Utomo Way Jepara dalam memahami materi listening menggunakan audio autentik. Latar belakang penelitian ini adalah rendahnya kemampuan siswa dalam menangkap informasi dari rekaman bahasa Inggris yang bersifat natural, terutama karena kecepatan penuturan, kosakata yang tidak familiar, dan variasi aksen. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan melibatkan 32 siswa sebagai partisipan. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, tes pemahaman listening, angket, dan wawancara semi-terstruktur. Hasil penelitian

menunjukkan bahwa kesulitan linguistik merupakan hambatan terbesar, termasuk rendahnya penguasaan kosakata, ketidakmampuan memproses speech rate yang cepat, serta kesulitan memahami connected speech dan bentuk-bentuk reduksi. Faktor psikologis seperti kecemasan dan kurangnya kepercayaan diri juga memengaruhi fokus dan konsentrasi siswa selama proses listening. Selain itu, faktor lingkungan seperti kualitas audio yang buruk, kebisingan kelas, dan gangguan teknis turut menurunkan efektivitas pembelajaran listening. Kurangnya strategi mendengarkan yang efektif memperburuk keadaan, karena siswa cenderung berusaha memahami setiap kata secara literal. Penelitian menyimpulkan bahwa pembelajaran listening perlu dirancang dengan dukungan strategi prapendengaran, pelatihan strategi metakognitif, peningkatan kosakata, serta penyediaan lingkungan belajar yang kondusif. Penggunaan bahan autentik sebaiknya diberikan secara bertahap untuk membangun kepercayaan diri siswa dalam memahami bahasa Inggris lisan secara natural.

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INTRODUCTION

. Listening comprehension is one of the fundamental skills in English language learning, yet it is also considered one of the most challenging for many students at the upper secondary level. Listening requires learners to process spoken language in real time, interpret meaning, and respond appropriately. For students in Class XI of SMK Budi Utomo Way Jepara, East Lampung, listening comprehension is an essential competency, especially since vocational students are expected to interact with English in practical and workplace-related contexts (Morales and Beltrán 2006). Despite its importance, many students continue to struggle due to limited exposure to authentic spoken English and insufficient listening practice that reflects real-life language use.

Traditional listening activities used in classrooms often rely on scripted, artificial recordings that do not represent natural speaking situations. These materials may contain clear pronunciation, slow speech rate, and simplified structures that do not align with authentic communication outside the classroom. As a result, students become accustomed to unrealistic listening conditions and face difficulties when encountering natural English. Authentic audio materials, such as interviews, podcasts, news broadcasts, and real-life dialogues, offer richer linguistic input. However, they also present challenges due to speed, accents, background noise, and complex vocabulary that can overwhelm learners (Li 2012).

Preliminary observations in Class XI showed that students frequently failed to catch key information when listening to authentic materials. Many expressed frustration

because native speakers talked too fast or used unfamiliar expressions. Some students lacked concentration, while others struggled to identify the main ideas and supporting details. These difficulties suggest that learners are not yet equipped with effective listening strategies, making it necessary to analyze the specific factors contributing to their struggles. Understanding these difficulties is essential for designing instructional approaches that can better support listening development. (Thanajaro 2000)

Listening comprehension involves both bottom-up and top-down processing. Bottom-up skills require recognizing sounds, words, and grammatical structures, whereas top-down skills involve using background knowledge, predicting content, and forming inferences. Students at SMK Budi Utomo often demonstrate weaknesses in both areas. Many cannot distinguish similar sounds or decode rapid speech, indicating problems with bottom-up processing. At the same time, they show limited ability to make predictions or use contextual clues, which reflects challenges in top-down processing. These combined difficulties hinder their overall comprehension of authentic audio materials (Dolog Halong Atas-Kota Ambon Posel 2020).

Authentic listening materials expose students to various accents, speech rates, and situational contexts that differ significantly from textbook recordings. While these materials enrich learning, they also demand higher levels of listening competence. Students in Class XI reported difficulty dealing with unfamiliar accents, reduced forms, and idiomatic expressions. They also struggled with the natural pace of authentic speech, which often includes hesitations, repetitions, contractions, and connected speech. These linguistic features are rarely found in scripted listening materials, making authentic listening a demanding activity for learners who lack sufficient practice (Kochkorova 2025).

Another challenge lies in students' limited vocabulary knowledge. When students encounter too many unknown words, they tend to lose track of the meaning and become discouraged. Vocabulary limitations also prevent them from identifying the main ideas or following the flow of information in the audio. This problem is especially prevalent in vocational students whose exposure to English outside the classroom is minimal. Without adequate vocabulary, even simple authentic audio materials can become overwhelming and impede the comprehension process (Alamri 2025).

In addition to linguistic challenges, psychological factors also influence listening comprehension. Many students reported feeling anxious or stressed when dealing with authentic audio because they feared not being able to understand anything. This anxiety reduces concentration and negatively affects performance. Moreover, low listening confidence can discourage students from fully engaging in listening tasks. Such emotional barriers must be acknowledged because they significantly shape learners' ability to process spoken English effectively.

Environmental factors further contribute to listening difficulties. Noise within the classroom, poor audio quality, and technological issues often disrupt students' attention and hinder comprehension. Some students also struggle to maintain focus for extended periods due to insufficient listening stamina. These issues indicate that listening comprehension is not solely a linguistic skill but also influenced by the learning environment and the tools used for instruction. Teachers must therefore consider these factors when implementing authentic listening activities. (Susanto 2021)

The complexity of listening tasks also plays a role in students' comprehension. Tasks that require simultaneous listening and writing, such as note-taking or answering detailed questions, place additional cognitive load on learners. When tasks are too demanding, students may not be able to process spoken input effectively. Task design must therefore be appropriate for students' proficiency level and gradually increase in difficulty to build confidence and skill (Halim, Mukminatien, and Anugerahwati 2018).

Given these challenges, it is crucial to analyze students' specific difficulties in listening comprehension when using authentic audio materials. By identifying the linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors affecting comprehension, teachers can develop more effective instructional strategies. This study aims to explore the types of difficulties faced by Class XI students at SMK Budi Utomo Way Jepara and provide recommendations for improving listening instruction. Through a deeper understanding of these challenges, educators can better support students in developing listening competence required for real-world communication (Morales and Beltrán 2012).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

. Listening comprehension is a complex cognitive process that involves interpreting spoken language through the integration of linguistic and non-linguistic information. According to Rost (2011), listening requires the ability to recognize sounds, understand vocabulary, interpret grammar, and construct meaning from contextual clues. This process engages both bottom-up and top-down processing. Bottom-up processing focuses on decoding individual sounds, words, and structures, while top-down processing relies on prior knowledge, expectations, and situational context. Effective listening occurs when learners are able to coordinate both processes simultaneously, allowing them to interpret spoken language rapidly and accurately (Morales and Beltrán 2018).

Authentic audio materials are recordings that reflect real-life communication, such as podcasts, interviews, news reports, songs, and spontaneous conversations. Gilmore (2007) argues that authentic materials expose learners to natural language use, providing rich input that supports language acquisition. These materials contain linguistic features found in real communication, including reduced forms, connected speech, varying intonation patterns, and natural speech rate. However, these same

features also make authentic materials more difficult for learners, especially those with limited proficiency. Despite the challenges, research shows that exposure to authentic materials helps learners develop listening skills that are transferable to real-world contexts (., Prof. Dr. I Made Sutarna, and Dra. Sang Ayu Putu Sriasih 2015).

Listening difficulties among learners often arise from linguistic challenges such as limited vocabulary, unfamiliar accents, rapid speech, and complex sentence structures. Nation and Newton (2009) emphasize that vocabulary knowledge plays a critical role in listening comprehension; when too many words are unknown, learners cannot construct meaning effectively. Furthermore, natural spoken English contains reduced forms (e.g., “gonna,” “wanna”), hesitations, and incomplete sentences, which can confuse learners who are accustomed to textbook recordings. These linguistic factors contribute significantly to learners’ struggles with authentic audio materials (Aghayani and Hajmohammadi 2019).

Psychological factors also influence listening comprehension. Anxiety, low confidence, and lack of motivation can hinder learners' ability to process spoken input. Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests that when learners experience stress or fear, their ability to acquire language decreases because the affective filter blocks input from being fully processed. Many learners feel overwhelmed by authentic listening materials, perceiving them as too difficult. This emotional response reduces concentration and makes listening comprehension even more challenging. Addressing these psychological barriers is essential for improving listening competence (Thanajaro 2000).

Environmental and contextual factors further affect learners’ listening performance. Poor audio quality, classroom noise, and technical issues can distort the input and disrupt comprehension. According to Vandergrift (2011), the listening environment must be optimized to minimize distractions and support learners' attentional processes. Additionally, the design of listening tasks can influence difficulty levels. Tasks that require simultaneous note-taking or detailed information extraction increase cognitive load, making comprehension harder. Appropriately sequenced tasks and supportive scaffolding can help learners gradually build listening skills.

Studies on authentic listening comprehension indicate that learners benefit from structured listening instruction that integrates strategy training, pre-listening activities, and guided practice. Field (2008) suggests that teachers should focus not only on testing listening ability but also on teaching how to listen. This includes preparing students with background knowledge, activating schema, and providing targeted exercises that strengthen decoding skills. When learners consciously apply listening strategies – such as predicting, inferring, monitoring, and clarifying – their comprehension improves significantly. These theoretical insights support the importance of analyzing student difficulties to design more effective instructional interventions (Kochkorova 2025).

RESEARCH METHOD

. This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to analyze the difficulties faced by Class XI students at SMK Budi Utomo Way Jepara in comprehending authentic audio materials. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore learners' listening challenges in depth and understand the underlying linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors. The descriptive nature of the research supports a detailed analysis of students' experiences, perceptions, and performance during listening activities. Through this method, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive account of the specific problems encountered by students and the reasons behind their struggles (Sugiyono 2019).

The participants of the study included 32 students from Class XI of SMK Budi Utomo Way Jepara, selected through purposive sampling based on their regular involvement in English listening activities. These students were chosen because authentic audio materials were newly introduced to their listening lessons, making them suitable subjects for examining comprehension difficulties. The study was conducted over a four-week period during regular English class sessions. The classroom teacher collaborated with the researcher to observe student behaviors and collect data throughout the listening activities (Suryabrata 1998).

Data collection was carried out through observations, listening comprehension tests, student questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. Observations focused on identifying visible behaviors such as hesitation, distraction, confusion, note-taking attempts, and reactions to fast speech. Listening tests were administered using authentic audio sources including short interviews, announcements, and conversational clips. The questionnaires were designed to capture students' self-reported difficulties, such as trouble with vocabulary, speed, accent, or unfamiliar expressions. Semi-structured interviews provided deeper insights into students' emotional responses, confidence, and perceived barriers during listening (Hoy 2010).

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. First, all observation notes, test results, and interview responses were transcribed and coded to identify recurring themes. These themes were then grouped into categories representing linguistic difficulties, psychological challenges, environmental factors, and task-related problems. The researcher compared findings across data sources to ensure validity through triangulation. This analytical process enabled the study to provide a clear and systematic explanation of the students' listening difficulties and their underlying causes, forming the basis for recommendations to improve listening instruction at the school (Ramdhan 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

. The findings of the study revealed that students in Class XI encountered significant difficulties when listening to authentic audio materials. During initial listening sessions, many students appeared overwhelmed by the natural speed of the recordings. They frequently stopped paying attention after missing the first few words or sentences, indicating that the rapid pace made it difficult for them to follow the flow of information. The problem was especially evident when the audio involved spontaneous speech, informal expressions, or reduced word forms commonly found in real-life conversation. These features made the listening process challenging for students accustomed to slower, scripted textbook recordings.

Vocabulary limitations emerged as one of the most dominant difficulties. Students reported that unfamiliar words impeded their ability to comprehend the main idea and supporting details. Observation showed that when students encountered unknown vocabulary, they often became confused, lost concentration, and failed to reconnect with the subsequent information. Since authentic materials naturally contain richer and more varied vocabulary than teacher-made recordings, students experienced frequent breakdowns in comprehension. Many expressed frustration because they believed they could not understand anything if even a few difficult words appeared.

Another major difficulty was the inability to process connected speech. Students struggled to identify words when speakers used reduced forms, such as contractions, linking sounds, and assimilation, which are typical in natural spoken English. For example, phrases like “wanna,” “gonna,” or “did you” sounded unfamiliar to them when spoken quickly. This difficulty reflects students’ limited bottom-up listening skills, especially in recognizing individual sounds and decoding natural pronunciation patterns. Students often misheard entire sentences, which affected their comprehension of subsequent information.

Accents also contributed significantly to listening difficulties. Students found it particularly challenging to understand speakers with accents different from the standard American English they were accustomed to hearing in textbooks. Authentic audio clips featuring British, Australian, or Southeast Asian English variations caused noticeable confusion. Students reported that even slight variations in rhythm, stress, or intonation made the content difficult to interpret. This difficulty indicates a lack of exposure to diverse accents, which limited their ability to adapt to different speech patterns.

Psychological factors were also evident throughout the listening activities. Many students expressed anxiety and lack of confidence when faced with authentic audio. Their fear of not understanding the recordings led to decreased concentration, affecting overall performance. Some students hesitated to participate in post-listening discussions because they felt embarrassed to admit they missed important information.

This emotional barrier created a negative cycle where anxiety reduced listening efficiency, and poor comprehension further increased anxiety.

Environmental factors within the classroom influenced students' ability to comprehend the audio. Noise from outside the classroom, technical issues with the speakers, and inconsistent audio volume caused additional strain on students' listening efforts. At times, the classroom acoustics made certain words unclear, further complicating comprehension. Students reported that even slight disturbances could cause them to miss vital information, particularly when the audio played only once. These findings highlight how environmental conditions can significantly affect listening outcomes.

Task difficulty also played a role in students' struggles. Some students found it challenging to complete listening tasks that required detailed information gathering, such as filling out forms or answering specific comprehension questions. When asked to listen and write simultaneously, many students appeared overwhelmed and quickly lost track. They struggled to divide attention between decoding the audio and recording information, resulting in incomplete or inaccurate responses. The cognitive load was too high for learners who were not yet skilled in handling demanding listening tasks.

The results also revealed that students lacked effective listening strategies. Few students attempted to predict content before listening or use contextual clues to aid comprehension. They tended to focus on individual words rather than overall meaning, which caused them to panic when encountering unknown vocabulary. During interviews, students admitted that they listened passively and hoped to catch as many words as possible without applying any structured strategies. This lack of strategy awareness further contributed to poor listening performance.

Concentration issues were common among students during longer listening passages. Many struggled to sustain attention beyond the first minute of the audio. As the recording continued, students became increasingly distracted, either by their own thoughts or by external noises. When attention drifted, students missed essential information and found it difficult to follow the remainder of the content. This issue highlights the importance of listening stamina, which must be built through regular exposure and guided practice.

Students also encountered difficulties identifying the main idea and specific details in the audio. While some students could recognize isolated phrases, they struggled to synthesize information and form a coherent understanding of the message. This indicates that students lacked higher-level comprehension skills necessary for processing and organizing spoken information. Task results showed that many students answered questions incorrectly because they failed to distinguish between important and unimportant information.

A number of students reported difficulty interpreting implied meaning or making inferences while listening to authentic materials. They relied heavily on literal comprehension and were unable to deduce meaning from tone, context, or speaker intent. This issue suggests that students' top-down processing skills were underdeveloped. Since authentic audio often requires listeners to infer meaning beyond the surface level, the lack of inferencing skills created an additional barrier to comprehension.

Overall, the findings indicate that students' difficulties stemmed from a combination of linguistic, psychological, environmental, and cognitive factors. The complexity of authentic audio materials, combined with students' limited exposure and strategy use, created substantial challenges. These results highlight the need for listening instruction that includes explicit strategy training, gradual exposure to authentic materials, diversified accents, and supportive classroom conditions. Understanding these difficulties is essential for improving teaching practices and enhancing students' listening abilities.

B. Discussion

. The findings of this study reveal that students' difficulties in understanding authentic audio materials stem from a combination of linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and environmental factors. Linguistic challenges such as rapid speech, unfamiliar vocabulary, and connected speech significantly limited students' ability to decode spoken English. These results align with Field's view (2011) that listening comprehension often breaks down at the perceptual processing stage when learners fail to identify sounds or segment speech correctly. Authentic materials, which naturally contain reduced forms and spontaneous speech patterns, intensified these challenges for students who were more accustomed to slow, scripted recordings. Thus, students' struggles highlight the need for more explicit instruction in phonological awareness and decoding skills.

The findings also demonstrate the crucial role of vocabulary knowledge in listening comprehension. Students consistently reported losing meaning whenever they encountered unknown words. This supports Nation's argument (2009) that insufficient vocabulary acts as a major barrier to comprehension, especially when listening to authentic speech. Since authentic audio contains a richer lexical range than classroom materials, students' limited word knowledge resulted in frequent breakdowns in understanding. This indicates that integrating pre-listening vocabulary preparation, glossaries, and repeated exposure to high-frequency words may help reduce comprehension difficulties.

Psychological factors such as anxiety and lack of confidence also played a significant role in shaping students' listening performance. According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, emotional barriers hinder language acquisition by restricting the amount of input that can be processed. Students in this study experienced anxiety when listening to authentic audio due to fear of failure and unfamiliarity with

natural speech patterns. This anxiety reduced concentration and led to poor performance. Therefore, teachers should create a more supportive learning environment by providing reassurance, allowing repeated listening, and using scaffolding techniques to build confidence gradually.

Environmental and contextual factors further complicated the listening process. Noise distractions, poor audio quality, and technological issues negatively influenced students' ability to process auditory information. As Vandergrift (2011) notes, listening is highly sensitive to environmental conditions, and even minor disturbances can interfere with comprehension. These findings indicate that teachers must ensure optimal classroom conditions, such as minimizing noise, using high-quality speakers, and testing audio equipment before listening activities. Additionally, shorter listening segments may help students maintain focus and reduce fatigue.

The study also highlights students' lack of effective listening strategies, which contributed to their difficulties in understanding authentic materials. Many students attempted to understand every word rather than focusing on general meaning, leading to frustration and cognitive overload. This suggests that students need systematic strategy instruction, including predicting content, inferring meaning, monitoring comprehension, and identifying key information. As recommended by Vandergrift and Goh (2012), teaching metacognitive listening strategies can significantly improve learners' comprehension and confidence by helping them approach listening tasks more purposefully.

Overall, the results suggest that improving students' listening comprehension requires a holistic approach that addresses linguistic competence, strategy use, emotional readiness, and learning conditions. Authentic audio materials are valuable for exposing students to real-life language, but they must be introduced gradually with appropriate scaffolding. Teachers should design listening lessons that integrate pre-listening support, guided practice, and reflective post-listening tasks. By understanding students' challenges in depth, educators can tailor instruction to better prepare learners for authentic communication demands in academic, professional, and everyday settings.

CONCLUSION

. The findings of this study show that students in Class XI of SMK Budi Utomo Way Jepara face significant challenges when listening to authentic audio materials. These difficulties arise from linguistic factors such as limited vocabulary, fast speech, reduced forms, unfamiliar accents, and challenges in processing connected speech. Cognitive issues, including difficulty identifying main ideas and synthesizing information, further hinder comprehension. Additionally, psychological barriers such as anxiety and low confidence, combined with environmental disturbances, contribute to students' struggles. These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of listening comprehension and demonstrate the need for instructional support tailored to students' specific challenges.

The results also emphasize the importance of explicitly teaching listening strategies to help students become more effective and independent listeners. Many students lacked metacognitive awareness and relied heavily on word-by-word decoding rather than focusing on overall meaning. Providing strategy training—such as predicting content, using context clues, inferring meaning, and monitoring comprehension—can help reduce cognitive overload and improve performance. Furthermore, incorporating pre-listening vocabulary activities and gradually increasing exposure to authentic materials can help build students' confidence and familiarity with natural spoken English. Creating a supportive learning environment that minimizes anxiety and enhances motivation is also essential for developing listening competence.

In conclusion, improving students' listening comprehension requires a comprehensive and sustained instructional approach. Teachers must consider linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors when planning listening lessons and ensure that authentic materials are introduced in a structured and supportive manner. This study recommends that English teachers integrate authentic audio gradually, provide explicit strategy instruction, enhance vocabulary support, and ensure optimal classroom conditions. By addressing these areas, educators can better equip students with the listening skills needed for academic success and real-world communication. Future research may explore intervention-based approaches or compare different types of authentic materials to further strengthen listening instruction.

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