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Students' listening comprehension problems and coping strategies in TOEFL tests

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ABSTRACT

Listening comprehension is widely acknowledged as a critical component of second language proficiency, yet many learners continue to experience substantial difficulty in this skill, particularly in high-stakes assessment contexts such as the TOEFL. Despite its importance, research continues to highlight a gap in understanding the specific challenges faced by learners and the strategies they adopt to manage these demands. Accordingly, this study sought to explore the types of listening difficulties encountered by students during the TOEFL and to identify the strategies they employ to address them. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected from twenty undergraduate students who had previously taken the TOEFL through structured interviews and documentation analysis. The findings revealed several recurring challenges, including reduced concentration, unclear speaker voice, low audio quality, rapid delivery of speech, and unfamiliar vocabulary. Participants reported managing these difficulties through increased exposure and practice, maintaining stronger focus throughout tasks, utilizing top-down strategies such as identifying main ideas, and applying inferencing and prediction to anticipate information. Overall, the study illustrates the multifaceted nature of TOEFL listening challenges and emphasizes the value of explicit listening strategy instruction and regular practice within language programs. Future research involving more diverse learner populations is recommended to strengthen the generalizability and applicability of these findings.

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1. Introduction

For many TOEFL candidates, listening remains one of the most demanding sections to master (Sepyanda et al., 2025). Learners frequently encounter difficulties with rapid speech, unfamiliar accents, and the academic density of test materials, which can feel overwhelming even when digital and practice resources are available. These challenges show that comprehension involves more than linguistic knowledge alone, as it also depends on cognitive processing and mental efficiency (Wallace & Lee, 2020). Anxiety and nervousness in high-stakes testing conditions intensify the problem and further reduce students' ability to focus. Those with limited vocabulary and weak inferencing skills are especially prone to comprehension breakdown when exposed to demanding academic listening passages (Rahma et al., 2022). Research suggests that strategies such as note-taking and informed prediction may improve understanding, but only when applied in ways that match learners' proficiency levels (Vandergrift & Baker, 2015).

A recurring obstacle is limited vocabulary knowledge, which prevents students from grasping the intended meaning when unfamiliar academic words appear. Nurjannah et al. (2024) demonstrated a close relationship between vocabulary mastery and students' success in understanding TOEFL listening passages. A broad lexicon alone is insufficient without an awareness of contextual usage. Weak vocabulary depth not only hinders comprehension of individual words but also disrupts retention of main ideas. Addressing this issue is therefore critical to improving listening outcomes (Luo et al., 2021).

Student performance is also shaped by a combination of internal and external influences, including focus, test anxiety, sound quality, and the physical conditions of the exam setting. Research by Aprino et al. (2022) found that distractions such as background noise and poor audio quality, together with difficulty maintaining concentration significantly impair comprehension. Even learners with strong language ability can underperform when these conditions are present. This indicates that preparation should encompass both linguistic skill development and strategies for coping with stress and testing environments.

Helping students become more aware of listening strategies has been linked to stronger performance and greater confidence in academic learning situations. Cognitive techniques like note-taking, repetition, and summarizing enable learners to engage more actively with input and remember key points (Zhai & Aryadoust, 2022). Metacognitive practices such as planning ahead, checking understanding during listening, and reflecting afterward support performance by encouraging self-regulation (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021). Learners who practiced planning, self-monitoring, and reflection not only scored higher but also developed greater confidence in their listening skills. Studies further indicate that teaching listening strategies can ease anxiety, as learners feel more in control

during demanding test. Integrating explicit strategy instruction into classroom routines gives students transferable tools for navigating different listening situations.

A notable limitation of prior research is its focus on individual elements like vocabulary or speech rate, often without considering how these factors overlap in authentic test conditions. In reality, students frequently face simultaneous challenges, such as coping with unfamiliar terminology while also processing rapid speech. Listening becomes even more demanding when test conditions include issues like background noise or weak audio quality, which intensify existing challenges. Studies indicate that exposure to unfamiliar accents, combined with the need for rapid processing, further raises the likelihood of comprehension failure. Taken together, these pressures show that students seldom face one problem alone but instead deal with several difficulties at the same time. Research using diagnostic models further suggests that analyzing multiple linguistic and cognitive factors simultaneously gives a more accurate representation of listening performance (Dong et al., 2021). Without addressing these interactions, the complexity of test situations may be underestimated, and learners' struggles misrepresented (He & Jiang, 2020). This study aims to identify the main listening challenges TOEFL examinees face and the coping strategies they employ, as reported by 20 undergraduate EFL learners.

2. Literature review

2.1. Listening difficulties in high-stakes tests

Listening comprehension is foundational to academic readiness in English-medium environments. In the TOEFL context, learners must simultaneously manage linguistic, cognitive, and affective demands, consistent with Vandergrift's view of listening as an interaction between bottom-up decoding and top-down meaning construction. Fast speech rates often overload learners' perceptual and processing capacity, reducing their ability to segment input and build meaning in real time. Limited knowledge of academic vocabulary and technical terminology similarly restricts lexical access and inference-making (Nurjannah et al., 2024; Rahma et al., 2022; Wallace & Lee, 2020). Exposure to diverse English accents further challenges phonological decoding and schema activation, particularly among learners familiar with only one English variety (Aprino et al., 2022; Bsharat-Maalouf et al., 2023). Timed testing intensifies affective pressure, increasing cognitive load and contributing to concentration lapses, which Goh's (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021) metacognitive model associates with failures in attentional control (Xu et al., 2021). Collectively, these factors indicate that high-stakes listening performance reflects not only linguistic knowledge but also the ability to regulate cognitive resources under stress.

2.2. Coping and strategy use through cognitive–metacognitive–affective lenses

Learners' responses to these challenges align with established strategy taxonomies. Cognitive strategies such as note-taking, prediction, and inferencing support bottom-up processing and hypothesis formation when encountering rapid auditory input (Goh &

Vandergrift, 2021; Robillos & Bustos, 2022). Metacognitive strategies including task planning, ongoing comprehension monitoring, and flexible adjustment of processing focus reflect the sequential processes in Goh's metacognitive model and Vandergrift's pedagogical cycle (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021). These strategies help learners manage attentional resources, particularly when faced with unfamiliar accents or dense academic language (He & Jiang, 2020). Affective strategies such as anxiety-reduction techniques, positive self-talk, and controlled breathing correspond with Khonamri and Ahmadi's argument (2015) that emotional regulation is integral to effective listening development; learners who manage anxiety sustain cognitive readiness more effectively (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Resnik, 2021; Sepyanda et al., 2025). Thus, proficient TOEFL listeners exhibit coordinated cognitive, metacognitive, and affective self-regulation rather than relying solely on linguistic competence.

2.3. Implications for pedagogy and test design: Strategy-based instruction models

Synthesizing across theoretical frameworks highlights the value of instruction that explicitly builds strategic awareness and regulation. Vandergrift's metacognitive cycle and Goh's self-regulation principles (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021) support instructional practices such as pre-listening planning, guided prediction, scaffolded note-taking, and structured post-listening reflection. Explicit metacognitive training can enhance learners' monitoring and strategic flexibility. Classroom practices incorporating varied accents, academic vocabulary development, and anxiety-management techniques align with TOEFL task demands while also addressing cognitive-affective considerations (Wallace & Lee, 2020). From a testing perspective, implementing balanced speech-rate standards, clear task scaffolding, and consistent audio quality can reduce construct-irrelevant variance and ensure that listening assessment reflects comprehension ability rather than stress tolerance or accent familiarity.

2.4. Research gaps through a theoretical lens

Despite extensive documentation of listening challenges and strategies, gaps persist concerning how learners develop sustained metacognitive control and which instructional sequences best support strategy internalization. Future studies should investigate the longitudinal effects of metacognitive training frameworks across different proficiency levels and delivery modalities. Research incorporating physiological indicators or digital trace analytics may offer deeper insights into cognitive-affective dynamics under test-like stress conditions (Meng et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2021). Furthermore, cross-context comparisons between students receiving metacognitive-cycle instruction and those undergoing traditional listening drills would clarify causal effects and refine evidence-based practices for TOEFL preparation.

3. Method

3.1. Research design

This research employed a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the problems students experience and the strategies they adopt in TOEFL listening comprehension. A qualitative design was considered appropriate because it provides deeper insight into personal experiences and the reasoning behind strategy use, elements that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measures. This approach enabled the study to document participants' perspectives in detail, revealing how they understood their own difficulties and solutions. Descriptive qualitative methods are especially valuable in educational research where uncovering learner viewpoints is essential, making this design suitable for exploring authentic test-taking experiences (Weyant, 2022).

3.2. Research site and participants

The participants in this study were undergraduate students who had completed the TOEFL as part of their university requirements. Recruitment was carried out by reaching out directly to student groups whose members had recently taken the exam, and inviting volunteers to join the study. From the students who expressed interest, twenty were purposively selected to reflect a range of English proficiency levels and levels of familiarity with standardized testing. To be included, students had to be currently enrolled at the university, have taken the TOEFL within the last academic year, and have completed the listening section in an official testing setting rather than through casual or practice-based attempts. The group represented students at different stages of their programs, from those in earlier semesters preparing for their first proficiency assessments to those in their final year completing graduation requirements. Selecting participants in this way ensured that each student had authentic experience with the TOEFL listening section and could speak meaningfully about the difficulties they faced and the strategies they used. At the same time, variation in academic standing and proficiency enriched the data by allowing a range of perspectives while still maintaining focus and depth in line with purposive sampling principles (Etikan, 2017).

3.3. Data collection and analysis

Data were gathered through structured interviews and documentation. Structured interviews then expanded on these responses, allowing participants to explain their experiences in greater depth. Employing multiple data collection tools also enabled triangulation, which strengthened the credibility of the findings. Documentation of the respondents' previous TOEFL scores was taken as a base for the interviews. This practice of combining instruments is well established in educational studies, as it balances breadth with depth of information (Alshenqeeti, 2014).

The process began with interviewing the selected participants to explore the issues further. The data were then coded, categorized, and examined thematically to identify recurring patterns in both problems and strategies. This systematic procedure ensured that the analysis was transparent and comprehensive. The results were finally linked to the

research objectives, offering practical implications for enhancing TOEFL listening preparation.

For data analysis, this study drew on thematic analysis procedures and the interactive qualitative analysis framework outlined by Miles et al. (2014). Interview transcripts and documents were systematized according to Miles et al.'s analytic stages to ensure transparency and an auditable trail (Bingham, 2023). The analysis began with data reduction, which involved summarizing key ideas, refining raw statements, and assigning initial codes through detailed, line-by-line examination while filtering out nonessential information (Cheung & Tai, 2023). The resulting codes and categories were then organized into matrices and narrative charts to visualize relationships among themes related to listening challenges and strategy use. Themes were refined and substantiated with illustrative participant excerpts to preserve accuracy and interpretive rigor.

Throughout the analytic cycle, emerging insights were continuously cross-checked across cases and adjusted as needed to strengthen validity. To further support dependability, a portion of the dataset was independently coded by two researchers, with discrepancies reviewed collaboratively until agreement was reached. This iterative, multi-phase process bolstered the study's rigor, coherence, and methodological transparency, ultimately yielding empirically grounded implications for enhancing TOEFL listening preparation.

3.4. The trustworthiness of the findings

To uphold the trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed multiple procedures grounded in established qualitative rigor criteria, which is credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was enhanced through methodological triangulation by integrating structured interview data with documented TOEFL score records. This approach enabled cross-checking of self-reported listening challenges and strategy use, reducing sole reliance on participant accounts and increasing confidence in the interpretations (Alshenqeeti, 2014). During analysis, codes and themes were continuously compared across cases to ensure that they represented recurring patterns rather than isolated perspectives. Member checking further supported interpretive accuracy, as participants reviewed interview summaries and initial analytic insights to verify meanings and suggest clarifications (Daulay, 2025). Their input contributed to refining categories and strengthening alignment between the findings and participant experiences.

Reflexive practices were also integrated throughout the research. The researcher maintained reflective memos to acknowledge potential biases, prior assumptions, and familiarity with TOEFL listening practices, promoting analytic neutrality and supporting confirmability. Dependability was strengthened through the maintenance of detailed audit trails and systematic records of coding and analytic decisions, allowing transparent tracing of how raw data progressed to the final themes (Miles et al., 2014). Collectively, the use of triangulation, member checks, reflexivity, and structured documentation

ensured methodological rigor and reinforced the validity and trustworthiness of the study's conclusions.

4. Findings

Only one student, Respondent 12, mentioned a strategy for dealing with situations where accent difficulty was intensified by unclear audio. This participant explained that they tried to become accustomed to listening to English as much as possible, suggesting that frequent exposure was seen as the most realistic way to cope when speech quality made comprehension harder. Rather than using specific techniques such as reviewing transcripts, focusing on individual sound features, or replaying recordings to practice difficult segments, the student relied on general listening habits and repeated exposure.
This pattern echoes observations in listening studies showing that when learners face overlapping challenges such as unfamiliar accents combined with weak audio that is those with less experience tend to fall back on broad practice rather than more targeted or metacognitive methods. It also indicates that, without guidance on specialized listening strategies, some students may assume that simply listening more will lead to improvement. As a result, this finding points to the value of instructional support that helps learners move from passive exposure toward more deliberate and strategy-based listening development, especially when accent comprehension is affected by technical limitations.

4.1.1. Problem in TOEFL listening comprehension

4.1.1.1. Concentration

The participants reported a range of difficulties related to maintaining concentration during the TOEFL listening test. These difficulties varied across individuals and were linked to several different causes. Some students attributed their lack of concentration to internal, psychological factors. For instance, Respondent 1 explained: "I think when the audio was playing my concentration suddenly broke. It probably happened because I panicked…" Similarly, respondent 15 stated: "Yes, sometimes I have trouble concentrating because I am nervous which disturbs my concentration…" Both accounts suggest that panic and nervousness interfered with their ability to focus during the test. Other participants mentioned external distractions in the classroom environment as a source of difficulty. From these responses, it is clear that noise, interruptions from others, and even the room's temperature contributed to reduced focus for several students. A third group of participants connected their concentration problems to the quality of the audio and the listening material itself. Respondent 5 explained: "Sometimes we want to focus but while listening is going on there are words or sentences from the speaker that we don't know or make us confused, causing our concentration to be broken…" Respondent 9 emphasized the impact of unclear audio: "Yes, I have. It happens because the audio is not clear so it causes lack of concentration because it disturbs my concentration. If the audio is not clear, it will be difficult for us to understand..."

The findings suggest that concentration problems in TOEFL listening can stem from internal factors such as panic and nervousness, external conditions such as classroom noise or temperature, and technical issues such as unclear audio. First-time test takers also reported greater difficulty maintaining focus compared to more experienced peers. At the same time, several students stated that they did not experience serious concentration problems during the listening section.

4.1.1.2. Accents

Participants reported a variety of difficulties related to accents in the TOEFL listening section. The majority explained that they struggled with accents that were unfamiliar to them. For example, Respondent 3 stated: "Yes. I feel the problem because of strange accent that I never heard before…" Similarly, Respondent 10 mentioned: "I always find accent that is unfamiliar for me… I will be confused about what the speaker is talking about…" Respondent 11 also emphasized the same issue: "Of course I have. It always affects me too much. By using outsider pronunciation that is strange for me or I haven't listened to before…" These accounts illustrate how exposure to accents outside students' prior experience often reduced comprehension.

Some students pointed out that their difficulty was not only with accent unfamiliarity itself but also with the speaker's voice quality. Respondent 7 explained: "Sometimes if the speaker is an old man, it would be difficult for me to understand because the voice of the speaker was difficult to catch up with." This response suggests that factors such as pitch or heaviness of the speaker's voice, especially with male speakers, made comprehension more challenging. Audio quality was also mentioned as an important factor. Respondent 12 commented: "Yes, maybe the problem is with the audio. Maybe the accent is easy, but because the audio quality is poor, the accents will be difficult to understand."

The findings indicate that accent-related problems in TOEFL listening stemmed from three main sources: unfamiliar accent exposure, speaker voice characteristics that students found hard to process, and poor audio quality that made accent comprehension more difficult. A small number of participants, however, reported that they did not experience problems with accents.

4.1.1.3. Speed of speech

Most participants reported that the rate of speech in the TOEFL listening section was a serious challenge, though a small number said they did not struggle with it. The majority explained that speakers often talked too quickly, making it hard to keep up and process information. Fifteen students mentioned this issue, with a few examples highlighted below. Respondent 4 commented: "…Because they are native speaker, of course they speak very fast compared to us who are not native." Respondent 8 described a similar experience: "Yes, I have problem in speed of speech. The problem is the speed of speech is too fast and I often missed it when I listen to the speaker." These responses

show that most students perceived fast delivery as a barrier to comprehension, while a few participants considered it manageable, especially when pronunciation was clear or when they were able to maintain concentration.

4.1.1.4. Vocabulary

Vocabulary emerged as another prominent problem, with most participants highlighting unfamiliar words as a barrier to listening comprehension. Seventeen students described difficulties caused by limited vocabulary, while a few indicated they did not experience such problems. Respondent 8 explained: "Yes. When I did the TOEFL test, there are so many vocabularies that I don't know before. I don't know what the meaning of that vocabulary is." Similarly, Respondent 13 admitted: "Sure, because English is my second language I still really need to enrich my vocabulary and there are some vocabularies that is unfamiliar to me." Other participants also reported the same issue.

4.1.2. Students' solutions to listening comprehension problems

During the TOEFL listening section, students reported employing a variety of practical methods to manage difficulties and answer questions accurately. These strategies were used both in real time during the test and as part of preparation routines. In general, learners described using emotional control, adjusting environmental conditions, increasing attentional focus, drawing on contextual inference, and relying on practice-based familiarity with the exam format. The following subsections describe these coping mechanisms according to the specific listening challenges they addressed.

4.1.2.1. Mental

To handle psychological challenges such as anxiety and panic, students emphasized strategies related to emotional regulation and confidence building. One student explained that staying calm and avoiding panic helped maintain concentration during the listening tasks. Another learner highlighted the importance of repeated practice with test-like materials to build confidence and reduce nervousness over time. These responses indicate that students viewed affective management either by remaining composed or by increasing exposure to testing conditions as an important mechanism for sustaining focus and supporting accurate response selection during listening tasks.

4.1.2.2. Classroom conditions (Noise and temperature)

Students also described techniques to manage distractions within the testing environment. Several participants reported intentionally redirecting their attention to the test audio or questions whenever surrounding noise interfered. One student mentioned using a physical action, such as snapping fingers, to regain focus. Others employed prediction strategies, attempting to anticipate content or likely answers when noise threatened comprehension. Physical positioning was also used to optimize conditions; one student selected a seat close to the speaker and away from the air conditioner to ensure

clearer audio and greater comfort. These responses illustrate that learners relied on both mental focus and environmental adjustments to maintain attentional control and respond accurately despite external disruptions.

4.1.2.3. Audio quality

When faced with unclear audio, participants adopted a range of compensatory behaviors. Several reported intensifying focus in order to capture key words, while others relied on contextual cues to infer meaning when parts of the audio were missed. In circumstances where meaning could not be recovered, students acknowledged using strategic guessing to complete the questions. These strategies demonstrate learners' flexibility in addressing breakdowns in auditory clarity by shifting between focused attentions, inference, and educated guessing.

4.1.2.4. First-time experience

For many students who take the TOEFL for the first time, the test format itself becomes an added source of mental strain. Without knowing what to expect or how quickly tasks move, they often end up using most of their energy simply trying to keep up with the recording and figure out what the test wants from them. This leaves little mental room for applying more advanced listening strategies. One student captured this experience clearly, explaining that they tried to "focus as much as possible on what the speaker was saying" so they could answer correctly. In other words, rather than using planning, monitoring, or predicting during the task, the student relied mainly on sustained attention. This kind of response is very common among first-time test-takers; before learners gain familiarity with the test and receive guided practice, they tend to depend on effort and concentration rather than strategic listening.

Previous studies have reported similar findings, noting that beginners often rely on sheer focus, while more experienced listeners shift toward automatic and flexible strategy use as they grow comfortable with the test and its demands (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021). In this light, the first TOEFL experience can be seen as an early step in a developmental process, where unfamiliarity and pressure temporarily limit strategy use, leading students to fall back on paying close attention as their main way to cope.

4.1.3. The solution to the problem of accent

4.1.3.1. Strange or unfamiliar accent

Participants described several approaches to managing unfamiliar accents. Many emphasized the importance of repeated practice and exposure after experiencing the TOEFL listening test. For example, Respondent 3 explained, "The solution is by practicing and try to learn all the accent so it can be similar with us," while Respondent 14 added, "We have to practice and learn to listen directly from the native speakers often."

Other students relied on understanding the topic and predicting meaning. Respondent 6 reported attempting to "guess what fits" while writing answers, and Respondent 10 stated, "The solution is to look at the question first to know what the topic is." These responses suggest two main patterns: extended accent exposure/practice and topic-based inference.

Accent unfamiliarity is a well-established challenge in TOEFL listening, as the test includes multiple English varieties such as North American, British, and Australian English, while most learners are typically exposed to only one (Aprino et al., 2022) When students encounter accents outside their accustomed variety, comprehension may decline even if vocabulary knowledge is sufficient.

To deepen understanding of these strategies, future research should examine the specific training techniques students use to adapt to unfamiliar accents for instance, practicing with accent-varied listening platforms, using scripted vs. unscripted audio, or engaging in targeted accent drills to clarify how such strategies support accurate response selection during listening tasks.

4.1.3.2. Poor audio quality

Only one student addressed accent difficulty compounded by poor audio quality. Respondent 12 shared, "the way I overcome this is to get used to hearing or listening to English," suggesting consistent listening exposure as a coping strategy. Given the limited responses on this issue, further inquiry is needed to document how students practically train themselves when facing overlapping accent and audio-clarity challenges such as re-listening routines, transcript use, accent-specific practice, or teacher-guided listening correction activities.

4.1.4. Solutions to speed of speech problems

Most participants struggled with rapid delivery in the TOEFL listening section. Many responded by increasing practice intensity. For example, Respondent 2 listened to podcasts and broadcasts "at varying speeds," while Respondent 4 emphasized frequent practice to build familiarity. Other students focused on attention control and meaning construction. Respondent 3 suggested managing focus, while Respondent 5 described connecting preceding and subsequent words to interpret sentences. These responses indicate four primary strategies:

(1) Intensive practice;
(2) Increased focus;
(3) Contextual integration; and
(4) Strategic guessing.

Future studies should document how learners operationalize speed-training such as graduated speed listening, shadowing tasks, repeated listening drills, or timed comprehension exercises to better understand how processing speed is developed and transferred to test performance.

4.1.4.1. Solutions to vocabulary problems

Vocabulary challenges were addressed through multiple approaches. Many students adopted post-test review and practice behaviors. Respondent 7 stated that unfamiliar words became "a lesson to improve vocabulary," and Respondent 12 emphasized reviewing meanings after the test. Respondent 17 simply noted the need "to learn more about English." Across several participants (Respondents 1, 2, 3, 6, 13, 15, 16, and 19), vocabulary expansion involved reviewing difficult words and using media to gain exposure. Other students relied on contextual inference during the test. Respondents 5, 8, and 20 described connecting familiar words within a sentence to derive meaning, while Respondent 10 viewed guessing as a last-resort strategy when context alone was insufficient.

Vocabulary development clearly involves both breadth and depth; learners must not only know individual words but understand their academic use. To advance this understanding, further research should explore specific vocabulary-building practices used for TOEFL preparation such as spaced repetition systems, thematic word lists, digital vocabulary tools, dictionary routines, note-taking formats, or targeted academic word training to determine which methods most effectively support listening comprehension.

5. Discussion

With regard to concentration, several learners described experiencing panic, nervousness, and other emotional reactions that disrupted their focus during the listening portion of the test (Li et al., 2023). This reflects the affective dimension of listening, in which anxiety interferes with attention management and working-memory function, as highlighted in metacognitive listening theories (Liu & Xu, 2021). Other students were affected by external classroom conditions such as background noise, room temperature, and weak audio quality. These distractions increased irrelevant cognitive demands and competed with listeners' ability to process input effectively. Some participants also reported difficulty concentrating during their first exposure to the TOEFL format, attributing this to unfamiliarity with the test structure and limited prior experience with strategic regulation in standardized listening situations (La'biran & Dewi, 2023).

Challenges linked to accent variation were also frequently mentioned. Students struggled with different English varieties and unfamiliar pronunciation patterns, indicating increased perceptual and cognitive demands when processing accents outside their accustomed input (Miao, 2023). In certain cases, these difficulties were heightened by unclear voice quality, and poor recording further compounded comprehension issues by reducing intelligibility and increasing listening effort.

In terms of speech rate, most learners stated that rapid delivery made it difficult to follow the audio, leaving them unable to process information quickly enough. This reflects processing-speed limitations in real-time comprehension and highlights the importance of fast bottom-up decoding, as emphasized in cognitive models of listening

(Hui & Godfroid, 2021). Vocabulary was also a common barrier. Students frequently encountered unfamiliar academic terms, and insufficient lexical knowledge constrained their ability to interpret meaning and answer questions correctly, demonstrating the key role of deep vocabulary knowledge in comprehension and inferencing (Li et al., 2024).

These findings align with earlier research. Hardiyanto et al. (2021) similarly identified rapid speech, accent variation, and vocabulary challenges as major listening barriers. However, unlike Hardiyanto's, this study also shows that concentration difficulties played a central role, emphasizing the interaction between emotional factors and cognitive load in high-stakes assessments. Other scholars have reported parallel findings. Rahma et al. (2022) noted that learners struggled with vocabulary gaps, lack of listening practice, and accent familiarity, while Ali (2023) and Fitria (2021) highlighted problems related to topic knowledge, idiomatic expressions, and low motivation. Batubara and Fatmawa (2023) additionally observed issues such as poor audio quality, rapid delivery, concentration loss, and environmental distractions.

Interview data also revealed a number of coping methods. Students described practicing regularly, concentrating deliberately, and occasionally skipping difficult items before returning to them. These approaches represent forms of metacognitive control, such as planning, monitoring comprehension, and selectively directing attention (Fu et al., 2023). Learners also drew on listening strategies like top-down processing, predicting content, linking familiar information, and making educated guesses to ensure they attempted all questions (Daskalovska et al., 2023). These patterns illustrate compensatory mechanisms used when cognitive demands increased or comprehension temporarily broke down.

Overall, the findings indicate that TOEFL listening challenges arise from both linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Frequent issues included rapid speech, limited vocabulary knowledge, unfamiliar accents, and anxiety during the test. These difficulties reflect linguistic gaps as well as cognitive and emotional constraints that influence listening performance. Collectively, the results highlight the complex nature of listening in high-stakes settings (Palakaprasith et al., 2024), where comprehension depends not only on language proficiency but also on cognitive processing speed, attention control, and emotional regulation.

6. Conclusion

Many students reported that staying focused during the TOEFL listening test was not always easy. Several mentioned feeling nervous or even panicked, and this emotional response made it harder for them to pay attention to the recording. Such reactions are understandable; anxiety can interrupt concentration and reduce the working memory available for processing spoken information, a point emphasized in metacognitive listening research (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021). Other students pointed to factors in the testing environment that diverted their attention, such as background noise, a room that felt too cold or too warm, and unclear audio from the speakers. These external conditions

add unnecessary mental strain, drawing attention away from the listening task itself. Some learners also said that taking the TOEFL for the first time made concentrating harder because they were still figuring out the format and did not yet have established strategies for managing the test.

Accent variation was another challenge commonly brought up. Students explained that they had difficulty understanding English speakers with accents they were not used to, and this slowed down their comprehension. This difficulty is consistent with findings in listening research, which notes that unfamiliar pronunciation patterns place extra demands on the listener (Verbeke & Simon, 2023). At times, these accent issues were even more difficult when the sound quality was not ideal. Poor audio can blur pronunciation and force learners to work harder to interpret what they hear.

Almost all students commented on the speed of speech. They explained that many recordings moved too quickly for them to catch all the important details, which made it harder to follow the main ideas. From a cognitive point of view, this finding fits with the idea that listeners need to process sounds quickly to build meaning in real time (Bozorgian et al., 2022). Vocabulary knowledge played a role as well. When students came across unfamiliar academic terms, they often could not infer the meaning of the passage accurately, underscoring the importance of knowing not only many words but also how they work in academic contexts (Han & Qian, 2024).

These observations echo earlier research. Goh (2008), for instance, also reported that rapid speech, varied accents, and advanced vocabulary tend to cause problems for listeners. However, this study highlights concentration problems more strongly, suggesting that emotional factors and cognitive strain interact powerfully in exam settings. Similar patterns have been reported in more recent studies. Rahma et al. (2022) noted the roles of vocabulary and lack of practice, while Ali (2023) and Fitria (2021) pointed to issues such as topic familiarity and idiomatic expressions. Batubara and Fatmawa (2023) likewise discussed audio clarity, quick speech, and environmental distractions as common obstacles.

Students used a range of strategies to cope with these challenges. Many said that regular listening practice helped them feel more prepared (Mukhtorova & Ilxomov, 2024). Others tried to stay mentally focused, and some moved ahead to other questions if they felt stuck, returning later when they could. These behaviors relate to metacognitive regulation, such as planning how to approach tasks, checking one's understanding, and intentionally directing attention (Al-Khresheh & Alruwaili, 2024). Students also applied different listening strategies. Some focused on the overall meaning or topic, others relied on familiar words to guess unknown terms, and many tried to predict answers or make educated guesses rather than leave questions blank.

Taken together, the results show that TOEFL listening comprehension is influenced by a combination of language skills, mental processing limits, emotional factors, and test conditions. Fast speech, gaps in vocabulary knowledge, unfamiliar accents, and anxiety during testing were the most frequently mentioned barriers (La'biran & Dewi, 2023).

These findings reinforce the idea that listening under time pressure in a high-stakes exam is not just about knowing English; it also involves managing cognitive load, processing speed, attention, and emotional reactions (Palakaprasith et al., 2024). Listening success in such settings therefore depends on a blend of linguistic competence, mental effort, and strategic awareness, suggesting the need for targeted strategy instruction (e.g., planning, monitoring, inferencing, and prediction training), structured practice with varied accents and authentic academic listening tasks, and assessment practices that recognize and reinforce metacognitive listening development such as strategy checklists, reflective listening journals, and formative tasks that reward strategy use alongside correct answers.

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