



A Thematic Analysis of Students' Listening Difficulties in an Indonesian EFL Senior High School Classroom (*Analisis Tematik Kesulitan Mendengarkan Siswa di Kelas Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing di Sekolah Menengah Atas Indonesia*)

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Article Info	Abstract
Article history: Received: 30 April 2026 Revised: 8 Juli 2026 Accepted: 14 Juli 2026	Listening is one of the essential skills in learning English; however, many students still experience difficulties in listening comprehension. This study aimed to analyze the listening difficulties experienced by students at SMA Negeri 1 Limboto, focusing on three aspects: speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation. A qualitative approach was employed involving 21 students of Class X-1 as the research participants. Data were collected through interviews and analyzed using the thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) which consists of six stages: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The findings revealed that students experienced difficulties related to speech rate, limited vocabulary, and pronunciation. In addition, they encountered challenges in maintaining concentration, understanding unfamiliar words, and distinguishing between spoken and written forms of words. The findings indicate that speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation are the primary factors influencing students' listening comprehension. These results are expected to provide insights for English teachers in developing more effective listening instruction that addresses students' learning needs.
Keywords: Listening Difficulties Speech Rate Vocabulary Pronunciation Thematic Analysis	
Kata Kunci: Kesulitan Menyimak Kecepatan berbicara Kosakata Pengucapan Analisis tematik	Abstrak Menyimak (listening) merupakan salah satu keterampilan esensial dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris. Namun, masih banyak siswa yang mengalami kesulitan dalam memahami materi simakan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kesulitan menyimak yang dialami oleh siswa di SMA Negeri 1 Limboto dengan berfokus pada tiga aspek, yaitu kecepatan tutur (speech rate), kosakata (vocabulary), dan pelafalan (pronunciation). Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan melibatkan 21 siswa kelas X-1 sebagai partisipan penelitian. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara dan dianalisis menggunakan kerangka analisis tematik yang dikemukakan oleh Braun dan Clarke (2006), yang terdiri atas enam tahapan, yaitu: memahami dan mengenali data (familiarizing with the data), menghasilkan kode awal (generating initial codes), mencari tema (searching for themes), meninjau kembali tema (reviewing themes), mendefinisikan dan memberi nama tema (defining and naming themes), serta menyusun laporan (producing the report). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa siswa mengalami kesulitan yang berkaitan dengan kecepatan tutur, keterbatasan kosakata, dan pelafalan. Selain itu, siswa juga menghadapi tantangan dalam mempertahankan konsentrasi, memahami kata-kata yang tidak dikenal, serta membedakan bentuk lisan dan bentuk tulisan dari suatu kata. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa kecepatan tutur, kosakata, dan pelafalan merupakan faktor-faktor utama yang memengaruhi kemampuan pemahaman menyimak

siswa. Hasil penelitian ini diharapkan dapat memberikan wawasan bagi guru bahasa Inggris dalam mengembangkan pembelajaran menyimak yang lebih efektif dan sesuai dengan kebutuhan belajar siswa.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Listening is one of the most essential skills in language learning because it plays a dominant role in daily communication. According to Rost et al. (2002), listening is the language skill most frequently used in everyday interactions. Similarly, Mendelsohn (1995) states that listening accounts for 40–50% of language use, followed by speaking, reading, and writing. These findings indicate that listening is a fundamental skill that learners need to develop in order to understand and use a language effectively. Furthermore, listening serves as the foundation for acquiring other language skills. Scott and Ytreberg (1995) argue that learners gain most of their initial understanding of a foreign language through listening. Through listening, learners become familiar with sounds, vocabulary, and pronunciation, which subsequently support the development of speaking, reading, and writing skills. Therefore, listening plays a crucial role in the process of language acquisition.

Despite its importance, listening is often regarded as one of the most difficult skills for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Several researchers have reported that listening requires a high level of concentration and attention to comprehend spoken language (Abdalhamid et al., 2012; Darti & Asmawati, 2017; Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Sa'diyah, 2016). Higgins and Raskind (1995) identify three major factors that influence listening difficulties, namely speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Limited vocabulary hinders students' understanding of spoken messages, while unclear pronunciation and rapid speech make it more difficult for learners to recognize and interpret spoken words. In addition, external factors, such as environmental noise and poor audio quality, may further affect students' listening comprehension.

Listening comprehension is not only a linguistic process but also a cognitive activity that requires learners to recognize sounds, interpret meanings, and retain information simultaneously. Unlike reading, listening provides learners with limited time to process incoming information because spoken language cannot easily be reviewed unless it is repeated. Therefore, students must process vocabulary, pronunciation, and speech rate at the same time while maintaining concentration. These characteristics make listening one of the most demanding language skills for EFL learners, particularly for students who have limited exposure to authentic spoken English.

Based on preliminary observations conducted at SMA Negeri 1 Limboto, students experienced considerable difficulties in listening comprehension. The English teacher reported that many students had limited vocabulary, which affected their ability to understand spoken English. Students also experienced difficulty recognizing words because of pronunciation differences and frequently needed to listen to audio recordings repeatedly before understanding the content. Furthermore, many students showed low participation during listening activities and tended to be passive when responding to teachers' questions. These findings indicate that students encounter both linguistic and learning-related challenges in listening comprehension, making further investigation necessary.

Several previous studies have examined students' listening difficulties in various educational contexts. Permatasari et al. (2023) found that unfamiliar vocabulary, unfamiliar topics, and lengthy spoken texts reduced students' concentration and listening comprehension. Likewise, Nadhira and Warni (2021) reported that speech rate, accent, pronunciation, and limited listening practice significantly influenced students' listening performance. Similarly, Wahidah et al. (2023). Identified vocabulary limitations, grammatical complexity, listening duration, and environmental factors, such as noise, as major obstacles to listening comprehension. Although these studies have provided valuable insights into students' listening difficulties, they were conducted in different educational settings. Consequently, their findings may not fully represent the listening difficulties experienced by students at SMA Negeri 1 Limboto. Moreover, limited studies have explored students' listening difficulties using a thematic analysis approach in this particular context.

Although previous studies have consistently identified speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation as major listening difficulties, most of them focused on identifying the problems rather than exploring how these difficulties are experienced by students in specific classroom contexts. In addition, relatively few studies have employed thematic analysis to examine students' personal experiences in listening activities. By using thematic

analysis, this study provides a deeper understanding of how students perceive and respond to listening difficulties within their own learning environment.

Therefore, this study investigates the listening difficulties experienced by students in Class X-1 at SMA Negeri 1 Limboto using a thematic analysis approach. Guided by Higgins and Raskind (1995) framework, this study focuses on three main indicators of listening difficulties, namely speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Through thematic analysis, this study aims to identify the difficulties encountered by students in listening comprehension and to analyze the factors influencing those difficulties based on students' experiences. The findings are expected to enrich the understanding of listening difficulties in the Indonesian EFL context and provide practical insights for English teachers in designing more effective listening instruction that addresses students' learning needs.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore students' listening difficulties. The study was conducted at SMA Negeri 1 Limboto, involving 21 students from Class X-1 as the participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This technique was chosen because it provides flexibility for participants to express their experiences while allowing the researcher to explore issues related to speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the purpose of this study was to obtain a deeper understanding of students' experiences rather than to measure their listening achievement quantitatively. Through this approach, the researcher was able to explore participants' perceptions, opinions, and explanations regarding the difficulties they encountered during listening activities. This enabled the researcher to identify patterns of listening difficulties that could not be adequately captured through quantitative methods.

Each interview was conducted individually in a quiet classroom environment to ensure that participants could express their opinions comfortably. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent to maintain the accuracy of the data. The recordings were then transcribed before being analyzed through thematic analysis.

Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their participation was voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This study adopted a deductive approach, in which the initial themes were guided by Higgins and Raskind (1995) framework consisting of speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

The analysis followed six stages: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The thematic analysis enabled the researcher to identify recurring patterns and interpret students' listening difficulties comprehensively.

The use of thematic analysis was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to explore students' experiences systematically and identify meaningful patterns across the interview data. Rather than focusing only on individual responses, this approach allowed the researcher to organize similar ideas into broader themes that reflected the common listening difficulties experienced by the participants. As a result, thematic analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of how speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation influenced students' listening comprehension in the context of English learning at SMA Negeri 1 Limboto.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of the interview data generated three major themes describing students' listening difficulties: speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation. These themes emerged consistently across interviews with the 21 participants from Class X-1 of SMA Negeri 1 Limboto and represent the primary factors influencing their listening comprehension. The findings are presented according to each theme.

3.1 Speech Rate Difficulties

The interview findings indicate that speech rate was the most frequently reported obstacle to listening comprehension. Most participants explained that they struggled to follow the teacher's explanation when English was spoken too quickly, making it difficult to process the information being conveyed.

One participant stated,

"The teacher speaks too fast, so I don't understand, and I lose focus." (S-5)

Similarly, another student explained,

"In my opinion, the listening section is quite difficult because the pronunciation is fast, so I have trouble following what is being said." (S-1).

These responses suggest that rapid speech not only reduced students' comprehension but also affected their concentration during listening activities. Several participants explained that they were unable to identify key information because they were still trying to process previously heard words while the speaker continued talking. Consequently, they frequently asked the teacher to repeat the recording or explanation to understand the message.

This finding is consistent with the framework proposed by Higgins and Raskind (1995), who identified speech rate as one of the principal factors affecting listening comprehension. When spoken input exceeds learners' processing capacity, they experience difficulty retaining information in working memory, resulting in incomplete understanding of the message. Similar findings were reported by Nadhira and Warni (2021) and Wahidah et al. (2023), who found that rapid speech significantly decreases students' listening comprehension and increases their reliance on repetition.

The interviews further revealed that students adopted different strategies when confronted with rapid speech. Some participants reported that they completely lost track of the speaker's explanation, whereas others attempted to understand only familiar words while ignoring unfamiliar ones. Although this strategy allowed them to recognize isolated vocabulary, it prevented them from constructing the overall meaning of the spoken text. As a result, students often failed to identify the main idea because they concentrated on decoding individual words rather than comprehending the message as a whole.

Another finding emerging from the interviews concerns the influence of the classroom environment. Several students explained that their seating position affected their ability to hear the teacher clearly, especially when the teacher spoke quickly. Although classroom seating is not included in Higgins and Raskind's (1995) theoretical framework, the present findings suggest that environmental conditions may intensify listening difficulties by reducing students' access to spoken input. Therefore, both linguistic factors (speech rate) and classroom conditions should be considered when designing effective listening instruction.

3.2 Vocabulary Difficulties

The second major theme identified from the interviews was **limited vocabulary knowledge**. Most participants acknowledged that unfamiliar vocabulary frequently prevented them from understanding spoken English, particularly when several unknown words appeared within the same listening passage.

One student commented,

"Sometimes in one explanation, there can be more than five words I don't understand. Like the words 'evaporation,' 'precipitation,' and 'environment.' I only find out what they mean after the teacher explains them at the end" (S-16).

Another participant similarly stated,

"I feel confused because it's the first time I've heard those words." (S-19)

These interview excerpts indicate that unfamiliar vocabulary interrupted students' comprehension because they were unable to infer the meaning of important words while simultaneously following the speaker's explanation. To overcome this challenge, several students reported asking their teacher or classmates for clarification, whereas others searched for the meanings of unfamiliar words independently after the lesson.

These findings reinforce Higgins and Raskind's (1995) assertion that vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental component of listening comprehension. Without adequate lexical knowledge, learners encounter difficulties interpreting spoken messages even when they recognize the pronunciation of individual words. The present findings also corroborate previous studies by Permatasari et al. (2023) and Wahidah et al. (2023), which identified unfamiliar vocabulary as one of the most significant barriers to successful listening comprehension among English language learners.

Beyond simple word recognition, the interviews revealed that limited vocabulary also disrupted students' ability to construct meaning from the listening passage. Participants explained that they often focused their attention on interpreting unfamiliar words, causing them to miss subsequent information presented by the speaker. Consequently, they lost the context of the passage and experienced difficulty identifying the speaker's intended message. This finding suggests that vocabulary knowledge functions not only as linguistic knowledge but also as a cognitive resource that enables learners to process spoken information continuously. Therefore, strengthening students' vocabulary repertoire is essential for improving overall listening comprehension.

3.3 Pronunciation Difficulties

The third major theme identified from the interviews was pronunciation difficulties, which affected students' ability to recognize spoken English accurately. Many participants explained that they frequently misunderstood words because their pronunciation differed from the written forms they had learned or because the speaker pronounced them too quickly.

One participant stated,

"I thought the word 'Earth' was 'Art'... I heard the word 'vapor' as 'paper' because the teacher read too quickly" (S-10).

Similarly, another student commented,

"I understand when I see it written, but not when I hear it." (S-13)

These interview excerpts indicate that students relied heavily on written representations of English words and experienced difficulty recognizing them in authentic spoken form. Rather than identifying words through their phonological features, many participants depended on spelling, making it difficult to interpret naturally spoken English. Consequently, students often misidentified familiar vocabulary despite already knowing its written form.

This finding is consistent with the work of Field (2008), who argues that successful listening requires learners to recognize continuous spoken language rather than isolated written words. Likewise, Goh (2000) reported that problems in speech perception frequently cause learners to misinterpret familiar vocabulary because they are unable to match the sounds they hear with lexical knowledge stored in memory. The present findings therefore suggest that pronunciation difficulties arise not only from unfamiliar vocabulary but also from students' limited exposure to authentic spoken English.

Several participants further explained that pronunciation differences reduced their confidence during listening activities because they doubted whether the words they heard were the same as those they had previously learned. As a result, students often hesitated to infer meaning from context and instead waited for the teacher's explanation. These findings highlight the importance of providing learners with regular exposure to authentic listening materials, enabling them to become familiar with natural pronunciation, connected speech, and variations in spoken English. Repeated listening practice using authentic audio resources may therefore help students improve both word recognition and overall listening comprehension (Field, 2008; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

3.4 Speech Rate Difficulties

The findings demonstrate that speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation should not be viewed as independent factors but as interconnected aspects of the listening process. Most participants experienced more than one difficulty simultaneously, indicating that listening comprehension involves the interaction of multiple linguistic and cognitive processes.

For example, students explained that rapid speech became considerably more challenging when it contained unfamiliar vocabulary or words pronounced differently from their expectations. In such situations, they devoted excessive attention to decoding individual words, causing them to miss subsequent information and lose the overall meaning of the spoken text. This interaction suggests that listening difficulties accumulate rather than occur in isolation.

These findings are consistent with Vandergrift and Goh (2012), who emphasize that successful listening requires the integration of phonological recognition, lexical knowledge, and real-time processing. Similarly, Rost (2011) argues that listening comprehension depends on learners' ability to coordinate multiple sources of information simultaneously, including speech perception, vocabulary knowledge, and contextual interpretation. When one component is disrupted, the overall comprehension process becomes less efficient.

Another important finding emerging from the interviews concerns the influence of the classroom environment. Several students reported that their seating position affected their ability to hear the teacher clearly, particularly when the teacher spoke rapidly. Although seating arrangement is not commonly identified as a linguistic factor in listening comprehension, it functioned as an environmental condition that intensified existing listening difficulties by limiting students' access to spoken input. This finding suggests that improving classroom acoustics and ensuring equitable access to auditory input may support students' listening development.

Overall, the results indicate that listening comprehension difficulties arise from the interaction between linguistic knowledge, cognitive processing, and classroom conditions. Therefore, listening instruction should not focus exclusively on vocabulary acquisition or pronunciation practice. Instead, teachers are encouraged to provide authentic listening materials with varying speech rates, explicitly teach pronunciation features commonly found in connected speech, enrich students' vocabulary, and create classroom environments that facilitate clear auditory access. Such an integrated approach is likely to better address the complex nature of students' listening comprehension difficulties.

3.5 Vocabulary Difficulties

The findings revealed that limited vocabulary knowledge was another major challenge affecting students' listening comprehension. Students frequently encountered unfamiliar words during listening activities, making it difficult to interpret the speaker's intended message. Rather than processing the spoken text as a whole, students often concentrated on identifying the meanings of unfamiliar words, causing them to miss subsequent information and lose the overall context of the listening passage.

The findings also indicate that students employed various strategies to overcome vocabulary limitations, including asking teachers or classmates for clarification and independently searching for the meanings of unfamiliar words after class. These strategies demonstrate that students recognized vocabulary as a significant obstacle and actively attempted to improve their lexical knowledge.

These findings are consistent with Nation (2006), who argues that vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental prerequisite for successful language comprehension because learners must recognize a sufficient proportion of words to construct meaning from spoken discourse. Similarly, Goh (2000) explains that unfamiliar vocabulary interrupts listeners' cognitive processing, leading them to focus on decoding individual lexical items rather than comprehending the speaker's overall message. Therefore, strengthening students' vocabulary knowledge should become an integral component of listening instruction, as it supports both word recognition and the construction of meaning during listening activities.

3.6 Pronunciation Difficulties

Pronunciation was also identified as a significant factor contributing to students' listening comprehension difficulties. The findings indicate that students experienced problems recognizing familiar English words when they were pronounced rapidly or differed from their expected pronunciation based on written forms. Consequently, students often failed to identify spoken words accurately, resulting in misunderstandings of the listening material.

The findings further suggest that many students relied on written texts to facilitate comprehension because visual representations helped them associate spoken sounds with familiar spelling patterns. However, when written support was unavailable, students experienced greater difficulty recognizing spoken input and understanding the speaker's intended message.

These findings support Field (2008), who emphasizes that successful listening depends on learners' ability to recognize naturally occurring spoken language rather than isolated written forms. Likewise, Rost (2011) argues that difficulties in speech perception frequently arise because learners are unfamiliar with connected speech, reduced forms, and natural pronunciation patterns used in authentic communication. Consequently, increasing students' exposure to authentic spoken English through regular listening practice and explicit pronunciation instruction may improve their ability to recognize spoken words more accurately and enhance overall listening comprehension.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusion

This study concludes that students' listening difficulties are influenced by speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation, which are interconnected and affect their overall comprehension. However, beyond confirming previous studies, this research provides contextual insights from SMA Negeri 1 Limboto. The findings show that factors such as classroom conditions, including seating position and clarity of instructional delivery, also play an important role in shaping students' listening comprehension. For example, students who sit at the back tend to experience more difficulty in hearing clearly, especially when the speech is delivered quickly.

In addition, students not only experience difficulties but also show efforts to overcome them, such as asking for repetition and independently searching for vocabulary meanings. This indicates that listening difficulties are not only influenced by linguistic factors but also by learning context and student strategies. Therefore, this study highlights that listening comprehension problems are complex and context-dependent, and should be addressed by considering both linguistic aspects and classroom conditions in English classrooms.

4.2 Suggestions/Recommendations

This section presents several recommendations addressed to various parties, namely students, teachers, and future researchers. These suggestions are intended to help address the difficulties experienced by high school students in learning English and to serve as a reference for parties interested in improving the teaching and learning process. The detailed recommendations are presented as follows.

First, for students, two important aspects need to be considered. Students are encouraged to recognize and accept the difficulties they encounter in learning English, particularly in listening comprehension. Awareness of these challenges can help students identify appropriate strategies to overcome them. In addition, students are advised to actively seek solutions by utilizing various learning resources, such as online platforms (e.g., YouTube, Google, and educational websites), as well as by engaging in discussions with peers and teachers.

Second, for teachers, it is recommended that they pay close attention to the difficulties experienced by students during the learning process. Ignoring students' problems may negatively affect students' motivation and the effectiveness of classroom learning. Therefore, teachers are expected to be more responsive to students' needs, especially in addressing listening difficulties in English instruction at the high school level.

Finally, for future researchers, it is suggested that further studies be conducted to explore effective strategies or interventions for overcoming English listening difficulties among high school students. Such research is expected to contribute valuable insights and practical solutions for both students and educators.

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