



Exploring The Obstacles by EFL Students in Listening Comprehension at ELESP: A Qualitative Study (*Mengeksplorasi Hambatan yang Dihadapi Mahasiswa EFL dalam Pemahaman Menyimak di Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris: Studi Kualitatif*)

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Article Info	Abstract
Article history: Received: 31 Agustus 2026 Revised: 1 Oktober 2026 Accepted: 1 Oktober 2026 Keywords: Listening Comprehension EFL Students Listening Obstacles Qualitative Study Kata Kunci: Pemahaman Mendengarkan Mahasiswa Bahasa Asing Hambatan Mendengarkan Studi Kualitatif	Listening comprehension is a fundamental skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, yet many students experience difficulties in understanding spoken English. This study aims to explore and describe the obstacles encountered by students in the English Language Education Study Program (ELESP) during listening comprehension activities. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to examine students' lived experiences of listening difficulties. Ten ELESP students who had completed listening comprehension courses were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed four major categories of obstacles: cognitive or processing, linguistic, affective, and environmental. Cognitive obstacles primarily involved difficulties in processing rapid speech in real time. Linguistic obstacles included limited vocabulary, unfamiliar idiomatic expressions, and complex sentence structures. Affective obstacles were associated with anxiety and lack of motivation, while environmental obstacles included background noise and poor audio quality. The findings also indicated that these obstacles are interconnected, with difficulties in one area potentially intensifying challenges in others. The study concludes that effective listening instruction should address linguistic, cognitive, affective, and environmental factors in an integrated manner. These findings provide insights for EFL educators in designing listening activities and instructional strategies that are more responsive to students' needs and challenges. Abstrak Pemahaman menyimak merupakan salah satu keterampilan fundamental dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL). Namun, banyak mahasiswa masih mengalami kesulitan dalam memahami bahasa Inggris lisan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi dan mendeskripsikan hambatan yang dihadapi mahasiswa Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris (ELESP) dalam kegiatan pemahaman menyimak. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi kualitatif untuk mengkaji pengalaman mahasiswa dalam menghadapi kesulitan menyimak. Sepuluh mahasiswa ELESP yang telah mengikuti mata kuliah pemahaman menyimak dipilih melalui teknik purposive sampling. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semiterstruktur dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi empat kategori utama hambatan, yaitu hambatan kognitif atau pemrosesan, linguistik, afektif, dan lingkungan. Hambatan kognitif terutama berkaitan dengan kesulitan memproses ujaran yang disampaikan secara cepat dalam waktu nyata. Hambatan linguistik

meliputi keterbatasan kosakata, ketidakfamiliaran terhadap ungkapan idiomatik, dan struktur kalimat yang kompleks. Hambatan afektif berkaitan dengan kecemasan dan kurangnya motivasi, sedangkan hambatan lingkungan mencakup kebisingan latar dan kualitas audio yang buruk. Temuan juga menunjukkan bahwa berbagai hambatan tersebut saling berkaitan dan dapat memperkuat kesulitan menyimak yang dialami mahasiswa. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pembelajaran menyimak yang efektif perlu mengintegrasikan aspek linguistik, kognitif, afektif, dan lingkungan dalam proses pembelajaran.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension is one of the language skills that plays a central role in the learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This skill serves as the foundation for the development of other language skills because, through the listening process, learners acquire the linguistic input necessary to develop speaking, reading, and writing skills (Rost, 2016). In the context of higher education, listening skills also play a vital role in supporting students' academic success, as most information is obtained through oral communication, presentations, discussions, and audio-visual materials. Therefore, the ability to effectively understand spoken language is a necessity that cannot be overlooked in English language learning

Nevertheless, listening comprehension is still considered one of the most difficult language skills for EFL learners to master. Various studies indicate that students often struggle to understand spoken English due to limited vocabulary, differences in accents, the speed at which speakers talk, and the complexity of the language structures used (Gilakjani, 2016; Kim, 2023). In addition to linguistic factors, other barriers such as anxiety, low motivation, and an unsupportive learning environment also affect students' success in understanding listening material (Nguyen & Tran, 2022).

Over the past decade, various studies have examined barriers to listening comprehension among EFL learners. Sari and Rahman (2021) found that Indonesian EFL students experienced difficulties due to fast speaking rates, unfamiliar accents, and poor audio quality during online learning. Nguyen and Tran (2022) reported that psychological factors, particularly anxiety, have a significant impact on the listening skills of EFL students in Vietnam. Meanwhile, Kim (2023) demonstrated that the use of digital technology can either enhance or hinder listening skills depending on how it is integrated into the learning process. More recent research by Munandar and Newton (2021) also reveals that cultural and environmental factors are major barriers for prospective English teachers in Indonesia in understanding spoken language.

Although these various studies have made significant contributions to our understanding of listening comprehension difficulties, there remains a research gap that needs to be addressed. Most previous studies have focused on the general context of EFL students or have used quantitative approaches that emphasize measuring difficulty levels through survey instruments. Research specifically exploring the experiences of students in English language education programs within a local context, particularly in the English Language Education Study Program (ELESP), remains relatively limited. Furthermore, studies that integrate linguistic, cognitive, affective, and environmental barriers simultaneously within a single analytical framework are also rarely found.

The novelty of this study lies in its effort to explore in depth the experiences of ELESP students in overcoming listening comprehension barriers through a phenomenological approach. Unlike previous studies, which tended to focus on one or two specific factors, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive picture of the various barriers that interact to influence students' listening skills.

Based on this background, this study aims to identify and describe the barriers faced by EFL students in ELESP in understanding spoken English. Specifically, this study focuses on students' experiences regarding linguistic, cognitive or processing, affective, and environmental barriers that arise during the listening comprehension process. This article consists of four main sections: introduction, research methods, results and discussion, and conclusions and recommendations. This structure is designed to provide a

systematic understanding of the phenomenon of listening barriers experienced by EFL students in the ELESF environment.

2. METODE PENELITIAN

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore in depth the experiences of EFL students in overcoming listening comprehension barriers. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it focuses on understanding the meaning of an individual's lived experience of a particular phenomenon and allows the researcher to obtain a comprehensive picture of the barriers students encounter during the process of understanding spoken English (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this approach, the study does not aim to measure or generalize the phenomenon statistically, but rather to understand the essence of participants' experiences from their own perspectives.

The research was conducted at the English Language Education Study Program (ELESF), Faculty of Literature and Culture, Gorontalo State University. The selection of the research location was based on the consideration that this program provides an academic environment that intensively involves students in English language learning, including the development of listening skills. The research was conducted during February 2026, adjusting to the academic schedule and participants' availability. The researcher's presence in this study served as the primary instrument responsible for planning the research, collecting data, analyzing data, and interpreting the research findings.

The research subjects consisted of ten ELESF students who had taken a listening comprehension course and reported having difficulty understanding spoken English. Participants were selected using purposive sampling because this technique allows researchers to choose informants with experiences relevant to the research focus (Patton, 2015). Participant criteria included active fourth-semester students who had taken at least two listening comprehension courses and had previously experienced difficulties in understanding vocabulary, speaking speed, accents, or other aspects related to listening comprehension. The number of participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which is the condition where the data obtained no longer yields significant new themes.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews as the primary research method. This method was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and views in depth while also enabling the emergence of new information beyond the prepared questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were conducted in person, lasting between 30–45 minutes per participant. In addition to the interviews, the researcher also observed listening learning situations in the classroom to gain a more contextual understanding of the barriers experienced by students. Documentation in the form of field notes, course syllabi, and student assignments was used as supporting data to reinforce the results of the interviews and observations.

The primary research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed based on theoretical reviews regarding barriers to listening comprehension. The interview guide included a series of open-ended questions focused on linguistic, cognitive, affective, and environmental barriers experienced by students during listening instruction. In addition, an observation sheet was used to record classroom conditions, audio quality, learning interactions, and other factors that could potentially affect students' listening skills. Before use, the research instruments were reviewed with the supervising lecturer to ensure alignment with the research objectives.

The data obtained were analyzed using a thematic analysis technique based on the model by Miles, et al. (2014), which comprises three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. During the data reduction stage, the interview results were transcribed and classified according to the themes that emerged. Next, the data were presented in the form of descriptive narratives to facilitate the identification of patterns and relationships among themes. The final stage involved drawing conclusions based on the interpretation of the identified themes and linking them to relevant theories and prior research findings.

To ensure data validity, the study employed source triangulation and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from various participants, while methodological triangulation was achieved through the concurrent use of interviews, observations, and documentation. Additionally, the researcher also employed member checking by asking several participants to review the results of the data interpretation to ensure that the research findings accurately represented their experiences. Through these procedures, the validity and credibility of the research results are maintained, ensuring that the findings produced have a high level of reliability.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data obtained were analyzed using a thematic analysis technique based on the model by Miles et al. (2014), which comprises three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. During the data reduction stage, the interview results were transcribed and classified according to the themes

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Table 1. Classification of obstacles to Listening Comprehension

Category of Obstacles	Indicators
Cognitive/Processing Obstacles	Rapid Speech rate
Linguistics Obstacles	Limited Vocabullary, Unfamiliar Idiomatic Expressions, Complex Sentence Structure
Environmental Obstacles	Background noise, poor audio quality
Hambatan Afektif	Anxiety, low motivation

The findings indicate that all participants identified fast speech as one of the main barriers to understanding spoken English. In addition, most students also experienced difficulties when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and complex sentence structures. From an environmental perspective, all participants stated that poor audio quality and noisy classroom conditions disrupted their concentration during the listening process. Meanwhile, affective factors such as anxiety and low motivation also emerged as barriers affecting students' ability to comprehend information conveyed orally.

3.1 Cognitive obstacles: Rapid Speech Rate

One of the main findings of this study is that rapid speech rate is the most dominant barrier to listening comprehension. All participants reported that they experienced difficulty when the speaker spoke at a rate approaching that of a native speaker. This situation caused students to miss important information because they did not have enough time to process the input they received.

This finding reinforces information processing theory, which explains that human working memory capacity has limitations in receiving and processing information simultaneously. When spoken information is delivered too quickly, students' cognitive load increases, making it difficult for them to recognize words, understand meaning, and connect information across parts of the utterance (Field, 2008).

The findings of this study align with Kim's (2023) research, which found that speaking speed is a major factor hindering EFL students' comprehension in South Korea. Sari and Rahman's (2021) study also showed that Indonesian students struggle to understand listening materials because speakers speak too quickly, particularly when using authentic materials. From a listening theory perspective, this obstacle is related to a failure in the bottom-up processing process. In this process, listeners must recognize speech sounds, words, and sentence structures before comprehending the message as a whole (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). When speaking speed is too high, the process of recognizing these linguistic elements is disrupted, preventing students from constructing a complete understanding.

The findings of this study indicate that instructors need to provide listening materials with a gradual level of difficulty (graded listening materials). Students also need to be trained to use the "listening for gist" strategy before focusing on detailed information. This approach is believed to help students gradually adapt to a more natural speaking pace.

3.2 Linguistic Obstacles: Limited Vocabulary

The second finding indicates that limited vocabulary is one of the main barriers students face in understanding spoken English. Most participants reported that when they encounter an unfamiliar word, they tend to stop trying to figure out its meaning and ultimately miss the subsequent information conveyed by the speaker.

This finding supports the research by Nation and Newton (2009), which states that vocabulary mastery has a very strong relationship with success in listening comprehension. The more vocabulary learners master, the greater their chances of understanding the information received through spoken language. Recent research by Anggraeni et al. (2024) also found that limited vocabulary is a major obstacle faced by prospective English teacher students in Indonesia. Students often have difficulty understanding authentic materials due to the large number of new vocabulary words they have never encountered before. Within the theoretical framework of listening, vocabulary serves as the foundation for bottom-up processing.

When students fail to recognize certain words, the process of interpreting the message is hindered. This indicates that listening comprehension depends not only on the ability to hear sounds but also on the availability of sufficient lexical knowledge.

The findings of this study reinforce the results of Nguyen and Tran (2022), which show that limited vocabulary can reduce the effectiveness of listening strategies because students focus too much on individual words and fail to grasp the overall meaning of the text.

Based on these results, vocabulary development needs to be an integral part of listening instruction. Pre-listening activities focused on identifying key words and important vocabulary can help students understand the material more effectively. Additionally, the gradual use of authentic materials can enrich students' lexical knowledge and enhance their ability to understand various communication contexts.

3.3 Linguistic Obstacles: Idiomatic Expressions

This study also found that idiomatic expressions posed a significant barrier for all participants. Students reported having difficulty understanding idioms because their meanings cannot be translated literally. They often understood the meaning of individual words but failed to grasp the speaker's actual intent.

These findings indicate that listening comprehension involves not only linguistic competence but also cultural and pragmatic competence. According to Vandergrift and Goh (2012), understanding spoken language requires the integration of linguistic knowledge and background knowledge. When students lack sufficient cultural knowledge, they struggle to interpret idiomatic meanings.

The findings of this study are consistent with the research by Kusumoriny and Aziz (2025) which found that Indonesian students have difficulty understanding idioms and cultural expressions in authentic listening materials. Kim's (2023) study also indicates that a lack of exposure to the culture of native speakers can hinder the understanding of nonliteral expressions. From a top-down processing perspective, understanding idioms heavily depends on the listener's ability to connect the information heard with prior experiences and knowledge. When such knowledge is limited, the interpretation of meaning becomes inaccurate.

Therefore, listening instruction needs to integrate cultural aspects into the teaching materials. Instructors can introduce idioms in authentic communication contexts through films, podcasts, videos, or everyday conversations so that students can understand their usage naturally and contextually.

3.4 Linguistic Obstacles: Complex Sentence Structures

Further findings indicate that complex sentence structures also pose a significant barrier. Most participants reported difficulty understanding long sentences containing multiple clauses or additional information. This finding reinforces Field's (2008) view that complex syntactic structures increase the listener's cognitive load. When students must retain information in working memory while processing new information that keeps coming in, their processing capacity becomes limited. Al-Mansoori's (2025) study showed similar results, namely that EFL students had difficulty understanding complex sentences due to limitations in real-time syntactic processing ability. Meanwhile, Nguyen and Tran's (2022) study also found that sentence structure complexity is one of the factors contributing to low student listening performance.

The findings of this study indicate a close relationship between linguistic and cognitive aspects in listening comprehension. Difficulties in understanding sentence structure are not only caused by a lack of grammatical understanding but also by limitations in students' information-processing capacity. Consequently, instructors need to train students to use the chunking strategy, which involves breaking long sentences into smaller units of information. This strategy can help students process information more efficiently and reduce cognitive load during the listening process.

3.5 Environmental Obstacles: Noise and Audio Quality

Environmental factors also emerged as significant factors influencing students' listening comprehension. All participants stated that classroom noise and poor audio quality caused them to lose focus and made it difficult to understand the information being conveyed. These findings support Goh's (2000) research, which explains that sound perception is a crucial initial stage in the listening process. If the quality of the input is disrupted by noise or unclear audio, the comprehension process in subsequent stages will also be disrupted.

Research by Astrid et al. (2024) found that learning environment conditions have a significant influence on the listening skills of EFL students in Indonesia. Similarly, Kim (2023) reported that the quality of audio technology is a determining factor in the success of digital-based listening learning. In the context of post-pandemic learning, the use of digital media has increased significantly, making the quality of audio equipment a critical factor. These findings indicate that success in listening comprehension depends not only on individual ability but is also influenced by the quality of the available learning environment.

Therefore, educational institutions need to ensure the availability of adequate audio facilities and create a conducive learning environment so that students can concentrate optimally during the listening learning process.

3.6 Affective Obstacles: Anxiety in Listening Comprehension

This study found that anxiety is one of the most dominant affective barriers. All participants reported feeling nervous, afraid of making mistakes, or worried that they would be unable to understand the listening material provided. These findings support the Foreign Language Anxiety theory developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). This theory explains that anxiety can hinder the language learning process by reducing an individual's ability to concentrate and process information effectively.

Kim's (2021) study showed that high levels of anxiety are negatively correlated with EFL students' listening performance. The results of Nguyen and Tran's (2022) study also indicate that psychological factors have an influence on listening ability that is just as significant as linguistic factors. Anxiety causes students to focus more on the possibility of failure than on the information they are hearing. As a result, their attention is divided and their ability to understand the material is impaired.

These findings suggest that instructors need to create an emotionally supportive learning environment. Collaborative listening activities, the use of positive feedback, and the reduction of evaluative pressure can help lower students' anxiety levels.

3.7 Affective Obstacles: Lack of Motivation

In addition to anxiety, low motivation was also identified as a barrier affecting students' listening comprehension. Most participants stated that low motivation caused them to make less effort to understand the material and to give up easily when faced with difficulties. This finding aligns with the theory of motivation in language learning proposed by Gardner (1985), who states that motivation is a crucial factor determining the intensity of effort and perseverance learners exhibit in achieving their language learning goals.

Lamb's (2018) research indicates that motivation has a positive relationship with success in English language learning in Indonesia. A recent study by Al-Mansoori (2025) also found that students with high motivation demonstrated better listening skills compared to those with low motivation. Motivation serves as the primary driving force that encourages students to keep practicing, seek effective learning strategies, and persevere when faced with difficulties. Therefore, boosting motivation should be a key focus in listening instruction. Instructors can boost student motivation by using materials relevant to their lives, incorporating engaging digital technology, and giving students the opportunity to choose listening topics that align with their interests.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that the barriers to listening comprehension experienced by ELESP students are multidimensional and interrelated. Linguistic, cognitive, environmental, and affective barriers do not exist in isolation but interact with one another to influence students' ability to understand spoken English.

For example, limited vocabulary can exacerbate the impact of high speaking speed. Inability to understand idioms can increase students' anxiety. Similarly, poor audio quality can lower motivation and reduce concentration during the listening process. These findings reinforce the view that listening comprehension is a complex process involving various aspects simultaneously.

Thus, efforts to improve students' listening skills cannot be achieved by focusing solely on a single aspect. A holistic learning approach is required, encompassing the development of linguistic competencies, cognitive strategies, affective support, and the provision of a conducive learning environment. Such an approach is expected to help students overcome the various obstacles they face and improve their listening comprehension skills in a sustainable manner.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion presented in this study, it can be concluded that EFL students at the English Language Education Study Program (ELESP) encounter various complex obstacles in listening comprehension. These obstacles are not only related to linguistic aspects but are also influenced by cognitive, affective, and environmental factors that interact with one another throughout the listening process.

First, the study revealed that cognitive or processing obstacles, particularly rapid speech rate, constitute one of the most significant challenges faced by students. Fast speech makes it difficult for learners to process spoken information in real time, causing them to miss important details and fail to comprehend the overall message effectively.

Second, linguistic obstacles, including limited vocabulary, unfamiliar idiomatic expressions, and complex sentence structures, were found to significantly affect students' listening comprehension. Limited vocabulary prevents students from recognizing and interpreting words within spoken discourse, while

unfamiliar idioms and complex sentence structures increase the cognitive demands of processing spoken language, thereby hindering comprehension.

Third, environmental obstacles such as background noise and poor audio quality were identified as important factors affecting students' listening performance. Unfavorable learning environments disrupt sound perception, which is the initial stage of listening comprehension, and consequently reduce students' ability to understand spoken input accurately.

Fourth, affective factors, particularly anxiety and lack of motivation, were also found to play a crucial role in students' listening difficulties. Anxiety negatively affects concentration and attention during listening activities, whereas low motivation reduces students' effort, persistence, and engagement in completing listening tasks.

Overall, this study confirms that listening comprehension is a complex and multidimensional process. The obstacles identified in this research do not operate independently; rather, they interact and reinforce one another. Therefore, improving students' listening comprehension requires a comprehensive instructional approach that simultaneously addresses linguistic, cognitive, affective, and environmental factors. Furthermore, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on listening comprehension by providing contextual insights into the experiences of Indonesian EFL students, particularly those enrolled in the English Language Education Study Program (ELESP).

4.2 Suggestions/Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed for students, lecturers, educational institutions, and future researchers.

- 1) For students: Students are encouraged to engage in regular listening practice through various authentic English-language resources, such as podcasts, educational videos, news broadcasts, movies, and songs. They should also expand their vocabulary knowledge and develop a better understanding of idiomatic expressions commonly used in everyday communication. The use of effective listening strategies, including listening for gist, predicting content, note-taking, and inferencing, may help students improve their listening comprehension. Additionally, students are advised to build self-confidence and manage listening anxiety in order to participate more effectively in listening activities.
- 2) For lecturers and English language instructors: Lecturers are encouraged to design more varied, engaging, and adaptive listening activities that correspond to students' proficiency levels. Listening materials should be presented progressively, beginning with slower speech rates and gradually moving toward more authentic native-speaker speed. Furthermore, vocabulary development, idiomatic expressions, and cultural knowledge should be integrated into listening instruction to facilitate students' comprehension of authentic spoken English. Creating a supportive, low-anxiety learning environment is also essential to help students feel more comfortable and confident during listening activities.
- 3) For future researchers: This study was limited by the relatively small number of participants and its focus on a single educational context. Therefore, future studies are recommended to involve a larger and more diverse sample from different institutions to obtain a broader understanding of listening comprehension obstacles among EFL learners. Future researchers may also employ mixed-methods approaches to combine qualitative and quantitative data, thereby providing more comprehensive findings. Additionally, intervention-based studies investigating the effectiveness of specific instructional strategies or learning models in overcoming listening difficulties are highly recommended.

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