EFL Students' Strategies in Answering the Listening Section of the Longman TOEFL

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Abstract

This study investigated the EFL students' strategies in answering the Listening section of the Paper-based TOEFL test. The samples of this research were purposively selected consisting of 30 English major students at Universitas Syiah Kuala, Banda Aceh, Indonesia. The samples were selected based on their recent TOEFL scores. All the selected samples achieved low TOEFL scores, especially for the Listening section. The data were gained by means of closed questionnaire and interviews. The interviews were conducted with three students of the 30 students and they were selected randomly. The results of the questionnaire revealed that the top three strategies the students used when answering the TOEFL questions ranged from the strategies of (1) 'before listening, I tried to anticipate the topic by looking at the answer in the test book', (2) 'while listening, I tried to determine the topic or main idea for each conversation, and (3) 'before listening, I tried to anticipate what the questions would be and I listened specifically for the answer'. This imply that a majority of students used strategies only to answer part B (dialogues) and part C (monologues) of the TOEFL Listening section. These parts were considered more difficult since many students were not familiar with the

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topics. Meanwhile, strategies for part A were neglected. These students often forgot to choose answers in this section. Unfortunately, strategies for part A are also important because they can achieve higher scores if the 30 questions in this part are answered correctly.

Keywords: Listening, TOEFL, Longman, strategies, EFL students.

1.   INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, most universities require all students to have high score in TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), and the minimum is 450-480. This score is expected to be achieved by students as one of the requirements for graduation of undergraduate candidates on campus (Samad, 2016). At Universitas Syiah Kuala, Banda Aceh, Indonesia, the minimum score for students to pass TOEFL is 475. This requirement has been applied to students since 2010. Students are expected to master English because the university wants them to be ready to face the globalized world with English as the most used language and with technological sophistication that is progressing every day.

Based on our preliminary study by interviewing 20 English major students of batch 2011 at the university, some students faced difficulty in answering the TOEFL questions. Among the three skills tested, listening is likely to be the hardest part, since test takers must concentrate on what are being spoken and the recordings are only played one time. Some of the students have taken the test more than two times to achieve the score of 475 as the passing criterion to graduate from the university. Meanwhile, as English major students, they should pass this score without major difficulties. However, this is what is not found in the field; there are still many English major students who cannot reach the score of 475 in their first tests. This imply that these students need strategies and more practices to comprehend the questions in the tests better, especially the listening section in which the least score is achieved by these students.

Regarding that matter, a study to investigate which sub-skills were found to be most difficult for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in TOEFL has been conducted by Silviyanti et al. (2017). The framework designed by Phillips (2001), in her book entitled 'Longman Course for the TOEFL Test', was used. Phillips (2001) designed 17 Sub Skills that students should master in order to achieve a high score in the Listening part of the TOEFL test. The data of this research were taken from the result of the students' TOEFL test, and each number was analysed to find out the most difficult part for them. The results show that Sub Skill 8 'listen for double negative expression' is the most difficult skills found, followed by 'listening to idioms' (M=20) and 'choose answer with synonyms' (M=18). These three top difficult sub skills are all in the Part A section of the TOEFL test.

Research on strategies and knowing the difficulties of undertaking this test is highly required. So far, a similar research has been conducted by Samad et al. (2017) focussing on students' difficulties in the third section of the test, which is Reading Comprehension Section. Hence, this research was conducted to compliment the research by Silviyanti et al. (2017). This research focused on finding out the strategies that the students used in answering the listening section test in TOEFL. We still use

the same framework designed by Phillips (2001) to find out the results. They have designed eight strategies to be used by the test takers. The students should have mastered the eight strategies and skills in the TOEFL test because they have passed Listening 3 as one of the core modules in their major (i.e. at the Department of English Education). Listening 3 or called Advanced Listening has specifically been set for the TOEFL preparation course, so that they have to apply the knowledge they have already known. Accordingly, of this research, we formulate one research question: 'What strategies are used by the English Department students in answering the Listening section of the TOEFL test?'. The strategies found in this research is expected to give more understanding to researchers and teachers in Indonesia, and specifically in the Acehnese context.

2.   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Listening Skill in TOEFL practice

Listening seems to be the most difficult skill among four skills in English language learning. Listening involves students' awareness about the content or topic that is spoken (Green, 2004). Students with untrained ears may face difficulties when people speak very fast (Silviyanti, 2014) and this may interfere with their concentration. However, according to Richards (2008) as cited in Bahri et al. (2016), listening has become more important in the last decade since the listening section is tested in several entrance and exit exams. Thus, it is important to start enhancing students' ability in listening.

TOEFL stands for Test of English as a Foreign Language. TOEFL is administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). It is used to measure a non–native English speaker's proficiency in the English language (Warfield et al., 2013) This test is considered as a standardized test to measure the level of understanding of English among non-native speakers. The test is always used by overseas universities in the USA, and other 150 countries as an official assessment that they can trust (Educational Testing Service, 2019). The first version of TOEFL is in the form of paper and pencil-based test, meaning that test takers are provided with answer sheets. The paper-based TOEFL consists of two layers: understanding form and understanding meaning. Moreover, the paper-based test consists of three sections: Listening, Structure and Reading. The listening part consists of 50 questions that must be answered in 25-30 minutes. The conversation is spoken just once, therefore the students taking this test must always be attentive to the audio. Section 2, Structure, consists of 40 questions to be answered in just 25 minutes. And the last section, Reading, consists of 50 questions and 55 minutes time is provided. The complete sections must be answered in 2 hours and no additional time. This is considered as relatively very short time for some incompetent English users (Matsuoka, 2009).

Listening is likely to be the most difficult part for test takers. Native's speaking speed, accent and tone may give impact to students' ability in understanding the message conveyed. Another difficulty is that students are not allowed to take notes during the test while Carrel et al. (2002) suggest that they should be able to do note taking since it will enhance their performance during a listening test. Linguistic intelligence plays dominant role in listening activity Mahdavy (2008). Thus,

considering the regulation of TOEFL, students' lack of listening practice to authentic materials may also lead to poor listening comprehension during this test (Kaneko, 2015).

2.2 Possible Strategies in Listening

According to Wenden and Rubin (1987) as cited in Matsuoka (2009), learning strategies refers to students' need to use strategy that can enable them to comprehend English skill as well as the aspects of language learning itself. The use of strategies can improve students' language skill as well as improve their score (Heffernan, 2006).

Thus far, research about strategies used in TOEFL listening are still limited. A research study was conducted by Matsuoka (2009) towards 17 high school students. They used Oxford's eight learning strategies. They also used questionnaire before and after students took TOEFL. From the questionnaire, the result showed that the top three difficulty that the students faced included (1) difficulty in understanding the choices (multiple choice option), (2) difficulty in understanding unknown vocabulary, and (3) speakers' speed in dialogues. Regarding to the strategies used, the students admitted that they enjoyed leaning TOEFL with the strategies because it helped them comprehend the passage better.

Another study was conducted by Heffernan (2006). A number of 116 participants in Japan who took an English program at a Japanese University were studied. They used strategies in listening practice during the course. The strategies involved included keywords and context strategies. The result shows that students could comprehend the passage (listening text) better after learning with those strategies.

Even though the strategies of the previous studies may be different from our research, it does make sense that any strategies will ease students in answering questions when they have to take a test. Arono (2015) agrees that listening strategies are needed so that students can develop their listening ability. Even if they do not know the answer, some strategies can make them guess the correct answer.

2.3 Strategies used in Longman TOEFL Preparation Book

Phillips (2001) designed a TOEFL preparation book for people whose English is their foreign language. There are two versions of the Longman book: The Introductory book for the beginner level and the Preparation book for more advanced test takers. Exercises are different for Structure and Reading sections; however, there are no difference exercises for the Listening section.

According to Phillips (2001, pp. iii-iv), in the content of the book, there are eight strategies that can be used to help test takers answer TOEFL listening questions correctly. For general strategies, there are three common strategies which are very important to notice, as follows:

1) Focus on the last line. Part A is conversation between two people. There are only two lines of conversation. Speaker A is saying one sentence, and is followed by a reply by speaker B. The last line or second line is spoken by speaker B. Phillips (2001) states that the answer to part A is most often (but not always) found in the last line of the conversation.

2) Choose answers with synonyms. When a test taker focuses on the second or the last line, he/she should find the restatement or synonyms of the key words in the last line.
3) Avoid similar sounds. Similar sounds are put in the options as distractors. Test takers with untrained ears may think that this is likely to be the best answers. Phillips (2001) reminds test takers to avoid words which sound similar to words spoken in the conversation. Instead, she/he should think of synonyms or restatement for the best answers.
4) Before listening
   a. Anticipate the topic. Students should be able to anticipate what the topic will be by learning the options.
   b. Anticipate the questions. Students should be able to anticipate what the questions will be by learning the options.
5). While listening
   a. Determine the topic.
   b. Draw conclusions about *who, what, when,* or *where*.
   c. Listen for the answers in order.

Strategies 1-3 are related to Part A of listening TOEFL, and strategies 4 and 5 are related to part B and C. Understanding the above Listening skills and its sub-heading could help students to answer the first section of the TOEFL test competently.

3.   METHODS

This research was a qualitative study. The samples were taken from 30 students of batch 2011 at the Department of English Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Syiah Kuala, Banda Aceh, Indonesia. They were selected purposively, that is, they still had lower scores (below 450). We used two instruments: 1) questionnaire, the questions of which were designed based on Phillips (2001); and 2) interview, which was adapted from Hamouda (2013) and based on the strategies designed by Phillips (2001) in Longman TOEFL Preparation book.

The questionnaire was about students' strategies in answering the TOEFL listening test. The strategies in the questionnaire were categorized as five general strategies, in which statements 1-3 are related to Part A of the Listening section, while statements 4-9 are related to Parts B and C of the Listening section.

The questionnaire was in the form of the Likert scale which required students to put their preference of statements. The options were Never (score = 0), Sometimes (1), Often (2), and Always (3). The questionnaire consisted of 2 parts. The first part was used as the additional data for the test results about students' difficulties and the most difficult skills (statements 1 to 3). The second part asked about the students' strategies in answering questions in TOEFL listening section (statements 4-9).

The interview about listening difficulties was carried out after they filled in the questionnaire. The third author (as the one who collected the interview data) asked several questions related to the students' strategies in the Listening section test. Each respondent was asked the same topic; however, the length of interview was varied for each interviewee, from 7-10 minutes. The interview was delivered in the Indonesian language, so that the students could express their feelings freely without being limited to vocabulary. The interview was recorded by using an audiotape. We did not

transcribe the data by using any specific method. The interview result was reported to enhance data from the questionnaire.

4.   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1   Questionnaire Result

Table 1 reveals the strategies used by the students from the highest preference (intentionally or accidentally) shown by the highest mean score to the lowest preference indicated by the lowest mean score.

Table 1. Result of the students' preferences about listening strategies.

No	Statements	Mean
1	When I heard the speaker, I focused on the last line of the dialogue I heard.	0.9
2	When I heard the speaker, I choose an answer that contains synonyms (words with similar meanings but different sounds).	1.3
3	If I don't understand the conversation, I tried not to choose an answer with similar sounds.	1.33
4	Before listening, I tried to anticipate the topic by looking at the answers in the test book.	2.2
5	Before listening, I tried to anticipate what the questions would be and I listened specifically for the answer.	1.83
6	While listening, I tried to determine the topic or main idea for each conversation.	1.9
7	While listening, I tried to draw conclusions about who, what, when, where. I kept in mind the situation, such as: Who is talking? When/where does the conversation probably take place? What is the source of information for the conversation?	1.8
8	While listening, I tried to ignore the answers and just listen to the talks.	1.03
9	While listening, I tried to follow along with the answer while listening.	1.6

The questionnaire result shows that the strategy 'Before listening, I tried to anticipate the topic by looking at the answers in the test book' is the mostly used strategy (M= 2.2). The second highest strategy goes to the strategy 'While listening, I tried to determine the topic or main idea for each conversation' (M= 1.9). The third highest strategy used is 'Before listening, I tried to anticipate what the questions would be and I listened specifically for the answer' (M=1.83).

The least strategy used goes to statement 1 (i.e. 'When I heard the speaker, I focused on the last line of the dialogue I heard)') with M= 0.9. The second lowest is 'While listening, I tried to ignore the answers and just listen to the talks' (M=1.03), followed by statement 2 (i.e. 'When I heard the speaker, I choose an answer that contains synonyms (words with similar meanings but different sounds)'). From the highest and the least strategies used, it is clear that the top three strategies are strategies to be used before students listen to part B and C of the listening section. Parts B and C consist of 20 questions and are scored less than part A which has 30 questions. The highest strategies that they use might not be suitable for part A. Thus, this may be one reason why they could not answer most of the questions correctly. Interestingly, statements 1, 2 and 3 received the lowest scores. These three are strategies to answer part A questions. Phillips (2001) mentions that test takers should focus on the second line, an answer with synonyms and never choose an answer which has a similar sound. Statement 8 which also got a low score claims that there are efforts to look at the option

to anticipate the topic/questions and this is suitable with the finding (statement 4) of the strategy most commonly used by the test takers.

4.2 Interview Result

The interview was conducted with three students. The students were coded as S1, S2 and S3. There were only three questions asked to the interviewees, the result of which will be discussed in more detail below.

4.2.1 What strategies do you use to answer part A Listening of TOEFL?

The answers from the students are as the following (S refers to Student):

(1) I usually focus on the second speaker, because the key words are usually found from the second speaker. (S1)

(2) Focus on the second line. (S2)

(3) If I miss or lose the first line, I always try to focus on the second line. (S3)

From the interview results above, it is clear that most students have already mastered the theory or strategies of taking TOEFL. They were taught of these strategies while taking the course of Listening 3 or Advanced Listening. However, it is believed that they rarely practice listening skill so that was why they still had problems in answering listening questions.

4.2.2 What other strategies did you use when you answered the Listening section of TOEFL?

The responses given by the students are as shown below:

(4) I prefer to use strategies 'before listening'. I'd like to look at the answer in the test book and try to anticipate the topic and guess it, and it really helps and I always use this strategy compared to the other strategies. (S1)

(5) If there is enough time for me to look at the choices A, B, C and D, I would really like to read them all and try to guess what the topic is. (S2)

(6) The strategy I always use is the strategy 'while listening'. I always try to determine what the topic is as well as the main idea. It is easier for me to understand and get the answer and the meaning when I listen. (S3)

Students 1 and 3 try to use strategies for Parts B and C. Part B is longer conversations between 2 people, while part C is monologues usually about lectures of some specific fields such as the American literature. Parts B and C consist of 20 questions. These students try to read along the options while they listen to the conversations. For trained ears, this strategy may help students in Part A as well. The

interview result also proves the questionnaire's result that the mostly used strategies are strategies for Parts B and C.

4.2.3 *What do you do if you do not understand the conversation/lecture at all?*

The responses given by the students are as shown below:

(7) I try to look at the options and I choose the answer based on my feeling. (S1)

(8) I just guess, hahaha. (S2)

(9) I guess, hahaha. (S3)

Surprisingly, most of the interviewees only guessed the answers. They forgot about the strategy to choose an option if they do not understand the conversation at all. They should choose the option which sounds the most different from what they hear in the conversation. According to Phillips (2001), similar sounds should definitely be avoided because this is a distractor.

Overall, the study reveals that a majority of students used strategies to answer part B and C of the TOEFL Listening section. While strategies for part A were neglected. Students forgot to choose answers with synonym and distraction options such as similar sounds. Unfortunately, strategies for part A are important because they could have achieved higher scores if the 30 questions in part A are answered correctly. Part B and C which consist of 20 questions were considered more difficult since the dialogues (part B) and monologues (part C) are longer and sometimes students are not so familiar with the topics. Even though not all students use all strategies, they find that the strategies helped them taking and answering TOEFL questions as explained by students from the interview (see 4.2.2.). This is similar to the findings by Matsuoka (2009) and Heffernan (2006) that using strategies will help students answer questions better.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The students have learned about the strategies to answer the Listening section of TOEFL when they took the Listening 3 or Advanced Listening course. This is the highest level of Listening modules at the Department of English Education of the university under study. The students are supposed to have mastered all skills and practiced TOEFL materials. However, the findings showed that they were likely to forget the strategies that they have learned. The strategies used to answer Part A of the Listening section received the lowest scores while the strategies used for Parts B and part C got better scores. The findings from the interview also support the questionnaire.

Therefore, from the finding of this study, we suggest that all students, especially those who still have problems with listening comprehension, should do more practice to listen to monologues and dialogues in English. Various sources can be found on the Internet such as videos from YouTube. We also suggest that each faculty, especially the English Department, to give more practice and socialization about the importance

of TOEFL, since the passing grade of 475 is obligatory for students to graduate from the university.

This study, however, has a number of limitations. The first one is that it was limited to the analysis of the Longman Preparation book and only investigated the Listening section. This leads to the second limitation, where students may also have problems in dealing with the other two sections (i.e. Structure and Reading). Therefore, we suggest other researchers to conduct further studies on these matters. We also suggest other researchers to conduct research on other possible strategies that are used in listening and use other TOEFL books for further research.

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