

## EXPLORING LISTENING PROFICIENCY AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the listening skills of students at STIKES Columbia Asia Medan and identify the factors that influence their listening comprehension. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, data were collected through an IELTS-format listening test provided by the British Council and semi-structured interviews. The results showed that 45% of students achieved an "Excellent" level, 25% were categorized as "Very Good," 10% as "Good," and 20% as "Fair," with no students falling into the "Failed" category. The qualitative findings revealed several key factors affecting listening performance, including limited vocabulary, difficulties in understanding foreign accents, lack of concentration, minimal exposure to authentic English, unfamiliarity with test formats, and psychological aspects such as anxiety. The study concludes that British Council listening materials can effectively support listening skill development, but they must be complemented by comprehensive teaching strategies and consistent practice.

**Keywords:** *listening skills, British Council, listening comprehension, nursing students, accents, anxiety.*

### INTRODUCTION

The capacity to focus on or perceive sounds is referred to as listening capacity, even though listening differs from hearing. While these terms are often used interchangeably, hearing and listening possess unique qualities. Both concepts involve the sense of sound, but the differing terms indicate the level of intentionality. Hearing is primarily associated with passive activities. People are said to be hearing when they detect sounds without concentrating on their source. When someone listens, their brain automatically interprets the words into the speaker's intended meaning.

Listening is one of the most essential skills, as it serves as the foundation for language development (Buayaban, 2021). Children first learn to listen before they begin speaking, then progress to reading, and finally develop writing skills. Brown (2014) also emphasizes that listening is often considered an integral part of speaking (as cited in Gilakjani et al., 2016). In other words, students develop their ability to speak English by first listening to the language. Listening involves the capability to understand spoken words. It is a crucial skill for nearly every activity we participate in.

People engage with various auditory inputs, such as what is communicated during a conversation, whether in person or over the phone, announcements that provide information at places like airports or train stations, the weather updates broadcasted on the radio, dramas aired on the radio, music, the conversations of others (often referred to as eavesdropping), lectures, professional guidance, such as at the doctor's office or in a bank, instructions that explain how to operate a photocopier or other equipment, and recorded dialogues used in educational settings.

Gronet and Van Duzer (1991) define listening as an active process where the listener constructs meaning from spoken input. They emphasize that listening is more than just hearing words—it involves understanding, interpreting, and responding to what is being communicated. The explanation outlined above shows how important the role of listening is in human life, for children, teenagers, and adults. Listening is a medium which people can communicate with each other to convey the message they want to convey. Listening comprehension is a complex process that requires the listener to simultaneously decode sounds, recognize words, understand grammar, and interpret meaning. Learners, especially in a second-language (L2) context, often encounter difficulties that affect their ability to comprehend spoken language effectively.

The researcher chose to conduct this research because English is an international language that is considered very important to master, as it opens up access to the world in various fields of work. For university students, particularly those enrolled in English- medium programs or preparing for international careers, proficient listening skills are crucial for understanding lectures, engaging in classroom discussions, and navigating real-world communication. Despite this importance, many students face difficulties in listening comprehension due to challenges such as unfamiliar accents, rapid speech, and limited access to authentic listening experiences. This study aims to uncover these obstacles and assess the listening skills of students at the university. To support students in knowing their level of listening comprehension, researchers are interested in conducting research at STIKES Columbia Asia Medan and have proposed one method for exploring Listening Skills through the British Council website.

Thesis from Universitas Islam Riau entitled "An Analysis of Listening Comprehension Problem on Communicative Listening Subject at The Second

Semester of English Language Education program" discusses the level of students' listening comprehension in the second semester of English language education. The similarity with this study is that both researchers use the same analysis technique, using descriptive and qualitative research, and use data collection procedures using a questionnaire in the form of a Google form to analyze the score to interpret the findings. And the difference in this study is that the previous researcher focused on the communicative problem while the researcher only explored students' listening comprehension at the university.

In the Journal entitled "Exploring students' experiences on improving listening skills through podcasts," previous research focused on the effectiveness of using podcasts to improve English listening skills among high school students in Indonesia, while in this research using British Council media. The similarities in both studies are that both use a qualitative method and use questionnaires to measure their listening levels.

Listening is a fundamental skill in second language acquisition, playing a critical role in communication and academic success. According to Gronet and Van Duzer (1991), listening is not merely hearing but an active process of constructing meaning from spoken input. Similarly, Brown (2014, as cited in Gilakjani et al., 2016) emphasizes that listening is essential for developing speaking skills, suggesting a sequential process of language acquisition: listening precedes speaking, reading, and writing.

Furthermore, Buayaban (2021) asserts that listening is foundational in early childhood language development, making it the first language skill acquired. This supports the idea that listening is not only receptive but also integrative in nature, requiring interaction with multiple linguistic components such as phonology, vocabulary, grammar, and semantics.

Listening comprehension in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts is challenging due to various internal and external factors. Factors influencing success include linguistic factors, such as vocabulary size and grammatical knowledge, paralinguistic and acoustic factors, cognitive factors, affective factors, and learning environment and strategy use. Limited vocabulary, unfamiliar accents, and fast-paced speech can hinder learners' ability to process meaning in real time. Cognitive factors, such as attention, working memory, and concentration, are essential for understanding extended audio texts. Affective factors, such as anxiety and fear of

failure, can also impact performance. Modern listening instruction incorporates digital tools and authentic materials, such as podcasts, interactive tasks, and IELTS preparation materials, to improve comprehension and engagement.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

A research design is a structured framework that helps researchers answer their research questions systematically and logically. It serves as a crucial tool for cohesively integrating various research components. By employing an appropriate research design, researchers can ensure that their discussion and analysis of findings are well-organized and effective, and contribute meaningfully to the study. According to Creswell (2014), research design is a structured plan and process that guides a study from its initial assumptions to the specific data collection and analysis methods. It requires researchers to choose the appropriate research approach, design, and methodologies that align with the study's objectives.

There are several types of research designs that can be used to conduct a study. This research employed a descriptive design using a qualitative approach. Qualitative design is a research approach aimed at exploring and understanding the meanings behind human behavior, experiences, social phenomena, and cultural contexts. Rather than relying on numerical data, it uses descriptive information such as words, observations, interviews, and written texts. Fitrah and Luthfiyah (2017) describe qualitative research as a methodological approach that relies on descriptive data, such as spoken or written words from observed individuals. It focuses on gaining a deep understanding of phenomena through rich descriptions and interpretations, highlighting the complexity of human experiences. According to Sugiyono (2013), descriptive analysis is a statistical method used to analyze data by describing the collected data.

Descriptive analysis entails describing or representing the subject of study, providing a detailed account that captures the core characteristics of the phenomenon. This approach is especially valuable for gaining insight into the distinctiveness of a phenomenon, focusing on in-depth examination of specific, unique cases rather than aiming to generalize the findings.

This research was conducted at STIKES Columbia Asia which is located at Jl. Sei Batang Hari No.28-30-42, Babura Sunggal, Medan Sunggal District, Medan City, North Sumatra, and the research began on October 20, 2024. This research was conducted to 20 undergraduate students of Nursing. The researcher focused the research on one

class to see how British Council resources contribute to their development and improvement in listening comprehension and also what are the factors that influencing their ability on listening English language. The researcher also did not forget to involve English lecturers who entered the class and obtained permission during the research process. The researcher involved lecturers during the implementation of the action plan by acting as observers and collaborators in this study. Observers assess the extent to which an action plan is successful or not.

To obtain accurate and in-depth data, this study employed several qualitative research instruments. A semi-structured interview guide was used to explore students' perceptions, experiences, and challenges in using British Council resources to enhance their listening skills. In addition, an observation sheet was utilized to monitor students' engagement and behavior during listening activities involving British Council IELTS Preparation levels materials, providing real-time insight into their listening performance. Supporting documentation, such as student learning logs and relevant course materials, was also collected to complement the primary data and strengthen the validity of the findings. These instruments were selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of how British Council tools contribute to the development of listening comprehension among students at STIKES Columbia Asia Medan.

To collect data, this research utilized one type of instrument: a questionnaire. The questionnaire, intended for students, was created using Google Forms. The data for this study were gathered through a questionnaire. The questionnaire was made as long as the British Council listening test.

In order to collect the data, the researcher sent a Google Form link to the class chairman via WhatsApp for the student questionnaire that contain 4 sections of IELTS Preparation level listening test from the British Council. The student questionnaire consists of 4 Section that each section contains 10 questions each. Once the responses are submitted through Google Forms, the researcher collect and analyze the scores to interpret the findings. In addition to the questionnaire, this study also employs interviews as a qualitative data collection method. The researcher conducted interviews with selected students to gain deeper insights into the difficulties they face in the listening section. These interviews aim to explore the specific challenges, such as unfamiliar vocabulary, fast-paced audio, accent comprehension, or concentration issues, that students commonly encounter.

Qualitative data from interviews and the test will allow the researcher to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the students' listening difficulties. Descriptive and qualitative research methods were employed to analyze the data collected from the questionnaire. After administering the questionnaire, the researcher will present the data and calculate the results using a formula to determine the percentage of students' scores as follows: The students' correct responses on the test were measured using the following formula.

The students were assessed using a standardized IELTS Listening test, which is divided into four sections with varying levels of difficulty. To provide a fair and proportional scoring system, each section was assigned a different point value based on the complexity of the questions. The breakdown below outlines the point allocation per question and per section, ensuring a total of 100 points across the full test.

1. Section 1: Questions 1–10
  - a. Task type: Note and table completion from Social Conversations (basic factual information)
  - b. Number of questions: 10
2. Section 2: Questions 11–20
  - a. Task type: Matching and table completion from Social Situation monologue (moderate comprehension and categorization)
  - b. Number of questions: 10
3. Section 3: Questions 21–30
  - a. Task type: Note completion with narrative content and literary analysis
  - b. Number of questions: 10
4. Section 4: Questions 31–40
  - a. Task type: Table completion and multiple choice with abstract or conceptual content
  - b. Number of questions: 10

This system ensures that as question difficulty increases, so does the value of each correct answer, providing a balanced measure of students' listening comprehension skills.

Maximum Score × 100

$$M = \frac{\sum fx}{N}$$

M: The average the main score

n: Total number of sample

Σfx: The total of obtain score sample

$$P = \frac{f}{n} \times 100\%$$

p: percentage

f: frequency

n: the number of students

After classifying the test item, the criterion of the element on student improvement can be seen on this table.

No	Letter Grade	The Percentage of ability	Category
1	A	91-100	Excellent
2	B	81-90	Very Good
3	C	71-80	Good
4	D	50-70	Fair
5	E	1-49	Failed

## FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

### FINDINGS

In conducting this analysis, the research focuses on addressing the problem, this study examines the effectiveness of strategies and methodologies employed to enhance listening comprehension. By analyzing relevant data, the research aims to identify key factors influencing students' listening abilities and evaluate the impact of instructional interventions. Through systematic assessment, the study seeks to provide insights into best practices for improving listening skills in an academic setting.

The research that the writers did towards 20 of 66 students at STIKES Columbia Asia Medan, combines 4 sections IELTS listening test preparation. Each test contains 10 questions. After analysing the data, the writer found the results for this research. The data are collected and used to calculate the students' scores on both tests. The data can be seen as below:

Students' Initial	Test Score	Test Grade
ABH	100	A
NRAP	86	B
DF	55	D
AS	70	D
INZ	96	A
ILS	70	D
YMT	70	D
SJBT	100	A
TAT	80	C
SN	100	A
VSP	96	A
WKD	90	B
WKH	98	A
WA	100	A
YH	90	B
AS	88	B
ADS	96	A
ASH	90	B
ART	98	A
AYS	80	C

**Table 3.2 Score Percentage**

No	Letter Grade	The Percentage of ability	Category	Percentage
1	A	91-100	Excellent	45%
2	B	81-90	Very Good	25%
3	C	71-80	Good	10%
4	D	50-70	Fair	20%
5	E	1-49	Failed	0



## **DISCUSSION**

These results indicate that the overall listening skills of the students are relatively strong. A significant portion of the participants, 45%, achieved an Excellent rating, scoring between 91–100, which suggests a high level of comprehension and accuracy in understanding spoken English in various contexts. Additionally, 25% of students were categorized as Very Good, with scores ranging from 81–90, indicating that they possess a solid grasp of listening skills, although with minor inaccuracies. Only 10% of the students fell into the Good category (scores between 71–80), showing that while they have a fair understanding, there is still room for improvement, particularly in more complex listening tasks. Meanwhile, 20% of the students were rated as Fair (scores between 50–70), suggesting they may struggle with certain aspects of listening, such as following longer conversations or understanding implicit meanings. Importantly, none of the students received a Failed grade (1–49), which reflects that all participants demonstrated at least a basic level of listening proficiency.

### **Factors That Influence Their Listening Ability**

To answer this research question, the researcher conducted interviews with a sample of students at STIKES Columbia Asia Medan who had participated in the listening test. The interviews aimed to explore their experiences, challenges, and perceptions related to English listening comprehension. The analysis revealed several recurring themes that can be categorized into linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and environmental factors.

### **Vocabulary Knowledge and Language Proficiency**

One of the most dominant themes that emerged from the interviews was the issue of vocabulary limitations. Many students expressed that their difficulty in understanding spoken English stemmed from not knowing the meaning of certain words. When unfamiliar words appeared in the listening test, students tended to lose track of the content, which affected their ability to answer questions correctly.

*"Kadang kami bisa menangkap inti percakapan, tapi kalau ada kata-kata yang belum pernah kami dengar, langsung bingung dan kehilangan fokus."*

This highlights that vocabulary size plays a critical role in listening comprehension.

Without a strong lexical foundation, students struggle to infer meaning, especially when they cannot rely on visual cues or written text. Moreover, their limited grammar awareness also contributed to misinterpreting complex sentence structures.

### **Accent and Pronunciation Variations**

Another influential factor mentioned was the challenge of understanding different English accents. Since the listening materials were based on British Council formats, the speakers in the recordings often had British, Australian, or other native accents unfamiliar to the students.

*"Kalau orang Inggris atau Australia yang ngomong, saya sering nggak ngerti. Pelafalannya beda dari yang biasa diajarkan di kelas."*

This observation suggests that learners are often more comfortable with American English or textbook pronunciation but face difficulty when exposed to more natural, accented, or colloquial speech. The unfamiliar rhythm, intonation, and connected speech patterns can obscure meaning and lead to confusion.

### **Concentration and Focus During Listening**

Cognitive factors such as attention span and mental focus were also cited. Several students stated that they found it difficult to maintain concentration throughout the test, especially when the audio clips were long or involved multiple speakers.

*"Pas listening, saya bisa tiba-tiba mikirin hal lain. Jadi waktu sadar, udah kelewatan jawabannya."*

This reveals how listening comprehension is not just a passive skill but an active cognitive process. A lapse in concentration—even for a few seconds—can result in missing key information. Distractions in the environment, physical fatigue, or nervousness during the test further reduced their ability to focus effectively.

### **Listening Practice and Exposure to English**

The frequency and quality of listening practice outside the classroom were significant determinants of student performance. Students who actively exposed themselves to English—such as through watching movies, listening to English songs, or using English-

language media—reported higher levels of comfort and understanding.

*“Saya suka nonton film atau video YouTube dalam Bahasa Inggris, jadi telinga saya lebih terbiasa dengan bahasa aslinya.”*

In contrast, students who rarely engaged with English outside of academic settings admitted to feeling unprepared and easily overwhelmed during the test. This reinforces the importance of immersive learning and regular exposure to authentic English content.

### **Familiarity with Test Format and Strategy**

Some students mentioned that they were unfamiliar with the structure of IELTS- like listening tests, which negatively impacted their ability to perform well. They were unsure of what to expect, how to take notes, or when to focus during the audio.

*“Saya baru tahu kalau harus dengar sambil cari jawaban. Kadang pertanyaannya sudah lewat sebelum saya selesai baca.”*

Lack of test-taking strategies, such as predicting content from questions, underlining keywords, or using time effectively between sections, created additional barriers to comprehension. This finding implies that students not only need listening practice but also specific training in test strategies.

### **Psychological and Emotional Factors**

Emotions such as anxiety, lack of confidence, and fear of failure also influenced student performance. Several participants indicated that they understood some parts of the recording but second-guessed themselves or panicked under pressure.

*“Pas ujian, saya sering grogi. Jadi walaupun ngerti, saya ragu dengan jawaban saya.”*

This suggests that emotional readiness is closely tied to listening performance. High-stakes testing environments can increase cognitive load, making it harder for students to concentrate or trust their instincts.

The interviews revealed that students' listening abilities are shaped by a complex

interplay of factors rather than a single cause. Vocabulary mastery and exposure to English significantly affect comprehension, while unfamiliar accents, lack of test familiarity, and emotional factors contribute to misunderstandings or errors.

## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

### **CONCLUSION**

Based on the findings and analysis presented in the previous chapters, several conclusions can be drawn:

1. **Improved Speaking Ability:** The implementation of podcasting significantly improved students' speaking abilities. Students demonstrated notable enhancements in pronunciation, fluency, and confidence when expressing their thoughts orally.
2. **Increased Motivation and Engagement:** The use of podcasting as a learning tool fostered greater motivation among students. They were more enthusiastic about participating in speaking activities, as podcasting provided an interactive and creative platform for practice.
3. **Practicality and Accessibility:** Podcasting proved to be a practical and accessible medium. Students could practice their speaking skills outside the classroom and receive feedback, allowing for continuous learning and improvement.
4. **Support for Independent Learning:** Podcasting encouraged autonomy. Students took initiative to rehearse and revise their speech recordings, thereby enhancing self-awareness and responsibility in learning.

### **SUGGESTION**

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following suggestions are offered for educators, students, and future researchers:

#### **1. For Educators:**

It is essential for English lecturers to provide diverse and authentic listening materials that reflect various accents and contexts. Integrating British Council resources, podcasts, and interactive listening exercises in the classroom can enhance students' exposure to real-life English usage. Educators should also incorporate listening strategies and note-taking techniques to help students manage listening tasks more effectively.

2. For Students:

Students are encouraged to increase their English listening exposure beyond the classroom by engaging with English media such as movies, news, audiobooks, and online videos. Developing vocabulary and familiarizing themselves with different accents can significantly boost their comprehension. Regular listening practice and self-assessment can foster better listening habits and reduce anxiety.

3. For Institutions:

Institutions should support language learning by providing access to listening laboratories, language software, and workshops focused on listening skills development. Facilitating mock tests similar to the IELTS format may also help students become more confident and familiar with standardized listening assessments.

4. For Future Researchers:

This study can be extended by including a larger and more varied sample across different faculties and universities. Future research may also explore the effectiveness of specific listening interventions or compare the impact of different digital tools (e.g., podcasts vs. video content) on listening improvement.

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