



## AN ANALYSIS OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN DOING ENGLISH LISTENING TEST

Irma Oktaviani<sup>1</sup>, Dodi Mulyadi<sup>2\*</sup>, Testiana Deni Wijayatiningsih<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup> Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang  
Semarang, Indonesia

\*[dodi@unimus.ac.id](mailto:dodi@unimus.ac.id)

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### Abstract

Proficiency Test of English Language (PTEL) is an English language test held by one of the private universities in Central Java as a graduation requirement, the test aims to measure students' ability in English. Although the PTET serves as a standardized English proficiency test and graduation requirement, many students experience significant difficulties, particularly in the listening section, adversely impacting their test performance and academic progression. This study aims to investigate the factors contributing to the difficulties encountered by students in doing the PTET listening test. The participants of this research were 50 undergraduate students of a private university in Central Java. They have taken the PTET test. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach with a sequential explanatory design, beginning with quantitative data collection and analysis, followed by qualitative inquiry to explain the findings. The closed-ended questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques. In contrast, responses from the open-ended questionnaire and interviews were examined through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and insights. Most students, based on closed- and open-ended questionnaires, struggled with unfamiliar accents, boredom from long audio, limited listening practice, and insufficient test time in the PTET. The interview results also showed that students often had difficulties with limited English vocabulary, different speakers' accents, and the speech rate and duration of the audio. The respondents solved these problems by remaining focused so that their attention was not diverted by other things, repeating the audio when experiencing difficulties, and matching the vocabulary that was remembered with what was heard from the audio. The conclusion of the research shows that students face several external and internal factors in the PTET Listening test. Students have difficulty with limited English vocabulary, different speakers' accents, the speed and duration of the audio, and noise interference from other participants in the test room.

**Keywords:** Listening Comprehension, PTET Listening, Solutions, Students' Difficulties

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## INTRODUCTION

Listening is a multifaceted and an active and complex process where listeners make sense of what they hear by connecting it to what they already know (Cao & Lin, 2020). In the context of learning English, listening involves the ability to understand and interpret spoken language so that the message is clearly grasped (Romadhon, 2022). According to Mulyadi et al., (2024) Listening skills are essential in language acquisition, and adding task-based approaches in an online setting can be a promising way to improve self-directed learning.

While the PTET serves a similar purpose to internationally recognized tests like TOEFL prediction, it follows a format and style unique to the institution, which many students find unfamiliar and difficult to navigate. Initial interviews and internal observations reveal that a significant number of students consistently struggle with the listening section, which not only affects their overall test performance but also contributes to delays in their academic progress. This study focuses on the difficulties of students while taking the PTET listening sections. Students' difficulty is something that interferes with students' ability to learn something and can prevent them from mastering it (Windamayanti et al., 2022). Listening difficulties are traits that interfere with text comprehension and are directly tied to cognition (Darti & Asmawati, 2017). Soali & Pujiani, (2021) argues

students' difficulties with the listening comprehension were primarily due to the unfamiliar vocabulary, the speed rate of speech from speakers, and a lack of focus during the listening test.

Research by Aprino et al., (2022) showed that students had significant problems with the low quality of tapes or disks produced by the equipment. Low-quality tapes or disks are the source of their difficulties with listening comprehension, and the unclear sound produced by low-quality equipment also have the potential to interfere with listeners' comprehension. Another research from Fitria, (2021) results that difficulty in TOEFL listening is a very complicated activity, which is influenced by various factors both internal and external. Internal factors include the physical and psychological conditions of the listener. External factors include environmental conditions, which have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the listening process. Therefore, students must understand and minimize the elements that affected the listening process, that it could run well and smoothly.

Based on interviews with several students who have taken the PTEL test, it has been observed that majority of students have difficulty in the listening section. They feel their listening skills were lower than Writing Structure and Expression, and Reading Comprehension. This is because they have difficulty remembering the sentences heard in the audio, and also their limited English vocabulary makes them felt more difficulty in listening. Moreover, the specific challenges students face in the PTEL listening section appear to stem from a combination of external factors (such as audio quality and speaker accents) and internal factors (like limited vocabulary, lack of focus, or even boredom). These struggles suggest a need for more tailored support and preparation strategies. To address this gap, the present study aims to investigate the specific factors that make the PTEL listening test difficult for students and to identify the strategies they use to overcome these challenges.

## **METHOD**

### ***Research Design***

This study involved several stages of data collection, including selecting participants, gathering responses, and using multiple research instruments. To gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the issue, this study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, using quantitative questionnaires to identify key issues, followed by qualitative instruments to explore students' experiences and contextualize the findings. This approach allows researchers to benefit from the strengths of each method, offering both numerical data and detailed personal insights.

### ***Participants***

The participants in this study were 50 undergraduate students enrolled at a private university in Central Java. These students were selected because they had already taken the Proficiency Test of English Language (PTEL), which is a mandatory requirement for graduation. The participants came from various academic programs, ranging from education to health sciences, and were in their final or penultimate semesters. Most were aged between 20 and 23 years old, with a fairly balanced distribution of male and female students.

### ***Research Instruments***

To better understand the students' difficulties with the PTEL listening test, we used three main instruments: a closed-ended questionnaire, an open-ended questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews. The closed-ended questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale, allowing students to rate their level of agreement with various statements about their listening challenges. This helped us gather clear, measurable data on how often and how strongly certain issues were experienced. We also included an open-ended questionnaire to give students space to express their thoughts more freely. It helped us explore their feelings, strategies, and unique experiences during the test.

To dig even deeper, we conducted semi-structured interviews. This type of interview gave us the flexibility to follow up on interesting points while still keeping a general structure across all participants. It allowed us to build a more detailed picture of the challenges they faced and how they tried to overcome them.

All of the instruments were self-developed, drawing from previous studies on listening difficulties in English testing. Before using them, we asked two experienced English education lecturers to review the questions to ensure they were clear, relevant, and aligned with the study's goals.

The research procedures explained to find research objectives is referred to as research procedures. The data analysis steps were conducted some planning, the second step was to collect data, and the final step was to analyze the data. Following data collection through questionnaires and interviews, it becomes easier to accept new possibilities and insights during the assessment and analysis process.

### ***Data Collection***

This study followed a step-by-step process involving participant selection, distribution of instruments, and follow-up interviews. First, a closed-ended questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale was distributed to 50 undergraduate students who had previously taken the PTEL listening test. This questionnaire was administered online over one week, allowing students to respond at their convenience. Next, an open-ended questionnaire was shared with the same participants to capture more descriptive responses regarding their personal challenges and strategies during the test. This step aimed to explore the nuances behind the numerical trends observed in the closed-ended responses. After analyzing both questionnaires, we selected five students with varying response patterns for semi-structured interviews, which were conducted via video calls and lasted 20–30 minutes each. These interviews allowed us to clarify and expand on earlier responses, providing richer insights into students' experiences. All instruments were self-developed, based on relevant literature, and validated by two senior lecturers in English language education to ensure the clarity and relevance of the content.

### ***Data Analysis***

Descriptive statistics were a critical component of biomedical research that summarized the basic characteristics of data in a study (Mishra et al., 2019). The data obtained from the questions were analyzed numerically. To make analysis easier, Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) Version 25 for Windows application was employed. Statistical analysis of closed-ended questionnaire data could be used to collect quantitative data and uncover specific patterns or relationships. Then, thematic analysis aimed to discover relevant or intriguing themes or patterns in data and utilized these themes to explain the research or addressed a problem (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). By using thematic analysis of open-ended questionnaire data, it was possible to examine and understand the different opinions, viewpoints, and thoughts of respondents.

The interpretive approach was the process of analyzing and describing research findings and drawing inferences from them. The chosen data interpretation method was to conduct interviews, which included analyzing and discussing the data analysis results during the post-analysis sessions. Data analysis interpretation examples included understanding questions, detailing the analysis method, explaining findings, and conveying conclusions. By using data interpretation as an interview analysis approach, could gain a better understanding of respondents' experiences, opinions, and perspectives.

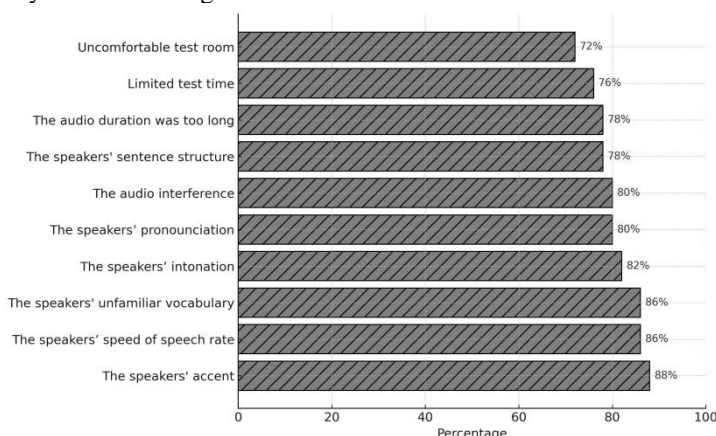
## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***The Factors that Influence PTEL Listening Difficulties***

Data research concludes that the majority of students struggle with the PTEL listening section. In this section, data was obtained from a closed-ended questionnaire. This factor is divided into two categories, external and internal factors. The following was an explanation of the results of both factors.

#### ***External Factors***

The following figure 1 illustrates the external factors that influence students' difficulties on PTEL listening. The figure indicates ten external factors, all of which have a high percentage, indicating that the majority of students have difficulty on the listening PTEL.



**Figure 1. The External Factors of Students Difficulties in Listening PTEL**

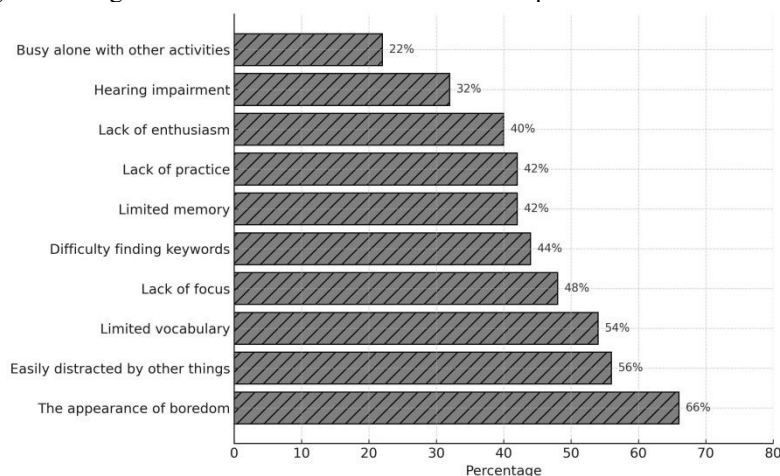
Based on the diagram above, it could be seen that students agree that the highest external factor that affected their difficulty in listening PTEL was the accent of the speaker, a different and foreign accent makes it

difficult for them to understand the conversation of the speakers, this was shown by the survey results of 88%. Then there was the lowest factor that does not really affected their ability to do the PTEL listening, namely the uncomfortable test room, with a percentage of 72%. Other students disagree with this statement and felt that the test room they were in was comfortable. Overall, the external factors that cause difficulties in PTEL listening were intonation, speaking speed of speech rate, accent, and speaking pauses from the speaker greatly affected their ability to do the listening test. There was also a very limited duration of audio and time given, and noise from the test room that makes their focus divided.

These results align with previous studies emphasizing the impact of such external variables on listening comprehension. Unclear pronunciation, variations in speaker accents, and rapid delivery rates often challenge EFL learners during listening tasks (Aprino et al., 2022). Similarly, Soali & Pujiani, (2021) highlighted that inconsistent speaker pauses and unfamiliar accents create barriers to comprehension, particularly for learners who lack exposure to varied English audio input. Moreover, the limited time and audio duration noted by students in this study are also consistent with findings that the real-time processing demands in listening tests offer little opportunity for learners to reflect on or decode unfamiliar content (Silviyanti et al., 2020). This issue is particularly problematic for students with lower listening proficiency or reduced experience with authentic spoken English. To address these challenges, it is essential to integrate diverse English audio materials into instruction, provide timed listening practice to improve test-taking stamina, and ensure a more controlled and comfortable test environment to enhance students' concentration and overall performance.

### Internal Factors

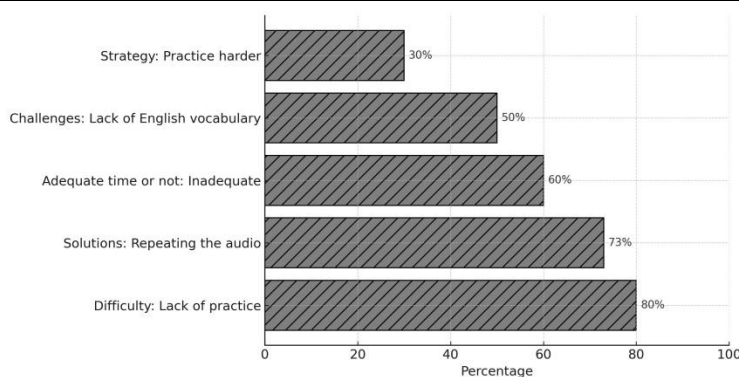
The following was known that there were ten internal factors that affected students' difficulties in listening PTEL. Figure 2 shows the results of students' responses to the influence of these internal factors.



**Figure 2. The Internal Factors of Students Difficulties in Listening Test**

The diagram results show that 66% of students believe that the internal factors which originate from themselves were the appearance of boredom when listening to the PTEL listening audio. They argue that the audio in PTEL was too long, and the large number of questions causes them to get bored easily, they were less focused when working. Furthermore, students disagree with the claim that they were busy alone with other activities. According to a survey result of 22%, students contend that they were not doing any other activities when taking the PTEL, instead focusing only on working and listening to the audio. It could be concluded that the internal factors that affected students' difficulties in listening PTEL were lack of focus, practice, and enthusiasm in doing the PTEL test. In addition, limited vocabulary skills, and being easily distracted by other things also greatly affected their ability to do the listening test. This is consistent with findings that the absence of self-regulated learning and inadequate task-based listening exposure contribute to poor listening outcomes in high-stakes tests, as students lack the endurance and strategies needed to process spoken English effectively (Mulyadi et al., 2024).

To find out more about the students' opinions, his data was also obtained from an open-ended questionnaire. The open-ended questions consisted of ten numbers that could be answered with short answers according to each students' opinion. The results of the open questionnaire are as follows.



**Figure 3. The Results of Open-ended questionnaire**

Based on the survey results, the majority of students reported experiencing significant difficulties in the PTEL listening section, primarily due to a lack of listening practice. As many as 80% of respondents indicated that limited exposure to English audio materials hindered their ability to comprehend spoken texts effectively. Furthermore, 60% of students expressed that the time provided during the test was insufficient, making it difficult to process the audio and respond accurately within the given timeframe. These findings suggest that both time pressure and inadequate listening practice contribute to students' underperformance in this section. This aligns with the previous study that emphasized that time constraints and limited training in listening to native English input often prevent students from developing essential listening strategies in test situations (Silviyanti et al., 2020).

Another notable challenge identified by the participants was a limited vocabulary range. Half of the students stated that unfamiliar vocabulary in the audio recordings disrupted their overall understanding. The inability to recognize key words and phrases significantly impairs comprehension, particularly when dealing with fast-paced or accent-varied speech. This is consistent with previous research, which highlights the strong correlation between vocabulary knowledge and listening proficiency (Darti & Asmawati, 2017). A limited lexical repertoire restricts students' ability to infer meaning from context, thereby affecting their ability to answer questions correctly.

In response to these difficulties, 73% of students reported relying on repeating the audio as a coping strategy. While this approach may provide short-term support, it is not a sustainable method for long-term improvement. Notably, only 30% of respondents indicated that they had engaged in more rigorous listening practice prior to the test. This highlights a gap between awareness of difficulties and the implementation of effective preparation strategies. These results underscore the need for structured listening instruction, including exposure to native speaker audio, targeted vocabulary enrichment, and regular simulation of test conditions to enhance students' readiness for high-stakes listening assessments such as the PTEL.

### ***The Solution was Implemented in PTEL Listening Difficulties***

Based on interviews with five students who have taken the PTEL test who have difficulty doing the listening test. They also provide suggestions and strategies to be implemented in doing the listening comprehension test in order to achieve better results.

During the first question of the interview process, students stated that almost all of them had difficulties remembering vocabulary or phrases from the audio they had heard, so the way they overcame this difficulty was by replaying the audio, and connecting words until they found the right answer.

*Respondent 1: "Recalling similar-sounding words and playing back audio to check the word or sentence heard was correct."*

The second question asked respondents effective solutions that students do when experiencing difficulties in listening PTEL. They answered that they read the available answer choices while listening to the audio, then answered when the question was read by the speaker.

*Respondent 2: "I listened to the audio while reading the answer choices with similar words or sentences, then when the question was read, I reconfirmed my answer in that choice."*

The third question was about the strategies that students used to improve PTEL listening skills. Respondents answered that they listen to the audio examples and podcasts from native speakers to get used to hearing English sentences.

*Respondent 3: "I have realized that I have difficulty in understanding long conversations in listening, so I started to get used to watching English movies or podcasts without subtitles and listening to*

*audio available on YouTube. Then I wrote down the key points that I captured to get used to hearing English sentences from native speakers."*

The fourth question asked what kind of improvement was required in listening abilities to obtain higher scores. They committed to answering by needing to practice listening to the audio to be able to catch the main idea and note important details of the conversation, time management and staying concentrated, and replaying the audio if needed.

*Respondent 4: "I think it is necessary to practice even harder, especially listening to the original English test audio in order to capture the main idea or topic being discussed, as well as time management so as not to run out. Then also do the test simulations many times while studying."*

The interview data suggest that students employed several practical strategies to overcome challenges in the PTEL listening test. Common approaches included replaying the audio to recall unfamiliar vocabulary, reading answer options while listening to anticipate content, and regularly practicing with authentic English materials such as podcasts or movies. These strategies reflect an attempt to build familiarity with spoken English and reduce cognitive load during the test. Fitria (2021) supports this, stating that repetitive exposure to English audio and prediction-based answering techniques help students better manage time and focus during listening tasks. In addition, the use of real-life listening sources, as reported by students in this study, aligns with the findings of Mulyadi et al. (2024), who emphasized that authentic, task-based listening activities significantly contribute to the development of self-directed learning and listening fluency in EFL contexts.

Another notable strategy was the simulation of listening test conditions at home, including time management and note-taking to capture main ideas reported by one student as key to improving performance. This echoes the research of Silvianti, Rahmadhani, and Samad (2020), who found that students who engage in listening simulations with native speaker content perform better due to increased familiarity with test structure and question formats. Overall, these student-initiated strategies demonstrate an adaptive effort to overcome both internal and external challenges in PTEL listening. However, without structured pedagogical support and guided feedback, such efforts may lack consistency and long-term effectiveness. Therefore, integrating these strategies into formal instruction, supported by teachers' scaffolding and reflective practice, may lead to more sustained improvement in students' listening skills.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study aimed to explore the factors that contribute to undergraduate students' difficulties in completing the listening section of the PTEL and to identify the strategies they use to address these challenges. The findings revealed that most students struggle with limited vocabulary, difficulty recalling phrases from audio, unfamiliar speaker accents, and distractions during the test. To cope with these issues, students often rely on strategies such as replaying the audio, focusing on key words in answer options, and practicing listening through English podcasts or videos from native speakers.

These findings highlight the importance of targeted listening practice and exposure to varied English accents to enhance students' comprehension skills. Additionally, they suggest a need for a more supportive instructional approach, where lecturers provide not only practice materials but also ongoing feedback to help students overcome listening barriers.

For future research, it is recommended to investigate PTEL listening difficulties in more diverse student populations and across different educational contexts. Employing experimental or longitudinal methods may also offer deeper insights into the effectiveness of various strategies in improving listening performance. Overall, this study contributes valuable input for educators and curriculum developers seeking to improve institutional English proficiency testing outcomes.

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