



The Students' Learning Strategies in Listening Section of Paper-Based TOEFL Tests

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify the learning strategies utilized by students in the English Department of UIN Ar-Raniry during the listening section of paper-based TOEFL tests, determine the predominant learning strategy among these students, and explore the differences in the strategies employed by those who achieved the highest and lowest scores in the listening section of the tests. The study's population comprised 224 students from the English Department of the Faculty of Education and Teacher Training of UIN Ar-Raniry who had completed paper-based TOEFL tests. The purposive sampling technique was employed to select the sample of forty students with the highest and lowest scores in the listening section of paper-based TOEFL tests for this study. The research methods employed included document analysis, questionnaires, and interviews. The questionnaire items in this study were adapted from SILL (The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) developed by Oxford. The study's findings indicate that students utilize diverse learning strategies throughout the listening section of the TOEFL test. The strategies encompass memory-based direct strategies, cognitive direct strategies, compensation-based direct strategies, metacognitive indirect strategies, affective indirect strategies, and social indirect strategies. They implement these strategies proficiently. The predominant learning strategies employed by the majority are "organizing and evaluating your learning," categorized under metacognitive indirect strategies. They utilize these strategies to a moderate extent. Simultaneously, the majority of students with the lowest scores employed a variety of learning strategies, particularly social strategies, and demonstrated high levels of proficiency in these strategies.

INTRODUCTION

When learning a new language, the learner should select appropriate learning strategies to help them address challenges encountered during the process. Oxford states that "the best language students have used strategies, ranging from naturalistic language practice techniques to analytic, rule-based strategies" (1990, p.1). Given that learning strategies are crucial for effective language acquisition, both teachers and students should be aware of language learning strategies and a basic overview of the system. Oxford also mentions that in the context of second or foreign language acquisition, strategies for learning signify the particular

measures implemented by the learner to facilitate learning in a manner that is more efficient, pleasurable, autonomous, effective, and applicable to novel contexts. This indicates that students employing efficient language learning strategies are likely to improve their proficiency faster and effortlessly. In other words, learning strategies are an active process wherein learners consciously engage in activities to govern their language acquisition and competency in a new language.

Effective learning strategies are important to enhance the students' proficiency in addressing standardized test questions. The majority of universities in Indonesia require the TOEFL, one of standardized tests, as a prerequisite for undergraduate graduation. The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is an assessment designed to evaluate the English language skills of individuals, particularly non-native speakers. The Educational Testing Service (ETS), a non-profit organization located in New Jersey, USA, developed the TOEFL, an English proficiency examination, to meet entrance criteria for non-native English speakers. Since 1963, scholarship selection committees from government entities, universities, and organizations such as Fulbright, the Agency for International Development, and Latin American Scholarship Programs have utilized the TOEFL as a standardized assessment of English proficiency for non-native speakers.

The listening comprehension section is the first section of paper-based TOEFL tests. There are fifty listening items organized into three groups: part A (short conversations), part B (long conversations), and part C (mini-talks and lectures). Part A contains 30 questions about short conversations, Part B has 8 questions about long conversations, and in Part C there are 12 questions about lectures and mini-talks. In all three parts, each item and question are spoken once only. However, a comprehensive introduction and instruction precede the test. The second section is Structure and Written Expression, which usually takes about 25 minutes. This section has 15 questions about completing sentences correctly and 25 exercises for identifying errors (Yosintha, Yuniarti, & Ramadhika, 2021). Finally, the test takers must complete the Reading Comprehension section in 55 minutes (Sharpe, 2005).

Each university establishes a different minimum score requirement for students to pass the TOEFL Test (Zimmermann et al., 2018). The English department at UIN Ar-Raniry now requires a minimum score of 470 points. Following years of English study, the English department anticipates that its students will exhibit their ability by successfully passing the TOEFL test (Rina & Tiarina, 2021). It functions as a preparatory plan established by the institution to equip students for an increasingly global setting where English is predominantly used (Rahman & Saputra, 2021).

Based on the preliminary research by interviewing several English department students, it was found that some of them faced problems in handling TOEFL questions, especially listening section. They also mention about taking the tests repeatedly because they could not pass the minimum requirements. Simultaneously, several of the students have no, or little problem, in tackling the listening section of the

TOEFL test. This implies that both groups of students might utilize different methods in answering the TOEFL listening items. Among the three skills assessed on the TOEFL, several students find the listening section particularly difficult (Widodo, Russilawatie & Dewi, 2021), attributing its challenge to the necessity for full concentration on the speakers' dialogue and the restricted duration for listening to the recording. Fitria (2021) asserts that both internal and external factors influence the problems encountered by test takers. Internal factors affect the students' ability to understand the listening section, including insufficient practice and experience, time constraints and question quantity, lack of enthusiasm and concentration, and their limited vocabulary. She highlights several examples of external factors, including the recording's speed, accent, and complex word choices, the intonation and sentence construction, and the occasional audio interruption that results in unclear audio. This condition indicates that the students should identify and practice appropriate strategies to address the listening difficulties they faced.

Silviyanti (2014) suggests that students with inexperienced auditory skills may encounter challenges when others speak rapidly, potentially disrupting their concentration. Richards (2008), as cited in Bahri et al. (2016), indicates that listening has gained significance over the past decade, as it is assessed in various entrance and exit examinations. Therefore, enhancing students' listening abilities is essential for achieving success in a TOEFL Test setting (Yuzar & Rahman, 2024; Iqbal & Zurriyati, 2020).

Another challenge is that the test (especially the TOEFL PBT test) prohibits students from taking notes, despite Carrel et al. (2002) indicating that permitting note-taking will enhance their performance in listening assessments. Mahdavy (2008) argues that linguistic intelligence significantly influences the listening activity. Consequently, in the context of TOEFL regulations, students' insufficient exposure to authentic listening materials may result in inadequate listening comprehension during the test (Kaneko, 2015). Moreover, listening strategies profoundly impact the successful completion of listening tests. Ho (2006), as cited in Yulisa (2018, p. 23), asserts that "listening strategies refer to skills or methods for listeners to directly or indirectly achieve the purpose of listening comprehension of the spoken input." Consequently, successful listening can also be regarded as the methods utilized by the listener throughout the listening process.

Therefore, the study of the learning strategies employed by students in handling TOEFL test items, especially the listening section, is essential. Numerous studies concerning this matter have been conducted by several other researchers (Silviyanti et al., 2020; Kharizmi, 2022; Alfiami, 2020; Iqbal, 2021; Razmalia & Gani, 2017; Hanim, 2023; Lasi & Bouk, 2022). The previous studies primarily concentrated on the difficulties students have when answering listening questions, as well as the general strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. Some of the general strategies suggested by the studies include anticipating the topic and questions by referring to the answer in the test book, identifying the main idea of each conversation, and concentrating on the last line of the conversation, particularly in listening part A.

Moreover, Oxford (1990) suggests two general strategies in language learning: direct and indirect strategies, which can be applied and tailored to enhance listening abilities. Each of those two strategies is categorized into three distinct categories that mutually reinforce one another. Students gain advantages from direct techniques, categorized into memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies, as they facilitate the storage and retrieval of information. These strategies assist learners in generating language despite a deficiency in knowledge. They also assist in comprehending and utilizing the new language. Indirect language learning strategies, such as metacognitive, affective, and social strategies, complement the direct strategies. They help learners regulate the learning process.

There are some possible strategies that the students can use in improving their ability in addressing the listening questions. Matsuoka (2009) employed some strategies by Oxford in his study conducted to high school students in order to find their strategies in understanding the speakers' intention in TOEFL listening section. The study found that some problems faced by the students including their inability in understanding multiple options, their lack of vocabulary, and the problem with the speed of the speaker speaking in the dialogues. In terms of the strategy used by the students, it found that most the students mostly enjoyed and used the strategy of conversational analysis in analysing the speakers' intention.

Iqbal (2021) conducted a study that students primarily used strategies like focusing on the last line of Part A and the entirety for longer conversations, avoiding similar sounds, focusing solely on the matched meaning between the recording and plausible options, anticipating potential questions, and emphasizing detailed information. The participants claimed that those strategies were effective in enhancing their capacity to respond to the TOEFL listening items. On the other hand, Alfiami (2020) reported the use of distinct strategies by the students in the TOEFL test. The study findings indicated that students mostly employed compensation techniques, cognitive strategies, and metacognitive methods. He also stated that, according to participant interviews, compensation is the most effective strategy for assisting students in answering questions.

Kharizmi (2022) also carried out a study on students' strategies for handling the listening sections of paper-based TOEFL tests. The study required the students to complete a questionnaire. He discovered that the students employed various specific strategies during the listening section, including reading instructions and questions, concentrating on alternative answers, anticipating questions, and attempting to understand the main idea of the conversation. Concerning the specific problems faced in particular parts of the listening section of the TOEFL test, a study done by Mahlil (2010) towards the students at the English Education Department of Syiah Kuala University has identified the obstacles students face in the listening section of the TOEFL test and the most challenging part for them. His research findings indicated that part A (short dialogues) in the listening section of the TOEFL test posed the greatest difficulty, followed by part B (longer conversations) and part C (talks). Yuliandani, Ikhsanuddin, and Sumarni (2014) at FKIP Tanjungpura

University conducted a study that supported the findings of prior research. They aimed to figure out the most challenging, problematic, and most mastered aspects in each section of the TOEFL listening comprehension test. The study indicated that section A (brief dialogues) represented the most challenging component of the listening TOEFL tests, representing 51.67% of the overall rating. The main challenge was the use of double negatives, while the most proficiently handled aspect was the passive voice. In parts B and C (conversations and talks), the topic of the talk ranked as the most challenging element, whereas precise details were the most proficiently handled.

Another study was performed by Heffernan (2006) in Japan to investigate the strategies used by the university students in listening practice during the course. This study found that the students were able to comprehend the listening text more easily after utilizing certain strategies, such as identifying keywords and the context of the text. Thus, by mastering keyword and contextual methods, learners can comprehensively grasp the meanings of the phrases they encounter in the task at hand. Students will face substantial obstacles in achieving an optimal score if they fail to comprehend the terminologies and context of the TOEFL situations. Moreover, there are various methods to excel in the TOEFL Listening section. It is essential to understand the types of questions, enhance your active listening abilities, take comprehensive notes, and refrain from selecting inaccurate responses (Higby and Hudon, 2014).

Although several studies have investigated the strategies used by students in the TOEFL test, particularly in the listening section, few have precisely analysed the distinct strategies utilized by high-scoring and low-scoring students. Therefore, the current study aims to investigate the strategies employed by both high- and low-score students. Moreover, the learning strategies employed in this study concentrate on SILL (the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) developed by Oxford.

Oxford (1990) developed six distinct learning strategies: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Students employed mnemonic techniques to encode and access new knowledge, facilitating the association of one L2 element or concept with another. Meanwhile, they employed cognitive strategies to acquire knowledge and comprehend the linguistic system, including interpreting the meaning of words through their context. A compensation strategy may assist learners in compensating for gaps in knowledge when they fail to comprehend information correctly. Consequently, they may utilize hints to infer the meanings of words or fragments of information. On the other hand, metacognitive strategies encompass the processes of focusing on one's learning, organizing and strategizing, and assessing one's educational progress (Rahman, 2020). Additionally, affective strategies assist listeners in managing their feelings, emotions, motivation, or attitudes throughout the acquisition of listening skills, while social strategies promote collaboration and comprehension of both the target language and the language itself.

METHODS

This study employed three techniques of collecting data: document analysis, questionnaire, and interview. The document analysis was done after obtaining the listening section results of paper-based TOEFL tests from the English Department. The document analysis provides information on the number of English Department students who took the paper-based TOEFL during a specific period. These students taken for the sample are the ones who got the highest and the lowest listening score for each single test done during the three months.

Forty students received the questionnaire, which was based on data from document analysis. The questionnaire adapted from the SILL of Rebecca L. Oxford book is a list of some items that needed to be responded to by the students. Each item is a statement about learning English. The students must respond to twenty-five items that pertain to their strategies for learning English, particularly in preparing for the listening section of the paper-based TOEFL. The students were asked to choose an alternative response that tells them how true the statement is. The researcher provided instructions to each participant individually. The researcher clarified some instructions to prevent misunderstandings during the questionnaire answering process. The result of the questionnaire was analysed by using the SILL scoring and the profile of the result on SILL.

Interviews were done to gain information deeply from the questionnaire. There were six students who were interviewed intensely from their responses to the questionnaire. These six students were chosen based on the analysis of the questionnaire in terms of six learning strategies covered in the questionnaire. Based on the analysis of the questionnaire, which covered six learning strategies, six students were selected for the interview. In addition, the interview was conducted to gain information and know how the students handled some problems in preparing for answering the listening section of paper-based TOEFL tests. The researcher posed multiple questions concerning the students' strategies in the listening section of the test. The researcher queried all respondents on the same topic, but each interview lasted between 10 and 15 minutes. The interview was conducted in Indonesian to enable the students to articulate their opinions and experience without lexical constraints. The interview was documented on an audiotape. The data was thereafter given to supplement the findings of the questionnaire.

The study's population consisted of the English Department students who participated in paper-based TOEFL tests during a designated timeframe. There was a total of 224 students involved in this study. The study's sample comprised of students who achieved the highest and lowest listening scores on paper-based TOEFL tests. Forty students were chosen as the sample of this study using the purposive sampling technique.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Average of Language Learning Strategies used by Students

The total number of language learning strategies used by forty sample students was 3.50, indicating a high level of usage in the listening section of the TOEFL test. The table data also indicates that the number of language learning strategies was equally distributed between medium and high levels. Memory, cognitive, and affective strategies are the categories for the medium level. Students use the remaining three strategies at a high level: compensation, metacognitive, and social strategies.

The table below shows the six types of language learning strategies that the students used. Of these, metacognitive strategies (mean: 3.67) were the most commonly used, which means that the students used these strategies a lot when they were taking the TOEFL listening section. The students used compensation (mean: 3.54) and social strategies (mean: 3.53) at slightly different levels in the second and third ranks. This indicates that students frequently employ these two strategies in their learning, particularly when responding to the listening portion.

The group of strategies under the memory strategies category is the least used by the students, with a mean score of 3.34. Both cognitive and affective strategies are reported as the second least-used strategies by the students, which means that these two strategies are used at a similar medium frequency level.

Table 1. Types of language learning strategies that the students used

No	Strategy category	Mean	Level
1	Memory Strategies	3,34	Medium
2	Cognitive Strategies	3,40	Medium
3	Compensation Strategies	3,54	High
4	Metacognitive Strategies	3,67	High
5	Affective Strategies	3,40	Medium
6	Social Strategies	3,53	High
Overall		3,50	High

Rank Order of LLS Group Usage

The following table shows the rank order of language learning strategies used by the students in handling the listening section of the TOEFL test. The memory strategy, which is the least frequently utilized, consists of four specific sets of actions: "creating mental linkage, applying images and sound, reviewing well, and employing action." On the other hand, the most frequently utilized strategy involves centering your learning, arranging and planning your plan, and evaluating your learning (Huy, 2015, p. 25-26).

Table 2. The rank order of language learning strategies used by the students

Rank	Frequency	LLS
6	Most Frequent	Metacognitive Strategies
5		Compensation Strategies
4		Social Strategies
3		Cognitive Strategies
2		Affective Strategies
1	Least Frequent	Memory Strategies

Average Frequency of LLS Usage by the Highest and lowest listening Score of the TOEFL test

There is a significant difference between the language learning strategies used by the students with the highest and the lowest listening score. The most important difference is that the students with the lowest listening score used the language learning strategies more often than the students with the highest score did. Overall, the students with the highest score used a medium level of language learning strategies, while the lowest one used them at a high level.

At the category level, both ranked-type students applied the cognitive and metacognitive strategies at similar levels. Despite having similar levels in both categories, the students with the lowest scores demonstrated superior application of these strategies. Furthermore, in the remaining four categories (compensation, memory, affective, and social), the students with the lowest listening score demonstrated a superior utilization of language learning strategies, particularly in the listening section of the TOEFL test.

Table 3. Types of language learning strategies that the students used (both ranked-type students)

Strategy Category	Highest Score Students		Lowest Score Students	
	Mean	Level	Mean	Level
1 Memory Strategies	3,14	Medium	3,51	High
2 Cognitive Strategies	3,39	Medium	3,42	Medium
3 Compensation Strategies	3,41	Medium	3,66	High
4 Metacognitive Strategies	3,59	High	3,75	High
5 Affective Strategies	3,31	Medium	3,50	High
6 Social Strategies	3,45	Medium	4,39	High
Overall	3,40	Medium	3,58	High

The interview results revealed that most students were familiar with the concept of a paper-based TOEFL test. It is because all of them were English Department students, and many of them have often taken the test. Some of the students agreed that the listening section was more difficult than the other two parts.

Then, most of the students decided that Part C is more difficult than other parts of the listening section of the paper-based TOEFL test. The difficulty was caused by some problems. For example, lack of vocabulary, there are no specific learning strategies they use for preparing themselves for the test, difficulty paying high attention in Part C of the listening section (since Part C is mini talks and lectures, which are taking a long time to listen to), and difficulty remembering some words that they have listened to. They found it difficult to grasp the topic and details information being presented throughout the talks. Moreover, the prohibition of taking notes also influenced their ability to remember the points that have been mentioned.

They stated that several learning strategies helped them to handle the listening section of the paper-based TOEFL, for example, practicing the examples of questions in the paper-based TOEFL handbook, getting used to English words by listening to English news and music or film, trying to lower the anxiety before taking the test by learning with others, and centering the learning. Furthermore, all the strategies they stated in the interview, based on Oxford theory, are included in indirect strategies (metacognitive, affective, and social strategies). Most of the students believed that the learning strategies were truly beneficial. The learning strategies were the main factor in increasing their score in the tests. Some of them stated that by applying these learning strategies, they were able to indirectly manage the difficulty of the listening section of the paper-based TOEFL test. Therefore, the students generally assumed the learning strategies they have used indirectly in preparing themselves for the listening section influenced the score they got for the paper-based TOEFL test.

The aforementioned discussion reveals that each student employs strategies unique to their personality and learning objectives. The results indicate that the students employed language learning strategies at a high level. This indicates that the majority of students employed specific learning strategies during their learning process, particularly in the listening section of the TOEFL exam. Based on the data, metacognitive strategies are the most commonly used in the learning process by the students with the highest listening score.

Most students who got the highest score in the listening section of the paper-based TOEFL test used metacognitive learning strategies. They employed indirect metacognitive strategies, specifically "organizing and evaluating your learning." It means that metacognitive strategies were the most used learning strategies by the students with the highest score. This finding differs slightly from the previous study done by Alfiami (2020), which reported that successful learners primarily used compensation strategies. The students with the lowest listening score primarily utilized social strategies for their learning. The results indicated that the students with the highest score concentrated on using a single group of strategies as their primary learning strategies. Conversely, the students with the lowest score employed a variety of learning strategies during their learning journeys.

CONCLUSION

Students from the English Department at UIN Ar-Raniry utilized both direct and indirect learning strategies to prepare for the listening section of the paper-based TOEFL test. The strategies include "remembering more effectively" in direct strategies, "using all your mental process" in cognitive strategies, "compensating for missing knowledge" in compensatory strategies, "organizing and evaluating your learning" in metacognitive strategies, "managing your emotions" in affective strategies, and "learning with others" in social strategies. The students employed the most effective strategies according to their individual personalities and learning objectives. The learning strategies mostly used by most of them are "organizing and evaluating your learning" in metacognitive of indirect strategies.

The students with the highest and lowest scores in the Listening section of the paper-based TOEFL test used different learning strategies. The students with the highest score primarily used metacognitive strategies, did not rely on memorization, and only a few used affective strategies. Meanwhile, most of the students with the lowest score used various learning strategies. However, the majority of these students utilized social strategies as their primary learning strategies, particularly to prepare for the listening section of the paper-based TOEFL test.

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