

**STUDENTS' LISTENING COMPREHENSION IN TOEFL: A STUDY
ON STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE
ACROSS THE SECTIONS**

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ABSTRACT

This study examines students' performance in the TOEFL listening comprehension test, focusing on their strengths and weaknesses across three sections: short conversations (Part A), long conversations (Part B), and short talks (Part C). There are 45 students registered in the course "Aplikasi Pendidikan Bahasa dalam Pembelajaran PJOK" on the odd semester in the 2024/2025 academic year participated in this study. The participants are chosen because the course integrates TOEFL-based language instruction, as outlined in the semester learning plan (RPS), where one of the students' difficulties is listening skills. A descriptive quantitative research design was conducted over a three-week study period, with listening tests administered weekly during three class meetings. The tests used questions adopted from standardized TOEFL practice materials, which were selected based on their alignment with the test's objectives and validated by experienced English instructors for relevance and difficulty. Data analysis discovered that students consistently performed best in Part C, with average scores increasing from 53% to 65% across three tests, while Part B presented the most significant challenges, with scores improving from 43% to 54%. Part A showed moderate performance, with scores rising from 49% to 60%. These results show that there is also an improvement on each part of the test, attributed to repeated exposure to the test format and the development of listening strategies. However, the persistent difficulty in Part B suggests the need for targeted instructional interventions to address challenges in extended dialogues. It can be concluded that the students demonstrated general improvement in TOEFL listening comprehension across all sections. The repeated exposure can be an effective strategy performance in TOEFL listening comprehension.

Keyword : *Listening comprehension, TOEFL, assessing listening*

INTRODUCTION

Listening is a fundamental skill essential for effective communication and learning across various contexts, as it enables individuals to comprehend, process, and respond to spoken information (Fitariana et al., 2021; Rahmiyati et al., 2021). In academic settings, listening plays a critical role in understanding lectures, discussions, and multimedia content. Recognizing its importance, listening comprehension is a key component of the TOEFL test, designed to assess a learner's ability to understand spoken English in academic and real-world scenarios (La'biran & Dewi, 2023; Razmalia & Gani, 2017). As one of the four main skills evaluated in the TOEFL, listening tasks challenge test-takers to process diverse types of spoken input, such as conversations, lectures, and monologues, making it a crucial area for language proficiency development.

Assessing students' listening comprehension skills in English proficiency tests is a critical aspect of language evaluation, particularly in standardized exams like the TOEFL. Listening comprehension is not only a vital component of effective communication but also a challenging skill for many students to master (Gutiérrez-Rojas & Rosado-Mendinueta, 2024; La'biran & Dewi, 2023). The ability to understand spoken language in various contexts is crucial for success in academic, professional, and social settings. In this regard, the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) provides a standardized measure to evaluate these skills in non-native English speakers, assessing their readiness to navigate English-speaking environments (Bashirli, 2024; Su & Liu, 2012).

Listening comprehension in TOEFL comprises three distinct sections: short conversations, long conversations, and short talks (Ristika et al., 2024; Safitri et al., 2024). Each section targets different aspects of listening abilities, testing skills such as understanding main ideas, recognizing supporting details, identifying implied meanings, and distinguishing speaker intentions. Due to the varied nature of these sections, students' performances often differ across each one, reflecting their strengths and weaknesses in specific listening skills. Thus, understanding students' performance across these sections can offer insights into areas where they excel or struggle.

For non-native English learners, particularly those in regions where English is not the primary language of communication, developing listening comprehension skills for the TOEFL can be especially demanding. Students must not only comprehend vocabulary and grammar but also interpret spoken cues like intonation, pace, and context, which may differ significantly from their native language (Gutiérrez-Rojas & Rosado-Mendinueta, 2024; La'biran & Dewi, 2023). This challenge often results in differing levels of comprehension

across the TOEFL's listening sections, influenced by familiarity with conversational or academic English.

Several studies have highlighted the importance of listening comprehension as a core skill for academic success in English-speaking countries, as it directly affects students' abilities to follow lectures, participate in discussions, and engage in everyday communication (Fitariana et al., 2021; Fitria, 2021; Lasi & Bouk, 2022). However, fewer studies have focused on analyzing student performance specifically across the TOEFL listening sections, which could provide valuable insights for lecturers and students alike. Understanding these section-based differences could lead to more tailored instructional strategies and targeted practice for students.

While several studies have explored listening comprehension in general, relatively few have focused on analyzing student performance across the specific sections of the TOEFL listening test. For example, a previous research primarily examined overall listening proficiency without investigating section-specific challenges (La'biran & Dewi, 2023). Similarly, another research highlighted the importance of listening comprehension but did not address why certain sections, such as long conversations, are more challenging for students (Razmalia & Gani, 2017). These studies offer valuable insights into general listening skills but fall short of providing actionable strategies for addressing difficulties unique to each section of the TOEFL listening test.

This study aims to fill this gap by focusing specifically on students' performance across the three listening comprehension sections of the TOEFL: short conversations, long conversations, and short talks. By analyzing their scores in each section, this study means to identify students' performance each section of the TOEFL listening test. Through an analysis of students' abilities across TOEFL listening sections, this study contributes to both pedagogical strategies and language testing methodologies. It bridges the gap between generalized listening research and the need for a more various understanding of section-specific challenges, ultimately supporting the development of effective approaches to English listening instruction and assessment on TOEFL.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to examine students' performance in the TOEFL listening comprehension test. The research focused on identifying trends and challenges across the test's three sections: short conversations, long conversations, and short talks. The population of this study were 52 students enrolled in the course *Aplikasi*

Pendidikan Bahasa dalam Pembelajaran PJOK during the odd semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. The sample size of 45 students was selected using a purposive sampling method. The sample was deemed adequate for providing meaningful insights into performance trends across the TOEFL listening sections while ensuring manageable data collection and analysis within the constraints of the study. Inclusion criteria required participants to be actively enrolled in the course and willing to participate in all three listening test sessions. Students who missed more than one test session were excluded from the analysis to maintain consistency in the data.

The instrument used in this study was a TOEFL listening comprehension test, administered three times over the semester during scheduled class meetings. The test items were adopted from Longman Preparation Course For The TOEFL Test and other recognized TOEFL preparation books, ensuring alignment with standardized TOEFL test formats. Each test consisted of three sections: Part A (short conversations, 30 items), Part B (long conversations, 8 items), and Part C (short talks, 12 items), totaling 50 items per test.

Related to the validity, the test items were reviewed by two certified TOEFL instructors who evaluated their alignment with the test objectives and their appropriateness for the students' proficiency levels. Reliability was assessed through a pilot study conducted with a similar group of students from other group of class, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85, indicating high internal consistency.

The scoring system awarded one point for each correct answer, resulting in a maximum possible score of 50 per test. Each test had a duration of 40 minutes, strictly timed to mimic the conditions of an actual TOEFL exam. Tests were administered in a quiet classroom environment under standardized conditions, with all students using individual headphones to minimize distractions and ensure equal audio quality. They are monitored to maintain test integrity and adherence to time limits.

In analyzing the data, students' scores from each TOEFL listening test were examined using descriptive statistics to assess their overall performance and identify specific challenges in each section. The analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel, where the following descriptive statistics were calculated for each section of the test: mean, median, standard deviation, and range. These statistics were used to evaluate students' central tendency, variability, and overall performance across the three test sessions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The analysis of the TOEFL listening comprehension test scores shown various levels of performance across the three sections: Part A (short conversations), Part B (long conversations), and Part C (short talks). Part C consistently recorded the highest average scores across all three tests, with percentages rising from 53% in the first test to 65% in the third. This suggests that students found short talks easier to comprehend due to their structured format and predictable content. In contrast, Part B demonstrated the lowest average scores, starting at 43% and improving to 54% in the final test. The low scores in this section indicate that students faced significant challenges in understanding extended dialogues, which require sustained attention and comprehension of complex interactions. The details can be seen on the following table.

Table 1. Students' Score on TOEFL Listening Comprehension Test

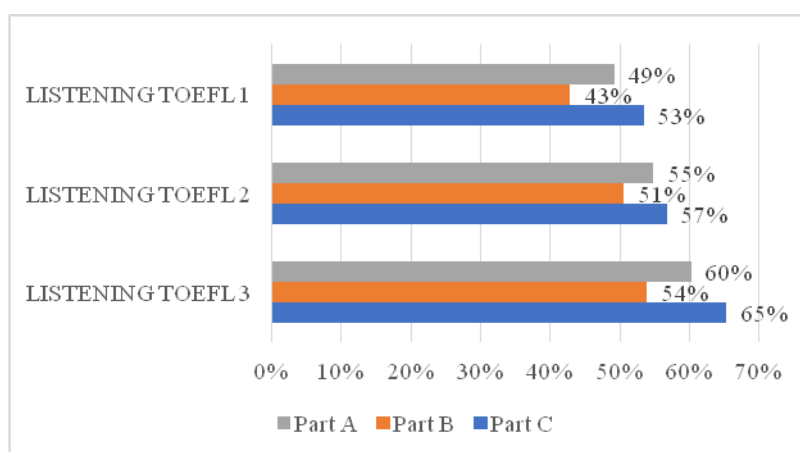
Result	Test 1			Test 2			Test 3		
	Part A	Part B	Part C	Part A	Part B	Part C	Part A	Part B	Part C
Average	49%	43%	53%	55%	51%	57%	60%	54%	65%
Min	30%	13%	33%	33%	25%	33%	40%	25%	25%
Max	93%	88%	83%	80%	75%	92%	87%	75%	100%

Besides the varying levels of difficulty, all three sections of the tests showed a tendency of improvement across the three test sessions. Part A showed a stable increase in correct responses, starting at 49% and reaching 60% by the third test. Similarly, Part B and Part C showed gradual improvements, indicating that students were adapting to the test format and potentially developing better listening strategies. This trend suggests that repeated exposure to TOEFL-style questions may have contributed to skill development and increased familiarity with the test structure.

The minimum and maximum scores across all sections also reflected outstanding differences. For Part A, the minimum score increased from 30% in the first test to 40% in the third, while the maximum slightly decreased from 93% to 87%. In Part B, the minimum score remained consistently low, starting at 13% and improving to only 25% by the final test, highlighting that this section remained the most challenging for all students. Part C showed the most significant improvement in maximum scores, with some students achieving perfect scores (100%) in the third test. These results suggest that while all students experienced some progress, their performance varied significantly depending on the test section.

The results highlight section-specific differences in difficulty. Part B posed the greatest challenge, likely due to the longer and more complex dialogues requiring students to maintain focus and process contextual cues over an extended period. On the other hand, Part C was the easiest section, as it involved shorter, more structured talks with fewer interactive elements. The higher scores in Part C suggest that students found it easier to extract main ideas and understand direct information from monologues than from dialogues. Simplify, it can be shown on the following picture.

Figure 1. Students' Score on TOEFL Listening Comprehension Test



The overall improvement in scores across the three tests indicates that students' listening comprehension skills developed over time. However, the persistent challenges in Part B suggest the need for targeted interventions to help students overcome difficulties with extended dialogues. The findings also emphasize the importance of providing practice in both structured and interactive listening tasks to build comprehensive listening skills.

These findings revealed the focus on students' listening strengths, particularly in comprehending structured monologues, while highlighting their struggles with extended dialogues in conversations. Understanding these trends provides a basis for developing targeted instructional strategies to address specific listening challenges. By focusing on these areas, lecturers can give a better support for the students in improving their overall listening comprehension skills.

Discussion

Listening, as a core component of TOEFL and one of the four basic language skills together with speaking, reading, and writing, holds main importance in assessing English language proficiency (Asrida et al., 2024). It evaluates a test-taker's ability to comprehend spoken English in various academic and real-world contexts, such as conversations, lectures,

and discussions. Effective listening enables individuals to process information, interpret meaning, and respond appropriately, making it a critical skill for success in both academic and professional environments (Picard & Velautham, 2016; White & Evans, 2006).

The findings of this study highlight that Part B (long conversations) consistently showed the greatest difficulty for students, with the lowest average scores and minimal improvement compared to other sections. It is because long conversations require a higher level of cognitive processing, as students must understand the flow of dialogue, infer relationships, and grasp contextual distinctions (Allen et al., 2017). In addition, the complexity of language in long conversations, including idiomatic expressions and implied meanings, may have further challenged students' comprehension abilities (Fitariana et al., 2021).

Difficulty on Part B can also be attributed to Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) proposed by Sweller in 1994. Listening to extended dialogues increases the mental effort required to retain and process information, particularly when students are simultaneously decoding unfamiliar vocabulary and understanding context (Çakmak, 2019). It is also emphasized that working memory plays a significant role in listening comprehension, and limitations in this area may result in students missing critical information in lengthy dialogues (Buck, 2002).

In contrast, Part A (short conversations) and Part C (short talks) demonstrated higher average scores and more consistent improvement. The relatively better performance in Part C can be explained by the structured nature of short talks, which often feature a single speaker presenting clear, focused information. It was stated that structured and predictable content is generally easier for learners to comprehend, as it reduces ambiguity and allows for better anticipation of key ideas (Goh & Vandergrift, 2012).

The overall improvement in scores across all three test sessions suggests that repeated exposure to TOEFL-style questions enhanced students' familiarity with the test format and their ability to employ effective listening strategies. It has been argued that test-takers benefit from repeated practice, as it helps them develop skills such as identifying signal words, predicting content, and focusing on relevant information (Rost, 2016). This improvement also supports the idea of test-taking as a learning opportunity, as students become more adept at handling the cognitive demands of listening comprehension tasks.

The persistent challenges in Part B underscore the need for targeted instruction to develop students' ability to comprehend extended conversations. Listening tasks should simulate authentic dialogues and train students to focus on discourse markers, speaker relationships, and shifts in topic (Rahmiyati et al., 2021). Incorporating interactive listening

activities, such as role-plays or discussions, may also help students improve their ability to process and retain information in long conversations.

Students' performance trends highlight the importance of teaching effective listening strategies. It was identified that key strategies for improving listening comprehension, including predicting content, selective listening, and summarizing (Razmalia & Gani, 2017; Silviyanti et al., 2020). Integrating these strategies into classroom activities can help students approach TOEFL listening tasks more effectively. Furthermore, explicit instruction in note-taking skills can support students in organizing information from extended dialogues, particularly in challenging sections like Part B.

The better performance in short talks (Part C) suggests that students may benefit from increased exposure to authentic English listening materials, such as TED Talks, podcasts, or recorded lectures. Authentic materials provide students with opportunities to practice understanding spoken language in a structured yet realistic context. It was emphasized that regular exposure to authentic listening content can bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world language use, enabling students to develop a more intuitive understanding of spoken English (Miller-Goldwater & Simmering, 2022).

The consistent improvement observed over the three tests reflects the role of repeated practice in enhancing listening comprehension skills. It was suggested that repeated engagement with listening tasks helps learners internalize linguistic features and build confidence in handling test-related challenges (Stup, 2022). This finding aligns with the principle of formative assessment, where iterative testing provides both practice and feedback, enabling students to monitor their progress and refine their strategies over time.

While the results indicate progress, the study is limited to a single group of students and focuses exclusively on TOEFL-style listening tasks. Future research could expand to include a larger, more diverse sample and explore the impact of supplementary listening activities, such as extensive listening programs or multimedia-based instruction. Moreover, qualitative data, such as students' reflections on their listening challenges, could provide deeper insights into the cognitive and emotional factors influencing their performance.

In conclusion, this study highlights the varying levels of student performance across the three TOEFL listening sections, revealing both areas of improvement and persistent challenges. While overall progress was observed, particularly in short talks, the difficulty in long conversations remains a significant difficulty. These findings suggest the need for more targeted instructional strategies to address specific listening comprehension challenges. Future

research could further investigate the impact of focused practice on these areas to enhance student performance in TOEFL listening tasks.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study shows that students improved their TOEFL listening comprehension over three tests, with the highest performance in short talks (Part C) and the lowest in long conversations (Part B). While repeated practice helped enhance their skills, challenges in understanding extended dialogues remain, highlighting the need for targeted teaching strategies. Lecturers should focus on training students to handle complex conversations using authentic materials and effective listening strategies. Future research could explore the effectiveness of targeted instructional strategies designed to address specific challenges identified in TOEFL listening sections, particularly in improving comprehension of long conversations.

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