

## **Foreign Language Listening Anxiety in an Academic Listening Class**

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### **Abstract**

In the process of teaching listening, anxiety is believed as a negative factor contributing to the students' poor listening comprehension and quite possibly the affective factor that the most persistently hinders the learning process. Thus, investigating its existence and delving its factors become salient in order to help the students overcome their listening learning barriers. This present study attempts to depict the condition of the students' listening anxiety in an Academic Listening (AL) class in an Indonesian tertiary context. 20-items of Foreign Language Listening Anxiety's (hereafter, FLLA) questionnaire were administered to 97 students taking that course. Having finished analyzing the levels of students' listening anxiety, in-depth interviews were conducted to four students who were considered having high listening anxiety to disclose the underlying factors. The research result revealed three pivotal issues; a) 54.6% of the students had relatively high level of listening anxiety, 18.5% had moderate listening anxiety, and 26.8% had low level of listening anxiety; b), 75% of the chosen measured items showed an extreme level of the students' listening anxiety, and c) the major factor contributing the listening anxiety was inadequate listening proficiency involving inability to deal with the rapid speech rate and range of lexical choices.

**Keywords:** *Listening, Anxiety, Foreign Language Listening Anxiety, Academic Listening*

### **Abstrak**

Kecemasan diyakini sebagai sebuah hambatan dalam proses pengajaran menyimak yang menyebabkan rendahnya kemampuan menyimak mahasiswa dan proses belajarnya. Oleh karenanya, sangatlah penting menggali informasi mengenai tingkat kecemasan mahasiswa beserta faktor-faktor yang melatarbelakanginya guna membantu mereka memecahkan permasalahan dalam proses belajar menyimak. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memberikan gambaran mengenai kondisi kecemasan mahasiswa dalam kelas *Academic Listening* (AL) di sebuah universitas di Indonesia. Peneliti menyebarkan 20 pertanyaan angket *Foreign Language Listening Anxiety* (selanjutnya, FLLAS) pada 97 orang mahasiswa yang mengambil mata kuliah tersebut. Selanjutnya, peneliti melakukan wawancara mendalam pada empat orang mahasiswa yang, berdasarkan angket yang disebar sebelumnya, memiliki tingkat kecemasan menyimak yang tinggi. Hasil penelitian ini memiliki tiga kesimpulan

pokok, yaitu: 1) 54.6% mahasiswa mengalami kecemasan yang tinggi, 18.5% sedang, dan 26.8% rendah; b), 75% dari pertanyaan angket yang disebar menunjukkan kondisi kecemasan mahasiswa yang mengkhawatirkan, and c) faktor-faktor penyebab utama kecemasan ini adalah karena ketidakmampuan mahasiswa untuk mengikuti ritme ujaran penutur bahasa Inggris yang terlalu cepat dan banyaknya kosakata yang sulit untuk difahami.

**Kata Kunci:** *Menyimak, Kecemasan, Kecemasan Menyimak Bahasa Asing, Menyimak Teks Akademik*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Considered as a difficult skill in English language learning, listening becomes an activity which provokes anxiety and impacts on the students' language performance. The students' learning attention on the listening process and the classroom activities are potentially distracted if they are experiencing listening anxiety. Young (1992) claimed that listening comprehension is highly anxiety provoking especially when the text is not intelligible to the learners in which this does not only effect on the students' listening comprehension but also their listening ability (Pan, 2016). As a result, the students might experience uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension and tension (Lili, 2015) when listening to the English oral texts. Diverse factors contribute to the emergence of listening anxiety, such as the authenticity of the listening texts (Christenberry, 2003), unfamiliar and difficult vocabulary used in the text (Young, 1992), incomprehensibility of the listening material due to environmental factors such as accent (Gonen, 2009), the complexity in its features inherent in oral input such as phonological and lexical features (Flowerdew *et al.*, 1994), reduced forms (Ito, 2001), invisible word boundaries

(Weber and Carter, 2006), and irregular pauses, false starts, and intonation patterns (Gillmore, 2007). Other reasons of why listening becomes a complex skill for some students are because of the limited processing skill (Buck, 2001) and lack of control over the rate of speech (Osada, 2004), or inadequate knowledge of vocabulary, topic, and accent (Buck, 2001). These complexities might effect on the ability of students on their listening comprehension (Xu, 2008). Furthermore, this will cause the feeling of fear while they are listening which lead them to experience listening anxiety.

The complexities causing anxiety during listening into English texts appeared in an Academic Listening (AL) class which was narrowly defined as 'listening to lectures and taking notes' (Lynch, 2011). The interpretation of academic listening in such a way was because in university settings the largely monologue lecture may remain the principal genre of instruction (G. Lee, 2009). However, the recent trends in AL classes involve the students to participate in a variety of other communicative events requiring the effective use of reciprocal listening skills – in small-group discussions and team projects, tutorials, seminars, meetings with

their supervisor/advisor, and so on – each of which makes specific demands on their ability to process and respond to spoken language (Lynch, *ibid*). Similarly, Goh (2018) strengthens that the students involve in diverse activities in AL class, such as lectures, tutorials, small group discussions, and seminars. Therefore, the students are engaged in more challenging tasks which might provoke listening anxiety more intensively.

Previous research in the area of listening anxiety is very inadequate (Lili, 2015). Yet, it has grown into more significant numbers recently. Tahsildar and Yusoff (2014) conducted a survey to determine the Malaysian students' listening anxiety level. They found that 58% of the students suffered for high level listening anxiety. Moreover, Pan (2016) found four factors contributing to Chinese students' listening anxiety; teachers, students, listening materials and process, and other factors. In conclusion, Dalman (2016) contends that as the listening proficiency increases the listening anxiety decreases, and vice versa. While previous studies conducted in China, Malaysia, and Iran focused on listening classes in general, this present study in Indonesia is taken place in a higher education setting, more specifically in an AL class which provides more complex listening activities and requires more students' involvement. This study addresses three central research questions:

1. Do the students taking Academic Listening course in a university in Tasikmalaya Indonesia experience listening anxiety?

2. Which of the components measured in the FLLAS do L2 learners face the most anxiety?

3. What factors contributed to the students' listening anxiety?

## **2. METHOD**

This study employed questionnaire and interviews to collect the data. The quantitative process was a replication from the previous relevant studies in foreign listening anxiety conducted by Elkhafifi (2005), Tahsildar and Yusoff (2014), and Zhang (2013). The 20 items in the questionnaire were adopted from Elkhafifi which describe about how the participants feel about listening to English spoken texts. They were required to read each statement carefully and give their first reaction to each statement, and choose an answer for every statement whether they (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) agree, or (5) strongly agree. The participants were given a consent form to confirm their agreement to be the data sources and informed that their identity is secure. The questionnaire was distributed to 97 students taking AL class. 78 students are females and 19 students are males. The following is the link of the google form questionnaire

<https://forms.gle/iSnVkqD8VePFne4R7>.

After having finished analysing the quantitative survey and classifying the level of students' listening anxiety (low, moderate, and high), in-depth interviews were conducted to 4 students who were considered having high level of listening anxiety and voluntarily willing to be

recruited as the participants. This method was conducted to explore the factors of listening anxiety occurrence. Interviews were taken three times to each participant in purpose of obtaining saturated data.

The data gathered from the FLLA questionnaire were analysed by using percentage formula to answer research question number 1, and 2, determining the level of students' listening anxiety and measured item of the most frequently appeared. Meanwhile, the result of the interview was transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis' method (Braun and Clarke, 2012) to figure out the emerging pictures about the factors of the students' listening anxiety.

### 3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

#### Students' Listening Anxiety

The first question in this study sought the level of students' listening anxiety. From the result of the survey, it can be concluded that more than half of the total population relatively experienced high listening anxiety. Table 1 demonstrates a summary of three different levels of listening anxiety: high, moderate, and low levels of listening anxiety of the participants of this study. High level of anxiety was calculated when a majority of the participants responded with Agree or Strongly Agree to the items in the survey, while for low level of anxiety, it was concluded when most of the participants answered Disagree or Strongly Disagree. As for moderate level, it was assumed when participants responded with a neutral answer in the survey. The

frequency and percentage were calculated to reflect the level of anxiety faced by the participants for each item.

**Table 1 : Summary of the measured items**

Level	Item(s)	Percentage
High	15	75%
Moderate	1	5%
Low	4	20%
<b>Total</b>	20	100%

Table 1 gives an illustration about the number of items that the participants chose to depict their listening anxiety levels. They have chosen Strongly Agree and Agree for 15 items (75%), of the FLLAS which suggested a high level of anxiety. In contrast, they only responded neutral for 1 item (5%) which is considered a moderate level anxiety. Moreover, the students showed low listening anxiety for only 4 items (20%) of the FLLAS. In short, it is concluded that most of the students suffered from high listening anxiety. This condition was worrisome since Xu (2011) mentioned, "When anxiety is present in the classroom, there is a down-spiraling effect. Anxiety makes [the students] nervous and afraid and thus contributes to poor performance; this in turn creates more anxiety and even worse performance."

To give more specific information about each student's listening anxiety condition, Table 2 demonstrates the number of the students in each level of anxiety.

**Table 2 : Summary of the students' level of listening anxiety**

Level	Number of students	Percentage
High	53	54.7%
Moderate	18	18.5%

Low	26	26.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 2 provides information about each student’s listening anxiety level. From 97 students involved in this survey, 53 (54.7%) students suffered from high listening anxiety, 18 (18.5%) experienced moderate listening anxiety, and 26 (26.8%) had low listening anxiety level. In other words, it strengthens the former calculation saying that more than a half of population suffered from severe listening anxiety. This supported the statement in Xu’s (2011) research finding that “Many students walk into a [foreign language] classroom feeling nervous and fearing failure or ostracism.”

***Components Measured the Most Frequent Listening Anxiety Factor***

The second research question aimed at providing information about the components measured in the FLLAS for L2 learners. Table 3 elaborates the answer of the first question and reviews the most frequent factor from the most chosen items of the distributed questionnaire. It also displays the percentages of each item which represents the scales of listening anxiety factors.

**Table 3 : Factors of Listening Anxiety**

No	Items	Percentage		
		H	M	L
1	I get upset when I’m not sure whether I understand what I’m hearing in English.	50 (51,5%)	32 (33%)	15 (15,5%)
2	When I listen to English, I often understand the words but still can’t quite understand what the speaker is saying.	47 (48,5%)	26 (26,8%)	24 (24,7%)

3	When I am listening to English I get so confused I can’t remember what I’ve heard.	36 (37,1%)	27 (27,8%)	34 (35,1%)
4	I feel intimidated whenever I have listening passage in English to listen to.	19 (19,6%)	28 (28,9%)	50 (51,5%)
5	I am nervous when I am listening to a passage in English when I am not familiar with the topic.	60 (61,9%)	19 (19,6%)	18 (18,6%)
6	I get upset whenever I hear unknown grammar when listening to English.	41 (42,3%)	29 (29,9%)	27 (27,8%)
7	When listening to English, I get nervous and confused when I don’t understand every word.	49 (50,5%)	21 (21,7%)	27 (27,8%)
8	It bothers me to encounter words I can’t pronounce when listening to English.	40 (41,3%)	33 (34%)	24 (24,7%)
9	I usually end up translating word by word when listening to English.	39 (40,2%)	17 (17,5%)	41 (42,3%)
10	By the time you get past the strange sounds English, it’s hard to remember what you’re listening to.	64 (66%)	20 (20,6%)	13 (13,4%)
11	I am worried about all the new sounds I have to learn to understand spoken English.	26 (26,8%)	38 (39,2%)	33 (34%)
12	I enjoy listening to English.	69 (71,2%)	21 (21,6%)	7 (7,2%)
13	I feel confident when listening to English.	40 (41,2%)	39 (40,2%)	18 (18,6%)
14	Once you get used to it, listening to English is not so difficult.	59 (60,8%)	26 (26,8%)	12 (12,4%)
15	The hardest part of learning English is learning to understand spoken English.	62 (63,9%)	17 (17,5%)	18 (18,6%)
16	I would be happy just to learn to read English rather than having to learn to understand spoken English.	35 (36,1%)	24 (24,7%)	38 (39,2%)
17	I don’t mind listening to English by myself but I feel very uncomfortable when I have to listen to English in a group.	36 (37,1%)	31 (32%)	30 (30,9%)
18	I am satisfied with the level of listening comprehension in English that I have achieved so far.	45 (46,4%)	25 (25,8%)	27 (27,8%)
19	English culture and ideas seem very foreign to me.	23 (23,7%)	36 (37,1%)	38 (39,2%)
20	You have to know so much	49	27	21

about English history and (50,5%) (27,8%) (21,7%)  
culture in order to understand  
spoken English.

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The statistics in Table 3 shows that the items in which the participants demonstrated a high level of anxiety were item 12, 69 (71%), followed by item 10, 64 (66%), item 14, 59 (61%), item 15, 40 (53.9%), item 1, 50 (51.5%), items 7 and 20 which have similar numbers, 49 (50.5%), and items 2 and 18, 47 (48.4%) and 45 (46%) respectively. However, item 6, 41 (42.3%), items 8 and 13, 40 (41%), item 9, 39 (40.2%), items 3 and 17, 36 (37%), and item 16, 35 (36%) represented the moderate level of listening anxiety of the participant. Meanwhile, there are only three items demonstrating the low level listening anxiety; items 11, 19, and 4, 26 (26.8%), 23 (24%), and 19 (19.6%) respectively. This result suggested that the participants did not really enjoy listening to the academic oral texts and considered that listening comprehension is the most difficult skill to learn amongst the other skills in learning English (speaking, reading, and writing). This maintained what Yilmaz and Yavuz (2015) stated, "listening is still a handicap for EFL learners though it seems a skill not hard to handle." The hardship to remember the strange sounds also became another primary factor causing the students experienced listening anxiety. According to Goh (1999) in Yilmaz and Yavuz (ibid), "the most common problems faced by students in listening in the order of frequency are quickly forgetting what is heard." The result also informed that the participants revealed their debilitating

emotions during listening to oral texts such as nervousness and distress. Elkhafaifi (2005) acknowledged that such situation brings negative impacts on the students' learning achievement; such as, "an altered performance, lower test scores and final grades"

### **Factors Contributing Foreign Language Listening Anxiety**

According to the results, the students' listening anxiety was mainly caused by their inability to cope with the rapid speech rate, background knowledge on the academic contents, and range of lexical choices. These conditions were explicated through the students' statements during the interview sessions.

#### *Inability to deal with the rapid speech rate*

Some students considered that they were incapable to grasp the information from the listening tasks given in AL class because they thought that the speakers performed unacceptable pronunciation and too fast speaking speed. These conditions contributed negatively on their listening comprehension, thus, they considered themselves failed to understand the texts.

*Student 1* "...the most visible difficulties I found are because the audio is too fast and sometimes unclear."

*Student 2* "...if the duration of the speech is long, and the typical native English speakers who tend to speak very fast. I need to listen many times to understand."

*Student 3* "The most influential factor is the speed, because it brings confusion and difficulties to process the words. Thus, it makes miscommunication."

These findings are relevant with Kim's (2000) study that revealed that the main concerns of foreign language listening learners are unfamiliar pronunciation and speed of delivery. This is also supported by Osada (2004) which maintains that listening is reported to be a difficult skill due to lack of control over rate of the speech. Similarly, Vogely (1998) strengthens that fast speech and unfamiliar accent are two major obstacles that the language listeners encountered when accomplishing the tasks. This eventually led the students to have poor listening comprehension.

#### *Range of lexical choices*

Another factor that hinders the students in the meaning-making process of the academic listening texts is because they have insufficient background knowledge about the topics discussed in the AL class. As a result, they often found many unfamiliar vocabularies that caused them difficult in comprehending the texts. This is in line with the statement from Lili (2015), "When students come across unfamiliar words and difficult sentences, they become stressed and anxious, which influences the following content." The students' statements below depict how hard they struggled understanding the texts they did not know the contents about because of their limited vocabularies.

*Student 1* "...yes that's right...there are too many unfamiliar

*vocabularies that are too bad for me. That was my major problem I think."*

*Student 2* "...because in this class the topics are very academic so that it heightens the level of difficulties. Because of that, there are many new words which I hardly understand."

*Student 3* "My listening anxiety happens because I less practice listening to English texts so that I have very limited vocabularies."

The students had clearly mentioned that they experienced listening anxiety because they missed a lot of information due to the limited knowledge of the words they were listening to. Kimura (2011) stated, "People feel that they have to listen to and make sense of every word and understand every detail to comprehend the message" and "when they fail to follow the text in this way, they become frustrated and worried" (Ćupurdija, 2012). This is in line with Young (1992) that informs, unfamiliar and difficult vocabularies used in the text are the reasons to make the students anxious. Similarly, Krashen (in Young 1992) recognized that, although speaking is cited as the most anxiety-producing skill, listening is also "highly anxiety provoking if it is incomprehensible". Moreover, Hamouda (2013) reveals that the lack of vocabulary obstructed the students in listening practice because they did not recognize those words, thus, it would be difficult for them to guess the meaning of the words based on the contexts.

In summary, the findings confirmed the research result conducted by Tahsildar and Yusoff (2014) which claimed that the anxiety factors the students experienced the most were because of "getting stuck with unfamiliar words, worrying over missing

important ideas, having difficulty with unfamiliar topics, getting nervous and confused for not understanding every word and getting annoyed when coming across new words while listening to English texts.”

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Anxiety was proven to exist in the students' academic listening class. As the result revealed that most of them experienced relatively moderate to high listening anxiety, the teachers should take it as a benchmark to evaluate the process of teaching academic listening which furthermore would become considerations in deciding the further planning in teaching this course. The emerging contributing factors are also two major hindrances that need to solve. The factors apparently come from the task-focused apprehension which incorporates two elements in speaking (speed rates and unrecognized words). Therefore, this becomes challenges for the teachers to create the more comprehensible inputs.

Further researchers can replicate this study using different groups of participants from diverse cultural backgrounds. The issues of age or gender in the anxiety level of the participants can also become other interesting topics to discuss, for example: male and female students listening anxiety or adult and young language learners' listening anxiety. You can also compare the anxiety level in private language classes with public ones. Bilingual and multilingual milieu might also affect the students' listening anxiety that can be brought under scrutiny in further research.

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