Challenges in Teaching Integrated-Listening Skill in the University

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ABSTRACT

This research describes challenges encountered by EFL instructors in teaching integrated-listening skills in the university. To deal with this issue, a qualitative approach notably a basic interpretive study was deployed as the research design. Conducted in a private university in Blitar, East Java, this study took 23 students enrolled in the Advanced Listening course as the participants. The data were collected through observation, interviews, and document analysis. The result revealed that the EFL instructor experienced some challenges in teaching integrated-listening skills to university students. The challenges included difficulties in locating appropriate materials, the students' low level of English proficiency, and the students' problematic attitude. Those problems hindered the students' ability in both speaking and writing activities as a follow-up to listening activity. The current gap in listening-related study is recognized, and suggestions for both practitioners and future researchers are proposed.

INTRODUCTION

Listening is a language skill that people mostly use in communication. It is noted that adults use almost half their communication listening (Fauziati, 2015). In the university context, listening is also a primary skill that must be mastered by English as Foreign Language students to better understand the lectures delivered in English. Bearing in mind that listening skill is crucial for EFL university students, it should be given a priority in the curriculum. Without a doubt, possessing listening skills is valuable for EFL students since it can precede the learning of other English skills.

Listening can be defined as the process of one individual perceiving another via sense, (specifically aural) organs, assigning a meaning to the message and comprehending it (Kutlu & Aslanoğlu, 2009). Prior to this, DeVito (1955) stated that listening is an efficient process of perception, comprehension, recognition, evaluation, and reaction in communication. In addition, Clark and Clark (1977, as cited in Fauziati, 2015) argued that listening is the mental process by which listeners take in the sounds uttered by a speaker and use them to construct an

interpretation of what they think the speaker intended to convey. Based on the provided definitions, listening can be said as the process of comprehending the speaker's utterances of which the listener's comprehension will influence the success of oral communication.

As one of the language skills in English, one must need a strategy to master listening. There are two major strategies in listening, that is, bottom-up and top-down strategies (Anderson, A., & Lynch, 1988). In the bottom-up strategy, the listeners rely on the language in the message; the combination of sounds, words, and grammar that create meaning. Meanwhile, in top-down strategy, the listeners tap into background knowledge of the topic, the context, the type of text, and the language (Fauziati, 2015). Some studies revealed that the implementation of both strategies were found effective to enhance listening comprehension. Khonamri & Ahmadi (2015) and Selamat & Sidhu (2013) investigated the effect of metacognitive strategy on EFL learners' listening comprehension achievement. In their study, both bottom-up and top-down strategy were extensively practiced, and the result showed that the metacognitive strategy improved students' listening achievement. In addition, Liyan, Duqin, & Chunyan, (2014) investigated the effect of formal schema on listening comprehension. Using the principle of top-down information processing, the result showed that activation of formal schema improved college students' listening comprehension.

To master English, however, it is insufficient to solely possess listening skill; other skills including speaking, reading, and writing should be mastered, too. With regard to this, since the introduction of 2004 English Curriculum as well as Standard of Content in Indonesia, the four skills need to be taught in an integrated way to make sure that students can master all the language skills (Depdiknas, 2006). With a focus on listening skills, listening can be integrated with other skills such as speaking and writing. In an integrated listening-to-speaking, for instance, students initially listen to a listening passage in the form of dialog or monolog or watch a video. During listening, they can take notes. Eventually, they retell what they have heard after listening. In an integrated listening-to-writing, students listen to a listening passage, and they should make a written summary based on the passage heard.

Some prior studies have been conducted highlighting the problems in listening. Bloomfield, Wayland, et al. (2010) reviewed a large number of studies focusing on factors affecting second language listening comprehension. They summarized the factors into three categories namely (1) characteristics of the listener, (2) characteristics of the passage, and (3) characteristics of the testing condition. The listener characteristics that made listening difficult were weak working memory, unaware of using strategy, low proficiency, and anxiety. The passage characteristics that affected listening comprehension included passage length, complexity, organization, and auditory features. Equally important, testing conditions that influenced listening comprehension covered time limits, multiple hearings, and note-taking. More recently, some studies confirmed Bloomfield, Wayland, et al. (2010) figuring out that students encountered some problems in listening such as recognizing vocabulary, rapid speech rate, and linking sounds between words (Chen, 2013; Li and Renandya, 2012).

Dealing with the teaching of listening in Indonesia, several studies revealed that a large number of listening materials and media were applied either for

intensive or extensive listening. As reviewed by Cahyono and Widiati (2009), several listening-related studies found that listening can take advantage of diverse materials and media such as telephone-conference (Antoro and Pantow, 2005), talk show (Karana, 2005), movie and song (Agustina and Puspawati, 2008), podcast (Juniardi, 2008), etc. To date, teachers can make use of listening materials available on the Internet such as British Council Learn English, VOA Learning English, TED Talk, etc. These materials can be accessed and downloaded for free; therefore, teachers can easily select ones that are appropriate with the students' listening level, or teachers can assign students to find their own listening materials based on their interests.

Although the study of listening skills has been widely studied, little has been written concerning teaching integrated-listening skills to university students. As generally known, that in the university context, the listening course is taught in a discrete way. In its implementation, however, the listening course is sometimes integrated with other skills. This is due to the need of checking students' understanding more comprehensively; not only using comprehension questions, but also implementing some practices associated with other skills such as discussion, role play, and interview (speaking), and writing a summary (writing) (Fauziati, 2015). This paper describes the challenges encountered by EFL instructors in integrating listening skills with speaking and writing skills in the context of university students.

METHOD

This research deployed a qualitative method to describe challenges in teaching integrated-listening skills to university students. Among several designs of the qualitative method, a basic interpretive study conformed to this research. This design provides descriptive accounts that is designed to understand an event through data that might be combined in numerous ways, such as interviews, observations, and document review (Ary et al, 2010).

This research was conducted in a private university in Blitar, East Java. The participants were 23 students of the English Department. During this research, the students were in the third semester enrolling Advanced Listening course. Advanced Listening is the highest level of listening course at the university. Before enrolling in this course, the students had to enroll in Basic Listening and Intermediate Listening courses.

The listening materials adopted TED Talk. In the integrated listening-to-speaking activity, the students selected a video they liked from TED Talk. After selecting and downloading the video, the students should comprehend the talk and prepare for a presentation in the class. There were three steps in doing the presentation. Firstly, the students summarized the talk orally, in brief, using their own words. Secondly, the students expressed their reaction (personal opinion) towards the talk. Thirdly, they explained the process of listening such as the level of difficulty, how long they understood the talk, how many times they repeated the video, etc. After a student-presenter performed, other students asked questions to the presenter. Instructionally, the presentation of the talk led to a classroom discussion, which invited other students to make immediate responses.

In the integrated listening-to-writing task, the students made a written summary of some talks from TED Talk in the form of Listening Journal adapted from (Takaesu, 2013). In total, the students made five summaries during five weeks of study. Once the students finished making a summary, they immediately submitted their work in Google Classroom (www.classroom.google.com). The reason behind the use of Google Classroom was its simplicity in creating tasks, distributing tasks/materials, and grading.

To collect the data, some techniques were performed including observation, interview, and document analysis. The combination of these techniques could result in better evidence. In doing observation, the researcher's role was as a participant-observer (Creswell, 2012), in which he took part in the activities he observed. While participating in the learning activity, the researcher recorded any information. Besides, interviewing the students was equally important to confirm the data from observation (field notes). The interview was performed using open-ended questions to record the students' answers. In addition, collecting documents is another technique to better triangulate the data. The document was in the form of a listening journal made by the students. In analyzing the data, this research followed three steps of qualitative data analysis consisting of reducing the data, displaying the data, and drawing a conclusion (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to describe the challenges encountered by EFL instructors in teaching integrated-listening skills to university students. The data analysis resulted in the disclosure of several challenges as follows.

1. Locating Appropriate Materials

Learning material is the nucleus of language learning due to its vital role in creating an effective learning process (Damayanti, Fauzi, & Inayati, 2018). It is indisputable in every learning process. In the case of teaching integrated-listening skills, listening materials should be well prepared. Often, however, EFL instructors found difficulties in locating relevant materials that suited the students' English proficiency level. During this research, the participating students enrolled in the Advanced Listening course. As the name of the course suggests, the students were ideally in advanced English level (C1) (see TrackTest English, 2019) to understand the instructions. In reality, however, the students had not reached the advanced level yet. When it came to locating the materials, it was difficult to select which materials suitable for the students. When adopting advanced listening materials, the students encountered a lot of difficulties mainly in rapid speech rate. This finding confirms Chen (2013) emphasizing the rate of speech as one of the biggest listening problems for students.

Dealing with the use of TED Talk as listening material, Takaesu (2013) suggested that TED talks motivated students to independently pursue their own

interests; therefore, the students practiced advanced listening in an interesting way. TED talks which belongs to authentic materials helped them get used to experience real aural input. The students were free to select their own videos, and they had to make an oral and written summary of the talk. In reality, however, the students were struggling really hard to comprehend the talk. They generally said that the speaker talked too fast. They needed to repeat the video several times until they could get the gist of the talk. The following is the sample of the students' reflection in the listening journal.

Reflection:

a. This listening is difficult to understand because the intonation is quite hard and there are some vocabulary that I do not understand.
b. I needed to replay 3-4 times to understand the purpose of this video.

(Document of the students' listening journal)

This finding again shows that selecting appropriate materials was complicated. Even when the students were free to choose their own materials, they could not easily comprehend the listening passage. The passage is often too complex, the speech is too fast, the vocabulary is unfamiliar, etc. This finding confirms that the characteristics of the listening passage was one of the factors causing low listening comprehension (Bloomfield, Wayland, et al., 2010).

2. The Students' English Proficiency

In addition to the materials, another challenge in teaching integrated-listening was the level of students' English proficiency. In the integrated listening-to-speaking, it was evident that the students had a limited vocabulary. Given the task to present the video they had heard using their own words, the students spoke haltingly. They often asked their friends about the meaning of some vocabulary. This finding shows that the students were not well-prepared for the presentation. Their speaking skill was hindered mainly by lack of vocabulary. One of the students says, *"My difficulty in doing a presentation is my limited vocabulary,"* (Interview with the student). This finding is consistent with Li & Renandya (2012) figuring out that recognizing vocabulary was a major problem in a speaking activity.

In the integrated listening-to-writing activity, it revealed that the students encountered difficulties in writing the summary. Most of them could not produce well-written sentences. The mistakes were mainly found in grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary. Regarding the mistakes in grammar and sentence structure, the following is the sample of the students' written summary.

A mistake in using modal:

"We must to learn English because English has simple alphabet."
(We must learn English because English has simple alphabet)
(Document of the students' summary).

A mistake in sentence structure:

"English language spoken well, great make people loved to hear you." *(Speaking English well make people love to hear you)* (Document of the students' summary).

From the excerpts of the students' written summary above, it shows that the students had problems in writing. They did not apply the rules of grammar and sentence structure correctly. Only a few students who wrote well. Those mistakes were the evidence revealing that integrating listening and writing instructions is challenging. The instructor should consider the students' ability in writing before setting up writing activity as a follow up to the listening activity. Regarding the students' problem in grammar and sentence structure, the finding of this study strengthens Alfaki (2015) and Nasser (2018) revealing that EFL students mostly commit mistakes in grammar (tense) and sentence structure.

Another noticeable challenge in integrating listening and writing activity was the students' lack of knowledge about the mechanics of writing (spelling, punctuation, and capitalization). From the students' summary in Listening Journal, several misspelled vocabulary included privat (private), developmen (development), comunication (communication), pronounciation (pronunciation), besidis (besides), etc. This finding shows that the students did not put attention to the spelling. It seems that they were unwilling to check the words in the dictionary. With regard to the mistakes in punctuation, the following is the sample of the students' mistakes in punctuation.

The missing comma:

"If you want to travel in other country you can use English to make it easy." (*If you want to travel in other country, you can use English to make it easy*) (Document of the students' summary).

The unnecessary comma:

"We should watch movie, play games to make us easy in learning English." (*We should watch movie and play games to make us easy in learning English*) (Document of the students' summary).

The evidence above shows that the students were untrained in using punctuation. They indeed said that punctuation has never been taught seriously in writing lessons. Regarding the use of capitalization, a lot of students also make mistakes in writing capital words. It was found that they often did not use capital

words at the beginning of the sentence. These findings suggest that mechanical mistake is a crucial problem for EFL students. If the instructors want to integrate listening and writing, they must ensure that the students had sufficient knowledge of writing; one of those is mechanical knowledge that is often neglected in writing lessons. The finding of this study is comparable to Alfaki (2015) identifying that mechanical mistakes, that is, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization are commonly encountered by university students in writing.

3. The Students' Attitude

In addition to the materials and English proficiency, the students' attitude is also a challenge that the instructor must cope with. The problematic attitudes in this research were anxiety, shyness, and mother-tongue use. Those attitudes were apparent in the teaching integrated-listening. In the listening lesson, the students often begged the instructor to play the listening passage several times, even before the passage was played. This condition reveals that the students were anxious about the passage. They were afraid of being unable to comprehend the passage. It is surely a challenge for the instructor to build the students' self-confidence and to convince them that they were capable of comprehending the passage. To cope with this challenge, the instructor used a top-down strategy by explaining the context and displaying several vocabularies related to the passage. This way, the students had a picture of what would be listened to and thus make them feel more confident. Listeners' anxiety can also impact the students' ability to understand what has been said. If a listener is anxious, it will be more difficult to accurately determine his saying (Bloomfield, Wayland, et al., 2010).

In the integrated listening-to-speaking activity, it was evident that the students were shy. Their shyness made them spoke haltingly during the presentation. Students who are shy are often hardly able to control themselves for speaking in the classroom (Arifin, 2017). One of the students says, *"My difficulty in presenting the talk is my lack of bravery and less-confidence,"* (Interview with the student). Similarly, another student says, *"I am untrained to speak in public so that I am less confident,"* (Interview with the student). This finding reveals that the students' low self-confidence greatly impacts their speaking skills. Even the students who are actually smart, but they are untrained to do public speaking, they are likely to fail when they have to present their ideas orally. This study is consistent with Arifin (2017) suggesting that having low self-confidence loses the students' performance and ability in speaking.

Another problematic attitude found in integrated listening-to-speaking activity was the tendency to use the mother tongue. In the EFL classroom, the students ideally practiced using English; however, it was always difficult to manage the students' language use. When presenting the talk, the students indeed started speaking using English. However, when it comes to explaining the content, they directly shifted English to Indonesian. When they were forced to keep using English, they encountered a lot of difficulties since they had a limited vocabulary. This condition should be taken into consideration by EFL instructors to create an effective integrated lesson in which the students can both

listen to the passage and present the passage very well. This study supports Ur (1955) explaining that mother-tongue use is one of the problems in speaking class.

CONCLUSION

Although listening is taught in a discrete way in university, it is still possible to integrate listening with other skills such as speaking and writing. The implementation of the integrated-listening activity, however, has several challenges that the EFL instructor must cope with. They included (1) difficulty in selecting appropriate materials suitable to the students' level; (2) the low level of students' English proficiency; and (3) the students' problematic attitude during the lesson. It is suggested for the listening instructor to cooperate with other instructors such as writing and speaking instructors to discuss the better formulation and implementation of the integrated-listening activity. In addition, the instructor must also plan on creating more interesting activities so that the students can be more motivated and enjoyed every learning step. Further studies can address teaching integrated-listening skills to the native speaker of English. It will be meaningful to compare the challenges in teaching integrated-listening skills to the EFL learners with that of the native speaker of English.

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