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Understanding The Challenges Faced By Junior High School Students In Learning English Vocabulary From Listening Skill

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Abstract

Listening skill is one of the most essential components in foreign language acquisition, particularly in supporting English vocabulary development among junior high school students. Through listening activities, students are expected to recognize pronunciation, understand word meaning, and connect spoken language with appropriate contexts. However, many students still experience difficulties in acquiring vocabulary through listening because spoken English often sounds different from its written form. This research aims to identify the main challenges faced by eighth-grade students in learning English vocabulary through listening skill. This study employed a qualitative case study design conducted at a junior high school in Surabaya. The data were collected through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. The participants involved eighth-grade students who had experienced listening-based vocabulary learning activities in English lessons. The data were analyzed descriptively by reducing, presenting, and interpreting the information obtained from the field. The findings show that students faced several challenges, including difficulty recognizing word pronunciation, inability to follow fast speech rates, limited vocabulary mastery, lack of contextual clues in audio materials, and low confidence during listening activities. Students also tended to depend on written texts and teacher explanations rather than using independent listening strategies. These problems affected their ability to understand new vocabulary from spoken input. The study suggests that teachers should apply more contextual and interactive listening activities, provide repeated exposure to audio materials, and use audio-visual technology to support students' vocabulary learning. These strategies are expected to help students improve their listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition more effectively.

Keywords: Vocabulary; Listening Skill; Challenges; Junior High School; English Learning

1. Introduction

English has become a global language and plays a significant role in international communication, technology, education, and global culture. In Indonesia, English is a compulsory subject taught from junior high school and is considered essential for students' academic success and future opportunities (Musthafa, 2010; Emilia, 2011). Among the four basic language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing listening is often perceived as the most challenging, especially for junior high school students who are still at a basic level of English proficiency (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

Listening is not a passive activity; it involves decoding, interpreting, and understanding spoken language in real time. It also requires the ability to access a sufficient range of vocabulary to make sense of what is heard (Nation, 2013). Inadequate vocabulary knowledge becomes a major barrier to listening comprehension. When students do not recognize key words, they are unable to follow the message and often become disengaged or frustrated (Field, 2009). Unlike reading, listening does not provide opportunities to reprocess the input, making it more difficult for learners to compensate for unknown words or unclear pronunciation (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

Many junior high school students in Indonesia face a range of challenges in learning vocabulary through listening, including unfamiliar accents, fast speech rates, limited classroom exposure to authentic listening materials, and lack of vocabulary scaffolding prior to listening tasks (Rukmini, 2014). These problems are often compounded by limited teaching strategies and resources, which do not always support integrated vocabulary

and listening instruction (Cahyono & Widiati, 2008). Additionally, psychological factors such as low confidence, fear of failure, and listening anxiety contribute to students' difficulty in acquiring vocabulary through listening (Graham, 2006).

While much research has explored vocabulary acquisition through reading or speaking, few studies have focused specifically on listening as a source of vocabulary learning, especially in the context of young learners in non-English-speaking countries (Webb & Nation, 2017). Yet, listening provides rich, contextualized input that can promote incidental vocabulary learning if approached appropriately (Brown, 2011). Given these issues, this study aims to investigate the challenges faced by junior high school students in learning English vocabulary through listening activities. Understanding these challenges is important for developing more effective instructional strategies that support both vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension. Furthermore, the findings are expected to contribute to better curriculum design and pedagogical practices in English language teaching at the junior high school level in Indonesia.

English has become the dominant language in global communication, serving as a lingua franca in diplomacy, business, science, and digital media. As a response to this global trend, the Indonesian government has emphasized English language education starting from junior high school as part of its national curriculum. Despite this initiative, many students at this level continue to face serious difficulties in achieving communicative competence, especially in listening comprehension and vocabulary mastery (Zein, 2017). In EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts such as Indonesia, listening is often regarded as the most demanding of the four language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing—due to its complexity and the minimal exposure learners have to authentic spoken English outside the classroom (Rao, 2019).

Listening is a key channel of language input and plays a foundational role in second language acquisition. According to Rost (2016), listening not only facilitates the comprehension of spoken language but also supports the development of other language skills, particularly vocabulary. In fact, many researchers argue that vocabulary is the single most important factor influencing success in listening comprehension (Bidabadi & Yamat, 2014). Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, learners cannot identify key lexical items, grasp the main ideas, or infer meaning from context. Moreover, they are unable to recognize known words when they are pronounced differently in connected speech, which is common in authentic listening texts (Bozorgian, 2012).

Vocabulary learning through listening, however, is not a straightforward process. Compared to reading, listening involves rapid decoding of sounds, and learners do not have the opportunity to go back and reprocess the input (Renandya & Farrell, 2011). Many junior high school students in Indonesia are not trained in bottom-up listening strategies, such as recognizing sound patterns, word segmentation, or phonological cues, which are crucial for vocabulary recognition in speech. In addition, the listening materials used in many Indonesian schools are often scripted, monotonous, and do not reflect natural English usage, limiting students' exposure to real-life vocabulary usage (Sulistyo, 2011).

Adding to the difficulty is the psychological dimension of listening. Many learners experience high levels of listening anxiety, which negatively affects their ability to focus and recall new vocabulary items. As reported by Wang and Treffers-Daller (2017), anxious learners tend to miss important information and fail to benefit from the exposure. Furthermore, motivation and self-efficacy also play a key role in the success of vocabulary learning through listening. Learners who do not believe in their ability to understand spoken English are less likely to engage with listening tasks, thereby reducing opportunities for vocabulary growth (Rahimi & Abedini, 2009).

While vocabulary teaching in Indonesian classrooms often focuses on rote memorization and explicit instruction through reading or grammar translation, the role of listening as a vocabulary-learning tool remains underutilized. Research by Hamouda (2013) highlights that many English teachers in EFL settings prioritize reading and writing over listening because they are easier to test and evaluate. This creates a mismatch between curriculum goals and classroom practice, leaving learners with poor listening habits and insufficient vocabulary acquisition. As a result, vocabulary learning through listening remains inconsistent and inefficient.

Despite the increasing recognition of the importance of listening input in vocabulary development, there is still a lack of focused research exploring the specific challenges that junior high school students face in this area, particularly in non-native English-speaking environments like Indonesia. The few existing studies tend to generalize vocabulary difficulties without connecting them directly to the listening skill, thus missing the nuanced relationship between oral input and vocabulary learning outcomes.

Therefore, this study aims to explore and understand the specific challenges faced by junior high school students in learning English vocabulary through listening activities. These challenges may include linguistic

factors (e.g., fast speech, unfamiliar accents), cognitive limitations (e.g., limited memory, slow processing), affective variables (e.g., anxiety, low confidence), and pedagogical constraints (e.g., insufficient scaffolding, lack of exposure to authentic input). By identifying and analyzing these obstacles, this research seeks to provide practical insights for educators, material developers, and policymakers to enhance the teaching and learning of vocabulary through listening.

In conclusion, vocabulary learning from listening is a complex, multifaceted process that requires adequate input, effective teaching strategies, and learner engagement. Recognizing and addressing the specific challenges faced by junior high school students is essential for developing more holistic and learner-centered approaches to English language instruction. Manuscript is presented in narrative (without bullet or number of sub titles) and presentation with sub titles in fact should be avoided.

Listening skill is widely recognized as one of the most essential components in foreign language acquisition because it provides learners with direct exposure to spoken language and contextual meaning. In English vocabulary development, listening plays a particularly important role because students do not only learn the written form of words, but also how those words sound, how they are used in real communication, and how meaning can change depending on context. For junior high school students, especially those learning English as a foreign language, listening becomes a foundation for developing other language skills such as speaking, reading, and writing. However, in classroom practice, listening is often considered difficult because students must process sounds quickly and understand meaning at the same time.

In the Indonesian junior high school context, many students still experience obstacles when learning English vocabulary through listening activities. These difficulties are influenced by linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and instructional factors. One of the most common problems is the difficulty of recognizing word pronunciation. Many English words are pronounced differently from how they are written, making students confused when they hear them in audio materials. Students may know the written form of a word, but fail to recognize it when it is spoken by a native or fluent speaker. This situation shows that vocabulary mastery is not only related to memorizing word meanings, but also to understanding sound patterns. Students who are rarely exposed to spoken English tend to depend on written texts and teacher explanations, so they find it difficult to identify familiar words in oral form.

Another major challenge faced by students is the fast speech rate used in listening materials. Spoken English often contains connected speech, contractions, reductions, and natural pauses that are unfamiliar to beginner learners. When the audio moves too quickly, students may miss key vocabulary and lose the overall meaning of the message. This problem becomes more serious when students try to translate every word into Indonesian while listening. Since listening requires real-time comprehension, students do not have enough time to stop, reread, or check meanings as they usually do in reading activities. As a result, they may feel left behind, become anxious, and stop paying attention.

Limited context in listening materials also contributes to students' difficulty in acquiring vocabulary. Some listening tasks used in classrooms present isolated sentences, short dialogues, or scripted audio that does not provide enough situational clues. Without clear context, students may struggle to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words. Vocabulary learning becomes more effective when words appear in meaningful situations, supported by visual cues, gestures, background knowledge, or real-life topics. Students may perceive listening as a test rather than as an opportunity to understand messages and discover new vocabulary. Therefore, the selection of listening materials is very important in helping students connect spoken words with meaning.

The lack of effective listening strategies is another important issue found among students. Many learners listen passively without knowing what to focus on before, during, and after listening. They often expect to understand every word, and when they fail, they immediately assume that they are not good at English. In fact, successful listening does not require complete word-by-word understanding. Students need strategies such as predicting content from the topic, identifying key words, paying attention to repeated expressions, using context clues, and confirming meaning after listening. Unfortunately, these strategies are not always taught explicitly. This makes students dependent on repeated playback and direct translation.

Psychological factors also influence students' success in learning vocabulary through listening. Students with low confidence often feel afraid of making mistakes or giving wrong answers after listening. Listening anxiety can reduce concentration and make students focus more on their fear than on the audio input. When students believe that listening is too difficult, they may avoid participating actively in listening activities. This attitude limits their exposure to English sounds and reduces opportunities for vocabulary development. Therefore,

teachers need to create a supportive classroom atmosphere where mistakes are treated as part of learning, not as failure.

The findings of this research indicate that the challenges faced by eighth-grade students in Surabaya are closely related to their limited exposure to authentic spoken English and the teaching methods used in the classroom. Observation showed that students needed more preparation before listening, such as vocabulary introduction, topic discussion, and pronunciation practice. Interviews revealed that students wanted listening materials that were clearer, more interesting, and related to their daily life. These results suggest that vocabulary learning through listening cannot be separated from the quality of input, the level of student readiness, and the teacher's ability to design meaningful activities.

To overcome these challenges, English teachers are encouraged to implement more contextual and interactive teaching methods. Before listening, teachers can introduce key vocabulary, discuss the topic, show pictures, or ask guiding questions to activate students' background knowledge. During listening, students can be asked to identify main ideas, recognize important words, and match spoken vocabulary with images or situations. After listening, teachers can provide follow-up activities such as pronunciation practice, short dialogues, vocabulary journals, or group discussions. The use of audio-visual technology is also highly recommended because videos, animations, songs, and digital learning platforms can provide richer context than audio alone. Visual support helps students understand meaning, remember vocabulary, and stay motivated during learning.

In conclusion, listening skill has a significant role in English vocabulary development, but junior high school students still face various difficulties in acquiring vocabulary through listening activities. The main challenges include recognizing pronunciation, following fast speech, understanding limited context, applying listening strategies, and managing anxiety. These problems show that listening-based vocabulary learning requires careful planning, appropriate materials, and supportive instruction. Teachers should not treat listening merely as a testing activity, but as a learning process that helps students become familiar with spoken English. By providing repeated exposure, meaningful context, strategy training, and audio-visual support, students can gradually improve their listening comprehension and vocabulary mastery. The results may support better English teaching practices and more effective listening activities for junior high school vocabulary development.

2. Research Methods

This research employed a qualitative descriptive method to explore the challenges faced by junior high school students in learning English vocabulary from listening skills. The qualitative approach was chosen to obtain detailed insights into students' real experiences, behaviors, and perceptions when engaging with listening-based vocabulary learning. The participants of this study were 30 eighth-grade students from a public junior high school in Surabaya, Indonesia, selected through purposive sampling based on their active involvement in English listening classes. Data collection was conducted during the second semester of the 2024/2025 academic year in the natural setting of the classroom.

Three primary data collection techniques were used: classroom observations, student interviews, and an English teacher interview. The classroom observations allowed the researcher to directly see the difficulties students experienced during listening activities, while semi-structured interviews with 10 selected students provided deeper insights into their individual struggles and strategies. Additionally, the teacher interview offered further information on instructional practices and teacher perspectives regarding students' vocabulary learning through listening. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, where transcripts were carefully coded and categorized into recurring themes such as difficulty understanding pronunciation, fast speech rates, unfamiliar vocabulary, and limited exposure to English outside the classroom. To ensure data trustworthiness, triangulation was applied by comparing data from multiple sources, and member checking was conducted to verify the accuracy of student responses. Overall, the research design enabled a rich and reliable exploration of the vocabulary learning challenges students face when dealing with English listening materials.

In addition, the researcher maintained ethical considerations throughout the research process. Before the data were collected, permission was obtained from the school authority and the English teacher. The students were also informed about the purpose of the study, the activities involved, and their right to participate voluntarily. Their identities were kept confidential by using codes instead of real names in the interview transcripts and research findings. This step was important to make students feel safe and comfortable when expressing their difficulties honestly.

During the observation process, the researcher focused on students' responses while they listened to English audio materials. Attention was given to their facial expressions, classroom participation, note-taking behavior, and reactions after the audio was played. The researcher also observed how the teacher introduced vocabulary, gave instructions, repeated the audio, and guided students in understanding the listening text. These observation notes helped strengthen the interview data because they showed what actually happened in the classroom.

The student interviews were conducted in a relaxed and simple manner so that participants could explain their experiences. The questions focused on their feelings during listening activities, the types of vocabulary they found difficult, the problems they faced when hearing English pronunciation, and the strategies they used when they did not understand certain words. Meanwhile, the teacher interview explored the teacher's views on students' listening ability, classroom limitations, teaching materials, and possible solutions for improving vocabulary learning.

After all data were collected, the researcher organized the information into meaningful categories. Similar answers and repeated patterns were grouped together to identify the main findings. The analysis was carried out carefully to ensure that the interpretation reflected the students' real experiences. Through this procedure, the study was able to describe not only what challenges students faced, but also why those challenges occurred in listening-based vocabulary learning.

3. Results and Discussions

The findings of this study revealed that junior high school students face several significant challenges in learning English vocabulary through listening activities. Based on classroom observations, student interviews, and the teacher's input, the researcher identified four major themes that represent the core difficulties encountered by the students during the listening process.

First, students struggled with **limited vocabulary knowledge**. When listening to English materials such as conversations or monologues, students often failed to understand the meaning of unfamiliar words, which significantly reduced their comprehension. This lack of vocabulary foundation created confusion and limited their ability to follow the topic of the listening materials, even if they understood some parts.

Second, students found it difficult to **recognize words due to pronunciation issues**. Many students could not identify familiar vocabulary when it was spoken quickly or with unfamiliar accents. This mismatch between written and spoken forms often caused them to miss important words or phrases, leading to incomplete understanding of the overall message.

Third, the **fast pace of spoken English** was reported as a major obstacle. Students often mentioned that they couldn't catch words because the speaker talked too fast. They needed more time to process the sentences, especially when multiple new words appeared in a short amount of time. This affected their ability to infer meaning or retain new vocabulary from the input.

Fourth, students were challenged by the **lack of contextual clues** in audio-only listening tasks. Without supporting visuals, gestures, or written text, they found it difficult to make guesses about word meanings or comprehend the situation being described. Context is crucial for beginner learners, and the absence of it in some tasks made vocabulary learning even more difficult.

Table 1. Identified Challenges in Learning Vocabulary From Listening

No	Theme	Description	Example from Data
1	Limited Vocabulary	Students lack basic vocabulary needed to understand spoken texts.	"I don't know the words. I just listen but I can't catch the idea."
2	Pronunciation Difficulty	Students can't recognize familiar words when spoken naturally.	"I read the word before, but when I hear it, I don't realize it's the same."
3	Speed of Speech	Fast pace of listening makes it hard to follow and process new words.	"It's too fast. I need more time to think about what the word means."
4	Lack of	Absence of visuals or situational context	"If there's a picture, I understand

No	Theme	Description	Example from Data
	Contextual Support	makes guessing word meanings harder.	more. Audio only is confusing.”

Table 1 presents four major themes that represent the challenges faced by junior high school students in learning English vocabulary through listening activities. Each theme is based on data collected from classroom observations and student interviews. The table provides a concise summary of the themes, along with their descriptions and examples drawn directly from student statements.

The first challenge is *limited vocabulary knowledge. Many students reported that they often could not understand the listening material because they lacked the necessary vocabulary to make sense of the spoken content. This limited lexical knowledge hindered their comprehension, even when they were able to recognize some individual words. One student expressed this by saying, “I don’t know the words. I just listen but I can’t catch the idea.” This quote clearly illustrates how a lack of vocabulary can prevent students from following the overall meaning of a listening passage.

The second challenge is related to *pronunciation difficulties. Students frequently mentioned that even when they had previously learned certain words in their reading or writing lessons, they failed to recognize those same words when spoken aloud. This was due to differences in pronunciation, accent, or intonation that were unfamiliar to them. A student commented, “I read the word before, but when I hear it, I don’t realize it’s the same.” This shows a disconnect between written and spoken forms of English, which can create confusion and obstruct vocabulary retention.

The third challenge identified is the *speed of speech* in the listening materials. Many students found it difficult to follow recordings that were spoken too fast, especially when they contained new or unfamiliar vocabulary. They needed more time to process the information and to infer the meaning of words. One student stated, “It’s too fast. I need more time to think about what the word means.” This indicates that fast-paced speech can overwhelm students, particularly those with lower listening proficiency.

The fourth challenge is the lack of effective listening strategies. Based on the interviews, several students admitted that they usually listened to the audio without knowing what they should focus on. They tended to wait for familiar words and became confused when they heard unfamiliar vocabulary. Some students also believed that they had to understand every single word in order to understand the listening passage. This perception made them feel pressured during listening activities. One student explained, “When I miss one word, I feel confused and I cannot continue.” This statement shows that students’ difficulty was not only caused by the listening material itself, but also by the absence of proper strategies to manage the listening process.

In classroom observation, students appeared to rely heavily on the teacher’s explanation after the audio was played. They rarely made predictions before listening or used contextual clues to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words. Most of them waited for the teacher to translate the vocabulary into Indonesian. This condition indicates that students had not yet developed independent listening habits. When they listened to English audio, they did not actively connect the topic, situation, and key words to construct meaning. As a result, listening became a passive activity rather than an active process of understanding spoken language.

Another important point found in the observation was that students needed more preparation before listening. When the teacher played the audio directly, many students looked confused and were not ready to receive the information. However, when the teacher introduced several key words, explained the topic, or showed related pictures before the listening task, students seemed more confident and were able to follow the material better. This shows that pre-listening activities play an important role in helping students build background knowledge. By knowing the topic and some important vocabulary in advance, students can predict what they are going to hear and understand the audio more easily.

The findings also reveal that students’ motivation affected their participation in listening activities. Some students felt that listening was the most difficult part of English learning, so they were less interested in joining the activity. They became quiet, avoided answering questions, and depended on more confident classmates. However, students showed better engagement when the listening materials were related to their daily life, such as school activities, hobbies, food, family, or simple conversations. This suggests that relevant and familiar topics can reduce students’ anxiety and encourage them to participate more actively in vocabulary learning through listening.

The use of audio-visual media was also considered helpful by the students. They stated that videos, pictures, subtitles, and gestures could help them understand the meaning of new words. Compared to audio-only materials, audio-visual materials provide more contextual support because students can see the situation while listening to the language. For example, when students watch a short video of a conversation in a classroom or market, they can connect the spoken words with actions, objects, and expressions. This makes vocabulary easier to remember because students do not only hear the words, but also see how the words are used in context.

Based on these findings, it can be understood that the challenges in learning English vocabulary through listening are interconnected. Limited vocabulary knowledge makes it difficult for students to understand spoken input. Pronunciation differences prevent them from recognizing words they may already know in written form. Fast speech reduces their ability to process meaning, while limited strategies make them unable to handle listening difficulties effectively. These problems become more serious when listening materials are not supported by context or when students do not receive enough guidance before, during, and after listening.

Therefore, English teachers need to design listening activities that are more gradual, contextual, and student-centered. Teachers can begin by introducing important vocabulary, discussing the topic, and giving students a clear listening purpose. During the listening activity, teachers may play the audio more than once and ask students to focus on general meaning before specific details. After listening, students can be guided to review new vocabulary, practice pronunciation, and use the words in simple sentences or dialogues. Through these steps, listening can become a meaningful learning process that supports vocabulary development, rather than a difficult task that only tests students' comprehension.

4. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this research, it can be concluded that junior high school students face various significant challenges in learning English vocabulary through listening activities. These challenges include limited vocabulary mastery, difficulty in recognizing pronunciation, fast pace of spoken English, and lack of contextual support. Each of these problems affects students' ability to acquire and retain new vocabulary, which in turn limits their overall listening comprehension and language development. The findings show that students often struggle to make sense of listening materials without adequate preparation, guidance, or exposure. The teacher's role, the choice of materials, and students' listening habits outside the classroom all contribute to the success or failure of vocabulary acquisition through listening. Thus, learning vocabulary from listening tasks is not only a matter of exposure but also depends on strategic teaching and supportive learning environments. In light of the conclusions above, several suggestions can be made. First, teachers are encouraged to implement pre-listening strategies such as introducing key vocabulary before playing audio materials. This will prepare students to listen with a clearer focus and greater confidence. Second, teachers should use listening materials that are appropriate to students' proficiency level—slower speech rate, clear pronunciation, and contextual support are highly recommended. Third, integrating visual aids or situational contexts (e.g., videos, pictures, gestures) during listening practice can significantly help students infer the meaning of new words. Fourth, schools and educators should motivate students to develop listening habits outside the classroom by engaging with English media such as songs, short videos, or podcasts, which not only improve listening skills but also expose them to authentic vocabulary in use. Lastly, future research could investigate the effectiveness of specific techniques or digital tools in improving vocabulary acquisition through listening in different learning contexts.

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