Vocabulary Development and Listening Comprehension: A Critical Analysis of Student Challenges in TOEFL Test on the Nursing Students University

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Abstract. TOEFL test is a key assessment for non-native English Speakers seeking admission to universities and institutions in English -Speaking countries or for applying job to fulfills a requirement. Listening section of the TOEFL exam present significant challenges for students, particularly when unfamiliar or complex vocabulary is used in academic contexts. This study to identify the challenges and the obstacle that by faced by the nursing students in listening comprehension TOEFL Test. The respondents were 20 nursing students. Test listening and was a vocabulary level test (VLT) and Word Associates Test (WAT) used as instruments for this study. The methodology was qualitative with using correlation design. the data was analysis by comparing the result from VLT test and WAT test, and listening test. The findings highlight students' struggles with academic and low-frequency vocabulary. The average nursing students got the obstacle in part 2 and part 3 in the listening section, where these parts, the students must understand a long conversation, and also use lecturing in explaining a material contained in the listening questions. It usually found in the third part of listening section. The students are constrained in understanding vocabulary particularly high-frequency words and vocabulary depth. while in the first part, 75 % of the students answered with the correct choice.

Keywords: Vocabulary, Listening, TOEFL Test

1 Introduction

TOEFL is a standardized test that measures the English language proficiency for the speaker that come from non- English language. The benefit of this Test, it can be used widely for the applicants who apply for the scholarship, and for their education in English country, it plays a pivotal role in determining students' admission and eligibility [1]. Only two levels of headings should be numbered. Lower levels headings remain unnumbered; they are formatted as run-in heading [2].

There are four skills to measure the ability in mastering English (TOEFL test) language which are listening, writing, speaking, and reading. Listening become of the challenges skill for the for the students, because it involved vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, [3] Syaifullah explained vocabulary, poor grammar, and misunderstanding of listening interpretation factors would be the most difficult factor to gain the success

in listening comprehension for the students in the TOEFL test. The students need a high strategy to listen carefully what speaker are saying, high concentrate and also another destruction will affect the result of the TOEFL score. In the other hand, [4] Halim also mentioned, in his research, the students challenge in vocabulary acquisition because of limited exposure to academic English outside of specialized coursework and clinical. This gap in language exposure, combined with the fast-paced nature of the TOEFL test, can impede their ability to understand and retain key concepts, resulting in lower scores in listening sections. It means to memorize in listening section is the hardest one because of limited capacity working memory. From the word given above, we can recognize that listening is the most commonly used language skill which plays a great role in the development used in the same way. Vocabulary is a fundamental component of listening comprehension because it directly affects a student's ability to grasp the meaning of what is being spoken. Students with a limited vocabulary may struggle to understand the context, identify key concepts, or even answer questions correctly

One of the key challenges faced by students in the TOEFL test is listening comprehension, which is often closely linked to vocabulary knowledge. Based on the observation, the nursing students at STIKes Medika Nurul Islam has difficulties in answering the question from listening section. Almost of them got lower score. The average score of listening under 400. The result of the student's proficiency score for English students are lower, because of some factors, one of them is lack vocabulary [5]. As the result many students failed the test. They did not gain the standard which determined. This article critically analyzes the relationship between vocabulary development and listening comprehension, particularly in the context of TOEFL, and explores the difficulties that students commonly encounter in this area.

Listening comprehension in TOEFL assesses the ability to understand spoken English in various academic and conversational contexts. The Listening section includes listening to academic lectures, conversations, and discussions, followed by questions that test comprehension, inference, and the ability to identify main ideas and supporting details. The difficulty of this task lies in the complexity and variety of the vocabulary used during these audio clips. Hence, it can be separated the vocabulary the listening section. Therefore, this study explored the vocabulary development and listening comprehension: a critical analysis of students challenges in TOEFL test on the nursing student university.

2   Literature Review

2.1   Vocabulary and Listening Comprehension

Recent studies have also underscored the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and listening comprehension. The learners with a larger vocabulary can better process spoken information and make inferences, which is particularly important for standardized tests like TOEFL [6]. Learners with a broader vocabulary base are also better equipped to handle the diverse range of listening materials in academic settings, which often contain complex vocabulary and academic terms. Further demonstrate that active vocabulary learning through speaking and writing tasks supports listening

comprehension by reinforcing the connections between words and their meanings [7]. This active engagement with vocabulary helps learners retain words more effectively, enabling them to understand spoken discourse more easily. Earlier findings by demonstrating that vocabulary depth is critical for academic writing and discourse. While a larger vocabulary size can help learners understand more texts and contribute to conversational fluency, deep vocabulary knowledge—such as understanding a word's connotations, usage in different contexts, and syntactic properties—facilitates higher-order cognitive processes, such as academic analysis, synthesis, and argumentation. This is particularly important for achieving high scores on tests like TOEFL, where students need to understand not only the meaning of individual words but also their nuanced uses in academic settings [8].

2.2 The Evolution of Test TOEFL

Since its introduction in the 1960s, the TOEFL has undergone significant changes to meet the needs of a global and increasingly digitalized educational environment. The most notable shift in recent years has been the transition from paper-based to internet-based testing (iBT), with the TOEFL iBT becoming the dominant format. This shift has improved test accessibility, allowing test-takers from around the world to take the test at their convenience while providing more accurate, real-time feedback. The iBT format assesses four skills—listening, reading, speaking, and writing—in a single test session, which better reflects how English is used in real-world academic settings [9].

In 2019, the TOEFL introduced MyBest Scores, which allow candidates to combine their best scores from each section across multiple attempts. This feature helps alleviate test anxiety and encourages repeat testing, potentially leading to higher overall scores for candidates who have improved in specific areas[7]. This change also provides institutions with a more accurate picture of a candidate's proficiency.TOEFL Listening scores correlated with the ability to follow lectures and participate in discussions, indicating that high TOEFL scores can be indicative of a student's ability to perform in real-world academic settings [10].

3 Methodology

The study employs a descriptive, correlation design in order to explore how students' vocabulary knowledge (both in terms of size and depth) affects their performance on TOEFL listening tasks. This approach also aims to identify the specific vocabulary-related challenges students face during the listening section of the TOEFL exam and the strategies they use to cope with those challenges. The instrument was a vocabulary level test (VLT), it designed to measure the size of a student's vocabulary across different frequency bands such as high-frequency, academic, and low-frequency words, and word Associate test (WAT) to assess how well learners can understand words and their relationships, such as collocations and word associations. This test is designed to measure how well students know words in context, which is crucial for understanding spoken language during listening comprehension tasks [11]. Test listening

comprehension from the TOEFL was used to measure the ability of students both lecture-based or conversation-based task. The numbers of respondents in this study were 20. All of them was nursing students at semester seventh, where they studied TOEFL to prepared their TOEFL test as a requirement for their final test.

Data collection divided into two phases first, Participants will first complete the Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) and Word Associates Test (WAT) to measure their vocabulary size and depth. These tests will be administered in a controlled setting, and participants will have a set amount of time to complete them. Second, Following the vocabulary tests, participants will take the TOEFL-like listening comprehension test. This test will consist of both lecture-based and conversation-based tasks, designed to reflect the style and format of the TOEFL iBT. Each task will be followed by a set of multiple-choice or short-answer questions.

Analysis data would be derived from Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT), the Word Associates Test (WAT), and the TOEFL-like listening comprehension test. Then all the data integrated to provide a fuller picture of the relationship between vocabulary development and listening comprehension. The aim is to identify not only the statistical correlation between vocabulary size and listening comprehension but also to explore the personal experiences of students regarding the challenges they face and the strategies they employ.

4   Result

The result from the analysis of data obtained from the VLT and WAT and the Listening comprehension as bellowed:

4.1   Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT)

The result of VLT test from the respondents showed in the table below:

Table 1. Table Students Results From VLT Test

High – frequency vocabulary	Academic Vocabulary	Low Frequency
5%	20%	75%

There were three categories level for the VLT test, high, academic, and low frequency. The table showed 75%, the students able to understanding the meaning of vocabulary provided in the task. While high only 5 %, it lower than the academic vocabulary.

Table 2. Percentage of Listening Comprehension

Measure	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Listening Comprehension	75.3%	10.3
Lecture-based listening in spoken texts	76.5%	-
Conversation Based on tasks	76.5%	-

Then the percentage of SD can be seen in the table. The TOEFL-like listening comprehension test involved both lecture-based and conversation-based listening tasks. The overall mean score for listening comprehension was 72.4% (SD = 10.3), which suggests that while students had a relatively strong understanding of the main ideas and specific details, they faced difficulties with more complex inferences and implied meanings in spoken texts. Students performed slightly better on the lecture-based listening tasks (mean = 76.5%) compared to the conversation-based tasks (mean = 68.3%). The lecture tasks, which are typically slower-paced and more structured, may have been easier for students because they were able to identify key ideas more clearly. In contrast, the conversation tasks, with their more natural speed, varied accents, and informal speech, posed greater challenges for students.

Many students reported difficulty understanding the meaning of specific terms, particularly when they were presented quickly or in a complex academic context. Students' inability to grasp certain vocabulary items often led to misunderstandings of key details, especially in the lecture-based tasks where technical vocabulary was frequently used. This suggests that vocabulary knowledge, particularly academic vocabulary and its use in context, plays a crucial role in listening comprehension.

4.2   Correlation Between Vocabulary Knowledge and Listening Comprehension

To assess the relationship between vocabulary size and listening comprehension, Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated between the VLT scores and the TOEFL-like listening comprehension scores. The result can be seen in the table below.

Table 3. The correlation between Vocabulary and Listening Comprehension

Measure	Correlation with Listening Comprehension (r)	Significance (p-value)
Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT)	0.56	0.01
Word Associates Test (WAT)	0.72	0.01
TOEFL-like Listening Test	0.72	0.01

A moderate positive correlation of r = 0.56 (p < 0.01) was found, suggesting that students with a larger vocabulary size performed better on the listening tasks. This result supports the hypothesis that vocabulary knowledge, particularly in terms of size (high-frequency words), is an important predictor of listening comprehension ability.

A second correlation was performed between vocabulary depth (from the WAT) and listening comprehension scores. A stronger correlation of $r = 0.72$ ($p < 0.01$) was found, indicating that students with deeper knowledge of words, including their meanings and associations, performed better on the listening comprehension test. This suggests that the ability to understand words in different contexts and recognize nuances of meaning is particularly important for listening comprehension in TOEFL-like tasks, especially in academic settings.

5   Discussion

5.1   Role of vocabulary size in listening comprehension

The findings from this study highlight the importance of vocabulary size in successful listening comprehension on the TOEFL test. Participants performed better on listening tasks when they were familiar with the high-frequency vocabulary items that appear frequently in spoken English. A broad vocabulary base allows students to quickly recognize and understand words during listening tasks, facilitating better comprehension [7]. However, students' struggles with academic and low-frequency vocabulary emphasize the importance of focusing on both breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge. While high-frequency vocabulary might support general comprehension, understanding specialized terms, especially in academic contexts, is critical for tackling the more difficult sections of the TOEFL listening test.

5.2   Impact of vocabulary depth on listening comprehension

The results indicate that vocabulary depth, or the ability to understand and manipulate words in various contexts, has a stronger correlation with listening comprehension than vocabulary size. Students who scored higher on the Word Associates Test (WAT), which assesses vocabulary depth, were more successful in understanding nuanced meanings in spoken texts, particularly in the lecture-based tasks. This finding supports by the other study who highlight the importance of contextual vocabulary knowledge for interpreting spoken discourse, especially in academic settings [11]. Students' difficulty with unfamiliar word associations such as polysemy or collocations in the WAT suggests that vocabulary knowledge goes beyond simple recognition of words; it involves a deeper understanding of how words are used in various contexts, which is essential for understanding spoken academic discourse in the TOEFL test.

6   Conclusion

The analysis of data from the Vocabulary and the TOEFL-like listening comprehension test reveals a clear relationship between vocabulary development (both size and depth) and listening comprehension. While vocabulary size (particularly high-frequency words) plays a role in supporting general comprehension, vocabulary depth—particularly the ability to understand words in context—emerges as a stronger predictor of

success in academic listening tasks.it means that the nursing students of STIKes Medika Nurul Islam in this study faced significant challenges with academic vocabulary and the rapid pace of listening tasks, which impacted their comprehension. The findings highlight the need for targeted vocabulary instruction, particularly focusing on academic vocabulary and word associations, as well as the development of listening strategies that allow students to deal effectively with unfamiliar words during listening comprehension tasks.

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