

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF LISTENING LEARNING IN ENGLISH: A QUALITATIVE DESCRIPTIVE STUDY ON CHALLENGES, STRATEGIES, AND ATTITUDES

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ABSTRACT

The urgency of this research arises from the gap between the importance of listening skills in academic and professional communication and students' low self-confidence and learning outcomes in this area. Students' perceptions of the listening learning process play a crucial role in English competency achievement. The objectives of this study are: (1) to describe students' perceptions of English listening learning; (2) to identify the main challenges students face in the listening learning process; (3) to explore the strategies students use to overcome listening difficulties; and (4) to analyze students' affective responses to English listening learning activities in class and independently. This study used a descriptive qualitative method. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and open-ended questionnaires. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques, which included the following stages: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. This study yielded a comprehensive picture of students' perceptions of English listening learning through thematic analysis of data from 20 participants. Four main themes were identified: (1) The students have different opinions about listening, but most of them agree that listening is challenging; (2) multilevel challenges encompassing linguistic, cognitive, and affective dimensions. The obstacles faced by a person do not only come from one source, but occur at three different levels at once, namely the language level, thought processes, and feelings; (3) There are many different ways used to achieve a goal, but most of these methods rely on digital-based tools, devices, or systems. (4) a motivational landscape characterized by conditional anxiety but also motivation responsive to the relevance of the material. These findings contribute to listening pedagogy by emphasizing the importance of integrating authentic listening materials, explicit strategy instruction, structured digital resources, and supportive assessment practices to enhance students' listening engagement and confidence in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Affective responses, Challenges, Listening Skills, Learning Strategies, Students' Perceptions

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INTRODUCTION

Listening is one of the four fundamental skills in English language learning and plays a crucial role in communication, language acquisition, and academic success. As a receptive skill, listening provides learners with essential linguistic input through which they process phonological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic information before producing spoken or written language. In EFL contexts, listening competence contributes significantly to communicative ability, vocabulary development, pronunciation awareness, and overall language proficiency (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021; Rost, 2016). Rather than functioning as a passive activity, listening is widely understood as an active and complex cognitive process involving interpretation, inferencing, prediction, and meaning construction under real-time conditions (Field, 2008). Since spoken language serves as one of the primary channels for communication in academic and social interaction, effective listening competence becomes essential for learners' successful participation in English language learning environments.

Despite its importance, listening is consistently perceived as one of the most challenging skills among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Previous studies have shown that students frequently experience difficulties in understanding spoken English due to rapid speech, unfamiliar accents, connected speech, limited vocabulary knowledge, and the need to process information immediately without opportunities for repetition (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Kim, 2022; Rungsinanont, 2024). In many cases, these linguistic difficulties are intensified by cognitive and affective factors, including limited concentration, low confidence, and listening anxiety. Recent studies have further demonstrated that students' listening difficulties often emerge from the interaction between linguistic limitations and emotional pressure, particularly when learners are exposed to unfamiliar spoken input or formal listening assessment situations (Chen et al., 2023; Thompson & Khawaja, 2016; Tran et al., 2025). As a result, many learners perceive listening as cognitively demanding and emotionally stressful, which may reduce engagement and listening confidence.

In the Indonesian EFL context, listening remains a persistent challenge, particularly at the tertiary level where students are expected to comprehend authentic spoken materials and participate in academic communication. Studies conducted in Indonesian higher education contexts indicate that students frequently struggle with speech rate, unfamiliar vocabulary, accent variation, and concentration difficulties during listening activities (Marzona, 2023; Permatasari et al., 2023). At the same time, listening instruction in many EFL classrooms continues to emphasize listening assessment rather than listening development, resulting in limited opportunities for students to strengthen listening competence through meaningful and strategy-based learning experiences. As emphasized by Kaur (2014), listening instruction may sometimes become more focused on "testing listening" than "teaching listening," thereby restricting students' opportunities to develop confidence and effective listening strategies in authentic communicative contexts. More recent evidence also suggests that students' listening experiences are strongly shaped by classroom practices, emotional experiences, and access to meaningful learning resources, which together influence motivation and attitudes toward listening learning (Pham & Le, 2025).

Beyond linguistic and cognitive challenges, students' perceptions of listening learning play a crucial role in shaping their engagement, confidence, and willingness to participate in listening activities. Learners' perceptions influence how they interpret listening tasks, respond to difficulties, and evaluate their own listening competence. Previous studies have reported that EFL students often perceive listening as both challenging and beneficial, particularly when listening activities provide meaningful exposure to authentic language use and opportunities for gradual comprehension development (Ma'fiah et al., 2021; Nuralisa et al., 2025). In Indonesian EFL contexts, students generally demonstrate positive attitudes toward listening learning despite experiencing considerable comprehension difficulties, especially when supported by engaging materials and technology-enhanced learning environments (Dewi, 2023; Sudewi & Isma, 2023). Such findings suggest that students' perceptions of listening are

not merely shaped by difficulty levels but also by learning experiences, classroom support, and opportunities for meaningful listening practice.

To cope with listening difficulties, students frequently employ various metacognitive and self-regulated listening strategies, including repeated listening, contextual inferencing, note-taking, predicting meaning, and monitoring comprehension. Listening comprehension is increasingly understood as a metacognitive process in which learners actively regulate their understanding through planning, monitoring, and evaluating listening performance (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021). Research has shown that metacognitive awareness and self-regulated listening practices help learners manage comprehension breakdowns, improve confidence, and sustain engagement in listening tasks (Mansouri & Graham, 2025; Robillos & Bustos, 2022). At the same time, digital listening environments have increasingly become important spaces for listening development. Students frequently use online videos, podcasts, streaming platforms, and technology-enhanced listening applications to supplement classroom learning, gain exposure to authentic spoken English, and repeatedly access listening materials according to their learning pace (Taghizadeh & Emam, 2023; Tran et al., 2024). Recent studies also indicate that technology-supported listening environments may reduce listening anxiety, improve engagement, and foster greater learner autonomy in listening development (Dewi, 2023; Xiao, 2025).

Several previous studies have examined listening learning in EFL contexts, including students' listening difficulties, perceptions of listening instruction, technology-assisted listening, and metacognitive listening strategies. In Indonesia, existing studies have explored students' difficulties in listening comprehension, particularly related to speech rate, unfamiliar vocabulary, concentration, and accent variation (Marzona, 2023; Permatasari et al., 2023). Other studies have investigated students' perceptions of digital listening environments and technology-supported listening instruction, reporting generally positive responses toward the use of YouTube, virtual listening classes, and technology-enhanced listening activities (Dewi, 2023; Ma'fiah et al., 2021; Sudewi & Isma, 2023). Meanwhile, studies on metacognitive listening have emphasized the importance of listening strategies and self-regulated learning in helping students overcome listening comprehension difficulties (Robillos & Bustos, 2022).

Despite these contributions, previous studies tend to focus on isolated dimensions of listening learning, such as listening difficulties, digital listening tools, metacognitive strategies, or learner anxiety separately. Limited qualitative studies have holistically explored how university students perceive listening learning through the interconnected dimensions of perceptions, challenges, coping strategies, and attitudes, particularly among English Language Education students in Indonesian higher education contexts. Moreover, while previous studies have documented listening challenges, less attention has been given to understanding how students interpret these experiences and actively negotiate listening difficulties through self-regulated and technology-supported learning practices. Therefore, a more comprehensive qualitative exploration is needed to understand students' listening experiences beyond descriptive reports of difficulties or performance outcomes.

To conceptually understand students' listening experiences, this study draws upon listening comprehension's theory and the metacognitive listening framework. Listening comprehension is understood as an active meaning-making process involving decoding, inferencing, prediction, and interpretation of spoken input (Field, 2009; Rost, 2016). Furthermore, the metacognitive listening framework emphasizes learners' ability to regulate listening processes through planning, monitoring, problem-solving, and evaluation, allowing learners to manage comprehension difficulties more strategically (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021; Teng, 2020). These frameworks provide an important lens for understanding how students experience listening learning, perceive challenges, and develop coping strategies within their academic context.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to explore students' perceptions of listening learning among English Language Education students at a private higher education institution in eastern Indonesia. Specifically, the study seeks to examine students' perceptions of listening learning, the challenges they encounter, the strategies they employ to cope with

listening difficulties, and their attitudes toward listening learning. The findings are expected to contribute to listening pedagogy by providing insights into how listening instruction may better support students' listening development, confidence, and engagement in Indonesian higher education contexts.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore students' perceptions of English listening learning in depth, comprehensively, and contextually. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' subjective experiences, challenges, strategies, and attitudes toward listening learning within their natural educational context. As noted by Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative inquiry enables researchers to examine participants' perspectives and meanings regarding a particular phenomenon in depth rather than through numerical measurement.

The study was conducted at English Education Study Program, University of Muhammadiyah Palopo. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants based on criteria relevant to the study objectives. Participants were required to: (1) be active students in the English Language Education program, (2) have completed at least one listening course, and (3) be willing to participate voluntarily in the study. A total of 20 students participated in this research, ranging in age from 18 to 22 years. The participants consisted of seven students from the second semester, six students from the fourth semester, and seven students from the sixth semester. The inclusion of students from different academic levels was intended to provide broader insights into listening learning experiences across stages of study and to capture potential variations in listening perceptions, strategies, and challenges.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

Demographic Variable	Category	n
Age Range	18–22 years	20
Semester	Semester II	7
	Semester IV	6
	Semester VI	7
Total Participants		20

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and open-ended questionnaires to enable data triangulation and strengthen the credibility of findings. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method because they allowed participants to express their experiences and perspectives in detail. The interview guideline was informed by listening comprehension theory and the metacognitive listening framework, particularly concerning learners' listening challenges, strategy use, self-regulation, and attitudes toward listening learning (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021; Teng, 2020). The interview protocol was also developed based on the research questions to ensure alignment between the study objectives and the collected data. Interviews were conducted individually with all participants, lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent for subsequent verbatim transcription.

Classroom observations were conducted to obtain contextual insights into students' listening learning experiences and classroom behaviors. The observations took place over four weeks and consisted of 12 observation sessions across listening classes, with three sessions conducted for each class. Each teaching and learning session lasted approximately 90–100 minutes. Observational data focused on students' classroom engagement, responses to listening materials, participation patterns, strategy use, and classroom interactions during

listening activities. Field notes were used to document classroom dynamics and behavioral patterns relevant to students' listening experiences.

In addition, open-ended questionnaires were administered to all participants before the interviews to gather baseline information regarding students' perceptions, listening difficulties, independent learning practices, and attitudes toward listening instruction. The questionnaire data functioned as preliminary insights that informed the interview process and supported methodological triangulation. Responses from the questionnaires were coded thematically and compared with interview and observation findings to identify converging patterns, inconsistencies, and complementary insights across data sources.

Data analysis followed the six-stage thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022), including: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, observation notes, and questionnaire responses; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) identification of preliminary themes; (4) review and refinement of themes; (5) definition and naming of themes; and (6) production of the final analytical report. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed alongside observation notes and questionnaire responses through manual coding procedures. Data from each source were analyzed separately before being integrated through triangulation to strengthen interpretive rigor and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the study, the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were applied, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through triangulation across interviews, classroom observations, and questionnaire data, as well as member checking by confirming interpretations with participants. Triangulation was conducted by comparing data from the same source using different techniques. Data from interviews on the four themes were then checked by observing student behavior in class and then validated with a questionnaire administered to students. The number of participants is sufficient to build a coherent justification for the theme without being excessive. Data triangulation focuses on the quality of confirmation, not the absolute number namely minimum 2-3 informants (1 main informant + 1-2 additional informants) (Anggraeni, 2016). Triangulation is an ongoing process, not a one-time event. It begins with data collection, then transcribes, then codes, and ends with final validation with participants (Abdillah, 2018). Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the research setting and participants, while dependability and confirmability were strengthened through systematic documentation of the research process and peer discussion with the co-authors during data interpretation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports the results derived from thematic analysis of the interview data and the findings of this study are organized into four interconnected themes derived from thematic analysis of interview data, classroom observations, and open-ended questionnaires. These themes include: (1) students' perceptions of listening learning, (2) challenges in listening learning, (3) strategies employed to overcome listening difficulties, and (4) students' affective responses to listening learning. Rather than presenting findings separately from discussion, each theme is interpreted in relation to relevant literature and theoretical perspectives to provide a deeper understanding of students' listening experiences in the context of English Language Education.

Table 2. Summary of Themes and Supporting Data Sources

Theme	Main Focus	Supporting Data Sources
Theme 1	Students' perceptions of listening learning	Interviews, observations, questionnaires

Theme 2	Listening challenges	Interviews, observations, questionnaires
Theme 3	Listening strategies	Interviews, observations, questionnaires
Theme 4	Affective responses	Interviews, observations, questionnaires

Students' Perceptions of Listening Learning

Findings from interviews, classroom observations, and open-ended questionnaires revealed that students generally perceived listening as one of the most challenging yet essential aspects of English language learning. Although a small number of participants expressed confidence in their listening ability, most students described listening as cognitively demanding, emotionally challenging, and highly dependent on repeated practice and contextual familiarity. This finding suggests that students' perceptions of listening are not entirely negative but rather characterized by tension between perceived difficulty and recognition of its importance.

Many participants associated listening difficulties with the real-time nature of spoken language, in which information must be processed immediately without the opportunity to revisit meaning as in reading. S3 explained:

Excerpt 1

"Listening is definitely the hardest for me. When I read, I can go back and re-read. But when I listen, everything happens so fast and I can't pause the speaker in real life." (S3, Semester VI)

This statement illustrates students' awareness of the cognitive demands involved in listening comprehension. Unlike receptive reading activities, listening requires learners to process spoken language instantly while simultaneously decoding sounds, recognizing vocabulary, and constructing meaning. According to listening comprehension theory, listening is an active meaning-making process that involves continuous interpretation and inference under time constraints (Field, 2009; Rost, 2015). For many participants, the inability to control the pace of spoken input increased feelings of difficulty and uncertainty.

Interestingly, students' perceptions were not uniformly negative. Several participants viewed listening as difficult but improvable, particularly when they engaged in frequent exposure to authentic listening materials. For example, one participant (S7) stated:

Excerpt 2

"I used to hate listening class. But now that I use podcasts every day, I feel it's challenging but I can actually improve. It just takes a lot of practice." (S7, Semester VI)

This finding in excerpt 2 indicates that students' perceptions of listening may evolve through repeated exposure and self-directed practice. From a metacognitive perspective, learners who regularly engage with authentic listening input tend to develop greater awareness of listening processes and become more confident in managing comprehension difficulties (Vandergrift & Goh, 2022; Teng, 2020). The participant's statement suggests that listening challenges do not necessarily discourage learning; instead, they may foster persistence when students possess effective coping strategies and sufficient exposure.

Another participant (S10) highlighted the role of digital media in shaping positive perceptions of listening:

Excerpt 3

"I enjoy listening more than speaking. When I watch Netflix with subtitles, I feel like I can understand a lot. But formal listening tests still make me nervous." (S10, Semester VI)

This quotation in excerpt 3 reveals an important distinction between authentic and evaluative listening contexts. While students may feel relatively confident during self-paced digital listening activities, anxiety tends to emerge in formal assessment situations. This finding aligns with studies suggesting that listening anxiety often intensifies when learners perceive high evaluative pressure or fear misunderstanding spoken input (Chen et al., 2023; Thompson & Khawaja, 2016). It also suggests that students' listening perceptions are shaped not only by linguistic competence but also by classroom assessment practices.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that students' perceptions of listening learning are multidimensional and dynamic. Listening was commonly perceived as difficult due to its cognitive complexity, rapid processing demands, and emotional pressure. However, students also recognized listening as a skill that could improve through repeated practice, authentic exposure, and strategic learning efforts. These findings extend previous studies on EFL listening perceptions (Isaadah, 2023; Nuralisa et al., 2025) by showing that English Language Education students in the Indonesian higher education context experience listening not simply as a linguistic challenge but as an interaction between cognitive demands, emotional responses, and learning opportunities.

These findings also provide an important foundation for understanding the challenges and strategies discussed in subsequent themes. Students' perceptions of listening difficulty appeared closely related to the specific barriers they encountered, such as rapid speech, unfamiliar accents, and listening anxiety, which in turn shaped the learning strategies they adopted to cope with listening demands. Pedagogically, this suggests that listening instruction should move beyond assessment-oriented practices and provide supportive, strategy-based learning environments that encourage gradual confidence development and authentic listening engagement. The findings regarding students' perceptions of listening as cognitively demanding and emotionally challenging provide an important basis for understanding the specific difficulties encountered during listening learning. These perceptions were closely associated with the linguistic, cognitive, and affective barriers explored in the following theme.

Challenges in Listening Learning

Findings from interviews, classroom observations, and questionnaire responses revealed that students experienced listening difficulties across three interconnected dimensions: linguistic, cognitive, and affective. Although students frequently described specific barriers separately, the findings suggest that these challenges rarely occurred in isolation. Instead, students' listening difficulties emerged through the interaction of limited linguistic knowledge, real-time processing demands, and emotional responses during listening activities.

Among the challenges reported, rapid speech rate emerged as the most persistent source of difficulty. Many participants explained that they struggled to process spoken language quickly enough to understand meaning while simultaneously attempting to recognize unfamiliar words and infer context. One participant (S2) stated:

Excerpt 4

"Native speakers speak too fast. I can catch individual words but by the time I process one sentence, the speaker has already moved on to the next three sentences." (S2, Semester IV)

This quotation illustrates the heavy cognitive processing demands involved in second language listening. Students were often able to recognize isolated vocabulary items; however, they experienced difficulty integrating linguistic information into coherent meaning because spoken input moved too quickly. According to listening comprehension theory, listening requires simultaneous decoding, interpretation, and meaning construction under strict time constraints, making speech rate a particularly significant obstacle for EFL learners (Field, 2009; Rost, 2015). In this study, rapid speech frequently triggered comprehension breakdowns, particularly among lower-semester students who reported less exposure to authentic spoken English.

In addition to speech rate, students frequently described difficulties understanding unfamiliar accents and connected speech patterns. Several participants reported that listening materials featuring British, Australian, or unfamiliar English varieties increased confusion and reduced confidence during comprehension tasks. As one participant explained:

Excerpt 5

"British accents are very different from what we learn in class. The first time I heard a British professor on a TED Talk, I couldn't understand almost anything even though my vocabulary is okay." (S9, Semester IV)

This statement suggests that listening difficulty is not solely determined by vocabulary knowledge. Even students who considered themselves linguistically prepared struggled when encountering unfamiliar pronunciation patterns and accent variation. This finding supports previous research demonstrating that accent diversity may increase listening complexity because learners must adjust to unfamiliar phonological features and speech rhythms in spoken input (Isaadah, 2023; Li & Zhao, 2025). For English Language Education students, whose classroom exposure often relies on relatively standardized listening materials, authentic varieties of spoken English may create additional barriers to comprehension.

Limited vocabulary also emerged as a recurring challenge, particularly when students encountered unfamiliar lexical items during listening tasks. Several participants explained that missing one unfamiliar word often disrupted overall comprehension because they became preoccupied with interpreting individual items rather than maintaining attention to the broader message. One student reflected:

Excerpt 6

"When I don't know a word, I stop and think about it. Then I miss the next part. It's like a domino—one unknown word that makes everything fall apart." (S8, Semester II)

This quotation reflects what listening scholars describe as cognitive overload, where learners allocate excessive attention to individual lexical items and consequently lose track of ongoing meaning construction (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021; Meng et al., 2023). Such findings suggest that listening difficulties among EFL learners are often cumulative rather than isolated. Linguistic limitations, particularly vocabulary constraints, may intensify cognitive burdens and reduce learners' ability to employ effective inferencing strategies during listening.

Importantly, the findings also demonstrated that listening challenges were strongly influenced by affective factors. Anxiety frequently emerged during formal listening assessments, where students expressed fear of misunderstanding information, missing answers, or failing to keep pace with the audio. Classroom observations further indicated that students often displayed visible signs of frustration, hesitation, or disengagement when exposed to unfamiliar or rapidly delivered listening materials. This finding aligns with research suggesting that listening anxiety significantly influences learners' ability to process spoken language and may negatively affect confidence, concentration, and overall comprehension performance (Chen et al., 2023; Thompson & Khawaja, 2016).

Taken together, the findings reveal that students' listening difficulties should not be understood solely as linguistic problems. Instead, listening challenges appeared as multidimensional experiences shaped by the interaction of language proficiency, cognitive processing demands, and emotional responses. This finding extends previous studies on EFL listening difficulties by illustrating how English Language Education students in an Indonesian higher education context experience listening challenges not as isolated obstacles, but as interconnected struggles that influence confidence, motivation, and learning behavior. Furthermore, the findings help explain why many students later adopted compensatory strategies, such as repeated listening, contextual inference, and digital listening practices, to manage listening difficulties more effectively.

Pedagogically, these findings suggest the importance of designing listening instruction that gradually exposes students to authentic speech variation while simultaneously reducing unnecessary evaluative pressure. Lecturers may also need to provide explicit listening strategy training, scaffold vocabulary support, and encourage repeated listening opportunities to help students cope with the cognitive and affective demands of listening comprehension.

As students encountered various listening challenges, they did not remain passive recipients of difficulty. Instead, many participants actively developed strategies to manage comprehension breakdowns and improve listening performance. The following theme discusses how students adapted to listening demands through both metacognitive regulation and digital learning practices.

Students' Strategies in Overcoming Listening Difficulties

Findings revealed that students employed a variety of strategies to cope with listening difficulties, particularly those related to rapid speech, unfamiliar vocabulary, and listening anxiety. Rather than remaining passive recipients of classroom instruction, many participants actively developed personal strategies to manage comprehension breakdowns and improve listening performance. These strategies ranged from repeated listening and contextual inference to extensive use of digital resources such as YouTube, podcasts, Netflix, and language learning applications. Importantly, the findings suggest that students' listening strategies emerged as adaptive responses to the challenges discussed in the previous theme.

Repeated listening was among the most commonly reported strategies. Many students described listening to the same audio several times to gradually build understanding, moving from general comprehension toward more detailed interpretation. One participant explained:

Excerpt 7

"I always play the audio at least three times. The first time just to get the general idea, the second time to focus on details, and the third time to check what I missed." (S1, Semester IV)

This quotation illustrates a metacognitive approach to listening in which students consciously regulate their comprehension process through planning, monitoring, and evaluation. Rather than expecting immediate understanding, participants demonstrated awareness that listening comprehension develops progressively through repeated exposure. According to Vandergrift and Goh (2021), successful listeners often engage in metacognitive regulation by monitoring comprehension difficulties and adjusting strategies to improve understanding. In this study, repeated listening appeared to function not only as a comprehension strategy but also as a confidence-building mechanism that reduced anxiety associated with missing information.

Another prominent finding concerned students' increasing reliance on digital listening resources. Many participants reported independently using YouTube, podcasts, TED Talks, streaming platforms, and language-learning applications to supplement classroom learning.

These resources were often chosen based on personal interests, allowing students to engage with listening materials more meaningfully and at their own pace. One participant stated:

Excerpt 8

"YouTube is my best teacher for listening. I watch videos about topics I love—technology, gaming—and because I'm interested, I pay more attention than in class." (S14, Semester IV)

This finding highlights the important role of learner autonomy in listening development. Students appeared more motivated when listening to activities aligned with their interests and when they could regulate the pace and frequency of exposure independently. Previous research similarly suggests that digital listening environments support autonomous learning by providing authentic input, repeated exposure, and greater learner control over listening experiences (Vy & Jinming, 2024; Yang, 2021). In the present study, digital platforms did not merely function as supplementary tools; rather, they became essential learning spaces where students experimented with strategies, increased listening exposure, and gradually strengthened confidence.

Contextual inference also emerged as an important coping strategy, particularly when students encountered unfamiliar vocabulary. Rather than stopping to translate every unknown word, several participants attempted to infer meaning through surrounding information, topic familiarity, and contextual clues. As one student described:

Excerpt 9

"When I can't catch a word, I use the surrounding context. The words before and after usually give me enough clues to figure out the meaning. This strategy has helped me a lot." (S5, Semester VI)

This quotation demonstrates the development of strategic listening awareness in which students actively construct meaning despite incomplete understanding. From a metacognitive perspective, successful listeners are often characterized not by perfect comprehension but by their ability to tolerate ambiguity and employ inferencing strategies effectively (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021; Teng, 2020). Interestingly, participants from higher semesters appeared more likely to report such strategies, suggesting that listening experience and increased exposure may contribute to greater strategic flexibility over time.

Taken together, the findings suggest that students' listening strategies functioned as adaptive mechanisms for managing linguistic, cognitive, and emotional challenges. The strategies adopted by students reflected not only attempts to improve comprehension but also efforts to reduce frustration, increase confidence, and sustain motivation in listening learning. This finding extends previous studies on EFL listening strategies (Isaadah, 2023; Li & Zhao, 2025) by illustrating how English Language Education students in Indonesian higher education contexts strategically negotiate listening difficulties through both metacognitive regulation and digital learning practices.

Pedagogically, these findings indicate the importance of explicitly integrating listening strategy instruction into classroom practice. Rather than focusing predominantly on testing outcomes, listening instruction may benefit from helping students develop metacognitive awareness, repeated listening habits, contextual inferencing skills, and purposeful use of digital listening resources. Such practices may support students in becoming more independent and confident listeners over time.

The strategies students adopted appeared closely related to their emotional experiences and motivation toward listening learning. Students who developed effective coping strategies often demonstrated stronger confidence and engagement, whereas unresolved listening difficulties frequently intensified anxiety and reduced motivation. This relationship is further explored in the following theme.

Students' Affective Responses to Listening Learning

Findings revealed that students' affective responses to listening learning were characterized by a complex interaction between motivation, anxiety, confidence, and perceived relevance of listening materials. Although many participants acknowledged the importance of listening for English proficiency and future communication needs, their motivation to engage in listening activities was often conditional upon learning experiences, topic relevance, and emotional comfort. This suggests that students' attitudes toward listening were neither entirely positive nor negative but fluctuated according to classroom experiences and perceived listening success.

One recurring finding was the strong influence of listening anxiety on students' attitudes toward listening activities, particularly in formal classroom assessments. Several participants described feelings of nervousness, fear, and mental pressure when required to understand spoken English under time constraints. One participant explained:

Excerpt 10

"During the listening test, my heart beats very fast and my mind goes blank. I know I have studied the vocabulary, but when the audio starts, I forget everything." (S8, Semester II)

This quotation demonstrates how affective barriers may interfere with listening comprehension even when learners possess adequate linguistic preparation. Listening anxiety appeared to reduce students' confidence and cognitive focus, limiting their ability to process spoken information effectively. Consistent with previous research, anxiety in listening contexts often emerges due to fear of misunderstanding, rapid processing demands, and evaluative classroom pressure (Chen et al., 2023; Thompson & Khawaja, 2016). In this study, anxiety was especially evident among lower-semester students, suggesting that limited listening experience may intensify emotional pressure during listening tasks.

Despite these challenges, students' motivation toward listening learning remained evident, particularly when materials were perceived as meaningful, authentic, and personally relevant. Several participants expressed greater enthusiasm when listening activities involved real-life conversations, podcasts, films, or topics aligned with personal interests. One participant stated:

Excerpt 11

"When the topic is interesting and the materials use authentic conversations—not just textbook recordings—I feel more motivated to focus. Boring topics make me anxious." (S6, Semester IV)

This statement indicates that students' motivation was strongly shaped by material relevance and authenticity. Authentic listening materials appeared to reduce anxiety while simultaneously increasing engagement and willingness to persist through comprehension difficulties. This finding aligns with studies emphasizing that authentic materials can enhance learner motivation because they increase contextual relevance, reduce learning resistance, and expose students to meaningful language use (Husnawati et al., 2024; Kaur, 2014; Nuralisa et al., 2025). It also reinforces findings related to students' strategies in overcoming listening difficulties, where students independently sought authentic listening input through digital platforms outside classroom settings.

Interestingly, some participants demonstrated strong intrinsic motivation toward listening learning despite the difficulties they encountered. These students described listening not as a compulsory academic task but as a personally meaningful activity linked to enjoyment and self-improvement. One participant explained:

Excerpt 12

"I practice listening for about 45 minutes every day using podcasts. Not because the teacher told me to, but because I genuinely enjoy it. My confidence has improved a lot this year." (S20, Semester VI)

This quotation reflects the development of autonomous learning behaviors and increasing self-efficacy. From a metacognitive perspective, students who engage regularly in independent listening practice tend to develop stronger awareness of listening processes and greater confidence in regulating comprehension difficulties (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021; Teng, 2020). Notably, students with stronger motivation also appeared more likely to employ strategic listening behaviors, suggesting a close relationship between motivation and strategy use.

Overall, the findings indicate that students' motivation toward listening learning was highly dynamic and context-sensitive. While listening anxiety frequently reduced confidence and engagement, authentic materials, supportive learning environments, and opportunities for autonomous practice often strengthened motivation and persistence. Importantly, this theme illustrates how students' attitudes toward listening were shaped by the cumulative interaction of perceptions, challenges, and coping strategies identified in previous themes. Students who experienced repeated listening difficulties without sufficient support tended to develop negative attitudes, whereas those who successfully adopted effective strategies and accessed meaningful listening experiences demonstrated stronger confidence and motivation.

Students' perceptions of listening learning are the foundation for determining their attitudes and motivation to learn. Perception significantly influences learning motivation, while attitudes also contribute significantly. When students perceive listening learning as a useful, challenging, and relevant activity, they develop intrinsic motivation to actively participate. Conversely, negative perceptions, such as viewing listening as a passive or unimportant activity, will decrease motivation and foster resistance to listening learning. Challenges in listening learning, such as lack of focus, non-interactive learning media, and less-than-optimal teacher roles, directly influence students' perceptions. Students who struggle to understand material due to uninteresting media will perceive listening learning as difficult and unenjoyable. These challenges also decrease motivation because they feel unable to achieve the expected competencies.

Students' strategies for overcoming listening difficulties serve as critical mediators. Students who employ active strategies, such as noting key points, asking questions when they don't understand, or using replication techniques, are able to overcome challenges and maintain positive perceptions. Effective strategies also increase motivation because students feel in control of the learning process and are able to achieve goals despite obstacles. These four variables form an integrative cycle: positive perceptions reduce the perceived difficulty of challenges, encourage the development of active strategies, which in turn increases motivation. High motivation further strengthens positive perceptions and constructive attitudes toward listening learning.

Educators need to understand that interventions in one variable will affect others. Improving the quality of learning media (overcoming challenges) will improve perceptions, which in turn will increase motivation. Similarly, equipping students with effective listening strategies will strengthen positive perceptions and motivation to learn. Pedagogically, these findings suggest the importance of designing listening instruction that not only develops linguistic competence but also addresses students' emotional experiences and motivational needs. Lecturers may benefit from integrating authentic materials, reducing excessive evaluative pressure, promoting learner autonomy, and fostering supportive classroom environments that gradually build students' confidence in listening comprehension.

CONCLUSION

This study explored students' perceptions of English listening learning among English Education Study Program students at University of Muhammadiyah Palopo through a qualitative descriptive approach supported by interviews, classroom observations, and open-ended questionnaires. The findings demonstrate that students' listening experiences are shaped by four interconnected dimensions: perceptions of listening learning, listening challenges, coping strategies, and attitudes toward listening learning. Listening was widely perceived as a challenging yet essential skill, influenced by linguistic barriers, cognitive processing demands, and affective factors such as listening anxiety. At the same time, students actively employed adaptive strategies, including repeated listening, contextual inferencing, and the use of digital listening resources, to overcome comprehension difficulties.

Beyond merely identifying listening challenges, this study contributes to the growing body of EFL listening literature by providing a more holistic understanding of how English Language Education students in Indonesian higher education experience, negotiate, and respond to listening difficulties. Drawing on listening comprehension theory and the metacognitive listening framework, the findings reveal that successful listening development is influenced not only by linguistic competence but also by learners' metacognitive awareness, emotional regulation, and opportunities for authentic listening engagement. Furthermore, the study extends previous research by illustrating how digital listening environments increasingly function as important spaces for autonomous listening development beyond classroom settings.

The findings carry important implications for listening instruction in Indonesian higher education. First, listening pedagogy should move beyond assessment-oriented practices and provide greater emphasis on explicit listening strategy instruction, including inferencing, repeated listening, comprehension monitoring, and metacognitive regulation. Second, lecturers are encouraged to integrate authentic listening materials, such as podcasts, videos, and real-life spoken interactions, to improve students' engagement and exposure to diverse accents and natural speech patterns. Third, supportive classroom environments that reduce excessive evaluative pressure may help minimize listening anxiety and strengthen students' confidence in listening activities. Finally, the purposeful integration of digital listening resources can support learner autonomy and provide students with greater opportunities for self-directed listening practice.

This study is not without limitations. Since the research was conducted in a single higher education institution and involved a relatively small number of participants, the findings may not fully represent broader EFL listening experiences across diverse educational contexts in Indonesia. In addition, the study focused primarily on students' perceptions and experiences within one institutional setting, limiting broader contextual comparison. Future studies may involve participants from multiple universities and regions to generate broader insights into listening learning in Indonesian higher education. Longitudinal studies may also be conducted to examine how students' listening perceptions, strategies, and motivation evolve over time. Furthermore, future research may explore the effectiveness of digital listening interventions and metacognitive listening instruction in supporting students' listening development and reducing listening anxiety.

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