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by Husnul Lail

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PROBLEMS IN LISTENING COMPREHENSION OF INTERNATIONAL STANDARDIZED TEST: A Study at Islamic State Highschool in West Lombok

Kurniawan Apgrianto
wawan.mataram@unram.ac.id

Sribagus
sribagus@unram.ac.id

L. Nurtaat
lalunurtaat@unram.ac.id

Husnul Lail
husnullail@unram.ac.id

English Department, University of Mataram
Mataram, Indonesia

Abstract— In recent years, standardized testing has become the most efficient tool adopted by institutions to measure one's ability in English Proficiency. All master students in university have to get a certain score of their English proficiency test as the requirement before their graduation. To develop teachers' professionalism, teachers of Islamic Schools are suggested to upgrade their teaching proficiency by having master degrees in their scientific fields. The popular problem when they tried to finish their study is their low scores of English Proficiency. This study is to find out teachers' scores in listening comprehension test as well as to discover their problems and possible recommendation in order to increase their listening skill. The subject of the study are teachers of Islamic senior high school in West Lombok. There are 19 teachers as respondents. To gain the teachers' level of comprehension of listening skills, TOEFL-Like test was conducted. While to have teachers' perspective related to their problems, questionnaire and interview were done as well. The result would then describe the teachers' scores and its possible relation to their problems as well as possible recommendation for increasing their listening skill regarding the problems faced. Finally, there would also be recommendation concerning their professional development in having better English proficiency.

Keywords—*standardized test, listening ability, problems in listening comprehension*

I. INTRODUCTION

Listening capability is one important part in mastering foreign language besides other skills such as reading, writing, and speaking. Listening test as part of TOEFL is considered 'good' to measure some one's ability. Chastain (1971) says that listening ability is an ability to understand utterances in normal speed. When a text stated by a foreigner which has different sound system, it will make problems to people who are listening. Morley (2001) says that listening ability involves some important parts, i.e., distinguishing sounds, spoken grammar, finding important information, remembering, and then connecting them with the process between sounds and the meaning conveyed.

Indonesia adopts English as a foreign language which is learned in high school as one of mandatory subjects. But out of four skills, reading is the most skill learned in this level. Then, writing is the second one, while listening and speaking are the least. Feyton (1991) says that people are mostly exposed with listening (45%), then followed by speaking (30%), reading (16%), and writing (9%). But we need to consider that in Indonesia people are not exposed with English by the same way. English are exactly exposed mostly in classrooms, airports, some tourism places. The intensity of the exposure is varied, and listening exposure is the least.

In order to improve quality of teaching and learning process, teachers of high schools are suggested to have master degree. So, they have to study to have their master degrees. One of regulations for students of post graduate to finish their study is that they must have a certain TOEFL score, that is, 450 for master students (except English Department, 500), and 500 for doctoral students. This is not easy for most students, especially for those who are not English department students. As the reference, from all new students of post graduate program at Mataram University, only 10% (45 of 433 students) who have score more than or the same as 450 and the average is 382.

This study aims to get an overview of the difficulties experienced by teachers of Islamic Senior High School in working on international standardized listening tests, as well as finding solutions that can be done to solve the problem.

II. THEORETICAL REVIEW

A. Standardized Test

One of the functions of test is to measure student's competence after having teaching and learning process. Standardized test has standardized criteria and objective but without having specific field (Bachman, 1996). This type of test does not adopt specific curriculum, has a very large scope, and measures common competence. A good standardized test should be a kind of result of empirical researches and from a long development (Fulcher and Davidson, 2007). The most popular of standardized tests of English are TOEFL and IELTS. Both tests

measure general language competence, i.e., listening, reading, writing, and speaking.

B. Standardized Listening Test

Listening is one important competence of language skills as this is an input channel for people to gain information from the source. Mistakes during the transmission of information will potentially mislead and responded incorrectly. With a good listening skill, a person possibly responds properly as he has a correct input to respond. On the other hand, people with inaccurate source received will lead to inaccurate response. Therefore, listening ability is very crucial to build effective and successful communication. This listening task is different from reading which gives more time to understand the text. People only have relatively very limited time to proceed the data (the utterance) which is gone in second after produced. People cannot re-listen they have failed about what is already spoken. (Call, 1985; Joiner, 1986 in Ohata, 2006).

In language learning, listening has a very important role to measure students' improvement as one of receptive skills. This standardized test allows teachers to have more information of students' ability generally in comprehending the text. The most popular of standardized test are IELTS and TOEFL. Both test adopt listening as one of the skills conducted.

Following the changes of industrial era 4.0, English becomes more important for people around the world since the communication has globally cope, even for people who do not move abroad. It is then followed by a regulation issued by ministry of higher education that every student must have a good English proficiency before they graduate. Although many people did not agree with this regulation, rectors from various universities issued chancellor's regulation about English proficiency for students.

C. Washback

Washback is the effect of a test on teachers and students to do something that would not be done. Washbacks are more likely to reduce the validity of a test. (Fulcher and Davidson, 2007). Washback seems to be a kind of activities to anticipate the test. That is why people tend to prepare before taking the tests in certain way which is sometimes not related to acquisition. This phenomena is one of the effect of the test (Bachman, 1996). A test-driven learning activity, an activity of learning which is designed to prepare student to be able to answer kinds of questions of a test, is normally designed as preparation for a test. One of the washback phenomena is doing "*bimbingan belajar*" or learning for test preparation ("cram" and "teaching to the test"). A good washback can provide information about the advantages and disadvantages of students / test takers. There are at least some of the following washback facts:

1) Tests can be used to prove one's ability.

In this case, the test gives a result in the form of a score which then becomes a picture of the ability of someone who takes it. Even though the validity and reliability of the test will not give

100% correct information of the test takers. This depends on the type of test adopted.

2) Tests encourage students to succeed

Before taking the test, it is usual for someone to prepare to get good results. Therefore, tests can be considered as one component that increases participants' motivation to improve their abilities. This is considered a positive washback (Bachman, 1996). Consequently, this kind of formative tests that are carried out to have more positive effects on the teaching and learning process. This test will be able to describe the shortcomings and strengths of students / teachers as long as they provide feedback on the results of the tests as starting point to improve the quality of learning later (following semester / year).

3) Tests can be stressful

Tests do not always have positive effects, sometimes they can also reduce learning motivation. For example, if someone does not have competence as expected, but he is insisted to take the test repeatedly. This situation can mesh up participants' psychological disturbances (Legg, 2017). He feels that he did not manage significant progress and it caused stress. Therefore, there must be a way out if such a situation occurs. At least, how to avoid the effects like this. Psychic assistance can alternatively be done from the beginning. Further more, the existence of alternative policies as a way out for anyone who encounters a deadlock capability. This is normal in society because not all individuals have the same abilities in a scientific field and / or skills.

D. Vocabulary and Grammar

Vocabulary is the basis for someone to understand a language. Vocabulary includes several elements, such as: alphabet, spelling, pronunciation (including stresses and intonation), and variations of English (Ur, 1984). Vocabulary is influenced by the exposure of the language students receive. The more exposure the language receives or experiences, the faster the language can be mastered. Of all the vocabulary learned (given), both directly and indirectly, it will not always be active vocabulary. Repetition and having a context in learning helps learners to keep the words resident in the memory.

Grammar describes structure of language. It manages how words (vocabulary) are arranged to have certain meanings in communication (Richards and Schmidt, 2002). Grammar has a strategic role and important position for students to understand language. Grammar makes it easy for someone to convey their ideas to others. In addition, grammar also makes the language well systemized that the recipients can easily understand.

III. METHOD

A. Participants

The subjects in this study were teachers who taught at the State Madrasah Aliyah in West Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara. In West Lombok Regency, there are only one *Madrasah Aliyah Negeri* (MAN, State Islamic Senior High School), namely MAN

Gerung. There were 30 teachers registered at MAN Gerung when the study took place. Of the 30 teachers, 19 teachers were willing as respondents. The respondents were teachers from different educational backgrounds. There is no specific reason for choosing the respondents, i.e., only for teachers who had the opportunity and willingness in this research activity. The data were taken in the form of description, namely the answer to the questionnaire and the score achieved of the listening test. The listening test was a part of the TOEFL-like test. The questionnaire were of 18 questions which ask about the difficulties faced in answering listening test questions in TOEFL.

IV. RESULT

A. Result of listening test

In accordance with the purpose of this study, namely to find out the problems that make the low listening test scores of teachers in Islamic schools in West Lombok, here are the scores of Listening test for two years (2017 and 2018)

Table 1. Result of the test

Year	2017	2018
Maximum	48	51
Maximum	38	31
Median	41	41
Average	41.4	39.6
Mode	40	37

Range of scores of TOEFL Listening: 24 – 68

Participants from 2017 study are somewhat different from those from 2018. Participants who took part in 2017 were part of the teachers in West Lombok in general, both were those who taught in public and private schools. And for this study (in 2018), the participants were teachers who taught in public school only.

From the two existing data, it seems that the latest results show a decrease, although both are still low, which is around 40 (if converted, it is 400). If we look at the terms used by the university as a threshold, which is 450 for S2 and 500 for S3, the score of 400 is still below the threshold. When the score is compared to the TOEFL score scale (24-68), the score (40) is at the level of around 50 if the range is 0-100, and it reflects relatively low or Extremely Limited User.

B. Problems in Listening Comprehension

Language consists of two major elements: vocabulary and grammar. In vocabulary, there are system of spelling, pronunciation, and stresses. In addition, there are also cultural factors that influence speeches appear in language. The following are some problems that are considered to be closely related to the low listening ability of teachers in MAN Gerung, West Lombok.

1) Low language exposure

This is a common phenomenon in Indonesia where English is not a second language. The second language for most people

here is Indonesian, while the first language is the language of their respective regions (Sasak language is people's mother tongue in Lombok). Of all respondents, only one respondent said that he frequently exposed by English deliberately by some media (television, youtube, etc.), 2 people never accessed these things, and 16 respondents stated that they sometimes access them. So it can be said that language exposure is relatively very low.

2) Varied pronunciation of the same alphabet

Language system of mother tongue relatively influences people in learning new language or foreign language. For example, pronunciation of alphabetical system of Indonesian is relatively has the same pronunciation of words. It does not work with English, there are many different pronunciations with the same alphabet. There were 18 respondents (more than 90%) who state that these differences provide obstacles in understanding the text when synchronizing with what they hear in the listening test. Only one respondent stated that the difference does not become an obstacle.

3) Low of Vocabulary mastery

Of all respondents, only one respondent feels that his vocabulary mastery is sufficient to understand questions in English listening test. The remaining 18 respondents state that they still feel lacked of vocabulary mastery as a means of understanding listening tests

4) Speech Speed

Speech speed greatly affects the listener's understanding. Normal speaking speed will be felt quickly for people who are learning English at the beginner level. Of all respondents, 17 feel that the speed of speaking in listening is difficult to follow, or feel too fast, even though it is admitted that it is the normal speed of a native speaker. Only 2 people can follow what is said in the recording.

5) Intonation

As we know, intonation of each language is unique. Mother tongue (*Sasak language, Sumbawa language, Bima language, Javanese*) and second language (*Bahasa Indonesia*) which is owned by the respondents influence the understanding of listening texts. Of the 19 respondents, 13 state that intonation included obstacles for them in understanding listening texts. While 3 respondents did not answer, the remaining 3 respondents stated that intonation was not an obstacle in understanding listening texts.

6) Grammar

English has a grammar that is relatively more complicated in terms of time when compared to Indonesian or regional languages in Lombok. Almost all respondents (as many as 18) state that grammar contributes to the difficulty of their understanding of listening texts. Only one person states that English grammar is not difficult.

7) American Culture

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8) The time limit

The TOEFL test already has a standard procedure in its implementation, including setting the time to answer questions. There are 14 respondents feels that the time is too short in answering questions, while 5 respondents state that they do not feel the same.

9) Distractor

One characteristic of a multiple choice question is that there is a distractor in the choices listed. This is often confusing beginner students. Beginner learners tend to choose the answers which relatively similar in sound as what they hear in the recording. There are 16 respondents who state that they are not aware of the distractors in the options. While the other 3 respondents understand this kind of distractors and must be avoided.

10) Preparation

The most important thing in facing a test is preparation. Both are mental and material preparation. There are 7 respondents who state that they prepared themselves before taking the test at that time. Eleven respondents did not prepare themselves, and 1 respondent did not respond this problem.

C. RECOMMENDATION

Looking at some of the problems faced by the teachers of MAN Gerung, there is a way out to help them improve the ability to understand listening tests in particular, and understand listening texts in general so that they expect to understand English more clearly. The following recommendations can be made for them to increase their comprehension of the listening test of TOEFL.

1) Preparation

Preparation is a very important thing in dealing with anything. Material preparation for the TOEFL here is more to vocabulary. The components are: words, spelling, and pronunciation (intonation and stresses). There are some recommendations regarding material preparation:

a) Increase English exposure in the daily life

By increasing listening to English-language texts such as news on television or sources on the internet such as *youtube*, which practically provides examples of listening texts. This is also better if equipped the program completed with English subtitles. This is to get used to listen as well as read what in the screen at the same time.

b) Increase vocabulary mastery.

There are many reading resources that discuss vocabulary, including pronunciation of various spellings. People can have deliberate activity to understand words with various spellings. The terms "weak form" and "strong form" are important to learn because those which are in the position of "weak form" are often almost inaudible when spoken.

c) Understand Grammar

Grammar is very helpful to understand the meaning of sentences. In spoken, the grammar appears to be simpler than written language. This can lead learners to realize that spoken is theoretically easier than written. This will support them to learn.

d) Read about academic atmosphere in the US

Culture greatly influences the language used. Therefore, people need to start reading about some cultures in America. Learners need to know kinds of culture especially in academic situation there in the US.

e) Understand distractors

Distractor is a natural thing in a test, in listening test as well. Frequently, the words in the choices are similar to what is said in the question. This problem must be understood precisely that this is a kind of distractors. The expected answer is mostly synonym.

2) Non-material Preparation

This preparation is as an addition to the test material itself. Physical and mental or psychological conditions before the test are very influential. Some tips that need to be considered are as follows:

a) Health must be the most consideration

Keeps healthy before the test must be a top priority. No matter how good the preparation of test material is, if at the time the test gets a health problem, it will be very disappointing. People can even fail to take the test because of illnesses. Therefore, in preparation, do not spend energy above the limits. Food intake and adequate rest must be considered. Do not stay up late just to pursue the test without considering your health.

b) Physical condition

Make sure that the preparation include all materials. This gives psychical strength, namely the confidence to answer questions. Do not let the fear haunt us because some material is missed and has not been discussed, while we feel less capable of it. This will increase the level of our worries which will eventually disrupt our readiness. With the completion of the material, we will feel relieved and mentally prepared to take the test.

Getting high test result is every student wants. This will provide evidence that he is able to show the expected quality. But to get the optimal results, the difficulties or problems that exist need to find the best solution. Common problems such as lack of exposure, lack of mastery of vocabulary, grammar, and lack of preparation are not problems that have no solution. Seriously sorting out the existing problems, it turns out that there are some things that seem difficult to do become things that are easy and doable. No exception for respondents in this study, namely MAN teachers in Gerung, West Lombok, recommendations from this study can be done to improve skills in listening of English texts, including listening in TOEFL. The key is discipline in participating in capacity building programs.

In the future, it will be very good if the result of this study can be followed up in subsequent studies. Listening programs will be very useful for all English students. However, there is no rose without thorn, this research still lacks many things. Hopefully it can be a reflection of future researchers.

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