

Listening Anxiety Among EFL Tadulako University Students: Causes And Coping Strategies From Students' Perspectives

Muhammad Irli Ma'arif¹, Aminah Suriaman², Maf'ulah³, Muhammad Arid⁴

^{1,2,3,4}Universitas Tadulako, Sulawesi Tengah, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Listening anxiety is a common affective factor that can hinder English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' listening comprehension and academic performance. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the causes of listening anxiety and the coping strategies employed by EFL students at Tadulako University from students' perspectives. This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach, with data collected through semi-structured interviews involving EFL students. The findings revealed that the majority of participants (90.51%) experienced low levels of listening anxiety, while a smaller proportion reported moderate (7.66%) and high (1.83%) levels of anxiety, which significantly affected their academic performance. The main sources of listening anxiety included fear of misunderstanding spoken English, fear of negative evaluation by peers and instructors, and limited vocabulary knowledge. To cope with listening anxiety, students employed various strategies, including cognitive strategies (note-taking and inferencing), metacognitive strategies (pre-listening preparation and self-evaluation), and affective strategies (such as deep breathing exercises). The study concludes that listening anxiety among EFL learners is influenced by both cognitive and affective factors, highlighting the importance of incorporating students' coping strategies into listening instruction. These findings suggest that EFL instructors should integrate anxiety-reduction techniques and strategy-based instruction into the curriculum to create a more supportive learning environment and enhance students' listening skills and overall language proficiency.

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Corresponding Author:

Muhammad Irli Ma'arif

Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Department of Language and Art Education, Tadulako University.

Email: aalirli0@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

English plays a crucial role as a global means of communication, prompting an increasing demand for effective English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction across higher education contexts worldwide [1]. Among the four fundamental language skills, listening serves as the primary channel for linguistic input and underpins the development

of speaking, reading, and writing abilities [2]. Despite its centrality, listening remains one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners and is frequently underemphasized in both pedagogical practice and empirical research. This paradox highlights the need for greater scholarly attention to listening as a core skill in language learning.

A growing body of research indicates that difficulties in listening comprehension are not solely linguistic in nature but are strongly influenced by affective variables, particularly anxiety. Listening anxiety, as a specific manifestation of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), refers to learners' feelings of tension, apprehension, and fear when processing spoken input in a foreign language [3]-[4]. Such anxiety can disrupt cognitive processing, overload working memory, and ultimately impair comprehension and academic performance [5]. Therefore, listening anxiety represents a critical psychological factor that may hinder learners' success in EFL contexts.

Previous studies consistently demonstrate a negative relationship between listening anxiety and listening performance. For example, Wang and Cha [6] found that higher levels of listening anxiety significantly predicted poorer listening outcomes among lower-proficiency Chinese EFL learners. Similarly, Mohammadi Golchi [7] reported that Iranian EFL learners with elevated listening anxiety employed fewer effective listening strategies and achieved lower comprehension scores. These findings underscore the debilitating role of anxiety in listening contexts, particularly when learners are exposed to fast speech rates, unfamiliar accents, limited lexical coverage, and high-stakes evaluation conditions [8]-[9]. Such conditions intensify learners' psychological pressure and reduce their ability to process spoken input effectively.

Theoretically, listening anxiety is grounded in Horwitz et al. [3], conceptualization of FLA, which comprises communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. In listening contexts, these components manifest uniquely due to the transient and uncontrollable nature of spoken input [10] [11]. Cognitive theories further explain that anxiety diverts attentional resources from language processing to worry management, thereby reducing comprehension efficiency [12]. Neurocognitive studies also reveal that heightened anxiety activates emotional processing regions of the brain, such as the amygdala, at the expense of linguistic processing areas [13]. These theoretical perspectives collectively explain why anxious learners often struggle to comprehend spoken language in real time.

While substantial research has examined the causes and effects of listening anxiety, existing studies reveal several limitations. First, much of the literature relies heavily on quantitative methods, offering limited insight into learners' lived experiences and subjective coping processes [14]. Second, many studies emphasize teachers' perspectives or generalized anxiety constructs rather than skill-specific anxiety from students' viewpoints [15]. Third, empirical evidence from the Indonesian EFL higher education context remains scarce, despite the country's predominantly teacher-centered instructional tradition, which may exacerbate students' affective barriers [16]- [17]. These limitations indicate a clear gap in context-specific and learner-centered investigations of listening anxiety.

Addressing these gaps, the present study investigates listening anxiety among EFL students at Tadulako University, Indonesia, with a specific focus on identifying its

underlying causes and exploring students' self-reported coping strategies. Drawing on established theoretical frameworks of FLA Horwitz et al. [3], listening anxiety [4], and language learning strategies [18]-[19], this study adopts a qualitative approach to foreground students' voices and experiences. This approach enables a deeper exploration of learners' subjective perceptions that may not be fully captured through quantitative measures alone. By doing so, it seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how learners perceive, experience, and manage listening anxiety in an authentic academic setting.

The objectives of this study are twofold: (1) to identify the primary factors contributing to listening anxiety among EFL students at Tadulako University, and (2) to examine the coping strategies employed by students to manage and reduce this anxiety. Understanding these aspects is essential for informing pedagogical interventions that are both context-sensitive and learner-centered [20]. Clearly defined objectives also ensure that the study remains focused and methodologically aligned with its research aims.

It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute theoretically to the growing literature on skill-specific language anxiety by offering qualitative evidence from an underrepresented EFL context [21]. Practically, the results are expected to assist EFL lecturers, curriculum designers, and policymakers in developing instructional practices that integrate affective considerations and strategy training into listening instruction. Ultimately, by acknowledging students' psychological experiences and empowering them with effective coping strategies, this research aspires to foster a more supportive learning environment and enhance EFL learners' listening competence and overall language proficiency. Thus, the study seeks to bridge the gap between theory, research, and pedagogical practice in EFL listening instruction.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative, cross-sectional research design to investigate the causes and coping strategies of listening anxiety among EFL students from the 2023 cohort at Tadulako University, who were in their fifth semester at the time of the study. This design was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences related to listening anxiety in academic English contexts. As Creswell [22] notes, qualitative methods are effective for exploring complex psychological phenomena such as anxiety because they allow researchers to capture participants' perspectives in detail. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to provide rich, open-ended responses about their feelings, challenges, and coping strategies.

The study was conducted at Tadulako University, located at Jl. Soekarno Hatta No. KM. 9, Tondo, Mantikulore District, Palu City, Central Sulawesi, in 2025. The participants were EFL students from the 2023 cohort who were actively enrolled in English courses. A total of 239 students participated in the questionnaire phase, selected based on active enrollment, varied English proficiency levels, and willingness to participate. In addition, key informants, including English instructors, academic advisors, and university counselors, were involved to provide supporting insights into students' listening anxiety and coping strategies. Participant recruitment was conducted through classroom announcements and online platforms [23].

Two research instruments were used in this study: questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire was the main instrument for identifying factors contributing to students' listening anxiety. It was adapted from the Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) proposed by Horwitz et al. [3] and consisted of 20 statements measured using a Likert scale: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). In addition, a structured interview was conducted with five selected students, using predetermined questions to explore their experiences of listening anxiety in greater depth.

Data collection combined semi-structured interviews and structured questionnaires to obtain comprehensive data. The interviews lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and were conducted in a comfortable and private setting. Sample interview questions included: “What did you feel when listening to materials in English?” and “What strategies did you use to cope with anxiety while listening?” Meanwhile, the questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms, beginning with demographic information (age, gender, and English proficiency) and then proceeding to Likert-scale statements related to listening anxiety. Quantitative questionnaire data were analyzed statistically, while qualitative interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

The degree of listening anxiety was measured using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). The questionnaire consisted of 10 items rated on a 5-point scale: Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). According to Debreli and Demirkan [24], the minimum total score was 33, and the maximum score was 165. Students' anxiety levels were determined by calculating the average score and classifying them into three categories, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Average score and Category

The average score	Category
< 99	Low
99 - 132	Moderate
> 132	High

Qualitative data analysis followed three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing [25]. The data, primarily verbal information from interviews, were organized, categorized, and interpreted to identify recurring patterns and themes. This systematic process facilitated meaningful interpretation and ensured that the findings could be clearly communicated.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the study's findings on listening anxiety among EFL students at Tadulako University. The data were obtained through a mixed-methods approach, combining questionnaire responses with structured interviews to provide a comprehensive picture of students' listening anxiety. While the questionnaire data illustrate the overall levels of anxiety experienced by the students, the interview data offer deeper qualitative

insights into the sources of anxiety and the strategies students employ to cope with listening difficulties.

3.1. Results

The findings of this study reveal that EFL students at Tadulako University experience varying degrees of listening anxiety, influenced by both linguistic and situational factors. Based on questionnaire data from 106 respondents, listening anxiety was categorized into three levels: low, moderate, and high. The results indicate that most students experienced low to moderate anxiety, while a smaller yet notable group reported high levels of listening anxiety. Specifically, 47.17% of the students were classified as having low listening anxiety, 38.68% experienced moderate anxiety, and 14.15% reported high listening anxiety. These results suggest that although many students feel relatively comfortable during listening activities, listening anxiety remains a significant issue for a substantial number of learners.

To obtain deeper insight into students' listening anxiety, interviews were conducted with five students who reported experiencing relatively higher anxiety than others. One of the most frequently reported sources of anxiety was the fear of misunderstanding the main ideas of listening materials. Several students expressed nervousness when listening to English, particularly because they were afraid of missing important information. One respondent stated, *"I often worry that I might miss important points when I'm listening,"* while another added that this anxiety was especially strong during lectures. However, not all participants shared this feeling, as one student explained that they were usually able to focus on what they understood rather than what they missed.

Limited vocabulary knowledge also emerged as a major contributor to listening anxiety. Most interviewees reported feeling panic or stress when they recognized less than 95% of the words in listening materials. Students described feeling lost, confused, or unable to follow the context when encountering too many unfamiliar words. As one respondent noted, *"If I don't know most of the words, I feel lost,"* while another explained that unfamiliar vocabulary often caused their mind to "go blank." Nevertheless, a few students reported trying to infer meaning from context despite missing certain words.

Another factor that intensified listening anxiety was students' perceived lack of preparedness, stemming from limited vocabulary mastery. Several respondents admitted that they often felt unprepared for listening tasks, particularly when the topics were technical or unfamiliar. One student stated that vocabulary limitations were among their biggest challenges, while another emphasized that a larger vocabulary would significantly reduce anxiety. In contrast, a small number of students felt that they could manage listening tasks adequately despite vocabulary gaps.

Time constraints during listening examinations were also identified as a source of anxiety. Most respondents reported that time pressure increased their stress levels and negatively affected their concentration. One interviewee described time pressure as overwhelming, explaining that constantly thinking about the remaining time caused panic. Although one student reported feeling comfortable with time limitations, the majority agreed that limited time made listening tasks more stressful.

Despite experiencing anxiety, students reported employing various strategies to cope with listening difficulties. Some students mentioned setting specific goals before listening tasks to help maintain focus and reduce anxiety. One respondent stated that goal-setting helped them stay on track, while others admitted that they did not consistently use this strategy. Additionally, discussing difficult listening passages with classmates was frequently mentioned as an effective coping strategy. Several students explained that sharing ideas and clarifying misunderstandings with peers made listening activities easier and less stressful. One respondent noted, *“It really helps when we talk it out together,”* highlighting the role of peer collaboration in managing listening anxiety.

Overall, the findings indicate that listening anxiety among EFL students at Tadulako University is shaped by multiple factors, including fear of missing the main ideas, limited vocabulary, and time pressure during listening exams. At the same time, students’ use of coping strategies such as goal-setting and peer discussion demonstrates their active efforts to manage anxiety and improve listening comprehension. These results underscore the importance of addressing both affective and cognitive aspects of listening instruction in EFL contexts.

3.2. Discussion

This study investigated the factors contributing to listening anxiety among EFL students at Tadulako University, as revealed through questionnaire data. The findings indicate that listening anxiety is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by cognitive, affective, and linguistic factors. Three major themes emerged from the data analysis: fear of misunderstanding, fear of negative evaluation, and limitations in vocabulary. These findings highlight the complex challenges EFL learners face in listening comprehension and underscore the need for pedagogical interventions that address both linguistic competence and affective barriers.

Fear of misunderstanding was identified as the most prominent source of listening anxiety. Many students reported difficulty processing spoken input, particularly when dealing with fast speech rates or unfamiliar accents. This fear stems from the real-time nature of listening, which requires learners to comprehend information instantly without the opportunity to control the input. Unlike reading activities, listening tasks do not allow learners to pause or revisit information, thereby increasing cognitive load and anxiety. As one participant explained, rapid speech caused panic and disrupted concentration, leading to concerns about missing important information. This finding aligns with previous studies suggesting that limited processing time and speech rate significantly affect learners’ listening performance and anxiety levels [2]. Consequently, fear of misunderstanding not only hampers comprehension but also undermines learners’ confidence in their listening abilities.

Another significant factor contributing to listening anxiety was the fear of negative evaluation. Students expressed apprehension about being judged by their peers and instructors during listening activities, especially when required to respond orally after listening. This fear was particularly evident in classroom discussions, where students felt pressure to demonstrate comprehension publicly. The concern that others might perceive them as less competent often resulted in avoidance behaviors, such as reluctance to

participate or remaining silent during discussions. This finding supports Horwitz et al. [3] notion of language anxiety, which emphasizes fear of negative evaluation as a central component of foreign language anxiety. Such anxiety can create a detrimental cycle in which learners avoid participation, thereby reducing exposure to input and opportunities for improvement, which in turn perpetuates their anxiety.

Vocabulary limitations also emerged as a critical source of listening anxiety. Many participants reported that encountering unfamiliar vocabulary during listening tasks led to confusion, frustration, and increased anxiety. Insufficient vocabulary knowledge makes it difficult for learners to construct meaning from spoken texts, resulting in a loss of confidence and motivation. One participant noted that unfamiliar words prevented them from following conversations effectively. This finding is consistent with Cheung's [10] assertion that learners need to recognize approximately 95% of the vocabulary in a listening text to achieve adequate comprehension. When students perceive their vocabulary knowledge as inadequate, anxiety increases and negatively affects their ability to process incoming information and acquire new language skills.

Overall, the findings suggest that listening anxiety among EFL students at Tadulako University is influenced by interrelated cognitive and affective factors. Fear of misunderstanding, fear of negative evaluation, and vocabulary limitations collectively hinder students' listening comprehension and engagement. Addressing these issues requires instructional strategies that reduce anxiety, such as providing graded listening materials, pre-teaching key vocabulary, offering repeated exposure to listening input, and creating a supportive classroom environment that minimizes evaluative pressure. By mitigating these anxiety-inducing factors, educators can help learners develop greater confidence and improve their listening proficiency.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the factors contributing to listening anxiety among EFL students at Tadulako University and revealed that multiple interrelated factors influence listening anxiety. The findings indicate that fear of misunderstanding, fear of negative evaluation, and vocabulary limitations are the primary sources of listening anxiety among students. These factors highlight that listening anxiety is not solely a linguistic issue but also an affective and cognitive challenge in the EFL learning context.

Fear of misunderstanding emerged as the dominant factor, particularly with fast speech rates and unfamiliar accents, which increase cognitive load and reduce learners' ability to process spoken input in real time. Additionally, fear of negative evaluation was found to intensify students' anxiety, especially during classroom listening activities that require public responses or discussions. This fear often leads to avoidance behaviors that limit students' participation and opportunities to improve their listening skills. Furthermore, limited vocabulary knowledge significantly contributed to listening anxiety, as unfamiliar words hinder comprehension and lower learners' confidence and motivation.

The findings of this study suggest important pedagogical implications. EFL instructors are encouraged to provide supportive and low-anxiety learning environments, use level-appropriate listening materials, pre-teach key vocabulary, and allow repeated exposure

to listening input. Such strategies may help reduce listening anxiety and enhance students' confidence and listening proficiency. Future research is recommended to explore coping strategies employed by learners and to investigate listening anxiety using mixed-method or longitudinal approaches to gain a deeper understanding of its development over time.

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