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INDONESIAN EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND CHALLENGES IN DEVELOPING ACADEMIC LISTENING COMPETENCE: A MIXED-METHOD INVESTIGATION

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how students perceive and understand academic listening, a fundamental skill for success in educational settings. Through questionnaire distribution among secondary and tertiary students, the study identifies common obstacles and approaches students employ when engaging with academic content. Findings reveal that although students acknowledge academic listening's significance, many encounter difficulties processing lecture structures, identifying key information, and maintaining focus during extended listening sessions. The restricted exposure to authentic academic discourse and insufficient training in specialized listening strategies compound these challenges. Recommendations include implementing systematic listening practice, enhancing exposure to genuine academic materials, and incorporating technology-based tools for autonomous skill development.

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INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension within academic contexts presents distinct challenges for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, particularly in Indonesian higher education settings where exposure to authentic academic discourse remains limited (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). Unlike conversational exchanges, academic listening demands sustained cognitive engagement with dense, specialized content delivered at varying speeds and organizational structures (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

Indonesian university students face compounded difficulties as English-medium instruction increases across academic programs, yet systematic training in academic listening strategies remains inconsistent in national curricula (Richards, 2008). These learners must simultaneously process complex lexical items, identify rhetorical signaling devices, and extract hierarchical information structures—cognitive demands that exceed those required for everyday communication (Field, 2008). The metacognitive awareness necessary for effective academic listening often develops slowly without explicit pedagogical intervention (Rost, 2016).

This investigation examines how Indonesian EFL students at State Islamic University of North Sumatra conceptualize academic listening, what obstacles they encounter during lecture

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comprehension, and which compensatory strategies they employ. Unlike previous research that primarily documents listening difficulties, this study categorizes student perceptions through thematic analysis to reveal patterns in metacognitive awareness and strategy application. Understanding these patterns holds implications for curriculum development in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses within Indonesian Islamic higher education, where integrating listening skills training with content-area instruction presents unique opportunities.

METHOD

a. Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative thematic analysis to capture both breadth and depth of student experiences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The approach enabled statistical patterns to emerge while preserving the nuanced perspectives expressed in open-ended responses.

b. Participants

Participants comprised 47 undergraduate students (n=47) enrolled in English Education Department courses at State Islamic University of North Sumatra during the 2024/2025 academic year. Purposive sampling targeted students who had completed at least one semester of English-medium academic courses, ensuring participants possessed sufficient experience with academic listening contexts. The sample included 38 females (80.9%) and 9 males (19.1%), aged 18-22 years (M=19.8, SD=1.2). All participants were Indonesian L1 speakers with intermediate to upper-intermediate English proficiency (CEFR B1-B2 equivalent based on institutional placement assessments).

c. Instrument Development

The questionnaire was developed through a three-stage process. First, initial items were derived from Vandergrift & Goh's (2012) Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) framework, adapted for academic contexts. Second, eight open-ended questions were constructed to elicit detailed descriptions of listening challenges and strategies. Third, two ELT faculty members reviewed the instrument for content validity, resulting in minor wording adjustments for clarity.

The final questionnaire contained three sections: (1) demographic information; (2) five Likert-scale items measuring confidence and awareness (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree); and (3) eight open-ended questions exploring conceptual understanding, challenges, and strategy use. The instrument was piloted with 12 students not included in the main sample, revealing adequate internal consistency for scaled items (Cronbach's α=0.78) and comprehensibility for open-ended questions.

d. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected via Google Forms distributed through course learning management systems with instructor permission. Participants received information about research purposes, voluntary participation, and anonymity protections. The questionnaire remained accessible for two weeks (October 15-29, 2024), with reminder messages sent after one week. All 47 responses were complete and included in analysis.

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e. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from Likert-scale items were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) in SPSS 26.0. Qualitative responses underwent thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) familiarization through repeated reading; (2) initial coding of semantic content; (3) theme identification through code clustering; (4) theme review and refinement; (5) theme definition and naming; and (6) report generation with illustrative excerpts.

Inter-rater reliability was established by having two researchers independently code 20% of responses (n=9), achieving substantial agreement (Cohen's κ=0.82). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus emerged. Thematic saturation was reached as no new codes emerged after analyzing 38 responses.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

a. Quantitative Overview of Academic Listening Awareness

Likert-scale responses revealed moderate to high awareness of academic listening as a distinct skill domain (Table 1). Most participants (83%, n=39) agreed or strongly agreed they had studied academic listening, while 74.5% (n=35) reported understanding what distinguishes academic from conversational listening. However, confidence in comprehending English-medium lectures was more variable (M=3.2, SD=0.9), with only 51% expressing confidence.

Table 1. Student Awareness and Confidence in Academic Listening (N=47)

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	M	SD
I have studied academic listening	2 (4.3%)	1 (2.1%)	5 (10.6%)	28 (59.6%)	11 (23.4%)	3.96	0.87
I understand what academic listening means	1 (2.1%)	3 (6.4%)	8 (17.0%)	26 (55.3%)	9 (19.1%)	3.83	0.91
I feel confident understanding academic lectures	3 (6.4%)	10 (21.3%)	10 (21.3%)	18 (38.3%)	6 (12.8%)	3.30	1.15

b. Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Responses

Four major themes emerged from open-ended responses, each revealing distinct dimensions of how Indonesian EFL students experience academic listening.

Theme 1: Academic Listening as Hierarchical Information Processing

Students conceptualized academic listening as involving multi-layered comprehension beyond surface-level decoding. Responses emphasized identifying organizational structures, distinguishing central propositions from elaborative details, and tracking logical relationships across extended discourse:

> "Academic listening is not just understanding words but seeing how the whole lecture is organized—what's the main argument, what are the supporting points, how everything connects" (Participant 18).

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This conceptualization aligns with Hyland's (2009) description of academic discourse as requiring attention to macro-structure alongside micro-level linguistic features. Students demonstrated awareness that academic contexts demand cognitive processing at multiple simultaneously—lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical—which distinguishes this listening mode from conversational comprehension.

Theme 2: Discourse Markers as Navigational Scaffolding

Participants consistently identified discourse markers as crucial orientation devices that structure information flow and signal rhetorical functions. Students described these markers as "signposts" (mentioned by 34 participants, 72.3%) that reduce processing burden by telegraphing upcoming content:

"When professors say 'for instance' or 'on the other hand,' you immediately know what type of information is coming, so you can prepare your mind for it" (Participant 7).

This finding extends Jung's (2003) research on signaling cues by revealing that Indonesian EFL learners recognize discourse markers' functions even when application remains inconsistent. The gap between recognition and utilization suggests that explicit instruction in real-time marker identification could enhance listening performance.

Theme 3: Cognitive Overload in Real-Time Processing

The most frequently cited challenge category involved managing simultaneous cognitive demands during lectures. Students reported three specific overload sources:

3a. Speed-Accuracy Tradeoff: Rapid speech rates forced learners to choose between complete comprehension and continuous processing, often resulting in fragmented understanding (mentioned by 38 participants, 80.9%).

3b. Note-Taking Interference: The physical act of writing disrupted sustained listening, creating gaps in comprehension as attention shifted between auditory input and written output (32 participants, 68.1%).

3c. Lexical Barriers: Encountering unknown specialized terminology triggered comprehension breakdowns that persisted beyond the unfamiliar item, disrupting subsequent information processing (41 participants, 87.2%).

"The biggest problem is everything happens at once—listening, understanding, writing notes. When I focus on one, I lose the others. After missing one technical term, I'm lost for the next five minutes" (Participant 29).

This theme resonates with Field's (2008) cognitive load framework, where working memory limitations constrain simultaneous processing capacity. For Indonesian students with limited exposure to academic English, these demands intensify as lexical retrieval requires more conscious attention, leaving fewer resources for higher-order comprehension processes.

Theme 4: Compensatory Strategy Diversity

Students reported employing varied strategies to manage listening difficulties, though strategy sophistication and consistency differed markedly. Five strategy categories emerged:

4a. Preparatory Schema Activation (27 participants, 57.4%): Pre-reading topic materials to build background knowledge that facilitates prediction during listening.

4b. Technological Mediation (39 participants, 83.0%): Using recording devices, playback controls, and subtitle features to enable repeated processing.
4c. Metalinguistic Monitoring (19 participants, 40.4%): Consciously attending to discourse markers and structural signals as guides for information hierarchy.
4d. Approximation and Inference (23 participants, 48.9%): Constructing meaning from partial understanding through context-based guessing rather than word-by-word decoding.
4e. Environmental Optimization (15 participants, 31.9%): Positioning themselves physically closer to speakers and minimizing distractions to enhance acoustic clarity.

Notably, strategies clustered around external supports (recordings, subtitles, positioning) rather than internal metacognitive regulation. Only 40.4% mentioned metalinguistic monitoring, suggesting that Indonesian EFL learners rely heavily on technological scaffolding to compensate for underdeveloped self-regulatory listening strategies. This finding has implications for EAP pedagogy in Indonesian Islamic universities, where fostering learner autonomy remains a curricular priority.

Discussion

These findings illuminate specific challenges facing Indonesian EFL learners in Islamic higher education settings where English-medium instruction increasingly predominates. The gap between students' conceptual awareness (74.5% understand academic listening) and practical confidence (only 51% feel confident) suggests that knowledge about academic listening develops more readily than actual competence. This dissociation resembles what Vandergrift & Goh (2012) termed "declarative-procedural gap"—students know what they should do but struggle to execute strategies effectively during real-time processing.

The heavy reliance on technological supports (83% use recordings/subtitles) reflects both resource availability and strategy preferences. While technology enables repeated exposure, over-dependence may inhibit development of real-time processing skills necessary for live lectures and academic discussions. Indonesian universities might therefore design EAP curricula that systematically scaffold students from technology-supported practice toward unassisted comprehension, gradually removing supports as competence increases.

The relatively low adoption of metalinguistic monitoring strategies (40.4%) despite high awareness of discourse markers (72.3% can identify them) reveals an instructional opportunity. Explicit training that moves beyond marker recognition toward functional application during listening could help students leverage these organizational cues more effectively. Such training aligns with principles of strategy-based instruction (Oxford, 2017) and would be particularly valuable in Islamic university contexts where students often engage with lectures incorporating both secular academic content and Islamic scholarly discourse traditions, each with distinct rhetorical patterns.

CONCLUSIONS

This investigation revealed that Indonesian EFL students at State Islamic University of North Sumatra possess moderate conceptual awareness of academic listening as a specialized

skill domain but demonstrate variable confidence and inconsistent strategy application during actual lecture comprehension. Thematic analysis identified four key dimensions: (1) students conceptualize academic listening as hierarchical information processing; (2) they recognize discourse markers as navigational scaffolding; (3) cognitive overload from simultaneous demands constitutes the primary challenge; and (4) compensatory strategies cluster around technological supports rather than self-regulatory processes.

The findings extend existing academic listening research by providing systematic evidence of the declarative-procedural gap in Indonesian Islamic higher education contexts, where students understand listening principles but struggle with real-time application. The predominance of technology-mediated strategies over metacognitive self-regulation suggests that Indonesian EAP curricula should emphasize gradual scaffolding toward autonomous listening competence, explicitly training students to operationalize their awareness of discourse structures and markers.

Several pedagogical implications emerge for Indonesian universities. First, EAP courses should integrate explicit strategy instruction that moves beyond declarative knowledge toward procedural skill development through guided practice with progressively challenging authentic materials. Second, curriculum designers might develop listening modules that systematically reduce technological scaffolding over time, preparing students for unassisted comprehension in live academic contexts. Third, assessment practices should incorporate strategy-use evaluation alongside comprehension outcomes, incentivizing students to develop sophisticated self-regulatory approaches rather than relying exclusively on external supports.

Future research should examine the efficacy of strategy-based listening interventions in Indonesian Islamic higher education settings, particularly exploring whether explicit metalinguistic training improves real-time marker utilization. Longitudinal studies tracking how listening competence develops across undergraduate programs would illuminate optimal sequencing for EAP instruction. Additionally, comparative investigations examining listening challenges across different academic disciplines (Islamic studies, sciences, humanities) could reveal domain-specific comprehension demands requiring tailored pedagogical approaches.

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