

## **Listening Comprehension Problems: The Pre-Diploma Students' Insights and Experiences**

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Despite the fact that listening is one of the fundamental skills to develop in English language learning, most of the pre-diploma students at Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Cawangan Melaka often regard listening as a difficult skill to learn. However, little research has been conducted regarding the listening comprehension problems that students experienced in English class. This paper investigated the pre-diploma students' insights into English listening difficulties that they encountered in listening comprehension and explored numerous effective listening strategies to improve their English listening abilities. 80 pre-diploma students who took the Pre-Diploma English Language course were selected randomly for the study. Data collections included 5-point Likert type questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Results suggest that the main problems highlighted by most students are linked to the speed of speech, text length, vocabulary knowledge, and unfamiliar accents.

*Keywords:* listening difficulties, listening strategies, listening comprehension, listening abilities

*Terlepas dari kenyataan bahwa mendengarkan adalah salah satu keterampilan dasar untuk dikembangkan dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris, sebagian besar siswa pra-diploma di Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Cawangan Melaka sering menganggap mendengarkan sebagai keterampilan yang sulit untuk dipelajari. Namun, sedikit penelitian yang telah dilakukan mengenai masalah pemahaman mendengarkan yang mereka alami di kelas bahasa Inggris. Makalah ini, dengan demikian menyelidiki wawasan para siswa pra-diploma tentang kesulitan mendengarkan bahasa Inggris yang mereka temui dalam pemahaman mendengarkan dan mengeksplorasi berbagai strategi mendengarkan yang efektif*

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*untuk meningkatkan kemampuan mendengarkan bahasa Inggris mereka. 80 siswa pra-diploma yang mengambil kursus Bahasa Inggris Pra-Diploma dipilih secara acak untuk penelitian ini. Pengumpulan data termasuk kuesioner 5-point Likert dan wawancara semi-terstruktur. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa masalah utama yang disoroti oleh sebagian besar siswa terkait dengan kecepatan bicara, panjang teks, pengetahuan kosa kata, dan aksen yang tidak dikenal.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Listening skill is viewed as one of the most pivotal language skills to develop in English language learning (Gilakjani, 2016). Zinonos (2017) states that listening comprehension ability is considered one of the most significant competencies in the second language learning (L2) and one of the most important skills for people to develop since it is one of the basic attributes of communication. In spite of the importance of listening skill in learning English language, Hong (2016) mentions that listening comprehension is the neglected communicative componential requirement for second language acquisition. Furthermore, listening skill is considered as difficult by some of the English as a second language (ESL) learners. For example, Graham (as cited in Wang & Treffers-Daller, 2017) points out that “listening is a source of frustration to learners and an area in which it seems difficult to make progress.”

The expressions of the speakers, their speed of speaking, unfamiliar content, and cultural references have been recognised as factors that make comprehension more difficult when listening in a second language (Lynch, 2009). For example, pronunciation is the source of difficulty that affects the performance of ESL students in English listening comprehension (Zinonos, 2017). Vandergrift and Baker (as cited in Wang and Treffers-Daller, 2017) also states that a listening comprehension process is complicated because it is based on linguistic knowledge such as vocabulary or grammar and also non-linguistic information such as knowledge of the world.

Listening comprehension problems are quite common enough among ESL learners. At Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Cawangan Melaka, the pre-diploma students have to take the Pre-Diploma English Language course, coded as ELC 030. ELC 030 encompasses a range of English language skills including listening, speaking, reading, and writing that are important for students to be functionally proficient in English. English listening comprehension has been taught to them using various methods, for example, the students extract information from news reports. However, for most of the pre-diploma students, listening comprehension is viewed as one of the most difficult skills to be acquired despite of learning English for more than ten years. The possible reasons for this issue are due to an unfamiliar accent and speech rate.

Although a great deal of research has been done in the study of listening, little research has been conducted regarding listening difficulties that pre-diploma students at UiTM Cawangan Melaka have encountered in listening comprehension. Recognising and understanding the difficulties that the students commonly encounter in English listening comprehension then may help the UiTM education experts and English lecturers to understand the listening comprehension issues experienced by pre-diploma students and to discover effective solutions so that the English subject for the pre-diploma students (ELC030) can be reviewed and modified accordingly, if necessary. The results also may help the materials developers to design useful and relevant teaching and learning materials for English listening

class. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the English listening problems experienced by pre-diploma students. Specifically, the study aimed to address the following questions: (1) What are the pre-diploma students' perspectives on the problems they encounter in English language in terms of input, listener, and context? (2) What are students' stated beliefs about how listening should be taught and activities should be carried out in listening class?

### **Listening: Process, Problems**

The process of listening in the second language is quite complex. Several scholars have defined listening with consistent elements including perception, attention, interpretation, remembering, and response (Glenn, as cited in Wolvin, 2010). Joan Rubin from the University of Pennsylvania explains that listening "consists of processing information which the listener gets from visual and auditory clues in order to define what is going on and what the speakers are trying to express" (Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1990).

According to Snowling and Hulme (as cited in Fong & Ho, 2017), listening comprehension is the ability to extract meaning from spoken discourse which involves cognitive and linguistics skills. It plays a significant role in language learning process, and it is also considered as one of the most fundamental skills that need to be developed by language learners (Zinonos, 2017). It is a complex and active process in which the listener must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intonation, retain what was gathered in all of the above, and interpret it within the immediate as well as the larger sociocultural context of the utterance (Vandergrift, as cited in Kok, 2013).

Listening involves bottom-up, top-down, and interactive processing (Wolvin, 2010). In bottom-up processing, listeners use the acoustic message, individual sounds, or phonemes, together make up phrases, clauses, and sentences then combine the sentences to create ideas and concepts and relationship between them, while top-down processing emphasises the use of prior experience and the surrounding context which enables listeners to comprehend input (Wolvin, 2010). Interactive processing, however, involves both bottom-up and top-down processing (Wolvin, 2010).

One of the the problems of listening comprehension is related to varied or different accents and pronunciation. Accent is reported to represent an obstacle to understanding in listening comprehension among ESL listeners. For example, in a study at the Hakkari University, Turkey, Ömer Gökhan Ulum found that varied and unfamiliar accents caused an obstacle to understand the listening text among students (Ulum, 2015). In addition, learners may find difficulty to understand a lecture even though a speaker uses simple structured language due to an unfamiliar accent of the speaker. For instance, a study by Zinonos (2017) discovered that the students in Cyprus did not perform well when listening to standard varieties of English as in that case the British-English pronunciation due to various factors such as unique phonological, phonetic, morphological, and cultural characteristics. Zinonos (2017) concludes that the students' listening performance is higher when the pronunciation is closer to the sounds of their mother tongue. However, it is interesting to note that the second language listeners gradually have less difficulty in understanding an individual speaker with a particular accent once they become familiar with it (Lynch, 2009).

Previous studies have shown that there is a strong link between knowledge words and second language (L2) listening. A language user's knowledge on L2 vocabularies plays essential role in successful listening comprehension. For native speakers, they do not encounter much problems to recognise, understand, and interpret words because they have been exposed to a large number of contextualized spoken input. However, for the second language listeners, if they are not exposed much to the target language characteristics of native speakers, the L2 listeners may have problems to recognise words in spoken form. The L2 listeners may even encounter difficulty to recognise or understand specific words in listening even though they know the words in written form (Goh as cited in Matthews, 2017). Zhang (2013) found that vocabulary could arouse anxiety among students. One of the reasons for this problem is that while listening, the foreign learners paid too much attention to new sounds which lead to difficulty to understand the listening comprehension. As a result, they may feel unmotivated due to anxiety.

Wang and Treffers-Daller (2017) explain that vocabulary size for listening comprehension is very significant among L2 learners. The researchers suggest that in order to improve learners' listening comprehension, teachers must focus on enhancing learners' vocabulary knowledge by organising intentional vocabulary learning activities and exposing learners more to incidental vocabulary learning from aural and written input. For instance, the learners can learn vocabulary through multimedia software to develop the L2 learners' vocabulary knowledge and positively improve L2 listening comprehension (Wang & Treffers-Daller, 2017).

In addition, previous empirical studies suggest that speed of delivery influences the performance in listening comprehension performance in listening comprehension. Faster delivery of speech is said to result in more listening difficulty due to shorter period of time to process the incoming. Lynch (2009) reports the same thought among his English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. It is believed that people can comprehend the listening text better when the speech rate is slower (McBride, as cited in Zinonos, 2017). The length of text also plays a significant role in listening comprehension. According to Atkins et al (as cited in Zinonos, 2017), tiredness and lapse of concentration can be decreased if the learners use a short listening text because the learners do not have much trouble to follow the text and they can grasp the information more easily.

Finally, physical environment is another factor affecting listening comprehension. Environmental distractions can be understood as noises from the surrounding environment such as the ringing of phones or noise in the audio (Zinonos, 2017). Amber and Bloomfield (as cited in Zinonos, 2017) explain that noise or distortion in the audio contributes to lower performance in listening comprehension. Thus, it is clear that noises may impede the listeners' concentration during the listening process.

Ulum (2015) classifies the factors affecting listening comprehension as follows: The first factor is listening process characteristics such as cognitive and metacognitive. Another factor is input characteristics including vocabulary, speech clarity, and grammatical structure of the text, speech rate, prosodic features, accent, vocabulary, pause and text length. Another factor is listener characteristics, for example, memory, attitude and attention. Furthermore, there are task characteristics such as task type, local questions, and type of responses. A further

aspect is affect characteristics such as level of anxiety and comprehension failure and finally, there are context characteristics.

## **METHODS**

The study was carried out through quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. Quantitative data were used to analyse the result of the obstacles that students encountered in English listening comprehension while qualitative data was employed to gain a broad insight into beliefs about problems that they faced in English listening comprehension and how listening should be taught and activities should be carried out in listening class.

80 pre-diploma students of “Mengubah Destini Anak Bangsa” (MDAB) program from Universiti Teknologi Mara Cawangan Melaka, Malaysia participated in this study. The respondents were selected randomly from five different classes of the program mentioned above. Among these participants, 25 were males and 55 were females (mean age = 1.69 years, SD = 0.47). The age of the participants was 18 on average and they were native speakers of Bahasa Malaysia. Every participant has studied English for more than 10 years before participating in the current study. The English class the students attended contained a listening section; they sometimes listened to songs and watched videos in English.

Generally, two instruments were used for data collection in the study. The instruments employed in this study were questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The questionnaire employed in this study was an adapted version of “Beliefs on English Language Listening Comprehension Problems” (Lotfi, as cited in Solak and Altay, 2018). It was administered to 80 students to investigate their English listening problems. For the aim of this study, the researcher modified the number and the content of the questions. There were 18 items in the questionnaire. Statements-type items were measured by six Likert scales, with the options ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (1=strongly agree, 5=strongly disagree).

Quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire were entered into a Statistical Program for Social Sciences Statistics (SPSS) 24 and analysed by means of descriptive statistics to report the beliefs of students on listening problems in numerical data. Descriptive statistics were calculated (frequencies, percentages, median, mode, std. deviation). The data obtained from the questionnaire, mean ( $\bar{x}$ ), was analysed using a statistical technique to find out the rate of agreement related to the items about listening difficulties of the students in English class. The scorings below were used in order to compare the means ( $\bar{x}$ ) of the perspectives specified:

1. I strongly agree : 1.00 – 1.49
2. I agree : 1.50 – 2.49
3. I am natural : 2.50 – 3.49
4. I disagree : 3.50 – 4.49
5. I strongly disagree : 4.50 – 5.00

With regard to semi-structured interview, five participants were interviewed in English language by the researcher. The interviews were conducted after the participants answered the survey. The aim of the interviews was to elicit learners’ perceptions on the listening comprehension difficulties encountered by pre-diploma students and the listening activities

they thought should be conducted in class. The researcher recorded the interviews. The data gathered from the interviews were evaluated and presented in the paper.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

In this section, the researcher answers two questions based on data collection.

Question 1 : *What are the pre-diploma students' perspectives on the problems they encounter in English language in terms of the following criteria? a) input b) listener c) context*

### Questionnaire

To answer the question about the listening problems which pre-diploma students encountered during listening process, descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of students' responses were calculated (Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3).

### Input characteristics

The input characteristics such as vocabulary, speech clarity, grammatical structure of the text, speech rate, accent, pause, and text length have been studied in the research. The input factors contain the students' beliefs on the obstacles that they encountered in listening comprehension related to those input characteristics. According to Field (as cited in Solak and Altay, 2018), input means the target language discourse that reaches the learners' auditory system in unidirectional listening.

Table 1: Results pertaining to the problems related to input

Items	Characteristics	N	M	sd
1. I have difficulty understanding speakers with unfamiliar accents.	Accent	80	2.94	0.92
4. I find it difficult to interpret the meaning of a long listening text.	Text length	80	2.83	0.84
3. I find it difficult to understand listening texts which have difficult grammatical structures.	Grammatical structure	80	2.79	0.76
2. I find it difficult to understand listening texts in which there are too many unfamiliar words.	Vocabulary	80	2.71	0.83
7. I find it difficult to understand the listening text when speakers speak with varied accents.	Accent	80	2.60	0.79
5. I find it difficult to understand the meaning of words which are not pronounced clearly.	Speech clarity	80	2.58	1.02

8. I find it difficult to understand the listening text when the speaker does not pause long enough.	Pause	80	2.58	0.74
6. I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast.	Speech rate	80	2.21	0.94
<b>Total</b>			2.66	

Table 1 shows that in item 1 regarding ‘I have difficulty understanding speakers with unfamiliar accents’, the mean score for this part is 2.94. This score indicates that participants were natural with the statement in item 1. Furthermore, as observed in Table 1, item 6 which is regarding ‘I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast’ has the lowest mean score which is 2.21. It can be understood that participants agreed with item 6. All in all, the average of all items in this factor is 2.66.

### *Listener Characteristics*

Listener factors have been studied in this research. This part consists of 10 items which contain the participants’ beliefs about problems in listening associated with three characteristics including attention, attitude, and memory.

*Table 2: Results pertaining to the problems related to input*

<b>Items</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>sd</b>
7. I find it difficult to quickly remember words or phrases I have just heard.	Memory	80	3.50	4.04
8. I have difficulty understanding a listening text because I cannot understand every single word I hear.	Attitude	80	3.25	0.92
9. When thinking about meaning of unfamiliar words, I neglect the next part of the listening text.	Attention	80	3.18	0.74
10. I have difficulty comprehending the listening text because I don’t know which strategy to use while listening.	Attitude	80	3.05	0.73
11. I am slow to recall the meaning of words that sound familiar.	Memory	80	2.99	0.79
12. I find it difficult to remember the meaning of a long listening text.	Memory	80	2.93	0.71
13. I find it difficult to really concentrate on listening.	Attention	80	2.91	0.89

14. When I hear the new words, I forget the content which was mentioned before	Memory	80	2.91	0.80
15. I lose the flow of speech because I concentrate very hard on understanding every word or phrase I hear.	Attention	80	2.89	0.93
16. During listening, although some words sound familiar, it is difficult for me to recall their meaning immediately.	Memory	80	2.80	0.74
<b>Total</b>			3.04	

As it is shown in Table 2, for item 7, regarding “I find it difficult to quickly remember words or phrases I have just heard,” the mean score for this part is 3.50. This score indicates that participants disagreed with the statement, but for the 16<sup>th</sup> item, the mean score is 2.80. It means that the participants were natural with the statement, “during listening, although some words sound familiar, it is difficult for me to recall their meaning immediately”. Overall, the average of the items in this factor is 3.04.

#### *Context Characteristics*

In this part, the researcher investigated the participants’ beliefs on learning context affecting listening comprehension.

*Table 3: Results pertaining to the problems related to context*

<b>Items</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>sd</b>
17. Unclear sounds resulting from poor acoustic conditions of the classroom interfere with my listening comprehension.	80	2.50	0.89
18. Unclear sounds resulting from a poor-quality CD-player interfere with my listening comprehension.	80	2.34	0.93

Table 3 shows the results pertaining to the problems of listening related to context. The mean score for item 17 regarding “Unclear sounds resulting from poor acoustic conditions of the classroom interfere with my listening comprehension” is 2.50. This score indicates that participants were natural with that statement. However, for item 18, the participants agreed with the statement “Unclear sounds resulting from a poor-quality CD-player interfere with my listening comprehension” with the mean score, 2.34.

#### *Semi-structured Interviews*

During the interviews, the participants expressed their thoughts about the listening comprehension problems that they faced. Based on the responses from the interview questions, the researcher concluded that students suffered from weaknesses in listening comprehension performance and this problem attributes to numerous factors such as accent, text length,



unfamiliar words or vocabularies, and noise. The listening problems that they experienced are summarised below:

*Do you have any comments about the listening comprehension problems you encounter?*

Most of the participants stated that the most common listening comprehension problems that they encountered are including text length, speed of delivery, unfamiliar words, and accent. Interestingly, one of the participants mentioned that one of the problems that she encountered in listening comprehension is due to noise. The participant explained that she preferred to listen to songs or any other listening texts alone because if she listened to the listening texts with other people around her, she could not focus on what she listened to.

#### *Text length*

Most of the participants were of the opinion that they preferred a short text because if they listened to a long text, they faced problems to understand the listening texts and forgot the important points. As stated by participant A:

*“Listening texts should be simpler and shorter so I can understand the content”.*

#### *Speed of delivery*

A majority of the participants stressed that they could not comprehend the listening texts when the speaker spoke too fast. It means that they lack control over the speaker’s speed. This factor hinders them to comprehend the listening texts. With regard to speed of delivery, a participant claimed that:

*“The speaker speaks too fast so I cannot catch up on what he or she talks. The speaker should talk slowly and clearly”.*

#### *Unfamiliar words*

All of the participants reported that the lack of prior knowledge in English vocabulary inhibited their understanding in the listening process. It means that inadequate vocabulary contributes to lower performance in listening comprehension among students. For example, a participant said that:

*“Sometimes I do not know the meaning of the words used in the listening texts. I give up.”*

#### *Accent*

The participants reported that they encountered difficulties in understanding the words which were pronounced with varied accents. Most of the listening texts that they listened to were from other western countries such as from the United States. Thus, as the second speakers of English, most of them found difficulties to understand the texts. They would prefer to listen to local artists (Malaysians) for the listening activities in class, therefore they could understand better on the messages delivered.

### Noise

There was only one participant who expressed her opinion about noise which hindered effective listening. A participant stated that following for example:

*“I am not able to understand the listening text as there are many students in class who make some noises”.*

Question 2: *What are students’ stated beliefs about how listening should be taught and activities should be carried out?*

In response to the interview, pre-diploma students made the following practical suggestions for their lecturers to consider the modification or adjustment of the listening activities in class. Some participants made the following comments:

1. The English lecturers should choose English songs which have clear pronunciation for the English listening activities. They like to listen to English songs from local singers (Malaysians) or other countries like Britain (British accent with clear pronunciation).

*“I prefer local English songs such as Yuna’s English songs.”*

2. The lecturer should provide short and simple listening texts for them. For example, one participant stated that:

*“Usually, the song that my lecturer uses in class is long. I prefer a short song because if I missed out one word, then I lost everything.”*

3. Some students prefer to watch English movies with subtitles so they can understand the spoken texts. For instance, one participant mentioned that:

*“I like to watch English movies in class during our listening class rather than listening to news items because watching English movies makes me feel happy and motivates me to learn English. But, sometimes I do not understand the English movie that I watch because I do not understand the actors’ pronunciation and accent. I would prefer if my lecturer provides subtitles when watching the English movie in class.”*

### Discussion

The current study is primarily focused on the listening difficulties that pre-diploma students faced in listening comprehension. The results from the questionnaire indicate that a majority of the participants had neutral opinion regarding the three characteristics of listening comprehension problems which are input, listeners, and context. However, the findings from the interview revealed that generally, there are five common listening problems that they encountered in listening comprehension and these results were similar to those obtained by

earlier researchers (eg., Zinonos, 2017; Ulum, 2015). The problems that hinder their listening performance are varied accents, text length, speed of delivery, noise, and unfamiliar words.

The results from the questionnaire show that most of the participants agreed that factors such as the speakers speak too fast and a poor quality of CD-players hinder their listening comprehension. During the interview, five participants also had expressed their opinions regarding the speech rate and noises which caused problems in listening. These findings are in line with Brunfaut and Revesz (2015), Lynch (2009), and Assaf (2015) as cited in Zinonos (2017). According to Brunfaut and Revesz (2015) as well as Lynch (2009), students faced problems with faster delivery of speech because they only had a small amount of time to process the information in spoken input. A slower speech rate may help the listeners to comprehend the listening texts. Beside that, a poor-quality equipment also causes problems in listening among participants. One possible explanation is that the compact disc (CD-ROM) that lecturers or listeners use got problems and this may affect the students' concentration during the listening process. The result reinforces the explanation offered by Amber and Bloomfield et al (2011), they mentioned that distortion in the audio inhibits the listeners' performance in listening.

As indicated in the study, most of the participants were natural with the text length statement. However, during the interviews, all participants commented that a long text contributes to poor performance in listening comprehension. When they listened to a long text, usually they lost the important points. The results appear to support the previous literature. When the listeners listen to a short listening text, they can comprehend the information more easily (Atkins as cited in Zinonoz , 2017).

Moreover, varied accent also is another prominent factor which affect the listening comprehension. The study found that most of the participants understood more easily the Malaysian speakers compared to American speakers. It is possible that they lack of exposure of American or British spoken texts such as American movies or songs, but a small number of participants could understand the British accent very well because they like to watch Harry Potter and listen to British songs. Another possibility is that they are surrounded by Malaysian speakers, so they are more exposed to Malaysian-English pronunciation. This finding is in agreement with that of Zinonoz (2017) who found that students in Cyprus scored higher with the Cypriot-English pronunciation than their listening test scores with British-English pronunciation. Hence, it can be concluded that the pre-diploma students can perform better in listening comprehension which is closer to the sounds of their mother tongue, Bahasa Malaysia. The students can understand better with the accent or pronunciation which they are familiar with. However, the educators can train or teach the students with the foreign-accented speech by exposing them more to foreign-accented speech teaching materials.

Unfamiliar words also is another common problem that pre-diploma students faced in their listening comprehension. It is very likely that some of them did not have sufficient vocabulary range to understand the English listening texts. The result supports opinion stating that inadequate vocabularies contribute to lower performance in listening comprehension. The second language (L2) vocabularies are very important for the listeners to succeed in listening comprehension. However, it is interesting to note that for certain cases, some students may know the words but when it comes to pronunciation, they cannot comprehend the meaning of the words spoken by the speakers. It may due to accent or pronunciation problems. For

example, the researcher discovered that some students know the word “plumber” but when they listen to the British standard pronunciation, they do not know the word is “plumber”. This is because they are used to listen to Malaysian-English pronunciation.

Meanwhile, when the participants were asked to express their thoughts on the listening activities that should be carried out in class, most of them suggested the lecturers to consider some aspects such as pronunciation, accents, text length, and speech of delivery to make the class more enjoyable and importantly to overcome their listening problems.

## CONCLUSIONS

Listening is one of the most important skills to develop among the English as a second language (ESL) speakers because it is one of the basic attributes to communication. Therefore, the ability to transfer, process, interpret and understand the spoken input that we receive by listening can contribute to mastering the English language.

The present study is an attempt to discover the beliefs of the pre- diploma students on English listening problems that they experienced in listening comprehension. The findings of the current study led to conclusion that most of the pre-diploma students at Universiti Teknologi Mara Melaka encountered numerous obstacles when listening to listening texts. There are numerous problems pertaining to listening comprehension in English language that are commonly faced by the students such as accents, pronunciation, speed of delivery, text length, and unfamiliar words.

Therefore, the education experts and English lecturers should help the students to overcome the listening problems that they encounter in English listening comprehension by providing more interesting listening activities and considering factors that hinder their listening comprehension so that they feel more motivated to learn and improve their listening skills.

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