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Factors Influencing Listening Anxiety among EFL Students in TED Talks-Based Listening Activities

Ismi Sofia Ningrum¹, Refi Ranto Rozak², Meiga Ratih Tirtanawati³

^{1,2,3}English Language Study Program, IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro, Bojonegoro,
Indonesia

ismisofianingrum@gmail.com¹, refi.ranto@ikippgribojonegoro.ac.id²,
meiga_ratih@ikippgribojonegoro.ac.id³.

abstract—Listening anxiety is one of the affective barriers frequently experienced by EFL learners, particularly when they engage with authentic materials such as TED Talks. This study aims to explore the factors influencing listening anxiety among seven second-semester EFL students during TED Talk-based listening activities with varying playback speeds. This study employs a qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to understand participants' experiences and emotional responses. Participants were purposively selected based on their experiences facing difficulties and anxiety while listening. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and participant reflections. The results identified six main factors influencing listening anxiety: high speaking speed, limited vocabulary, unfamiliar accents, fear of missing important information, difficulty maintaining concentration, and low self-confidence. Among these factors, high speaking speed and limited vocabulary were the most dominant. The findings indicate that listening anxiety arises from the interaction of linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors that influence participants' comprehension of authentic materials. Therefore, adjusting playback speed, vocabulary reinforcement, and explicit training in listening strategies can help reduce anxiety and improve listening comprehension in an EFL context.

Keywords—Listening anxiety, EFL learners, TED Talks, Playback speed, Listening comprehension, IPA

Abstrak—Kecemasan mendengarkan merupakan salah satu hambatan afektif yang sering dialami oleh siswa EFL, terutama ketika mereka berinteraksi dengan materi autentik seperti TED Talks. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi kecemasan mendengarkan pada tujuh mahasiswa EFL semester dua selama kegiatan menyimak berbasis TED Talks dengan kecepatan pemutaran yang bervariasi. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) untuk memahami pengalaman dan respons emosional peserta. Partisipan dipilih secara *purposive* berdasarkan pengalaman mereka dalam menghadapi kesulitan dan kecemasan saat menyimak. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi, dan refleksi peserta. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi enam faktor utama yang mempengaruhi kecemasan mendengarkan, yaitu kecepatan bicara yang tinggi, keterbatasan kosakata, aksen yang tidak familiar, ketakutan

kehilangan informasi penting, kesulitan mempertahankan konsentrasi, dan rendahnya kepercayaan diri. Di antara faktor-faktor tersebut, kecepatan bicara yang tinggi dan keterbatasan kosakata merupakan faktor yang paling dominan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kecemasan mendengarkan muncul dari interaksi faktor linguistik, kognitif, dan afektif yang mempengaruhi pemahaman peserta terhadap materi autentik. Oleh karena itu, penyesuaian kecepatan pemutaran, penguatan kosakata, dan pelatihan strategi menyimak secara eksplisit dapat membantu mengurangi kecemasan dan meningkatkan pemahaman mendengarkan dalam konteks EFL.

Kata kunci—Kecemasan mendengarkan, Siswa EFL, TED Talks, Kecepatan pemutaran, Pemahaman mendengarkan, IPA

INTRODUCTION

Among the four language skills, listening is widely regarded as the most foundational, serving as the primary channel through which learners receive and process input in a target language. In higher education contexts, the capacity to comprehend academic spoken discourse is essential not only for classroom learning but also for professional and intercultural communication. Despite its centrality, listening remains the least explicitly taught skill in many EFL curricula, and learners frequently report significant difficulty and emotional distress during listening tasks (Rost, 2011).

One notable development in listening pedagogy has been the integration of authentic digital media particularly TED Talks as primary instructional materials. These videos offer learners exposure to real-world academic English delivered by speakers from diverse backgrounds, and their naturally occurring discourse closely mirrors the linguistic demands of professional contexts (Tilwani et al., 2022). The availability of transcripts, subtitles, and playback speed control further enhances their pedagogical appeal. Yet the same features that make TED Talks valuable – naturalistic speech, accent variation, and content complexity – can simultaneously overwhelm learners with limited listening proficiency.

Research consistently demonstrates that many EFL learners experience what is termed Foreign Language Listening Anxiety (FLLA), a specific form of anxiety arising from the perception that one cannot successfully decode and comprehend spoken input in the target language (Kimura, 2016; Chriswiyati & Subekti, 2022). This anxiety carries documented consequences for comprehension, attention, and academic

performance. Liu and Xu (2021) found that elevated listening anxiety correlates significantly with reduced test scores among Chinese university-level EFL learners. Comparable findings have emerged in Indonesian EFL contexts: Rozak et al. (2022) reported that the characteristics of listening input—particularly when materials are perceived as excessively difficult or beyond learners' processing capacity—play a central role in shaping listening anxiety levels, especially among pre-service teachers exposed to authentic spoken texts.

A factor receiving increasing scholarly attention is the role of speech rate, or playback speed, in shaping cognitive load and anxiety. Hidayati and Suharyadi (2023) found that authentic TED Talks typically operate at approximately 147 words per minute, a pace that many intermediate EFL learners struggle to process without considerable cognitive strain. Chiu and Chen (2023) further demonstrated that even a modest reduction of 10 to 20 percent from natural speed can meaningfully improve comprehension outcomes. In a related vein, Rozak et al. (2019) found that insufficient exposure to authentic listening input and difficulty processing spoken texts at natural rates contributed to higher levels of listening anxiety among student teachers, underscoring the importance of gradually scaffolded authentic input in EFL listening courses. Although previous studies have examined listening anxiety, authentic listening materials, and the influence of speech rate on listening comprehension, most have employed quantitative approaches that focus primarily on anxiety levels or comprehension outcomes. As a result, less attention has been given to how learners experience and interpret listening anxiety while engaging with authentic materials such as TED Talks. Furthermore, studies investigating the influence of playback speed on listening anxiety in Indonesian EFL contexts remain limited.

To address these gaps, this study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the factors influencing listening anxiety among Indonesian EFL students during TED Talks-based listening activities with varying playback speeds. By focusing on participants' lived experiences, the study provides a deeper understanding of how linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors interact in shaping listening anxiety. The findings contribute to the growing body of research on Foreign

Language Listening Anxiety (FLLA) and offer practical insights for designing more supportive listening instruction in EFL classrooms.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research design, employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as its primary methodological framework. IPA is particularly suited to research questions concerned with how individuals make sense of significant personal experiences, combining a phenomenological interest in lived experience with an interpretive commitment to understanding the meanings participants ascribe to those experiences (Willis & Harvey, 2025). In this study, IPA enabled a nuanced exploration of how EFL students perceived, emotionally responded to, and interpreted the anxiety they experienced during TED Talks-based listening activities at varying playback speeds. In accordance with phenomenological principles, the researcher employed bracketing – a deliberate effort to suspend prior assumptions and theoretical biases about listening anxiety – so that the essential structures of participants' experiences could emerge authentically from their own accounts (Neubauer et al., 2019; Greening, 2019).

The study was conducted in the English Education Study Program at a private teacher training college in Bojonegoro Regency, East Java, Indonesia. This setting was selected because the program incorporates TED Talks as primary authentic materials in its Academic Listening course, exposing students to spoken English at varying levels of complexity and speed. Participants were drawn from the second semester, a cohort at an early and formative stage of their academic English listening development.

Seven participants were selected using purposive sampling, a strategy that prioritizes alignment with the specific characteristics of the phenomenon under investigation over breadth of representation (Willis & Harvey, 2025). Inclusion criteria required that participants: (1) were currently enrolled in the TED Talks-based listening course; (2) had direct experience with playback speed variation during listening activities; (3) self-reported experiencing anxiety during listening tasks; (4) had achieved scores below the expected threshold in at least one prior listening

assessment; and (5) were willing and able to articulate their experiences reflectively. The seven participants were assigned the codes RR, FT, ZK, DN, HL, UL, and MS to protect their identities throughout the study.

Three complementary data collection techniques were employed to ensure methodological triangulation. First, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with each participant, lasting approximately 20 to 30 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to follow each participant's narrative while ensuring that key thematic areas—including specific anxiety triggers, physical and emotional responses, and coping strategies—were addressed. Second, non-participant structured observations were conducted during listening sessions to capture behavioral and nonverbal indicators of anxiety. An observation checklist adapted from frameworks proposed by Kimura (2016), Horwitz (2016), Liu and Xu (2021), and Chiu and Chen (2023) was used to systematically document observable behaviors. Third, participants wrote personal reflection notes following each listening session, guided by open-ended prompts about their emotional experiences, perceived difficulties, and coping strategies.

Data analysis followed the systematic IPA procedure outlined by Willis and Harvey (2025) and Smith et al. (as referenced therein). The process began with repeated, careful reading of all interview transcripts and reflection documents to develop a holistic understanding of each participant's account. Initial notes were recorded in three modes: descriptive (content of statements), linguistic (word choice and framing), and conceptual (tentative interpretive connections). Emergent themes were subsequently refined and organized into superordinate themes representing shared experiential patterns across participants. A cross-case analysis was conducted in the final stage to identify both convergences and divergences in how the seven participants experienced listening anxiety.

Several strategies were employed to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. Member checking was conducted by sharing transcript summaries and preliminary interpretations with participants, who confirmed the accuracy of the researcher's

representations. Methodological and source triangulation was achieved by comparing findings across the three data sources. Peer debriefing with supervisors and colleagues was used to challenge interpretive blind spots and refine analytical conclusions. Throughout data collection, the researcher maintained adequate engagement with participants to develop thorough contextual understanding of the phenomenon.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of interview data, observation checklists, and participant reflection notes yielded six interrelated themes that together constitute the landscape of listening anxiety experienced by EFL students in TED Talks-based activities. The discussion moves from the most consistently reported sources of anxiety toward more nuanced affective and behavioral dimensions.

1. Fast Speech Rate as the Primary Anxiety Trigger

Across all seven participants, the speaker's delivery speed emerged as the most salient trigger of listening anxiety. This was especially pronounced at speeds above 1.0x but was also felt at natural speed when an individual speaker's tempo was already rapid. Participants consistently described a sense of cognitive lag the feeling that their mental processing could not keep pace with the rate at which information arrived.

RR articulated this clearly, explaining that the most difficult part of listening to TED Talks was when the video was "too fast" because she was not yet fluent in English. At 1.25x speed, she felt the added difficulty of limited vocabulary compounded by pace. Her reflection notes revealed that at 2x speed, she felt "slightly anxious because I'm afraid of missing important information," and that "the faster pace makes it harder to process everything at once." RR's experience reflects a pattern deeper than cognitive difficulty alone: anxiety emerged from an inability to maintain a coherent mental representation of meaning under temporal pressure. FT described a comparable experience, noting that speed changes were "the most difficult part" of the task and that at 1.25x she felt nervous about missing the main point. She described something akin to a cognitive shutdown: "I become

confused and need to replay the video.” UL echoed this, reflecting that at 2x speed he “felt dizzy and missed a lot of parts” a vivid account of the temporal pressure embedded in high-speed listening. It is worth noting that individual differences in how participants experienced this challenge reflect variation in processing capacity and coping repertoires, not simply a uniform response to speed.

Observation data corroborated these accounts. During sessions where video speed increased, several participants were observed sighing, shaking their heads, or shifting restlessly in their seats. The checklist confirmed that participants frequently lost focus midway through faster videos, looked away from the screen, and stopped taking notes altogether. These behavioral indicators are consistent with Sweller’s (1988) cognitive load framework, in which excessive intrinsic load imposed by fast speech on a processing system not yet fluent disrupts task performance and triggers avoidance behaviors. What this study adds is the phenomenological layer: participants did not merely perform worse at higher speeds; they felt anxious, pressured, and physically tense experiences with lasting implications for their relationship to listening tasks more broadly. This pattern aligns with Chiu and Chen (2023), who demonstrated that moderate speed reductions meaningfully improve comprehension outcomes, and with Rozak et al. (2019), who similarly found that pre-service teachers with limited exposure to authentic input at natural rates were more susceptible to listening anxiety, suggesting that gradual familiarization with authentic spoken texts is essential for anxiety reduction. These experiences indicate that rapid speech was perceived not only as a linguistic challenge but also as a source of psychological pressure. Participants interpreted their difficulty in processing spoken input as a sign of inadequate listening ability, which contributed to feelings of anxiety and self-doubt.

2. Limited Vocabulary and the Word by Word Processing Trap

Closely linked to fast speech was participants’ awareness of their vocabulary limitations as a central source of anxiety. Several described a strategy that might be termed word by word listening an attempt to translate and decode each individual word before moving on to the next. While this is an understandable

response to uncertainty, it is fundamentally incompatible with the pace of natural or accelerated speech, placing an enormous burden on working memory. MS explained that the most difficult aspect of TED Talks was “unfamiliar vocabulary and some words that I do not know,” and that encountering such words caused him to “lose focus.” He described hearing new vocabulary at higher speeds as words sounding “like gibberish (blurred)” a vivid expression of the point at which lexical decoding breaks down entirely. Notably, MS reported managing this anxiety somewhat by focusing on keywords rather than attempting full sentence comprehension, a metacognitive strategy consistent with the adaptive socio-affective listening approach identified by Chriswiyati and Subekti (2022). RR noted that her main source of anxiety was the need to “translate word by word,” and that when she could not sustain that process, she would “go blank and cannot fully understand the video.” DN similarly described how some words “blend together” at faster speeds, particularly when speakers explained scientific or complex concepts.

Observation data reinforced these accounts: multiple participants were seen stopping their note-taking mid-session, an indicator that vocabulary-driven processing failure had overtaken their capacity for active engagement. This aligns with Rost’s (2011) model, which positions vocabulary knowledge as a foundational prerequisite for effective bottom-up processing, and with Tirtanawati and Putri (2021), who emphasize that limited vocabulary knowledge significantly burdens cognitive processing during listening and may heighten overall comprehension difficulty. From an IPA perspective, vocabulary limitations were experienced as more than a knowledge gap. Participants viewed unfamiliar words as barriers that interrupted meaning-making and reduced their confidence during listening tasks.

3. Unfamiliar Accents and the Challenge of Auditory Recognition

A third theme concerned the difficulty of recognizing and processing unfamiliar speaker accents. TED Talks feature presenters from a wide range of national and linguistic backgrounds, regularly exposing EFL learners to phonological variation in vowel quality, intonation, rhythm, and prosody that may

differ considerably from the standardized American or British English they have studied.

ZK identified “difficult accent and very fast speaking” as her primary source of listening difficulty, describing a state of confusion that led her to “pause the video” and write down unfamiliar words. Her reflections elaborated that the most challenging moments arose “when the speaker speaks with an unusual accent at high speed” suggesting that accent and speed interact as compounding variables rather than operating independently. HL similarly mentioned “unfamiliar words or specific accents” as factors that made listening more demanding, and FT described how speakers with “a very strong accent” made decoding individual words especially difficult, particularly during transitions between points. The relationship between accent and anxiety documented here is consistent with Astrid et al.’s (2024) findings, which identified unfamiliar accents as a significant anxiety factor among Indonesian EFL learners. What distinguishes this study is the specificity of context: participants were responding to accents in TED Talks specifically, where visual and contextual cues are available but do not always compensate for phonological unfamiliarity. The observation checklist noted that several participants displayed tense facial expressions and furrowed brows during sections featuring less recognizable accents. Participants’ accounts suggest that unfamiliar accents disrupted their expectations of spoken English, creating uncertainty and increasing the effort required to interpret the message.

4. Fear of Missing Information and Anxiety as Cognitive Pressure

Perhaps the most emotionally charged theme to emerge was what participants consistently described as a fear of missing important information. This fear functioned not merely as a concern about comprehension but as a pervasive cognitive pressure that shaped how participants engaged with—and sometimes withdrew from listening tasks.

FT stated directly that her primary source of anxiety was “fear of missing the main idea,” and that this fear had a cascading effect: “if I miss one sentence, I lose focus on the rest of the video.” This description captures a key phenomenological feature of listening anxiety—its self-reinforcing nature. Once a listener fears they

have missed something, they divert attentional resources toward recovery attempts at the expense of processing what follows, widening the gap between speaker and listener. HL echoed this, explaining that her anxiety stemmed from fear of “missing the material,” and that when this happened, her “concentration becomes distracted and I cannot catch the main idea well.” DN expressed a similar concern at 1.25x speed, and UL linked his fear to anticipated failure: “I’m afraid of missing important information and not being able to answer the questions afterward.”

These accounts resonate with Hidayati et al. (2020) characterization of FLLA as a response to the transient and non-repetitive nature of listening information passes once and cannot be recovered without deliberate intervention. Observation data showed that during higher-speed sessions, many participants appeared hesitant when asked to respond to questions and passive when instructions were given, confirming that the fear of missing information translated directly into reduced classroom participation. The fear of missing important information reflected participants’ concern about maintaining comprehension. This concern often intensified when they perceived that they could not keep pace with the speaker.

5. Difficulty Maintaining Concentration

Related to but distinct from the fear of missing information was a more general difficulty sustaining attention throughout a listening session. Participants described fluctuating concentration periods of engaged listening followed by moments of mental fatigue or distraction that made continuous processing particularly demanding.

UL expressed this most vividly, noting that at 2x speed “my brain gets tense and I get tired easily.” The word “tense” is telling: it suggests that concentration had become an effortful and physically demanding activity rather than a natural state. ZK mentioned feeling “nervous, shaky, and unfocused” during challenging listening moments, especially under time pressure. FT reflected that at 1.5x or 2x speed, it became “hard to keep up with the main ideas when I am still trying to translate the words in my head.”

Observation data provided rich evidence of attentional difficulty: multiple participants were seen with blank stares, looking dreamy, or bowing their heads without taking notes behavioral markers of attentional fatigue. These findings align with Mo et al. (2022) who demonstrated that higher video speeds are associated with greater attentional drift and reduced learning effectiveness. From an IPA perspective, the significance lies not only in the cognitive dimension but in the emotional experience of losing focus: participants did not describe distraction as a neutral lapse but articulated it as a source of frustration and self-criticism, feeding back into the anxiety cycle. These experiences demonstrate how sustained attention became increasingly difficult when participants simultaneously attempted to decode vocabulary, recognize pronunciation, and understand content.

6. Low Confidence and Emotional Self-Perception

A sixth and overarching theme concerned participants' sense of confidence or lack thereof during listening activities. While low confidence might initially appear to be a consequence of other anxiety factors, the IPA approach reveals it to operate simultaneously as a trigger, amplifier, and outcome of listening anxiety.

RR stated plainly that she would "lose confidence when the speed is faster," linking her confidence directly to the playback speed variable. FT noted that anxiety made her "less confident when answering questions," indicating that anxiety experienced during listening extended into subsequent task performance. UL described a particularly poignant experience: "I become less confident because I am afraid my answers are wrong" a statement revealing how deeply internalized the self-doubt associated with listening anxiety can become.

MS presented a somewhat different profile. He noted that while he felt nervous internally, he still "looked confident" outwardly a distinction that highlights the gap between internal emotional experience and external performance that lies at the heart of the phenomenological project. The observation checklist for MS reflected this contrast: while his facial expressions showed fewer visible tension signs than other participants, behavioral responses such as not taking notes and looking around still indicated cognitive disengagement. This underscores the

value of IPA in surfacing dimensions of experience that observation instruments alone cannot capture. The emotional self-perception dimension documented here is consistent with Kimura's (2016) self-presentational framework, which emphasizes how the listener's real-time evaluation of their own performance becomes a significant and self-sustaining source of anxiety. These experiences demonstrate how sustained attention became increasingly difficult when participants simultaneously attempted to decode vocabulary, recognize pronunciation, and understand content. These accounts reveal that confidence functioned as an emotional filter through which participants evaluated their listening performance. Lower confidence often amplified feelings of anxiety during listening activities.

7. Integrated View: Anxiety as a Multidimensional Experience

Taken together, the six themes paint a comprehensive picture of how listening anxiety manifests in the lives of these EFL students. The anxiety is not merely cognitive it is embodied (physical tension, restlessness, fatigue), behavioral (distraction, disengagement, reduced participation), and deeply emotional (fear, frustration, self-doubt). This integrated picture aligns with Liu and Xu's (2021) conceptualization of listening anxiety as a multidimensional construct operating across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions.

A particularly important finding is the role of playback speed as a trigger variable that amplifies pre-existing vulnerabilities. Participants who already experienced vocabulary limitations or accent difficulties found these challenges dramatically intensified at higher speeds, suggesting that speed functions less as an isolated variable than as a multiplier that exacerbates other sources of difficulty. This interaction effect carries important implications for instructional design: the mere availability of speed control features is insufficient; learners need explicit scaffolding in how and when to use them effectively.

The coping strategies reported by participants also warrant attention. Most commonly, participants described replaying videos, reducing speed retroactively, focusing on keywords rather than full sentences, using subtitles, and engaging in self-calming behaviors. These strategies reflect a blend of behavioral regulation

(adjusting the input) and emotional regulation (managing the affective response), consistent with what Cross and Vandergrift (2018) describe as a comprehensive metacognitive listening approach. However, in most cases, these strategies were employed reactively after anxiety had already disrupted comprehension rather than proactively, pointing to a gap in metacognitive awareness and self-regulatory skill that targeted instruction could meaningfully address.

Overall, the findings indicate that listening anxiety emerged from the interaction of linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors. Fast speech rate and limited vocabulary appeared to intensify other challenges, including difficulties in maintaining concentration, fear of missing information, and reduced confidence. These factors did not operate independently but collectively shaped participants' listening experiences during TED Talks-based activities.

CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate that listening anxiety in TED Talks-based listening activities is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interaction of linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors. This study explored the factors contributing to listening anxiety among EFL students engaged in TED Talks-based listening activities with varying playback speeds, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to foreground participants' lived experiences. Six interconnected themes emerged from the data: fast speech rate, limited vocabulary, unfamiliar speaker accents, fear of missing information, difficulty sustaining concentration, and low self-confidence. Among these, fast speech rate and limited vocabulary were the most pervasive, shaping the listening experience of nearly all seven participants in consistent and emotionally significant ways.

These findings carry several implications for listening instruction in EFL contexts. First, instructors incorporating authentic materials such as TED Talks should consider a graduated approach to speed adjustment beginning with slower playback rates and incrementally increasing speed as learners gain proficiency and confidence. Second, vocabulary instruction should be integrated into pre-listening activities to reduce the processing burden during the listening task itself. Third, explicit

instruction in metacognitive listening strategies particularly keyword-focused listening and self-regulatory practices can equip learners to manage anxiety proactively rather than reactively.

It is equally important for educators to recognize that listening anxiety has an emotional and embodied dimension that extends beyond measurable comprehension outcomes. Cultivating a classroom environment in which students feel safe to struggle, ask for repetition, and use speed control without embarrassment may be as consequential as any technical pedagogical intervention. This study is necessarily limited by its small sample size and single institutional context. Future research might extend to larger cohorts, different proficiency levels, or longitudinal designs that track changes in listening anxiety as learners are progressively exposed to faster authentic input. Comparative studies examining how different scaffolding approaches such as pre-listening vocabulary work, dictogloss activities, or explicit anxiety management instruction affect both anxiety levels and comprehension outcomes would also represent a valuable contribution to the field.

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