

STUDENTS' LISTENING COMPREHENSION PERFORMANCE IN THE MINI TALKS SECTION OF THE TOEFL (PBT)

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ABSTRACT

Listening comprehension is one of the essential skills tested in the TOEFL Paper-Based Test (PBT), and the Mini Talks section is often considered the most challenging. Students must concentrate on fast-paced monologues containing dense information and answer several questions at once. Observations and interviews revealed that many students failed to capture key details, lacked strategies to filter important information, and struggled to handle multiple questions within a short time. Based on these problems, this study aimed to describe the students' listening ability and identify the difficulties they faced when answering Mini Talks questions in the TOEFL PBT. This study used a descriptive quantitative method. The participants were 16 eighth-semester students of the English Education Department at Universitas Mahaputra Muhammad Yamin, Solok, in the 2024/2025 academic year. Data were collected using a listening test focusing on the Mini Talks section, and the students' scores were analyzed to determine their average performance and the easiest and most difficult question types. The results showed that the students' average score in the Mini Talks section was 47.7, categorized as "fair." The easiest question type was purpose (68.8%), while the most difficult was attitude and opinion (34.4%). The findings indicate that students had the most difficulty interpreting tone, making inferences, and identifying key information from audio played only once. This study suggests the need for more targeted listening practice and effective teaching strategies to improve students' performance in the TOEFL PBT listening section.

Keywords: listening section, mini talks section, students' ability, TOEFL Paper-Based Test

1. INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension is one of the most important skills in language learning, especially for academic purposes. For students who want to study abroad or pursue international

careers, good listening skills are essential. The Test of English as a Foreign Language Paper-Based Test (TOEFL PBT) is one of the most widely used tests to measure English proficiency, and its listening section assesses how well

students can understand spoken English in real academic situations.

The TOEFL PBT has three main sections: Listening Comprehension, Structure, and Written Expression, and Reading Comprehension (Brown 2004; Handayani 2019). Each section tests different language skills, but the listening section is often considered the most challenging. Unlike the reading section where students can read the text multiple times, or the structure section where they can review their answers, the listening section requires students to understand audio recordings that are played only once. Students must listen carefully, understand the information quickly, and answer questions immediately—all within a limited time. This makes listening particularly difficult for many test-takers (Nuraida & Sartika, 2025).

The Listening Comprehension section has three parts: short conversations between two people, longer conversations, and mini talks (Rogers, 2011). Mini talks are extended monologues that include academic lectures, campus announcements, or informational speeches. Most students find mini talks to be the hardest part because these passages are longer, contain more complex information, and require several types of comprehension skills (Pasaribu et al., 2023). Students need to identify the main ideas, remember specific details, understand what the speaker implies but does not say directly, and recognize the speaker's attitude or purpose. Because the audio is played only once, students cannot go back to check their understanding, making mini talks extremely demanding.

A number of empirical studies have examined students' challenges in the TOEFL listening test. Previous

research shows that many students have difficulties because of limited vocabulary, fast speech rate, unfamiliar topics, lack of concentration, and poor audio quality (Fitria 2021; Rina and Tiarina 2021; La'biran and Dewi 2023; Hadist et al. 2022; Aprino, et al. 2022). Studies in Indonesian universities also report that unclear recordings and noisy classrooms often make the listening process even harder for students (Aprino et al., 2022). However, most of these studies discuss listening difficulties in general and focus on the whole TOEFL Listening Section. They do not examine the mini talks part in detail. The existing research mostly explains common listening problems such as the speed of the speaker, difficult vocabulary, or background noise. It does not describe students' performance based on the question types in the mini talks section. Question types such as main idea, detail, inference, and attitude questions have not been studied separately. Because of this, there is still limited information about which question types in the mini talks section are the most difficult for students.

This study attempts to fill this gap by examining students' listening comprehension performance in the mini talks section of the TOEFL Paper Based Test. The research was conducted with eighth semester students of the English Department at Universitas Mahaputra Muhammad Yamin for the academic year 2024 and 2025. The purpose of this study is to identify the types of questions that students can answer successfully and those that they find difficult in the mini talks section. The results are expected to provide lecturers with a clearer understanding of students' listening challenges and to support the

development of more effective teaching strategies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Listening comprehension is an essential component of language proficiency, particularly in standardized English tests such as the TOEFL Paper-Based Test (PBT). In the TOEFL PBT, listening becomes a significant indicator of students' ability to process spoken English in academic and real-life contexts. According to Brown (2004), the listening section consists of short conversations, long conversations, and mini talks. Each part requires different levels of comprehension, ranging from understanding specific information to analyzing implied meaning. Mini talks, in particular, demand higher comprehension skills because students must process extended monologues that include complex information, academic vocabulary, and inferred meaning.

Understanding listening comprehension requires familiarity with the nature of spoken language input. Flowerdew and Lindsay (2005) argue that listening involves both bottom-up and top-down processes. Bottom-up processing requires listeners to decode linguistic features such as sounds, vocabulary, and grammatical structures, while top-down processing engages background knowledge, context clues, and prediction. When these two processes are not well developed, students often fail to interpret the main idea, supporting details, speaker attitudes, and implied messages. Several experts also explain factors influencing the difficulty of listening comprehension.

In the TOEFL Paper-Based Test (PBT), listening is assessed through three parts: short conversations, longer

conversations, and mini talks. These parts require different listening skills, from identifying specific information to understanding intention and inference. Mini talks are often considered the most demanding section because they present longer monologues with dense information. Gear and Gear, (2008) explain that students must listen to a short lecture-like passage only once and then answer several questions about it. This requires selective listening, quick processing, and the ability to connect different pieces of information.

The Mini Talks section usually evaluates six types of comprehension: main idea, details, setting, purpose, inference, and speaker attitude or opinion (Sharpe, 2024). These question types test both literal understanding and deeper interpretation. Students not only need to identify facts but also understand tone, make predictions, and infer meaning from the context. Because of these demands, many learners find Mini Talks difficult, especially if they are not familiar with academic vocabulary or typical discourse patterns found in spoken texts.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative design to obtain a clear picture of students' performance in answering Mini Talk questions. A descriptive quantitative approach is commonly used to present numerical results that reflect existing conditions or phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Through this design, the researchers systematically measured students' scores and described the patterns found in the data.

3.2 Participants and Data Sources.

The participants in this study were eighth-semester students of the English Education Department at FKIP UMMY Solok in the 2024/2025 academic year. These students were selected because they had completed courses related to TOEFL listening and had previous exposure to TOEFL-like assessments. As the total population consisted of only 16 students, the study applied total sampling, which is recommended when the number of eligible participants is below 30 (Sari et

al., 2025; Sugiyono, 2010). Therefore, all 16 students were included as research participants.

3.3 Instrumentation

Instruments are very useful tools for conducting research. Instruments are measuring tools and will provide information about what we are researching (Sukandra & Atmaja, 2020). Based on the explanation above, this study used tests as data collection and used mini talk questions that refer to six indicators, includes:

Table 1. Types of the Questions of Mini Talk Part

No	Type of Questions	Numbers of Questions
1	Main Idea Questions	13, & 17
2	Detail Questions	3, 7, 8, 12, 11, 18, 19, & 24.
3	Setting Questions	1, 5, 9, & 14
4	Attitude and Opinion Questions	4, 20, 22, & 23.
5	Inference Questions	2, 6, 10, & 16
6	Purpose Questions	15, & 21
Total		24 items test

The questions above were taken from the Longman Introductory Course for the TOEFL Test book (Brown, 2004). Although in official TOEFL PBT. The addition of the number of questions was done with aim of making the scope of the mini talk competence measured wider and deeper, and so that the results of the analysis of student ability on the indicators above are more representative.

3.4 Technique of Data Collection

Data collection was carried out offline. Regarding the method of data collection, there was several steps taken. The first step, the researchers provided some directions regarding the implementation of the data collection carried out. Next, the researchers distributed answer sheets to be worked on and explain the details of how to do it. Then the test was begun with the

researchers playing audio containing the narrative of the questions and their processing along with the audio playback. In the last step, after everything is finished, the answer sheets were collected from the research sample. The time given to complete the questions was 20 minutes.

3.5 Technique of Data Analysis

After collecting the data, the researchers conducted assessment process. After the assessment process, the researchers analyzed the students' ability in the mini talk part of the TOEFL listening, especially on the types of questions tested. The test consisted of 24 questions. The researchers calculated

all the scores received by each student after completing all the questions.

In analyzing data, the researchers used the formula scoring the test according to Malik (2018) below:

$$P = \frac{f}{n} \times 100\%$$

$$P = f/n \times 100\%$$

P = percentage

X = correct answers

M = total of item

After analyzing the score of the test, the researchers had classified the result of the test scores based on the classification table below:

Table 2. Scale to Classify the Level of Percentage Ability in Test

Frequency	Classification
81 – 100%	Excellent
61 – 80%	Good
41 – 60%	Fair
21 - 40%	Poor
0 – 20%	Very Poor

Adopted from Riduwan (2009)

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Result

The following analysis presents data on students' ability in answering the mini talk part of the TOEFL Paper-

Based Test (PBT). The result of this test has presented in the form of table below.

Table 3. Students' Result in Mini Talks Part Test

No Students	Correct Answer	Percentage	Classification
Student 1	6	25.0%	Poor
Student 2	20	83.3%	Excellent
Student 3	8	33.3%	Poor
Student 4	16	66.7%	Good
Student 5	10	41.7%	Fair
Student 6	9	37.5%	Poor
Student 7	5	20.8%	Poor
Student 8	14	58.3%	Poor
Student 9	18	75.0%	Good
Student 10	17	70.8%	Good
Student 11	10	41.7%	Fair
Student 12	10	41.7%	Fair
Student 13	9	37.5%	Poor
Student 14	9	37.5%	Poor
Student 15	15	62.5%	Good
Student 16	7	29.2%	Poor
Average		47.7%	Fair

Based on the data from the table above, it can be seen the results of students test in the mini talks part. Based on the test results in the table above, it was found that out of 16 students who took the test, 1 student (6%) was in the excellent category, indicating this student has best listening skills. Furthermore, 4 students (25%) were in the good category, meaning they had fairly good abilities with slight difficulties. In addition, 3 students (19%) were in the fair category, meaning the student's abilities show sufficient

and standard result. Meanwhile, the majority of students, namely 8 students (50%), were in the poor category. These results indicate that the majority of students' abilities in the mini talk test are classified as low.

After finding students 'general listening ability in mini talk part on TOEFL PBT, researchers divided the results of the mini talk questions into six types of questions: main idea, detail, setting, attitude and opinion, inference, and purpose questions. The result of this test has presented in the table below.

Table 4. Students' Result in Type of Questions on Mini Talks Part Test

No	Type of Question	Percentage	Classification
1	Main idea Question	62.50%	Good
2	Detail Questions	43.80%	Fair
3	Setting Questions	56.30%	Fair
4	Attitude & Opinion Questions	34.40%	Poor
5	Inference Question	37.50%	Poor
6	Purpose Questions	68.80%	Good

Based on the data presented in table above, the main idea questions students can achieve the highest average score was 65.5%, in the detail questions students can achieve the average score was 43.8%, setting questions students can achieve the average score was 56.3%, attitude and opinion questions students can achieve the average score was 34.4%. In inference questions students can achieve the average score was 37.5%. In Purpose questions students can achieve the average was 68.8%.

In addition, it can be seen the results of students test in the type of questions on mini talks part. The type of question with the highest score achieved was main idea, and purpose question, which is classified as good category. Moreover, the type of question with the middle score achieved was detail question, and setting question, which is classified as fair category. Furthermore, the type of question with the lowest score achieved was attitude & opinion question, and inference question, which is classified as poor category.

4.2 Discussion

Based on the findings above, the students' ability in mini talk part on Listening TOEFL PBT was divided fair category, performance in the fair category reflects limited proficiency in processing spoken information, particularly in capturing implied meanings and drawing inferences. Several factors may contribute to this outcome, including the rate of speech, discourse length, the use of less frequent academic vocabulary, and insufficient exposure to similar listening materials (Flowerdew & Lindsay, 2005). These findings underscore the need for more

structured and intensive listening practice that targets these specific challenges.

The results of the present study are consistent with those of Rainy (2014), who similarly reported that students' performance in the mini talk section of the TOEFL PBT was within the fair category. Such consistency across studies indicates a recurring pattern in which the mini talk section presents considerable challenges to learners despite its relatively short duration. Nevertheless, the mean score in the current study was slightly lower than that reported by Soali & Pujiani (2020), which may be attributed to differences in sample characteristics, the amount and frequency of listening practice, and variations in learning environments.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that attitude and opinion questions were the most challenging for students. This suggests that students experienced difficulty in interpreting the speaker's stance, feelings, or intentions, which inherently requires more advanced inferential listening skills. As noted by Buck (2001), answering questions that involve identifying attitudes and opinions requires the ability to process such as intonation and stress, recognize lexical indicators of stance, and interpret contextual cues within the discourse. This finding is in contrast with previous research by Soali & Pujiani (2020), who found that the most difficult type of question in mini talks was in inference question. The divergence in results may be due to

differences in the inferential listening skills of the participants or in the nature and design of the listening materials used in each study.

Based on the findings, the students' listening ability in mini talk part on TOEFL (PBT) was categorized as "fair". This result indicates that the students demonstrated sufficient abilities, showing mastery aspect of the material. However, they still experienced noticeable weakness that required improvement in order to achieve a higher level of proficiency.

5. CONCLUSION

Base on discussion above, the most difficult questions types for the students were attitude and opinion questions. They were classified in the "Poor" category, reflecting a relatively low level of mastery. This suggested that the students encountered significant challenges in understanding speaker attitude or opinion, which required more advanced listening comprehension skill. Therefore, this area should be given more emphasis in future learning and practice.

Based on conclusion above, it is highly recommended that instructional strategies focus on capturing more detailed information. Lectures should increase the practice of capturing non-explicit information to improve students' overall competence in mini talks. While providing valuable insights into students' listening difficulties, the findings of this study are limited by the small sample size. The small sample size used for this study limits the scope of the findings, meaning they cannot broadly generalize to a large population or different educational context. Future research should involve larger, more

diverse samples and use qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of the effective factors contributing to the observed difficulties in mini talks.

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