

## Students Experiences in Navigating Listening Challenges with World Englishes: A Phenomenological Study

Cicik Kurniasih<sup>1</sup>, Wahdan Fauzan Alfaridzi<sup>2</sup>, Teguh Abdurrahman<sup>3</sup>, Endang Darsih<sup>4</sup>  
<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>English Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education,  
Universitas Kuningan

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### ABSTRACT

*This study explores the challenges that students of English Education face in comprehending listening texts with accent variation within the framework of World Englishes. Using a qualitative phenomenological research design, the data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with ten students of the sixth semester of Kuningan University who had studied the World Englishes elective course. The results showed that the major difficulties comprised unfamiliar types of accents (such as Indian, Singaporean, and British accents), speed of speech, interference from background noise, and the use of unfamiliar local words and idioms. To cope with these, the students used a variety of coping strategies such as replay of audio, use of subtitles, increased exposure to varied accents through digital media, and the use of technology such as online dictionaries and artificial intelligence. The experiences of lecturer support differed; while some students felt supported by the diverse materials, others relied on self-study mechanisms. The study concluded that while there were complex difficulties in comprehending World Englishes, the students demonstrated enormous flexibility in self-study. The findings point to the need to develop a more inclusive listening curriculum and pedagogy that explicitly embraces global accent differences to prepare students for communication in real-life contexts.*

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#### Corresponding Author:

**Teguh Abdurrahman**

Universitas Kuningan

Jl. Cut Nyak Dhien No.36A, Cijoho, Kec. Kuningan, Kabupaten Kuningan, Jawa Barat 45513

Email: [teguhabdurrahman04@gmail.com](mailto:teguhabdurrahman04@gmail.com)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension is generally the simplest but most underdeveloped skill in second language learning. Although English has become the global language of communication, especially in virtual and multicultural society, students find it hard to understand English when it is delivered with unknown accent, various pronunciation, or speedy rhythm. This applies especially to the case of World Englishes (WE)—a term invented by Kachru (1985) in an attempt to explain global diversity of English usage among native and non-native speakers, structured according to three circles: Inner, Outer, and Expanding. In this system, there is not a single variety of English with privileged status; instead, all varieties—be they locally culture-influenced such as Indian, Singaporean, or Nigerian English—are both linguistically acceptable and of cultural value (Boonsamritphol & Rungrojsuwan, 2021; Rose, McKinley, & Galloway, 2020).

While this diversity is liberating in principle, it can still be confusing when it comes to hands-on practice—especially when it comes to listening comprehension. Nhan (2024) found that students were not only

confused by the technical aspects of listening such as limited vocabulary and rapid speech, but also by unfamiliar accents and limited exposure to real varieties of English. These difficulties have the potential to cause anxiety, misinterpretation, and mental fatigue when embarking on a listening exercise. The same problems are also identified by Babakhanova & Seitova (2024) that pointed towards the psychological stress imposed upon EFL learners due to varied pronunciation.

For the Indonesian EFL context, several studies validate accent variation, fast speech, and unfamiliar vocabulary as significant barriers. Fitria, Iswahyuni, & Perdhani (2022) reported that learners find it difficult to understand new accents and idioms, especially in spontaneous speech. Wahyuningsih & Salsabila (2023) also pointed out that there is a contrast between scripted classroom input and true listening needs, resulting in Indonesian learners developing passive listening skills. Even intermediate-level learners struggle when the accent is very different from American English or British English (Hardiyanto, Tanjung, & Suharjono, 2021).

Though World Englishes are being taught in some curricula, practically, its usage in true listening skills remains minimal (Ramadhani & Kurniawan, 2020). Shah (2024) showed that students lack facts about accents, and Yang (2023) further incorporated that speech rhythm patterns—especially those derived from mother tongue—can interfere with learners' processing of prosodic features. As a result, students can be victimized by what Luwiti, Irmawaty, & Mustapa (2023) referred to as "listening shock"—a form of mental disorientation when students are exposed to unknown global accents without prior preparation. However, few studies have directly explored how students in non-urban Indonesian contexts experience and respond to these challenges. Understanding these local experiences is essential for developing more realistic and inclusive listening instruction.

Given the lack of applicable teaching approaches and the ongoing gap between theory in the curriculum and practice in the field, it is important to understand this issue from the perspective of the students themselves. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the real experiences of EFL learners in the local Indonesian context. Specifically, it explores the listening issues faced by English Education students at Kuningan University, and how they deal with them through personal means or external tools. Based on the insights arising from their narratives, this study seeks to provide pedagogical implications for more realistic, inclusive, and globally empowered listening curriculum.

## 2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative research design with phenomenological research type in order to investigate the lived experiences of English Education students of Kuningan University in dealing with listening comprehension difficulties through the lens of World Englishes. The intention is to get a sense what they feel, think, and perceive of these problems. The study also aims to investigate contextual pressures, such as how learners perceive their problems, what the perceived salient causes are, and how they can be addressed (e.g., individual adjustments made or different listening materials used by teacher).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with purposely selected ten participants, which 8 males, and 2 females that representing a range of language proficiency levels from intermediate to advanced with varying exposure to different English accents. Thematic analysis involved: 1) Data Familiarization: reading and re-reading transcripts to gain an overview and establish patterns; 2) Coding: dividing the data into meaningful segments to give each a code; 3) Theme Development: collating related codes under broader categories; 4) Interpretation: examining the links between experiences, antecedents and solutions; and 5) Validation: presenting findings to participants to confirm interpretation and gain insight. This analytical procedure assures a thorough, systematic understanding in line with the research aims.

## 3. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the study identified three major concerns in connection with EFL students' listening experiences within a World Englishes setting which included major listening challenges, listening coping strategies and the role of the lecturers.

### Key Listening Challenges

Thematic analysis revealed four major challenges related to listening comprehension in the context of World Englishes. These include unfamiliar accents, fast speech delivery, environmental distractions, and unfamiliar idioms or expressions. These are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Key Listening Challenges Experienced by Students

Theme	Description	Sample Quote
Accent Variation	Difficulty understanding unfamiliar accents such as Indian, Singaporean, or British. Differences in pronunciation and rhythm hindered comprehension.	"It's hard to recognize what someone is saying when the accent is unfamiliar." (P2, F)

Theme	Description	Sample Quote
<b>Fast Speech</b>	Rapid delivery caused confusion and anxiety; students could not process speech in real time.	"I haven't finished understanding one sentence, and it already moves to the next." (P4, F)
<b>Environmental Interference</b>	Background noise (traffic, people talking) disrupted focus during listening tasks.	"I must be in a quiet, comfortable condition to fully concentrate." (P9, M)
<b>Unfamiliar Idioms</b>	Culture-specific phrases like "bear vex" were difficult to interpret without context.	"Bear vex was confusing—it's not standard English." (P3, F)

The one thing most frequently criticized was variation in accents – strange pronunciation patterns and rhythm that made it almost impossible to recognize (even) familiar words. Intelligibility, as P1 pointed out, sometimes broke down if students were accustomed to a different accent that that of the speaker. Students also lost the thread when the speakers spoke quickly, especially without subtitles. Some said they felt anxious or overwhelmed while listening. A third to consider was background distractors, such as noise or complexity, that would magnify the problem when unfamiliar speech was being decoded. Thirdly, idiomatic expressions unfamiliar to students, e.g. bear vex, were likely to cause confusion in that they were culture-bound and not addressed in standard EFL programmes. These uses of echo words are consistent with Nhan (2024) and Suzuki & Yamane (2024), where unfamiliarity with a foreign accent leads to gaps in comprehension and anxiety.

### Coping Strategies

Yet students made several practical choices to cope with their problems in understanding English spoken in new accents. A lot cued off repetitive sound bites and captions. Repetition allowed them to catch words they missed, while subtitles provided written reinforcement to verify meaning. The combination enabled students to slow down input and minimize confusion, especially when the speaker spoke rapidly or applied unfamiliar pronunciation.

In addition to classroom materials, students used online content to train their ears to different accents. YouTube, TikTok and streaming films through headphones became equivalent to informal learning resources — places to experience various speech patterns and cultural expressions. This exposure also served to moderate the American or British shock they experienced when they did hear exotic varieties of English from different parts of the world, making them less unrealistically shocked and more realistically shocked at how English is used on a day-to-day basis outside of America or England too. Some students also showed creative uses of technology. They used dictionaries, translation apps and other tools, even a few A.I.-based apps, to figure out unfamiliar vocabulary and idiomatic phrases. Some deliberately turned off the subtitles when consuming content, training themselves to rely on body language, facial expressions, context. These strategies embody independence and flexibility — auxiliary competencies that play a role in self-regulated learning as emphasized by Rakhman et al. (2020).

### Lecturer Role

As for the lecturers' support to their listening development with respect to World Englishes, participants had contrasting perspectives. Some students valued lecturers who exposed them to a variety of English accents and taught them how to compensate for them. This was to give students more confidence for actual communication. One student explains, "We get sensitised for better listening through our teacher." (P2).

A number of students, however, felt that lecturers provided least support, basing their materials exclusively on general British or American English. Without any variety, students had to go out on their own to look for resources when they encountered accents they didn't recognize. "Well, lecturers just gave us the subject but we can make up our mind if we want to get better or not," as P6 justified. These conflicting experiences indicate a disparity between the curriculum's aspirations and actual teaching practice (Ramadhani & Kurniawan, 2020; Prudnikova & Ptushka, 2023). Some teachers celebrate the diversity of world Englishes, while others hold on to traditional paradigms. If students do not receive regular support, they might be left to fend for themselves when learning to communicate on a world scale.

### DISCUSSION

This study identifies accent variation as the primary challenge in listening comprehension, particularly when learners encounter British, Indian, or Singaporean English. These accents differ significantly in prosody and phonology from American English, the most commonly taught model. Learners struggle with word stress, rhythm, and intonation, making it difficult to recognize even familiar vocabulary. Thus, comprehension is not solely tied

to lexical knowledge, but also to an awareness of global phonological patterns. This reinforces findings from Nhan (2024) and Suzuki & Yamane (2024), who argue that unfamiliar accents and speaking speed hinder comprehension. Additionally, rapid speech, especially when combined with unknown accents, leaves students without sufficient processing time, often resulting in lost meaning.

Environmental distractions, such as ambient noise, further complicate the process. Participants stressed the necessity of quiet and uninterrupted spaces to fully grasp spoken content. The findings also shed light on a rarely studied local context, where students independently engage with global Englishes through digital platforms. While World Englishes have entered the curriculum, their integration into practical listening activities remains limited. This study highlights learners' autonomous adaptation strategies in peripheral settings, contrasting with the usual urban-centric focus of global EFL research. It suggests the importance of acknowledging and exploring localized responses to global linguistic diversity.

Students show strong metacognitive awareness, actively seeking strategies beyond classroom instruction. They employ repetition, subtitles, and multi-platform audio-visual resources such as YouTube, TikTok, Spotify, and podcasts to support their learning. These practices align with Rakhman, Tarjana, & Marmanto's (2020) findings on Indonesian EFL learners' strategic use of spoken texts. However, institutional support is still lacking. Lecturers provide general materials without attention to accent variation, which is critical for global communication competence. A more responsive curriculum is needed to integrate authentic materials and encourages collaborative exploration of Englishes through digital contexts. Such innovation would help prepare learners for real-world, intercultural communication challenges.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Through this research it became evident that it became evident that EFL students from the English Education Study Program at Kuningan University experience major listening comprehension issues when they hear British, Indian, and Singaporean English which all diverge extensively from standard American English taught in their classrooms. Accent variation along with fast speech pace and unfamiliar idiomatic expressions serve as the main barriers to comprehension. The learners do not remain inactive when they encounter these comprehension obstacles. Through their self-directed digital learning methods students independently apply repetition techniques and subtitles while they actively explore various accents through YouTube and TikTok content and use artificial intelligence to get meaning clarification thus building an adaptable learning platform.

Students demonstrate through their active use of technology that educational methods do not match the true nature of global communication. The theoretical acceptance of World Englishes exists but the actual implementation of this concept in listening activities remains insufficient which requires students to find their own solutions. Educational institutions need to update their curricula by integrating genuine audio-visual content that represents different English-speaking environments. A curriculum reform would officially recognize students' independent learning while developing their listening abilities to succeed in intercultural communication across networked global environments.

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