

## ENHANCING TOEIC LISTENING PART 4 SCORES THROUGH ACTIVE LISTENING

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**Abstract.** Globalization has instigated multinational corporations to set up their business in countries where a language other than their own is spoken. To bridge the communication gap caused by language barriers, English as a universally understood language is utilized as a medium for communication. As a result, English language mastery is an essential requirement for the workforce, and one way to assess this proficiency is by looking at the TOEIC score. TOEIC, stands for Test of English for International Communication, is a standardized test for evaluating the English-language communication abilities required in the workplace. Attaining a good TOEIC score, particularly for the listening section, poses a significant problem for many English learners. Considering this challenge, this research aims to examine the role of active listening in assisting learners to understand the listening section and thus improve their scores. Active listening means focusing on the listening task that includes techniques like previewing and predicting, which are crucial to improve understanding. The method used in this research is descriptive quantitative. The data is taken from the pre and post-test of TOEIC listening part 4, the short talk. The result shows that there is an improvement of the TOEIC test score of the learners. However, a few learners do not show an increase in their score; therefore, further research should be conducted to know the underlying factors behind this.

**Keywords:** Active Listening; Short Talk; TOEIC Test

### INTRODUCTION

Globalization and high levels of interconnectivity have erased borders and boundaries between countries in various aspects, including in the context of international business. Various countries have opened branches and established factories in Indonesia to market their products and services. On the other hand, Indonesian companies have also begun to venture into the international arena by partnering with foreign counterparts and engaging in business transactions with foreign companies. Consequently, for the realization of positive and mutually beneficial interactions for all parties involved, good communication among stakeholders is undoubtedly necessary. With the presence of numerous foreign companies from different countries conducting business in Indonesia and Indonesian companies having business relations overseas, language proficiency that is understood by all parties is essential.

English is, by far, the most widely used global language in the world. According to Melitz (2016: 583), there has never been a language spoken more extensively in the past than English is today. As a lingua franca, which means a language used as a means of communication between people in a particular region where each person has different native languages, English has become the primary medium of communication in the business world. As English is a lingua franca, most of the native and non-native speakers of English are using English as their mode of communication in their business matters or business organizations, as pointed out by Rao (2019: 66). Numerous local and multinational companies and organizations recognize the importance of English proficiency among their employees to ensure effective communication when needed. Consequently, companies and

organizations are beginning to decide on their employees by incorporating English language proficiency as a requirement during the recruitment process and the job promotions. This emphasis on English language skills has become crucial in the business world today.

To assess someone's English language proficiency, one of the tools used is the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication). This test evaluates an individual's English language comprehension in a workplace context. Hsieh (2023: 3) explained that the TOEIC L&R test is a standardized language proficiency test that measures everyday English listening and reading skills needed to work in an international environment. The test consists of two parts: the listening part, which must be completed within 45 minutes, and the reading part, which provides a time frame of 75 minutes. Each section comprises 100 questions, and the highest score achievable is 990. Both the listening and reading sections cover topics related to activities commonly conducted in the workplace.

With the demands in the job market requiring prospective employees to obtain a good score in the TOEIC test, which demonstrates a high level of English proficiency, students need to be prepared to face the TOEIC exam. In response to this need, vocational schools and vocational education have started equipping students with preparation for taking the TOEIC test, commonly known as TOEIC preparation classes. In these classes, students are provided with useful strategies for tackling the TOEIC test. The objective of these classes is to equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary to achieve the expected score in the TOEIC exam, so that they are ready to meet the demands of the job market that require English language competency.

In the context of this research, vocational education students are facing challenges, particularly in the listening section, especially Part 4, which involves short talks. In this section, students are required to listen to several short talks, followed by a series of questions related to the content of the short talks, focusing on daily activities or work-related topics. Zahrani, et al. (2020: 83) mentioned that the short talk for the test can be a report, discussion, announcement, or other functional talks.

In the short talk segment, test participants will listen to a brief monologue delivered by an individual. The content of this segment is related to topics relevant to the business or work environment. Test takers will listen to short speeches, announcements, or explanations about a particular subject. Typically, these monologues last for a short duration, around 30-40 seconds, and are followed by several questions related to the monologue's content. The purpose of the short talk segment is to assess the participants' ability to comprehend important information conveyed in the brief monologue. Participants are expected to identify crucial details such as facts, opinions, or other information presented in the monologue. The short talk segment plays a significant role in the TOEIC test as it reflects communication situations frequently encountered in business and professional contexts. The participants' ability to comprehend and interpret information in these short monologues demonstrates English language proficiency relevant for effective international communication.

To achieve a better score in the listening section, it is fundamental for students to develop effective strategies while they are taking the test. One such strategy that can be applied is active listening or listening in an active manner. According to Marquardt (2014: 25), Active Listening requires a great deal of attention. Active Listening involves the active engagement of the test-takers during the listening process, such as paying full attention, quickly scanning all the answer choices that can be found in the test booklet, and making

predictions regarding the answers even before the questions are presented. In implementing the active listening strategy, students must fully focus and give intense attention to the content being conveyed. By applying this Active Listening strategy, students are expected to become more effective in identifying key words, understanding the context of the monologue, and providing accurate answers to the questions. The ability to comprehend the entire monologue and respond to questions related to its content is a crucial skill in achieving high scores in this segment.

This research aims to determine the extent of improvement in students' scores after applying active listening strategies in answering Part 4 of the TOEIC listening test. Through this study, it is expected to provide a deeper insight into the use of active listening strategies in the context of the TOEIC test. The data obtained from this research is expected to offer an understanding of the positive impact of active listening strategies on overall performance in the TOEIC listening section and, specifically, in the short talk segment. By conducting this research, valuable insights can be gained on how active listening strategies can enhance students' abilities in comprehending and responding to the content of the TOEIC listening test. The findings could contribute to the development of effective language learning and testing strategies, which may ultimately lead to improved language proficiency and test scores.

## **METHOD**

This research was conducted using a descriptive qualitative method. Nassaji (2015: 427) confirmed that qualitative and descriptive research methods have been very common procedures for conducting research in many disciplines, including education, psychology, and social sciences. Kim et al. (2017: 23) stated that qualitative descriptive research generates data that describe the 'who, what, and where of events or experiences from a subjective perspective. This method aims to describe the characteristics, patterns, and distribution of data related to the measured variables. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method, providing a systematic framework for collecting, analyzing, and objectively presenting data. By using this approach, researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of the population under study. The method involves gathering data through standardized instruments and analysis, which allows for precise and reliable results.

The research methodology utilized a diverse set of instruments to gather data, encompassing pre and post-tests, as well as questionnaires or surveys. This study follows a qualitative descriptive research approach, where data is collected through the deployment of research instruments. The information gathered primarily consists of numerical data obtained from the participating respondents. To present the collected data in a clear and organized manner, the researchers use tables and graphs. These visual representations will facilitate a more structured and comprehensive explanation of the information acquired during the research process. By employing such graphical aids, the study aims to enhance the accessibility and understanding of the findings, enabling meaningful insights to be drawn from the data analysis.

The research instruments used to collect data in this study were pre and post-tests and questionnaires/surveys. In this qualitative research, a questionnaire instrument was chosen as the data collection method. The use of questionnaire instruments is considered effective in collecting data from respondents. Taherdoost (2016: 1) claimed that decision

makers and researchers across all academic and industry sectors conduct surveys and questionnaires to uncover answers to specific, significant questions. The questionnaire instrument utilized in this study was carefully adjusted to align with the research objectives and address the specific research questions at hand. As for the pre and post-tests, the researchers utilized the TOEIC listening questions from part 4 of the TOEIC Target book. This standardized test provided a consistent and reliable measure to assess the participants' listening skills before and after implementing the active learning strategy. The study involved 32 students enrolled in the Vocational Education program, making them the participants who contributed to the data collection process. The selection of this particular group aimed to focus the investigation on learners with shared characteristics, enhancing the study's precision and applicability to this specific educational context. By incorporating a combination of pre and post-tests along with a well-designed questionnaire, the researchers ensured a comprehensive approach to data collection, facilitating a deeper understanding of the impact of the active learning strategy on the participants' TOEIC listening scores and overall learning experience.

Data collection was conducted over a period of four weeks; four face-to-face meetings and independent assignments. In the first week, a pre-test was conducted to determine the initial scores of the learners. After that, an initial survey was conducted to confirm the segments that the learners found most difficult. Data analysis was done by conducting a literature review and comparing the learners' test results.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the results of the pre-test, it became evident that students encountered difficulties specifically in the listening section, particularly in section 4, which focuses on short talks. This finding aligns with previous research, which also suggests that section 4, the short talk portion, is perceived to be the most challenging segment of the TOEIC listening test. The difficulty arises from the need to comprehend a substantial amount of information conveyed in a monologue. According to Sarich (2014: 3), the final section consists of 30 questions based on several short monologues which is by far the most difficult section as these talks are often information heavy. As a result, students often find it arduous to process the content effectively. To shed further light on the part of the TOEIC listening test that students find most difficult, an initial survey was conducted. The survey aimed to explore students' perceptions and experiences concerning the different sections of the listening test, with a particular focus on identifying the challenges they faced in section 4. The survey results are as follows.

**Table 1:** Response to each section

No.	Section	Considered as the most difficult section by	
1	Photos	-	0%
2	Question-response	4 students	13%
3	Conversation	9 students	28%
4	Talk	19 students	59%

Here are some reasons why learners found the 4th part, short talk, the most difficult compared to the other parts:

- I think the "talk" part is the hardest one because we have to understand the whole talk to answer 4 to 5 questions based on the "talk" part.
- because sometimes I forgot what they were talking about or I missed some things
- Sometimes I can't understand the topic what they're talking about because the background is around work-life
- because the voice that is said to like is not clear, too fast and I quickly forget it.
- Because I still don't understand the vocabulary
- sometimes feel too fast and sometimes forget what is being talked about
- Because I haven't listened well to the talk
- I'm not sure, I think I can't really focus on listening to it
- because the talk is too long, so I'm a bit confused.
- because the sentence is too long, so a little confusing
- Sometimes I miss what the topic is talking about

According to the explanations given by the students, it is clear that some of them had trouble understanding the brief discussion offered in part 4, which made it difficult for them to respond to the related questions. The following list of problems that the students mentioned might be used to summarize them: trouble focusing, difficulty understanding the topic and specifics, presence of unfamiliar vocabulary, length of the monologue. All of these challenges made it more difficult for the students to finish section 4 of the TOEIC listening test. Taking care of these particular issues may help the students perform better in this particular portion and improve their listening abilities as a whole.

Learners are then asked to take the pre-test again but only specifically for the short talk section, totaling 30 questions. The results of this pre-test will be compared with the results of the post-test after the learners have been trained to use active listening techniques. By active listening we are extending the connotation of being animated when you listen. Rost and Wilson (2013: 16) confirmed that the active listening refers to a broader range of cognitive and emotional activity that could be described as engaged processing. With active listening, learners are asked to fully engage in what will be heard. Spataro, et al. (2018: 168) suggests that active listening surpasses passive listening or simple hearing to establish a deeper connection between speaker and listener, as the listener gives the speaker full attention via inquiry, reflection, respect, and empathy. They are not passive listeners, but active listeners to be able to answer questions. Canpolat (2015: 170) confirmed that since the process of listening is a process of reasoning, active listeners question what they listen to, make inferences, and ultimately create meaning.

Referring to Rost and Wilson's active listening strategy, the frames that will be used are affective frame, top-down frame and bottom-up frame. In the affective frame, learners are asked to listen with full attention because what happens is that often when listening we don't focus on what we are listening to. According to Grohol (2018: 1) but most of the time, we don't listen as well as we could or sometimes should. In the top-down frame, learners must understand the topic of conversation and interpret it appropriately. In the bottom-up frame, learners understand the key words needed to be able to answer the question correctly.

In the subsequent meetings, instructors pushed students to use active listening strategies while solving issues. They were instructed to rapidly scan the questions they would need to answer ahead to get a sense of the subject being covered. They also practiced maintaining concentration while listening. They were able to recognize important terms throughout the listening exercise because of their preparation. However, it was made clear that if students lost interest while listening, this strategy would be ineffective. Therefore, it was stressed that staying focused throughout the listening session was essential to properly implementing these active listening techniques.

A post-test was given in the last week to see whether there had been an improvement in the students' TOEIC test results, particularly in the TOEIC listening exam part 4, which emphasizes brief discussions. The post-test outcomes are listed below.

**Table 2:** Post-test Result

Number of learners	Total	Percentage
Increase in score	23	72%
Constant score	4	12%
Decrease in score	5	15%

The results obtained revealed that there were still those who did not achieve better grades than before, as many as 5 people or 15%. In addition, there were also those who did not show a change in value, namely as many as 4 learners or 12%. On the other hand, the number of learners who succeeded in improving post-test scores compared to pre-test scores was 23 learners or 72%. From these results, it can be assumed that the strategy implemented can be considered to be quite successful. It is because more than half of the total number of participants show an increase in their scores. By addressing the time constraint and providing adequate opportunities for practice, the overall success rate of the active learning strategy is likely to see further improvement.

However, it's essential to take into account that the restricted training time for implementing the active learning strategy is one of the contributing factors for certain learners not demonstrating improvement in their scores. Enhancing TOEIC scores demands an ample amount of practice time to yield effective results. It is recommended to allocate more time for practice sessions, allowing learners to enhance their grasp of the material and thereby increasing their chances of obtaining better results in future assessments.

## CONCLUSION

With a better understanding of the role of active listening strategies, it is expected that this research can contribute to the development of more effective teaching methods to enhance students' general listening skills. Specifically, it is hoped that active listening can assist students in improving their TOEIC test scores, particularly in the short talk segment. Furthermore, this research is also expected to provide contributions to TOEIC preparation test instructors and relevant parties. In the teaching of TOEIC preparation tests, it is anticipated that more effective teaching methods can be developed to enhance students' listening abilities.

From the research results, it is evident that some students did not achieve an increase in their TOEIC listening test scores in section 4. There were also those whose scores

remained unchanged or only improved slightly. This may be due to a lack of sufficient foundation or understanding of the English language for those students to participate effectively in TOEIC preparation classes, as indicated by the results of the pre-test conducted before the classes commenced. Therefore, further research and the development of alternative strategies focusing on enhancing listening skills within the context of the TOEIC test are needed.

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