

## The Difficulties Faced by Jordanian University Students in Passing the Listening Section of the TOFEL Test

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the most important difficulties that face graduate students while doing the listening section of the (iBT) TOEFL test. A sample of 214 students was selected from eight Jordanian universities during the summer semester in the academic year 2021- 2022. All participants studied English as a foreign language for more than fifteen years. The findings revealed that lacking practice the listening skill in real-life events, lacking concentration, disability improving listening skills in classes, misunderstanding different listening topics and long dialogues, lacking practice in listening questions, misunderstanding complex structure and figurative expressions of some listening sentences, and disability in comprehending unfamiliar words and dialogues were the most difficulties that the students faced while doing the listening section of the TOFEL test.

**Key words:** TOFEL, iBT TOFEL Test, Jordanian Students, Listening Test

### INTRODUCTION

English is very important in communication and studying nowadays. It plays a vital role in education, business, politics and many other sectors. It is used widely in the world and usually studied as a foreign language or as a second language in many countries (Erdem-Keklik, 2011). Sindkhedkar (2012) describes English as “a link language in offices and among the educated people” and “the language of science and technology (p. 2)”. Ta'amneh (2019) also describes it as “an essential instrument for educational and technological development” (p. 28). Therefore, learning English becomes essential in different educational institutions all over the world. Consequently, English should be learned appropriately to achieve learners' purposes and goals. English learners should be aware that there are many factors that affect the process of language learning, such as instructors, methods of learning, subjects, course books and tests. Mahmud (2014) states that language testing plays a crucial way in language learning, evaluating the students' language proficiency and their achievements. Ta'amneh (2014) describes the test “as one of the essential components of any curriculum. It is very important in determining the progress of learners in the learning process and deciding the methods of teaching used by instructors”(p. 112). Students learn better when they realize that their efforts will be reviewed and evaluated (Candlin and Edelhoff 1982).

Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOFEL) is considered as one of the academic English test taken by students who want to register at some university in different countries of the world. It is one of the English language tests admin-

istered by many educational institutions (Nurhayati & Giri, 2014). Some people take this test to observe their personal achievement and competence, others take it for practical purposes such as getting some jobs in different places and areas (Azhari, Sahputri, and Rasyimah, 2021). It is also used as a criterion for university admission and for getting a scholarship (Setiawan, 2013) and to evaluate the level of English proficiency among learners (Suminto, 2010). Depending on the fact that TOEFL is a standardized test used to evaluate learners' skills to understand English in academic tasks and it is a good criterion reference test for measuring the students' foreign language competence, Jordanian universities, like many other international educational institutions, consider this test as one of the obligatory requirements to attend their higher educational programs.

The Test of English as a Foreign Language is “a standardized test designed to measure the ability to understand and to use English as it is used in a North American academic setting such as a university (ETS, 2019, p. 3) “. It measures English language skills related to the academic and professional fields. This test is presented in three forms, Paper-based (PBT), Computer-based (CBT), and Internet-based (iBT). According to ETS (2019), the TOFEL TEST evaluated one isolated aspect of language knowledge before 1998. In 1998, the specialists launched the second form of TOEFL which is a computer-based test. followed by the TOEFL iBT test in 2005, which measures learners' communicative abilities in all four basic English skills, including reading, listening, speaking, and writing.

### Statement of the Problem

Learning English is considered to be a difficult task for students as a result of traditional learning which concentrates on memorizing new foreign words, doing exercises, reading and answering questions without asking learners to use their learning in real-life situations. Students who attended TOFEL complain that there are some difficult and unfamiliar topics in the test. They think that these topics are different from what they studied at universities and educational institutions because sometimes the objectives of the English language curricula are not reflected in the test. Besides, they claim that this test needs a lot of practice and training to understand the techniques of answering its questions since it concentrates on all English skills. They believe that university learning generally concentrates on reading and writing skills and forgets listening and speaking. Consequently, students may find some difficulties in answering some questions in the TOFEL test related to listening skills since their learning is totally different from preparation for this test in terms of strategies, objectives, aims, content and evaluation. Meanwhile, answering the listening questions could be one of the most problematic sections for foreign language learners in this test since the meanings of some dialogs and conversations could not be comprehended by understanding their grammatical elements. According to Abboud and Hussein (2011), comprehending listening conversations and dialogues successfully requires understanding pronunciation, pauses, features of natural speech, and intonations. As a result, this could make some difficulties in answering the questions of this part. This study explored the difficulties faced by Jordanian university students in passing the listening section of the (iBT) TOFEL test. So, the study aimed to answer the following question:

What are the difficulties faced by Jordanian university students in passing the listening section of the (iBT) TOFEL test ?

### Significance of the Study

The major aim of carrying out this research is to know the obstacles encountered by Jordanian university students in passing the listening section of the TOFEL test. This study may help learners to know the obstacles of the listening section while attending the TOFEL test and use some effective strategies to solve these problems when answering the listening questions. In the same vein, It may provide instructors, trainers and test designers with suggestions needed to improve the process of passing the listening section of the TOFEL test successfully.

### Purpose of the Study

The current study aims at identifying the difficulties faced by Jordanian university students in passing the listening section of the (iBT) TOFEL test.

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Al-Rawashdeh (2011) conducted a study to discover the most important difficulties that face graduate students at Jordanian

universities during their TOEFL preparation program. One hundred and seventy-nine students participated in this study. The result revealed that there were four types of difficulties that students faced during their TOEFL preparation program, difficulties related to students themselves, the TOEFL test, the TOEFL curriculum, equipment and facilities, and language center staff. They also revealed that the most important difficulties were related to the students themselves.

Rina and Tiarina (2020) conducted a study to identify students' difficulties in answering the TOEFL test of listening comprehension and the factors of the difficulties. Thirty-six university students participated in this study. The result showed that the participants did not face difficulties in the listening section. They believed "that lack of vocabulary, lack of concentration, length and speed of listening and physical condition were the factors that encountered during the process of answering TOEFL test" (p.28).

Fitria (2021) did a study to identify the students' difficulty in doing the TOEFL test, particularly the listening section in Indonesia. The participants' difficulties were related to two factors: external and internal. There were a lot of external factors that prevent students from doing well on the test such as the speaker's accent, speed, intonation, pause in pronouncing a sentence, the choice of words and foreign terms, the complex sentence structure, and the audio interruption. Internal factors, according to the researcher, included many problems like lack of experience and practice in doing this test, limited time with many listening questions, students' memory limitations, lack of motivation and concentration, and lack of foreign vocabulary items. The researcher also concluded that the TOEFL Listening section was more difficult than the other sections.

In their study, Soali & Pujiani (2020) investigated the most difficult part of TOEFL listening comprehension and identified the reasons that make it difficult for the twenty-five participants. The results showed that the participants' difficulties were found in choosing synonyms of keywords, double negative expressions, idioms, the main idea of the paragraph, and detailed information. On the other hand, there were some difficulties that listeners faced such as excessive anxiety, difficulty in concentration, vocabulary meaning, and concluding conversations. The results also showed that the reasons that influenced the participants' difficulty in answering TOEFL listening section were related to many factors like low level of self-confidence, low mastery of English vocabulary and skills tested in this test, time management, and lack of practice.

Similarly, Rahmi, Kasim and Aziz (2020) investigated the difficulties of listening part of the TOEFL test faced by one hundred students at Syiah Kuala Language Center and their efforts to overcome these difficulties. The results showed that the participants faced many difficulties in understanding the native speaker's pronunciation such as, "unfamiliar topics, stress and intonation patterns, poor quality of equipment, listening strategies and training, linguistic features, speed rate of listening, lack of concentration, and other physical settings.(p.175 -176)". The results,related to the students' personal information on the listening skill, also

revealed that students tended to watch English TV programs, listen to English songs, and practice doing listening questions of the TOEFL test to overcome and minimize listening difficulties while taking this test.

In the same vein, Fitariana & Rohim (2021) conducted a study to identify the problems that students faced while answering the TOEFL listening section. The sample of this study consisted of twenty-five students. The results revealed that the students had many problems while answering the listening questions such as concentration while listening to dialogues, guessing vocabulary meanings in long and speedy conversations, and difficulty in recognizing foreign topics.

From some previous studies above, it can be concluded that the listening questions of the TOEFL test are considered a problematic issue for test takers in the field of English foreign language. Students faced many difficulties when answering this section (listening part). None of the previous studies discussed Jordanian university students' difficulties with the listening section of the TOEFL test.

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample of the Study

The sample of the study consisted of 214 students who finished TOEFL test at eight Jordanian universities during the summer semester in the academic year 2021- 2022. All participants studied English as a foreign language for more than fifteen years. their ages ranged from 21-23 years old. (Table 1) shows the distribution of the sample.

### Instrument

A questionnaire was developed by the researcher to collect data to answer the question of the study. It consisted of twenty items from different sources. The participants were asked to give their responses by choosing one of the five Likert Scales (Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree).

### Validity and Reliability

Eight professional experts were asked to examine the questionnaire to check the constructive validity and provide their suggestions. They were asked to give their opinions about

the questionnaire concerning the content and clarity. In addition, The researcher asked them for any suggestions and modifications, and any necessary changes. The percentage of the jury in the agreement was 89%. To establish the reliability of this instrument, twenty students were asked to answer the questionnaire's items. The reliability coefficient was calculated using Cronbatch Alpha. The computed value was 0.82.

### Data Collection

This study was conducted during the end of the summer semester of the academic year 2021/2022. The researcher obtained the permission of the students to carry out this study. A twenty item questionnaire was used to discover the participant's responses about the Jordanian university students' difficulties in passing the listening section of the (iBT)TOFEL test. 214 students responded to the questionnaire.

### Data Analysis

The researcher used a quantitative approach in this study. The answers of the students were analyzed. Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated using Statistical Package for Social Sciences. The descriptive statistics are presented in the following tables.

## RESULTS

The question of the study was about the difficulties faced by Jordanian university students in passing the listening section of the (iBT)TOFEL test. To answer this question, descriptive statistics (mean scores and standard deviations) were calculated. The following tables show the results.

(Table 2) shows that there are many difficulties that students faced while doing the listening section of the TOFEL test. There are ten difficulties received means 3.32 and over. This indicates that half of these difficulties affect the participants during their preparation. The rest of other items received means (2.45-3.24) which are still difficulties but without high effects on their achievements.

It is clear that the means range from (2.45 to 4.35). More specifically, the results show that the items of the highest mean scores were: item 9 "Listening skill needs to be practiced in daily life situations before doing TOEFL tests" (m 4.35), item 13 "I need more concentration to answer the listening questions" (m 4.06), item 7 "Ignoring listening skill in classes affects understanding some sentences while listening to the speaker" (m 3.95), item (17) "The topics and dialogues were not learned in the university materials" (3.90), item 18 "It is difficult to listen to the long dialogues" (m 3.75), item 12 " I need more practice in doing TOEFL (listening section) test" (m 3.60), item 4 " The complex structure of some sentences makes the process of remembering them difficult" (m 3.54), item 8 "I can't understand some listening figurative expressions" (3.51), item 16 "The dialogues were unfamiliar and irrelevant to my specialization" (m 3.40), item 3 " I can't understand some sentences since they have difficult and unfamiliar words (3.39), and item 11

**Table 1.** Distribution of the sample

University	Number
1 Yarmouk University	43
2 Jordan University for Science and Technology	31
3 The University of Jordan	30
4 The Hashemite University	18
5 Al Al-Bayt University	20
6 Al-Balqa' Applied University	29
7 Mutah University	22
8 Al-Hussein Bin Talal University	21
TOTAL	214

**Table 2.** Mean scores and standard deviations for all universities

No.	Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	
1.	It is difficult to understand the speaker's accent.	2	214	2.82	1.150
2.	It is difficult to understand some sentences and dialogues because the speaker speaks very quickly.	9	214	3.24	1.085
3.	I can't understand some sentences since they have difficult and unfamiliar words.	11	214	3.39	1.098
4.	The complex structure of some sentences makes the process of remembering them difficult.	14	214	3.54	1.014
5.	There were some problems in audio while listening to the questions.	1	214	2.45	1.258
6.	I face a problem in understanding some sentences because of the lack of English cultural background.	4	214	3.05	1.202
7.	Ignoring listening skill in classes affects understanding some sentences while listening to the speaker.	18	214	3.95	0.970
8.	I can't understand some listening figurative expressions.	13	214	3.51	0.948
9.	Listening skill needs to be practiced in daily life situations before doing TOEFL tests.	20	214	4.35	0.841
10.	It is difficult to guess the meaning of listening expressions while listening to the speaker.	8	214	3.19	1.073
11.	I need more time in doing TOEFL listening section) test.	10	214	3.32	1.106
12.	I need more practice in doing TOEFL (listening section) test.	15	214	3.60	1.112
13.	I need more concentration to answer the listening questions.	19	214	4.06	0.967
14.	It is difficult to find keywords while listening to the speaker,	6	214	3.13	1.122
15.	The topics and the words aren't related to my knowledge.	7	214	3.17	1.105
16.	The dialogues were unfamiliar and irrelevant to my specialization.	12	214	3.40	1.069
17.	The topics and dialogues were not learned in the university materials.	17	214	3.90	0.932
18.	It is difficult to listen to the long dialogues.	16	214	3.75	1.008
19.	It is difficult to understand English dialogues in oral communication.	5	214	3.08	1.076
20.	It is difficult to answer questions that depend on oral contexts.	3	214	3.03	1.072
	Valid N (listwise)		214		

"I need more time in doing TOEFL listening section) test" (m 3.32). By contrast, the items of the lowest means were: item 5 (There were some problems in audio while listening to the questions) with a mean score of (2.45) and item 1 (It is difficult to understand the speaker's accent) with a mean score of (2.82), item 20 (It is difficult to answer questions that depend on oral contexts) with a mean score of (3.03), item 6 (I face a problem in understanding some sentences because of the lack of English cultural background) with a mean score of (3.05), item 19 (It is difficult to understand English dialogues in oral communication) with a mean score of (3.08), item 14 (It is difficult to find keywords while listening to the speaker) with a mean score of 3.13, item 15 (The topics and the words aren't related to my knowledge) with a mean score of (3.17), item 10 (It is difficult to guess the meaning of listening expressions while listening to the speaker) with a mean score of (3.19), and item 2 (It is difficult to understand some sentences and dialogues because the speaker speaks very quickly) with a mean score of (3.24).

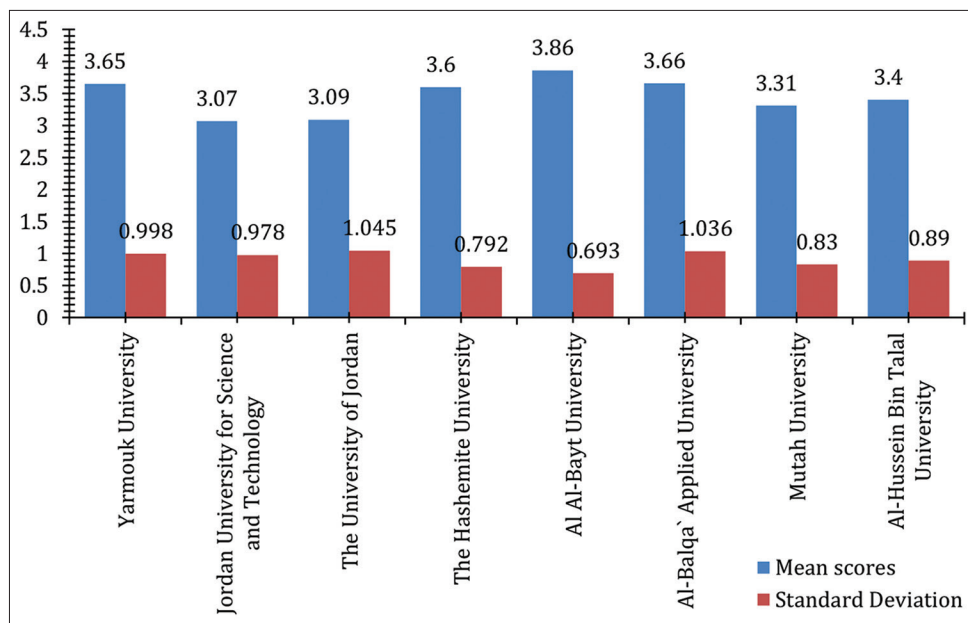
Diagram 1 shows mean scores for eight universities. The researcher prefers to summarize the participants' responses in order to give readers more details about their responses.

The above diagram shows that the students from different universities faced in general the same problems while answering the listening section of the TOFEL test. More specifically, the means range from (3.07 to 3.86). The results show that the students at Jordan University for Science and

Technology (with a mean score of 3.07) and The University of Jordan (with a mean score of 3.09) had the least difficulties compared with other universities (Yarmouk University, Al-Hussein Bin Talal University, Al Al-Bayt University, Al-Balqa' Applied University, Mutah University, and The Hashemite University).

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study identified the highest and the least difficulties that the participants faced while doing the listening section of the TOFEL test. More specifically, they revealed that the students had difficulties in practicing the listening skills in their daily life situations, concentration, ignoring listening skill in classes, understanding different listening topics and long dialogues, practicing doing the listening section, remembering complex structure and figurative expressions of some listening sentences, and comprehending unfamiliar words and dialogues. These difficulties affected their achievements and grades negatively. The results revealed different reasons behind the difficulties of answering the listening section of the TOFEL test successfully. Firstly, lack of guessing the meaning of new vocabulary items or limited vocabulary. While listening to English dialogues, students might encounter new vocabulary items which normally appear in these dialogues and make them unable to comprehend the speakers' talk which leads to difficulty in



**Diagram 1.** Mean scores and standard deviations for the eight universities

answering the listening questions that follow. According to Gilakjani (2011), listeners may face unfamiliar words which may force them to stop listening and try to guess the meaning of these words and consequently cause them to miss the next element of the speech. Therefore, students should increase their English vocabulary knowledge before taking this test. They need to realize that learning new vocabulary items and practicing guessing techniques may be essential for their self-development and consequently getting a high score in this section.

Secondly, lack of concentration. Some students can not concentrate while answering the questions of the test because of noisy sounds or other physical activities in the class which may affect their understanding of the main ideas of the dialogues and may lead to losing some points. To overcome this problem, students have to study hard to improve their abilities and increase their concentration. Brown (2000:60) believed that "Successful mastery of the second language will be due to a large extent of a learner's own personal 'investment' of time, effort, and attention to the second language in the form of an individualized battery of strategies for comprehending and producing the language".

Thirdly, the length and speed of the speaker's talking. The long conversation and the speed of native speakers' talking may be considered one of the most problems that students encounter while doing the test. They may affect their understanding to comprehend and answer the questions that depend on the listening dialogues. To overcome this problem and save a lot of time during the test, students should be familiar with the formats and directions of the test, the details of the listening questions, grade distribution, and the time assigned for each question. According to Mahmud (2014), joining a class to prepare for the TOFEL test is very important to make students familiar with the parts of this test. In the same vein, Pan (2009) confirmed that "test preparatory classes or test related instruction in regular English need to

be offered so that students will have greater familiarization with the test and a clear direction as to what and how to prepare for it" (p. 131).

Based on these findings, test designers as well as TOFEL instructors and trainers must pay more attention to the process of teaching the listening section, and students should practice and learn more dialogues and questions that are similar to the TOFEL test to help them overcome such difficulties. Besides, students should be familiar with different educational techniques and strategies to improve their listening skills. These findings are consistent with those of Rina and Tiarina (2020), Fitria (2021), Soali & Pujiani (2020), Rahmi, Kasim and Aziz (2020), and Fitariana & Rohim (2021).

## CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study investigated the difficulties that graduated students faced while doing the listening section of the TOFEL test which could be the most difficult part of this test. Students need to practice more on listening comprehension to improve their listening skills. On Based on the results of this study, the major students listening difficulties while doing the listening section of the TOFEL test were the following: lack of practicing the listening skill in real-life events, lack of concentration, disability improving listening skills in classes, misunderstanding different listening topics and long dialogues, lack of practicing the listening questions, misunderstanding complex structure and figurative expressions of some listening sentences, and disability in comprehending unfamiliar words and dialogues. According to these findings, the researcher advises test designers, instructors and trainers who design or teach the TOFEL test to develop and improve their teaching strategies and techniques to help students pass this test successfully. In the same vein, students should practice listening to more native speakers' dialogues and listen-

ing questions that are similar to the listening part of the (iBT) TOFEL test.

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