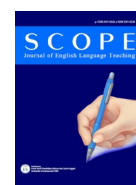




# SCOPE

## Journal of English Language Teaching

| p-ISSN 2541-0326 | e-ISSN 2541-0334 |  
<https://journal.lppmunindra.ac.id/index.php/SCOPE/>



Research Article

## The Need to Teach Grammar in IELTS Listening Class

Rahmarni Sawitri<sup>1\*</sup>, Riyanto<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universitas Indonesia, Kampus Baru UI Depok, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Universitas Indraprasta, Jakarta, Indonesia

### KEYWORDS

Grammar;  
 Listening comprehension;  
 Listening difficulties;  
 Grammar mastery;  
 Gap completion questions.

### A B S T R A C T

The aim of this research is to examine the effect of grammar mastery on listening skills. Does someone's mastery of grammar affect his listening skills? If it does, to what extent? To answer these questions, data, in a form of test answers were collected from students taking the IELTS Preparatory Class. The Listening section in IELTS consists of several types of questions including gap completion, matching and multiple choice questions. The focus of this research is on the gap completion questions as these types of questions require test takers to write down words/phrases/numbers as the answers; therefore, grammar mistakes are noticeable if there are any. Many students find the gap completion section quite challenging as they have to complete the blanks with a word or phrase used in a conversation accurately in terms of both spelling and grammar. Consequently, being able to get the right word or phrase to answer the question is important. The researchers tried to examine whether knowing some grammar can improve test takers' possibility of getting correct answers. The finding show that students' mastery of grammar, to some extent, has an effect on their listening skills. Knowing some grammar can help students get grammatically correct answers. As grammar is not a learning focus in most IELTS Preparatory classes, it is recommended that teachers select what grammar points should be addressed, to a certain degree, in order to improve test takers' listening comprehension and accuracy.

### CORRESPONDING AUTHOR(S):

E-mail: rahmarni\_sawitri@yahoo.com\*

## INTRODUCTION

One common requirement to study abroad is a mastery of English language, which can be shown by an English Proficiency Test Score. English proficiency can be shown by the use of some internationally recognized measurements or tests such as TOEFL (IBT) and IELTS. These two tests are quite similar in the types of skills tested, namely, writing, reading, speaking and listening. Yet, they differ in types of questions. The focus of this research is on IELTS test, especially the listening section.

Listening section in IELTS test consists of various types of questions including gap completion, multiple choice questions and matching. This research focuses on the gap completion questions, which require students or test-takers to write down a word or phrase taken from the conversation or talk they have listened to in the recording.

Davies, et. al. (2000) include many components in the definition about listening. It is considered that listening as anything but passive activity. These active and complex processes require listeners to discriminate sounds, to comprehend lexical and grammatical forms, to analyse

stress and intonation, and to keep all of these and to interpret them based on the surrounding and social and cultural contexts. What grammatical forms are especially important for someone to master when taking an IELTS Test, especially the listening section? To what extent should grammar be discussed in class? Grammar section is not always found in IELTS course books and it is not tested separately; therefore, grammar is sometimes taken for granted by test takers. Listening comprehension is related to many factors. Listening comprehension involves a process to comprehend speech, and it focuses on some linguistics roles such as phonemes, words, and structures of the grammar (Liu, 2015). Grammar is also one of factors that contribute to difficulties in listening comprehension included limited vocabulary and/or poor grammar, as well as wrong conceptions about the activities (Graham, 2006; Hopkins, 2008). In addition to these, context and situation as well as knowledge previously obtained and the listeners' anticipation also plays important roles.

In this article, the researchers will present what common mistakes participants of IELTS Preparatory classes commonly make in the Listening section and whether those mistakes are related to grammar or not; thus, it can be decided whether teaching grammar is necessary or not. It is expected that if the teaching of some grammar points is deemed necessary, teachers can select what grammar points should be addressed. To comprehend how listening is processed, characteristics of spoken discourse and the types of problems arising from them need to be considered. Spoken discourse is different from written discourse in a number of ways. One obvious difference is that spoken discourse is usually produced instantly; therefore, listeners must process it immediately, right on the spot. In most cases, listeners have no chance to listen to it for the second time. Another big difference is that spoken discourse may have different accents, for example, British English, American English, Canadian English, standard or non-standard, regional accents, etc.

To understand spoken discourse, there are two processes, which are known as bottom-up and top-down processing. As the name implies, the bottom-up processing begins from the bottom, in this case from the input. The bottom-up processing requires listeners to have competence in vocabulary and grammar as the process first scans the input for familiar words and then sees what relationship exists between components in a sentence using grammar knowledge (Richards, 2008). In contrast, top-down processing goes from meaning to language. What is especially needed in this process is previous knowledge or knowledge regarding the topic being discussed. It is said that students having low proficiency of English are likely to use bottom-up processing, while students with good mastery of English tend to use top-down processing

(Tsui and Fullilove, 1998). Nevertheless, in reality, these two processes might occur together, depending on some factors such as the topic being discuss, and the purpose of the listening activity.

Listening comprehension is defined by Rost (1994) as a process where collaboration and interaction need to be present. In this process, listeners are required to be actively involved to construct meaning. When a listener receives an oral input, this input is understood by discriminating sounds, involving background knowledge and grammatical structures. Other linguistics features, including stress, intonation, as well as non-linguistics ones are also included in the process. Chang (2009) states that a listening comprehension test covers three aspects: before, while and after the test. Strategies that test-takers apply before they do the test are significantly related to the result of the test. Research conducted by Vandergrift (2007) found that beginner-level elementary school students and university students of French commented on the importance of making predictions for successful listening, collaboration with a friend for monitoring and having confidence.

In most situations, listening class is part of a general course, which means listening skills are incorporated with the other skills. In this case, listening activities can sometimes become an input for speaking activities. Although IELTS classes separate the teaching of these two skills, some inputs obtained in listening classes, such as certain expressions, might be used in speaking classes. This is what some experts have proposed, that the role of listening in language teaching is to facilitate the acquisition of second language. There is a need to see that consciousness plays a role in language learning, when students are conscious in the learning process then they are able to notice. Here, students would not learn anything in listening classes unless they notice what they hear. When listening is considered as acquisition, then teachers might use different activities, consisting of two phases, namely noticing activities and restructuring activities. In noticing activities, after listening to the audio, students go back to the text and try to comprehend it and this text is also used to raise their awareness. Listening to the audio for the second time can be accomplished in order to see what is printed and what they hear and how these two forms differ. Restructuring activities use selected items productively. In this activities students may use certain expressions or other linguistic items they hear in the audio to complete gap-filling questions.

Using grammar as clues in listening activities can actually be seen as a strategy. Language learning strategies have some features which can be linked to the use of grammar. Oxford (1990) lists several characteristics of the strategies, which include focusing on problems, actions

taken by language learners, and something that can be taught. These are only three features among other features that were addressed by Oxford. If we see the first one, focusing on problems, one common problem in listening is that participants are not able to catch the answers as they cannot hear clearly. Knowing some grammar can be the solution to this problem. The second feature is actions which language learners take. In this case, the actions that they need to take is to learn what grammar clues are present in the questions which can help find the correct answers. And the last characteristics is something that can be taught. Grammar points can be taught and using grammar as clues in listening test can also be practiced.

Oxford (1990) also presents direct strategies which learners can exercise in learning a language. These include memory strategies, cognitive strategies and compensation strategies. She further divided memory strategies into four parts: 1) creating mental linkages, 2) applying images and sounds, 3) reviewing well and 4) employing action. One of the strategies that belong to the second group (applying images and sounds) is using keywords. Here, grammar can play its roles as some grammar points can function as clues.

## METHOD

The data used in this research were collected from the answers of IELTS test practice (2005) that participants of IELTS Preparatory classes took in three terms in a language institution located in Depok, West Java. There were about 45 participants in this research. Although participants of IELTS Preparatory Class have passed the placement test, which tested their speaking, listening, reading and writing, it is undeniable that many of them still have difficulties in certain areas, particularly in writing and listening. Yet, the focus of this research was on Listening. Answers of IELTS test practices that participants did in class were first collected and then checked. Mistakes were then classified based on the types, including wrong words, spelling and grammar.

Furthermore, grammar mistakes that most participants made during lessons and test were classified into the types of grammar points, including tenses, active and passive voice, parts of speech or word form, and singular and plural. An analysis was then conducted to examine what the cause of the mistakes were and how grammar can help them confirm or get the correct answers, as in listening, participants cannot always listen to the recording or audio clearly. There are some factors that may affect comprehension, which could be internal factors, such as the participants' physical or mental condition, or external factors such as outside noise or the quality of the recording.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As previously mentioned, not all IELTS course books dedicate some parts of the book to grammar points, nevertheless, during the discussion of the materials in class, some grammar points are often discussed as the types of mistakes that class participants make during listening session are mostly related to grammar, spelling and unfamiliar words. In this discussion the researchers try to present mistakes that are frequently found in the answers for the gap completion section. These mistakes occur as participants have one common problem, that is to identify the exact word needed to complete the blanks or gaps. This problem arises as questions or sentences that are presented in a test booklet are different from the utterances that are produced by the speakers in a conversation or a talk. In this case, participants need to listen to the audio carefully and even this does not guarantee perfect comprehension as the speakers use either British or Australian accent, which most participants find it difficult to catch.

Below is the discussion about possible mistakes that can occur and how knowledge of some grammar can help minimize the risk of making mistakes as gap-completion questions in IELTS require exact words for the answers, meaning they are correct in terms of grammar and spelling. Those mistakes are classified into 4 groups, depending on the grammar points in which they occur; namely parts of speech, singular/plural forms, tenses and active/passive voice.

### Some grammar points causing confusion among participants:

#### Parts of Speech

1. Question: According to Dr. Wilson, the \_\_\_ is now the most important thing to focus on.

(Tapescripts: *...well, you'll have to be pragmatic at this point, I think. What you'd better do is ensure your methodology is really strong.*)

Explanation: the blank is preceded by the article "the", therefore, a noun is needed. When test takers listen to the audio, they can learn that pragmatic is an adjective and ensure is a verb, therefore, they are not the correct answers. The correct one is methodology, as it is a noun.

2. Question: On average, 350 hours a week are spent on maintenance of the Eye, and only \_\_\_ is used to clean the glass.

(Tapescripts: *...with 350 hours' maintenance being required every week, and apparently strange demands such as washing all its glass with nothing but distilled water having to be met.*)

Explanation: the blank needs either a singular or an uncountable noun as the verb is 'is.' The script shows that the correct answer is distilled water, an uncountable noun. The problem that test takers might have here is in the spelling of the word 'distilled'. Is it distil /dɪ'stɪl/, a verb, or distilled /dɪ'stɪld/, an adjective? These two words are pronounced almost similarly, and it can be difficult for some test takers to hear the /d/ sound in the word distilled /dɪ'stɪld/. What can be used as a clue is the word 'water'. 'Water' is a noun; therefore, it is preceded by an adjective, 'distilled'.

### Singular/Plural Forms

1. Question: \_\_\_\_\_ were used for the first time on film in 1926.

(Tapescripts: .... *and the first step towards this was in 1926 when sound effects were used on films.*)

Explanation: what is missing from the blank is the subject of the sentence and the script shows that the correct answer is sound effects. The sound /s/ is not always clearly heard, therefore, using the verb form as a clue can help test takers decide to use a plural form.

2. Question: Nowadays used by \_\_\_\_\_ of large employers.

(Tapescripts: ....*and almost two thirds of the large employers use them.*)

Explanation: the word needed to complete the blank is a noun as it appears between two prepositions. Indeed, the script shows that the answer is a number, more specifically a fraction. Fraction is considered as a countable noun, which means it can be stated in a singular form or a plural form, for example one third, one fifth, two thirds, two fifths. As the answer is two then the noun 'third' becomes 'thirds', a plural form.

3. Question: Written by \_\_\_\_\_ who say candidates tend to be truthful.

(Tapescripts: *These tests are compiled by experts and they believe that the answers can provide a few simple indicators .....*)

Explanation: the question needs an object of preposition. To decide whether to use a singular or a plural noun, there are two grammatical clues. In the question, the sentence says .... 'who say candidates', the verb is in a plural form, that means the noun is in a plural form. The second clue is in the conversation. The speaker says ....by experts and they believe ..... . "They" in this clause refers to experts, therefore, test takers can be sure that the answer is experts and not expert.

4. Question: There is a collection of \_\_\_\_\_ in the art gallery.

(Tapescript: *One place you might like to try is the art gallery, because it's got a huge display of old postcards.*)

Explanation: The word needed to complete the blank is a noun as it comes after a preposition. Is in in a singular or plural form? The word 'collection' can mean 'a lot of things', which means it is followed by a plural word. The answer is 'postcards.' Test takers should not confuse it with 'a postcard collection,' which is in a singular form.

### Tenses

1. Question: In just 30 minutes Mozart \_\_\_\_\_ the piece of music, which his father \_\_\_\_\_ into Nannerl's notebook.

(Tapescripts: *In just 30 minutes Mozart mastered the piece of music, which his father had copied into Nannerl's notebook.*)

Explanation: The question consists of two clauses, each of which requires one answer. What is missing from the first clause is the verb as Mozart is the subject and the piece of music is the object, the pattern is S+V+O. The second clause, an adjective clause, is quite similar with the first one. It also needs a verb to complete the gap and has his father as its subject. To identify what is missing from the sentence might be quite easy; yet, there is another challenge, that is to decide what tense is used. Why is it necessary to predict what tenses to use? Some mastery of grammar is especially important when participants cannot depend solely on the sounds they hear to get the right answers. Certain sounds, for example the /d/ sound in simple past verbs, are sometimes hardly audible. The script shows that the answer is mastered /mɑ:stərd/. The words master /mɑ:stəf/ and mastered /mɑ:stərd/ may sound similar to some participants. It is quite difficult for them to hear the /d/ sound. In this case, the context becomes a clue that a past simple tense is needed. In the second clause, a past perfect tense is needed as it shows the action in the second clause happened before the action in the first clause. Once again, grammar plays its role as the word 'had' might not be clearly audible. 'Had' in this sentence is an auxiliary verb, which means the pronunciation is unstressed.

2. Question: One problem for historians is not knowing whether early equipment ---- as it was claimed.

(Tapescript: *But historians of cinema face difficulties in establishing if an apparatus functioned in the way that it makers asserted.*)

Explanation: The question is presented in a complex sentence. The main clause is 'One problem for historians is not knowing,' and the dependent clause is 'whether early equipment .... .' The word needed to complete the gap is 'functioned'. As it was discussed before, it is sometimes quite difficult for test takers to catch the /t/ sound in the word 'functioned' /fʌŋkʃnt/. Therefore, the clue that can be used is to see the tense

used by the verb in the next clause, that is '...as it was claimed.' The clue is not 'is not knowing' as it is the main clause of the sentence.

### Active/Passive Voice

1. Marshes were drained to provide land that could be \_\_\_\_\_.

(Tapescripts: ..... , *so marshland was drained and built on to house the large number of people*)

Explanation: If we see the construction of the question, we can say the answer is either a past participle verb or an adjective. The script shows that the utterance is in passive voice 'was drained and built on,' so the answer is 'built on.' Test takers should be aware that what is needed is a past participle verb. They should write 'built on' and not 'build on' as these two words, / bilt/ and /bild/, may sound similar to some.

### CONCLUSION

Although IELTS Test does not test grammar separately, mastery of some grammar is definitely necessary to succeed. The need to master some grammar in the Listening section might not be as obvious and essential as that in the writing and speaking sections, as in these sections test takers need to be productive. Yet, knowing some grammar points can help test takers confirm answers. For example, one test taker might not catch whether the word needed to complete the blank is a singular or plural form, yet, if this test taker can analyse the context and use some grammar clues, then a correct answer can be obtained. Furthermore, grammar can provide clues which will enable test takers to predict what kind of word is needed, a verb, passive form, adjective etc. Therefore, when this test taker listens to the audio, he/she is more prepared. Knowing some grammar can prepare test takers to anticipate what words are needed to complete the blanks. Making an anticipation is something that test takers can do before they listen to the audio. This supports what Chang (2009) states, "Three aspects are involved in listening comprehension test, before, during and after the test." Some knowledge of grammar is necessary in this Listening section as accuracy in terms of spelling and grammar is not negotiable in this test. If the answer is 'books', the singular form 'book' is not acceptable. Familiarity with some grammar points can improve the chance of getting correct answers.

### REFERENCE

- Chang, C-S. (2009). EFL listeners' task-based strategies and their relationship with listening performance. *TESL-EJ*, 13(2), 1-28. Retrieved from <http://www.tesl-ej.org/pdf/ej50/a1.pdf>
- Davies, P, et. al. (2000). *Success in English Teaching* Oxford. Oxford University Press.
- Graham, S. (2006). Listening comprehension: The learners' perspective. *System*, 34, 165–182. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2005.11.001>
- Hopkins, D. (2008). *Grammar for IELTS*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- IELTS Practice Test 3. (2005). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Liu, Y. (2015). The use of listening comprehension strategies to recall on toefl: the case of Chinese and Japanese successful and less successful listeners. *Asian EFL Journal Professional Teaching Articles*, 85.
- Oxford, R. L. (1990). *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know*. Massachusetts: Heinle & Heinle.
- Richards, J. C. (2008). *Teaching Listening and Speaking, from Theory to Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rost, M. (1994). *Introducing Listening*. London: Penguin English Applied Linguistics.
- Tsui, A. B. M., & Fullilove, J. (1998). Bottom-up or top-down processing as a discriminator of L2 listening performance. *Applied Linguistics*, 19(9).
- Vandergrift, L. (2007) Recent developments in second and foreign language listening comprehension research. <http://journals.cambridge.org>