Barriers in Using English Movies: Enhancing Students' Listening Skills

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Abstract

This study investigates the internal barriers faced by university students when using English movies to improve their listening skills. Conducted at the University of Muhammadiyah Tangerang, this research used a qualitative descriptive method involving 24 first-semester students through classroom observation and interviews. The results identified four main barriers: difficulty understanding grammar, limited vocabulary, dependency on subtitles, and trouble recognizing accents. For instance, many students struggled to follow figurative language and idiomatic expressions such as "get your head out of the clouds". Others reported confusion when characters spoke too quickly or with unfamiliar pronunciation. These challenges limited students' ability to fully comprehend the dialogue, despite their interest in using movies as a learning tool. The findings indicate that watching movies alone is not enough to improve listening skills without structured support. Therefore, educators should handle these barriers by providing guided activities such as teaching key vocabulary before viewing, using pause-and-reflect techniques, and conducting post-viewing discussions. These steps can help turn passive watching into an active learning process and enhance listening comprehension at the university level.

Keywords: *English movies; Listening skill; Students' barriers*

Introduction

Listening can be described as an individual's capacity to interpret and respond to sounds that are heard with full concentration (Pamungkas & Adi, 2020). In acquiring a language, learners are expected to master four integrated skills that complement one another (Arjulayana, 2018). Among these, listening requires specific stages such as maintaining strong focus, recognizing various accents, and understanding the context of the spoken message (Binsasi & Saraswati, 2024). As such, identifying effective methods to enhance listening ability is crucial for

language learners. Developing effective listening comprehension is essential for overall language proficiency, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings such as Indonesia.

In Indonesia, many learners face persistent challenges in mastering English listening skills. According to Education First (2023), Indonesia ranks 79th out of 113 countries, indicating low proficiency levels, especially in listening. This highlights a pressing need to address the difficulties students encounter during listening practice, particularly at the university level. In the Indonesian educational context, students frequently struggle with listening activities because of several linguistic and technical limitations. According to the interview with a lecturer of listening courses at Universitas Muhammadiyah Tangerang, students encounter several barriers in enhancing their listening skill. The lecturer mentioned that many students struggle with different accents and intonation patterns. Moreover, limited vocabulary makes it hard for them to follow fast paced conversations. Some students also feel insecure about their listening comprehension outcomes. These barriers highlight the need for more effective strategies in listening instruction.

One commonly used approach to enhance listening skills is by watching English movies (Fussalam et al., 2019). Through movies, learners are exposed to real-life usage of English. This helps them observe how native speakers pronounce words with the correct stress and intonation, as well as how they engage in social interactions. Using diverse media like movies can make English learning more engaging (Putri & Sinaga, 2020). Besides introducing new vocabulary and varied accents, movies provide an enjoyable learning atmosphere by combining education with entertainment. Nevertheless, although this method seems straightforward, its effectiveness depends on several factors. Some learners still encounter difficulties when applying this method (Hasibuan & Lubis, 2024), such as struggling with unfamiliar accents, rapid speech, or slang expressions that are not commonly taught.

However, the researcher believes that it is essential to carry out this study to explore the specific barriers faced by students at the University of Muhammadiyah Tangerang when using English movies to enhance their listening skills. Even though watching English movies is considered an effective way to practice listening, many students still encounter barriers that prevent them from fully benefiting from this method. Through this research, the researcher hopes to identify appropriate solutions so that the use of movies as a learning tool can be optimized. Furthermore, the findings of this study are expected to offer valuable insights for lecturers, enabling them to better support students in overcoming these barriers.

Even though using movies in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes is becoming more common, not many studies have looked into the real problems students face when trying to improve their listening skills through movies, especially at the university level. Most research only found about the positive side or general learning results. For example, Fidelia & Rohmah (2023) mention that students are excited and use different strategies when watching English-language

films. Siahaan et al. (2024) found that students support using films with subtitles to help build vocabulary and improve fluency. Similarly, Pamungkas & Adi (2020) focus on students' positive attitudes toward using films in vocational high schools. However, these studies rarely discuss the specific internal or external barriers that make it hard for students to understand what they hear in films.

Otherwise, the urgency of this research is to investigate the barriers that students face when using English movies to improve listening skills in a university context. While earlier research has demonstrated the benefits of this method and highlighted students' favorable perceptions, few have addressed the actual barriers. This research intends to fill that gap by analyzing the barriers in a university setting and offering insights into what may hinder the effective use of English movies for listening skill enhancement. Therefore, this study aims to answer the research question: "What are the barriers that students face when using English movies to improve their listening skills?"

Literature Review
Listening Skill

Listening is a fundamental component of language acquisition, especially in the current digital era where technological advancements play a significant role in enhancing learning experiences. Technology serves as a vital resource for supporting English instruction, particularly in developing listening proficiency (Olayiwola et al., 2024). Effective listening enables accurate understanding and efficient communication. According to Hardiah (2020), several indicators reflect students' listening competence: recognizing different accents, correct pronunciation of vocabulary, understanding grammar rules, and understanding vocabulary meaning.

These aspects collectively contribute to comprehending spoken language from various speakers. These indicators align with the definition that listening competence involves the ability to accurately perceive and interpret spoken messages, which is essential for mastering pronunciation, vocabulary, and overall message comprehension (Susiani et al., 2020). Strong listening skills are foundational for successful communication and language learning. Wahyuni & Inayati (2022) emphasize that listening is a receptive skill that plays a key role in learning English, as it serves as a central mode of communication both in direct and indirect interactions.

Barriers

In educational contexts, *"barriers"* refer to factors that hinder the effectiveness of the learning process. These barriers may stem from situational, physical, cultural, or personal conditions (Baran, 2019). Initially, the concept of educational barriers emerged as a shift from a medical model that focused solely on the student, moving toward a more inclusive approach that also considers family, institutional, and societal elements (Mavuso, 2020). Barriers may be physical, such

as inadequate facilities or technology, or psychological, such as anxiety or a negative attitude toward certain methods. In tech-based learning, limited digital literacy among teachers can impact teaching quality and interaction (Forde & Obrien, 2022). Unstable internet and low student preparation can also interfere with the learning process. Understanding these barriers is critical to enhancing educational experiences and improving outcomes.

Movies

Movies are widely favored, particularly among students. They capture attention by combining visuals, color, and sound (Sharjeel & Dadabhoy, 2013). Aside from entertainment, films often convey meaningful messages through storytelling and performance. Watching movies can fully engage viewers, allowing them to immerse themselves in the plot. In an educational context, films can serve as valuable tools to teach both language and cultural elements (Wardhany, 2022). They also expose students to social norms and cultural practices, enhancing language comprehension. In listening tasks, movies help learners focus on elements of spoken communication (Palupi, 2021). Through visual and audio cues, students can better understand life lessons and real-world language use.

Types of English Movies are divided into 9 types (Rao, 2020). First, Drama mostly about real life like A Man Called Otto. Second, Fantasy-fiction mostly about other worlds that full of imaginations like The Spiderwick Chronicles. Third, Romantic mostly about love like Take Purple Hearts. And other examples are, Action mostly about featuring thrilling scenes like Extraction, Comedy mostly about humor like Mr. Bean, Tragedy mostly about heartbreak like Romeo and Juliet, Adventurous mostly about thrilling journey like Jumanji, Documentary mostly about educating viewers like Leaving Neverland, and Cartoon mostly about animation movie like Toy Story. And The type of movie used in this study is a fantasy fiction.

Barriers in Listening Skill

According to Purwanto et al. (2021), several common barriers hinder students in improving their listening skills. One major issue is understanding different accents. Students often struggle to comprehend unfamiliar accents, which affects their overall listening comprehension. In addition, maintaining concentration is another barrier. Many students find it barrier to stay focused for an extended period during listening activities, which reduces the effectiveness of the learning process.

The speed of speech in audio materials can also be problematic. When speakers talk too quickly, students may fall behind and fail to grasp the full message. A limited vocabulary is another barrier; students who lack sufficient English vocabulary often have trouble recognizing and interpreting key words in conversations. Lastly, unclear pronunciation or poor audio quality can also make it hard for students to understand spoken messages, even if they already know the

words being used. These barriers highlight that listening comprehension involves multiple interconnected factors and not just a single skill.

Method

This research used a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the experiences and barriers faced by students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Tangerang when using English movies to improve their listening skills. The participants were 24 first-semester students, including 21 female and 3 male students. All of them took part in both the observation and interview sessions. Data were collected through classroom observation and interviews. The observation was conducted during a listening class on December 2, 2024, where students watched Bridge to Terabithia, a fantasy movie chosen for its emotional dialogue, clear storyline, and variety of English accents suitable for beginner-level learners. The observation lasted approximately 90 minutes, the full duration of the movie. During this session, the researcher noted students' behaviors, such as their level of focus, responses to scenes, use of subtitles, and interactions with classmates.

In addition to observation, interviews were conducted with all 24 students using 15 open-ended questions. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes and was carried out in the classroom. The purpose of the interviews was to gather more detailed information about the specific barrier's students encountered while trying to understand the movie, such as difficulties with vocabulary, accent recognition, pronunciation, and maintaining attention. The data were analyzed through the processes of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. To validate the findings, the researcher also interviewed a lecturer from the Listening course at Universitas Muhammadiyah Tangerang. The lecturer, who holds a Master's degree in English Education, provided insights that were used to confirm the relevance and accuracy of the results.

Results and Discussion

Results

This study aims to investigate the barriers faced by students in using English movies to enhance their listening skills at the University of Muhammadiyah Tangerang. The findings were drawn from a combination of student interviews, classroom observations, and lecturer insights. Based on the analysis of data from 24 first-semester students who watched Bridge to Terabithia during a listening class, several recurring challenges emerged. These barriers were not only expressed by the students themselves but were also evident through their behavior in class and supported by expert opinion from the course lecturer.

The data revealed that while students generally showed interest in learning through movies, they encountered multiple barriers that limited the effectiveness of this medium. The results have been categorized into four main barriers: lack of understanding of grammar, vocabulary limitations, difficulty understanding accents, and subtitle dependency. The first three categories (lack of understanding

of grammar, vocabulary limitations, and difficulty understanding accents) were adapted from Hardiah (2020), while subtitle dependency was adapted from Huda et al. (2023). Each of these themes is discussed in detail below, supported by direct student responses, classroom observation notes, and lecturer interview insights.

Lack of understanding of grammar

A total of 8 out of 24 students, including 7 females and 1 male, reported that they struggled to understand grammar when watching Bridge to Terabithia. EA explained that many dialogues, especially in the fantasy scenes, were hard to comprehend because they were full of imaginative language. AZ said, "I don't understand the grammar because the language is like poetry and too imaginative." HN shared that she was confused by the imaginary world and couldn't distinguish between real and fantasy elements, making it harder to grasp sentence structure. KD admitted feeling overwhelmed during emotional scenes, making it difficult to focus on how the sentences were formed. MA, the only male in this category, said that the emotional exchanges between Jess and Leslie were hard to follow due to their indirect and expressive language. H added, "In the sad parts, I get confused because the sentences are indirect, like they're implied." Other students like NA, SR, and FN also noted that figurative and metaphorical expressions were hard to interpret without strong grammar knowledge and contextual support.

This difficulty was clearly observed during the class session on December 2, 2024. Students showed limited critical engagement; none were seen taking notes on sentence structures or asking questions about grammar in the dialogue. When the scenes became emotional or slowed down, most students appeared to lose focus, some began talking to friends or checking their phones. The teacher did not pause or provide clarification, leaving students without the chance to process and understand grammar deeply. The absence of active strategies meant that students absorbed the content passively without analyzing how sentences were formed.

According to the lecturer, one of the main barrier's students face in understanding English movies is their tendency to focus on subtitles instead of auditory input. This habit hinders their development in processing grammar in real contexts. The lecturer recommended implementing pre-viewing activities such as introducing sentence patterns or common expressions that appear in the movie. With such preparation, students would be better equipped to identify and understand grammar while watching. However, these strategies were not applied during the observed session, and as a result, the opportunity to develop contextual grammar comprehension was missed.

Vocabulary Limitations

A total of 10 out of 24 students, consisting of 9 females and 1 male, reported facing limitations in vocabulary while watching the movie. AZ learned new words like Terabithia and phrases like create your own world that she only understood after seeing them in context. VM said, *"There were so many words I had never heard*

before, and even with subtitles, I was still confused." RA mentioned encountering new expressions like *"you have a death wish?"*, while EA said idioms like *"get your head out of the clouds"* were unfamiliar. HN and KR also noticed phrases such as *"hit the road"* and *"the sound of the prisoners rattling their chains"*, which were difficult but interesting. NN picked up the word *"outcast"*, and PP noted expressions like *"dead meat"* and *"beanpole"* that she hadn't seen before. H shared, *"I just learned what 'grief' means, and it kept coming up during the sad parts."* Both PL and MA said they learned words like *"after"* in an architectural context and *"grief"* related to emotional scenes.

Observation results supported this statement. Although English subtitles were provided, only three students were seen writing down new vocabulary during the movie. Most simply watched passively without making an effort to understand or remember unfamiliar words. Some students quietly asked their peers about certain phrases, but there was no structured vocabulary follow-up or discussion. This shows that without guidance or reflection, the potential to enrich vocabulary through movies remains underutilized.

The lecturer also stated that lack of vocabulary is the most fundamental barrier in understanding English films. Because movie dialogues often include idioms, slang, and informal expressions, students struggle to grasp their meaning without a strong vocabulary foundation. Therefore, the lecturer recommended strategies such as providing a vocabulary list, assigning pre-viewing tasks, and encouraging the use of listening journals to help students expand their vocabulary. However, these strategies were not implemented during the observed session, leaving vocabulary development from the movie unstructured and ineffective.

Difficulty Understanding Accents

A total of 9 out of 24 students, including 8 females and 1 male, stated that they had difficulty understanding the characters' accents in the movie. AZ shared that the rural American accent made it hard for her to catch each word clearly, and RA struggled with occasional British accents and fast speech. VM expressed, *"When the characters speak fast, I can't tell the words apart."* HN said she relied on tone and facial expressions to understand, as the pronunciation was unfamiliar to her. KR and KZ admitted having to replay certain parts because the characters spoke too quickly.

MA felt that the accent was generally clear but still hard to follow during emotional scenes. H said, *"I understand the words individually, but when they're spoken fast together, I get confused about the meaning."* NN, NA, and SN also mentioned that although the accent was in English, regional tone and unfamiliar pronunciation made comprehension difficult even with subtitles.

These difficulties were evident during classroom observation. When characters spoke quickly or with distinctive accents, some students were seen frowning, whispering to friends, or disengaging. There was no teacher intervention to pause or explain the unclear speech, leaving students to interpret the dialogue

on their own. Most efforts to understand accents were limited to relying on subtitles or watching facial expressions, which were not enough to ensure full comprehension. The lecturer confirmed that accents and speech speed are major challenges for students, especially those who lack listening stamina.

They recommended using short clips with a focus on accent training, targeted listening practice, and guided post-viewing discussions to help students recognize different pronunciation styles. The lecturer also stressed the importance of concentration, as low attention makes it difficult for students to notice speech patterns and make connections. Without these teaching strategies, understanding accents will continue to be a recurring obstacle for students trying to improve their listening skills.

Subtitle Dependency

A total of 10 out of 24 students, including 9 females and 1 male, said they were heavily dependent on subtitles to understand the movie. RA explained, "I need subtitles for the translation," indicating that she had to read subtitles to understand difficult phrases. HN admitted that subtitles were especially helpful during fantasy scenes. KR emphasized, "I must look at subtitles first before I understand," reflecting her strong reliance on reading before grasping the spoken content. KZ also noted that without subtitles, she couldn't understand the meaning of the dialogue. MA found subtitles particularly helpful during emotional and fast-paced scenes. NN, NA, and PP agreed that subtitles helped them understand unfamiliar vocabulary. Putra Iatsu used subtitles to check pronunciation and meaning, while YS mentioned that she had to rewatch certain scenes while reading subtitles to fully comprehend the dialogue.

This dependency was clearly visible during classroom observation. Almost all students focused on the subtitles rather than on the audio or character expressions. Very few tried to repeat phrases or take notes, indicating that they were not using the film as a tool for active listening. Even when the dialogue became fast or unclear due to accent, the film was not paused or clarified, making students even more dependent on the text. As a result, subtitles became a passive crutch rather than an active aid for listening skill development.

The lecturer emphasized that subtitles are important scaffolding tools, but they must be used gradually. English subtitles help students connect spoken and written language, but relying on native-language subtitles for too long may prevent listening growth. The lecturer suggested a gradual transition from native language to English subtitles, and finally to no subtitles at all to strengthen listening endurance. They also recommended strategies such as pause-and-reflect activities and group discussions to help students reduce their dependence on subtitles. Unfortunately, these approaches were not applied during the observed class, so students remained in their comfort zone without being challenged to improve their listening skills.

Discussion

This study shows that while English movies can help students improve their listening skills, there are still many barriers for university students. The observation and interviews found that most students had problems understanding different accents, learning the meaning of new words, and knowing how to pronounce them correctly. These barriers made it hard for students to follow the story or understand the conversations in the movie. Previous studies by Fidelia & Rohmah (2023) and Hasibuan & Lubis (2024) also found that strong accents, unfamiliar phrases, and limited vocabulary often stop students from fully understanding English movies. In this study, many students started the movie with interest but lost focus after a while, especially during slow or emotional scenes. This shows that students need more support to stay focused and learn effectively from movies.

One big barrier in this learning activity was the lack of structure and preparation. Even though English subtitles were provided, most students only used them to follow the story and did not use them to learn new words or improve pronunciation. There were no activities before the movie to explain the topic or important vocabulary, and there were no discussions after the movie to help students reflect or ask questions. Because of this, students missed the chance to learn more deeply. Pamungkas & Adi (2020) found that students enjoy using movies in the classroom when teachers give clear instructions and support. In this study, some students said the grammar in the movie was confusing and did not match what they had learned from textbooks. This shows the difference between textbook English and real-life English used in movies.

The results also show that using movies without teacher guidance may not give good results even if students enjoy watching them. Some students said it was hard to understand the dialogue because of fast speech, background noise, or emotional scenes. These barriers were also found by Augustin & Trisno (2021) who said that poor sound quality and unclear speech make learning difficult. Choerunnisa et al. (2024) also found that watching movies helps students get used to different English accents but only if they are well prepared. Teachers need to give support before, during, and after the movie such as explaining difficult words, pausing for questions, and having discussions at the end. With this kind of support, students can enjoy the movie and still improve their listening and vocabulary skills.

This study has some limitations. It only involved one group of students, one movie, and one class meeting. So, the results may not represent all university students. Future research should include more students, use different types of movies, and take place over a longer time. It would also be helpful to compare learning results between classes that use movies with clear learning steps and classes that do not. Even with these limitations, the study shows that movies can help university students learn English, especially vocabulary, pronunciation, and understanding real conversation. Nafla & Roshalina (2023) also found that students feel more relaxed and interested when learning through movies. With the

right teaching method, movies can be a fun and effective way to improve students' English at the university level.

Conclusion

This study concludes that while English movies can support students in improving their listening skills, several barriers still hinder their learning process. The findings revealed four major challenges: lack of understanding of grammar, vocabulary limitations, subtitle dependency, and difficulty understanding accents. These barriers made it difficult for students to follow the storyline and fully comprehend the spoken language in the movie. Moreover, the absence of structured activities such as pre-viewing preparation, vocabulary focus, and post-viewing discussions further limited students' ability to benefit from the film. Therefore, to optimize the use of English movies in listening classes, teachers need to provide proper guidance and integrate movies into a well-designed instructional framework

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