

Analysing English Language Education Department Students' Listening Comprehension Difficulties and Strategies

Wulandari Kristantiningsih
Universitas Internasional Batam, Indonesia
wulan.tanti14@gmail.com¹

Nurlaily
Universitas Internasional Batam, Indonesia
nurlaily@uib.ac.id
**Corresponding author*

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Highlights

The purpose of this study is to uncover students' internal and external difficulties when handling listening comprehension tests, as well as the strategies they used to overcome those challenges.

ABSTRACT: This research aimed to reveal students' internal and external difficulties in dealing with listening comprehension tests. The research was conducted in the English Language Education Department at a private university in Batam. The total of participants was 32 students, including second and third-year students. The data were analysed through mix-method, using three different instruments: a questionnaire, a listening comprehension test and an interview to collect students' perceptions of their challenges and the listening strategy applied. The students were categorised into two groups: intermediate and advanced students. The findings show that students tend to lose track of long conversation due to a lack of background knowledge and apply an ineffective strategy. Intermediate students utilised the combination of cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective strategies as advanced students did; however, they still needed to obtain unsatisfactory results due to ineffective strategies. Thus, this research can be useful for educational practitioners, syllabus developers, and students, in general, to be aware of the apprehension and exhibit a suitable strategy to minimise the issue.

Keywords: Listening Skills, Listening Skills Difficulties, Listening Comprehension Strategies

Introduction

Learning English consists of four essential skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening (Erlina et al., 2018). Daily basis communication requires listening as a vital and active skill during the conversation (Huy, 2015). Even though speaking is labelled the most demanding skill to survive in the global economy, listening is the initial skill that learners should acquire to comprehend and interpret any information or instructions given by the speaker. Saraswaty (2018) indicates how listening skill is neglected because most teachers have the notion that they can be developed naturally. In contrast, listening comprehension should be emphasised in every educational institution (Oteir & Abd Aziz, 2017), reminding that it needs a lot of concentration and spontaneous manner, and students are unable to revise or correct anything, unlike speaking, reading and writing. It leads to the absence of lecturers' awareness regarding the students' issues. As a result, students' listening comprehension skill is at stake.

Chang (2016) categorises listening difficulties as caused by internal and external factors. The internal factors are from the listener, such as; their listening proficiency, motivation,

background knowledge, and physical condition, while external factor includes learning environment, practice opportunities, and speaker factors, such as speech rate, accent and pronunciation, and effectiveness of a speaker's talk. These problems indicate that an appropriate and suitable applied teaching strategy is essential to achieve the learning objectives (Chang, 2016). Chang (2016) also mentions that there are medium factors affecting listening which involve text type, task type, and context of the text. These problems indicate that an appropriate and suitable applied teaching strategy is essential to achieve the learning objectives.

Common processes for receptive skills, reading and listening, can be described as top-down and bottom-up processes (Furuya, 2021). Moreover, some studies have found the effectiveness of cognitive style strategies (Manihuruk & Sidabutar, 2022). Secondly, according to Ratebi & Amirian (2013), metacognitive strategies let students plan and evaluate their listening ability. The third strategy is socio-affective, allowing students to interact with other listeners. These three strategies are essential as input for educational practitioners to be aware of the issue so that a suitable listening comprehension strategy can be implemented accordingly.

Rahimi & Soleymani (2015) suggest that listening comprehension problems can also appear not only to internal factors from the listener but external factors. These factors include 1) Noise and distraction from the surrounding environment. Students need deep concentration while listening, and poor environmental conditions will affect students' mood; 2) The authenticity of the listening text. Authenticity means that the listening text is intended to be heard by a target language user in the target language culture, and 3) Physical factors such as impaired quality of tape recorder and speaker.

Furthermore, Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016) describe the three strategies for listening comprehension development, including 1) Cognitive Strategy, a problem-solving strategy which requires long and short-term memory to process and decode the intention of utterances; 2) Metacognitive Strategy, a mental mechanism strategy that builds up students' awareness of listening comprehension ability by controlling and assessing learning activity autonomously but still under teacher supervisor; 3) Socio-Affective Strategy, promoting students to interact with others and maintain learning attitude to confirm understanding, boost motivation and decrease anxiety.

A study by Lengkoan et al. (2022) shows that there is a lack of ability in TOEFL listening test indicating students need to improve their ability to listen by listening to music, watching youtube videos, listening to podcasts, etc. Moreover, Ngonkum & Deerajviset (2022) studied Thai EFL undergraduate students' listening strategies and difficulty understanding academic English lectures. The study's results indicate that participants' difficulties with listening to academic lectures were due to their inability to comprehend both the main point and the key phrase. Furthermore, they found it difficult to follow the lecturers' speech rate, and their accents needed to be more precise. Imagery, inference and guessing, association and elaboration, and metacognitive strategies were frequently employed by participants. The most frequently used socio-affective strategies were encouragement, monitoring emotions or reducing anxiety, and questioning and clarification.

Listening comprehension skill remains an issue amongst primary English students at a private university in Batam. It is shown by the students of English language education had to take special class to improve their TOEFL score. This policy occurred because their listening score was lower than other skills tested. Subsequently, from the evaluation of the class, students shared their anxiety in joining listening test. Hence, this study aimed to analyse the difficulty in listening comprehension in depth and determine the strategies to overcome the issues of listening comprehension in the second and third year of English Language Education students.

The results of this research are expected to expose the issue of insufficient prior knowledge from the students or the inadequate learning strategies applied in the classroom. Therefore, education practitioners can recognize the current issues, and evaluate the applied teaching strategies in order to prevent the same problem emerged in the future. Students also can recognize and examine effective learning styles to accomplish learning objectives.

Method

This research employed a mixed-method research method to acquire and analyse the data. Mixed methods involve collecting and integrating quantitative and qualitative data, as only implementing quantitative and qualitative analyses is insufficient (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this study, qualitative data were collected after quantitative data. The quantitative data was collected using a questionnaire and a listening test. A questionnaire was used to assess students' perception of their listening skills. The questionnaire included students' preferred listening strategies and opinions regarding listening comprehension difficulties. A listening comprehension test was administered to assess students' listening comprehension skills and to provide a further basis for the data analysis. Further, qualitative data obtained from interviews aimed to strengthen the data.

Integration of the two databases will provide additional insight into research questions and problems. By using a mixed-method approach, one can develop a deeper understanding of a problem or question (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This study used questionnaire and semi-structured interview data captured data from the students. This data research is collected from second and third year of English language education students at a private university in Batam, Indonesia. The range of their age was 19-23 years old. The researchers chose them as participants because they were the representative participants to expose the data of the research problems.

The total numbers of participants were 32 students. The researchers chose students from the second and third year because their previous TOEFL test results needed to be examined and analysed for further research. In addition, second-year students have completed Integrated Listening and Speaking I & II and Strategic Listening courses, and Integrated Listening and Speaking I & II for third-year students.

Participants answered questions with a Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”. After collecting all questionnaire data, the researchers converted it into Excel format to be classified and analysed easily. The data gathered and analysed from the questionnaire were presented as tables and diagrams to provide insight into how the students

perceive their listening skills. Qualitative interview data were analysed through coding, classification, explanations, and conclusions.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

As several researchers have demonstrated in previous study, language anxiety is the result of anxiety associated with the practice of the foreign language skill. In dealing with foreign language skills, the tense influences students to demonstrate good performance and produces good results. Factors both internal and external can affect this phenomenon.

The findings from the questionnaire shows that 53% of students think their listening comprehension skill is rather average. While 6% said poor, 38% of students see that their skill is good and 3% said excellent. Even though students perceive their skill as average to good, still they encounter internal and external problem that create roadblock.

Internal Factors

Internal factors originally come within the students themselves such as psychological condition, concentration, comprehension ability, and content of the listening material affect students' performance.

Content of the Listening Text

From the findings of the questionnaire, majority of students are agreed that the content of listening many times affect students' performance.

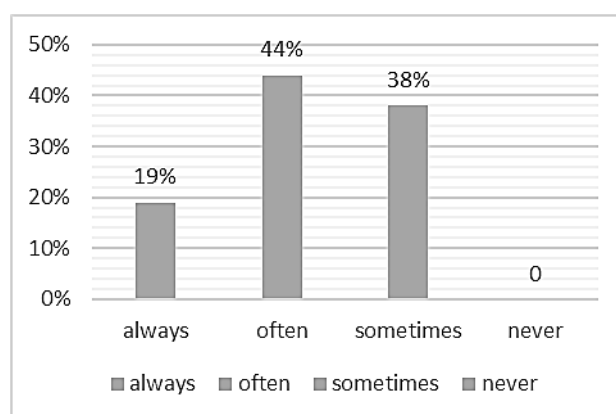


Fig. 1 Unfamiliar Vocabularies

From Figure 1, 44% of students often hardly interpret unfamiliar vocabulary, with 19% always, 38% sometimes, and none said never. A large number of often and always scales is dominated by 16 intermediate students, while only four advanced students chose those scales, and the rest sometimes experience the issue. In addition, unfamiliar terminology often interrupts students' comprehension, with 31% of students saying so. It indicates that problem-related with vocabulary is considered to be the biggest issue in comprehending listening text. In addition, the long-spoken text is considered the second apprehension. 22% were often, 13% were always, and 3% were never struggling with the long oral text. Hence, students require

more concentration to simultaneously digest the incoming audio and text. This condition created tension for most students, which undoubtedly influenced their readiness.

In dealing with a complex grammatical structure point shows, only 16% of students always stumbled on this issue, 13% said often, and the rest is sometimes and never. It is not as complex as the unfamiliar vocabularies issue.

Content of the Listening Audio

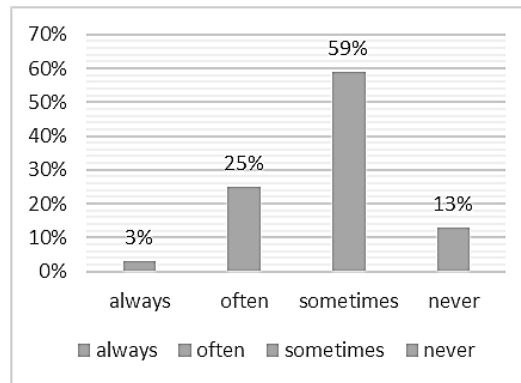


Fig. 2 Recognising the Audio

Listening to audio is usually long and fast. Due to ineffective strategy, most students needed help keeping track of the long audio. 28% of students conveyed that they often need a longer pause to process the audio and text they just heard. Out of 28%, all of them are intermediate student, and only one advanced student frequently experience it. From the questionnaire, the advanced student considers this issue a problem that sometimes happens but not regularly. Some students also inferred that some vocabularies are unrecognisable if pronounced; 22% of students stated that the meaning of specific vocabulary is much more noticeable if it is written. Additionally, 28% of students inferred that they were familiar with the word pronounced; however, they could not recognise the meaning and the word itself, 63% sometimes experienced it, and the rest for always and never.

Concentration

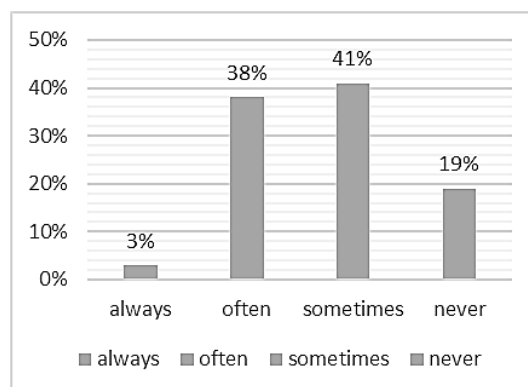


Fig. 3 Maintaining the focus

Even though students have trouble processing the text's content, only 28% spend more time processing the word. 38% of students often lose focus. Both intermediate and advanced students experience this problem equally, even though some advanced students have never been in this situation. Balancing the long text and audio track that often kept on playing is the cause of students losing their concentration, with 22% always and 28% often dealing with it. Most students often could not remember the audio they had just heard. However, instead of spending too much time recalling, 41% chose to analyse the whole sentences to get the text's intention. Both intermediate and advanced students implement this to shift their attention to acquiring meaning instead of focusing only on audio. Analysing the sentence is an excellent strategy to acquire interpretation without getting stuck in particular words.

Psychological Condition

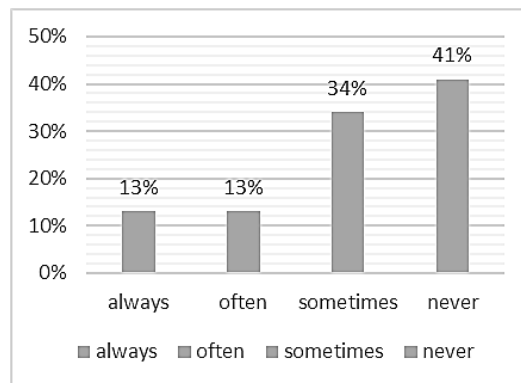


Fig. 4 Experiencing Anxiety

Psychological conditions such as nervousness and over worried affect students' performance. Before taking a listening comprehension test, 41% of students never felt worried or anxious. It is because students were barely thinking or planning the vocabulary. Regardless of being submissive to the test, when students could not decode the intention of the text or the meaning of specific vocabulary, 22% of them were always anxious, 25% were often anxious, 34% said sometimes, and 19% were never. It can be concluded that students' psychological condition solely appears if students recognise their apprehension.

External Factors

Background Noise

Background noise became the highest rank among external factors that caused listening comprehension difficulties. 56% of intermediate and advanced students indicated that surrounding sounds could make the audio inaudible and distract concentration. Therefore, it is essential to always focus on the audio track they are listening to.

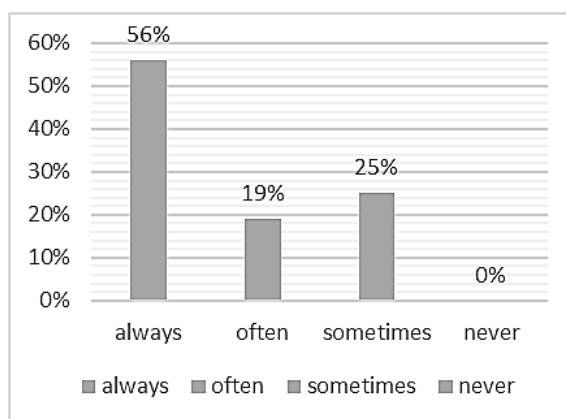


Fig. 5 Background Noise

Condition of the Audio Tape

Inaudible audio produced by bad-quality tape recorders also affects students' listening comprehension difficulty. 41% were constantly distracted, 34% were often, and 25% sometimes experienced this issue. Intermediate and advanced students consider this a problem that cannot be fixed with comprehension ability. It is a fundamental problem that cannot be avoided unless fixed externally.

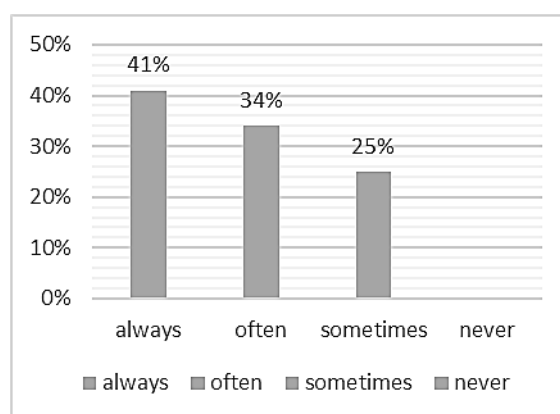


Fig. 6 Quality of Tape Recorder

Listening Comprehension Strategies

By using the questionnaire, the researcher was able to categorize participants into intermediate and advanced-level listeners in order to collect information related to the listening comprehension problem and strategies. Due to the fact that all students took listening classes throughout their first and second years, none of them were considered beginners. Students with advanced skill levels were classified as those who know effective learning strategies. It is for this reason that those who are less motivated to learn can apply the same strategies and expect to be able to achieve their educational goals.

Intermediate Students

In the interview, three intermediate students were involved to gain more insight into the difficulties and strategies they applied during the listening comprehension test. Three students were chosen as the representatives of the intermediate students. All of them were coded with a number to make sure confidentiality.

Student 1 stated that she could not catch up with the audio since she constantly lost track. Lack of background knowledge also affects her ability to understand the pronunciation of specific vocabulary. During the interview, she added that she was likely to lose track. It is proven by the answer of the test, which only mentioned words, not in the form of complete sentence information. Moreover, the words she noted could not describe the point of the audio.

I just heard one or two sentences but the other sentences keep coming on and on... some of the pronunciation sound the same that affect my focus as well. (S1)

As for the strategy, she conveyed that she leaves the text immediately and recalls the audio she has heard. She utilised a bottom-up cognitive strategy where she recalled the oral text and then elaborated on it with limited background knowledge. Hence, this caused her to lose concentration.

Student 2 generally encountered the same problems. Unable to maintain focus, often discovering unfamiliar vocabulary, and needing help interpreting the intention of the oral text affected her listening comprehension performance.

the same just like (student 1), in the moment where I wanted to take a note, the audio is keep playing so I couldn't catch the previous audio... many vocabularies that I cannot recognise.

listening comprehension test audio is only play once, hence, I decided to move on to the next number (questions). (S2)

Student 3 had the same apprehension as two previous students. She was likely to lose track, cannot keep her concentration, struggle to infer the meaning and have psychological condition factors. Student 3 utilised the bottom-up cognitive strategy, analysing the sound pattern even if it had different meanings. She was surprised by what she heard from the audio because she could not predict or expect what the audio contained. She usually only plans a little before taking the test. Thus, it turned her anxious. From the result of her test and note-taking, Student 3 used word elaboration to decode meaning or intention, yet her comprehension was inadequate.

Advanced Students

The researchers interviewed five advanced students as representatives to gain insight into their difficulties and strategies during the listening comprehension test. Five students were chosen following the results of the questionnaire. All of them were coded with a number to make sure confidentiality. Student 4 mentioned that her getting lost during the test is frequent.

However, she usually skipped the part if she needed help comprehending it and reflected on the previous or next sentences to find the idea. She utilised cognitive strategy to interpret the idea. She applied metacognitive and cognitive strategies if she could not recognise some vocabulary.

Moreover, Student 5 conveyed that she rarely found unrecognisable terminology or words that needed to be explained. Based on the questionnaire findings, she did not indicate having anxiety or encountering problems recognising unfamiliar words.

I have never had any cases where I cannot totally identify what the speakers say... I attempt to always relate it (the missing part) with the clause near to them. (S5)

Student 6 conveyed that during an official proficiency test, to get an idea of the text, she usually focuses on the last utterance of the speakers. Beforehand, she decoded the intention of the questions. She applied a metacognitive strategy for planning to create a prediction for better comprehension and inference.

commonly I only focus on the last utterances of the conversation audio because the last sentence or utterance are usually related to the questions. (S6)

She applied top-down cognitive strategies to conclude by activating background knowledge and visualising the words with the closest meaning. Her answer to the second question was correct, and she used cognitive strategy by making a fair inference. Despite this, she was also dealing with anxiety, yet she could manage it. It showed that she applied a socio-affective strategy consistently to encourage herself to have a better learning attitude.

yes I feel that way, I feel anxious I feel like my hand wanted to take a note of every audio I heard, however during the official TOEFL test we are not allowed to take any note so I applied those strategies. (S6)

Student 7 stated that he sometimes encountered words or phrases that were unfamiliar; however, he knew how to overcome them. He rarely got stuck on unfamiliar vocabulary or terminology; instead, he inferred the words he needed help understanding with his background knowledge or elaborated with the multiple-choice option that matched the question. Finally, Student 8 mentioned that he sometimes lost track of a long text and some unrecognisable pronunciation.

let's say the text is long, then I checked at the questions I am aware to what words should I shift my focus to. If the length of the audio is often long, I focus my mind to the only words that I wanted to hear.(S8)

Before taking every listening test, Student 8 usually read the instruction or questions to be aware of the keywords. He utilised his metacognitive ability to prepare himself and predict

the critical information that might be uttered from the audio. He utilised cognitive strategy by relying on background knowledge and interpretation. He selected a particular vocabulary that he wanted to comprehend so that he could be more focused.

Discussion

Insufficient vocabulary or background knowledge is the most affecting listening comprehension internal factor. Based on the findings from the questionnaire, content of the listening text earned a high percentage of affecting students' performance. Intermediate students dominated the high percentage, yet advanced students stated the same problem even though it is not as high as its counterpart. It is supported by the findings from Tran & Duong (2020) inferred that lack of vocabulary knowledge ranked as a significant problem for EFL students since it is closely related to the ability of L2 acquisition. They also added syntactic and semantics in a long text, and discourse-related problems followed as significant problems that caused difficulties.

The audio content is considered the second highest issue, as students from both levels stated it frequently affects their listening comprehension ability. It leads to more significant problems, such as losing concentration if the text is long and contain many terminologies. It may be difficult for foreign language learners to comprehend information given in a long speech and delivered at a high speed (Rina & Tiarina, 2021). As a result, these problems will prevent them from comprehending information and answering TOEFL test questions correctly.

The participants of this research also implied that they need help keeping track of the audio and concentrating on the text simultaneously. Students also barely recognised the pronounced words. Their concentration was divided due to barely recognised pronounced words. Regardless of these difficulties, students conveyed that most of them never feel anxious or over-worried before taking the test. It suggests that students choose not to think about the difficulties that might occur during the test. Otherwise, anxiety appeared after students perceived their weaknesses.

Background noises ranked as the highest external factor affecting listening comprehension performance for intermediate and advanced students. Students always consider it concerning, reminded that it cannot be fixed within themselves, which this problem is coming from outside. Fujita (2017) stated that students need to be trained with background noises to get used to this situation. Students from the second and third year mostly deal with the difficulties that may occur caused by the content of the listening text, followed by a problem related to audio and concentration. The external factors also bothered the students; however, this problem was not from the students themselves. Consequently, it needs external solution.

In order to minimise the difficulties, strategy shall apply during the test. Intermediate students are aware of listening comprehension strategies. Based on the insight above, they utilised cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies. Nevertheless, intermediate students tended to have lesser comprehension ability to interpret the idea or decode important information from the text. It is aligned with the findings of Hsueh & Liu (2008) researched listening comprehension strategies between two intermediate and advanced listeners. They

found out that both levels applied the same strategies. However, the intermediate listeners employed ineffective comprehension ability. Thus, it carried out preliminary results.

Advanced students used prediction, inferring, and activating background knowledge more often than using the bottom-up strategy. Advanced students usually have better strategies to decode meaning or select important information. Their comprehension ability is much greater than intermediate students; moreover, they have broad background knowledge, including rich vocabulary. Advanced students engaged in a metacognitive strategy to facilitate cognitive strategy effectively. Advanced students employed self-preparation and selective words to recognise critical information effectively. Even though intermediate students conducted the same strategies, it could have been more effective due to low comprehension and limited background knowledge. It is needed to solve listening comprehension difficulties from the root, problems related to background knowledge and comprehension ability. The participants were categorised into the intermediate and advanced levels to acquire data findings related to strategy. It can be concluded that advanced students applied a combination of cognitive and metacognitive strategies with some socio-affective strategies, which were also supported by their sufficient knowledge. Intermediate students also applied the same strategies but still needed to improve their results.

Conclusion

Both level, intermediate and advanced students more or less experienced the same difficulties during the listening comprehension test. The listening content ranked as the highest apprehension, followed by the audio content, concentration, and problem related to mental conditions and external problems. Thus, strategies shall be applied to overcome such internal issues. Advanced students employed cognitive strategies combined with metacognitive strategies effectively. Activating background knowledge, inferring, and elaborating with the keywords are undoubtedly effective in depicting the intention or critical information of the audio text.

Additionally, self-preparation before taking a test by scanning the keywords of the questions and word prediction supports the effectiveness of cognitive strategies. Advanced students also use bottom-up cognitive strategies, such as analysing the sound pattern of specific vocabularies to decode meaning or intention. However, this strategy is activated if they need to learn the text or audio. They draw conclusions or interpretations by focusing on a sound pattern with the closest pronunciation to words they recognise.

Intermediate students mostly rely on the sound pattern due to insufficient background knowledge towards certain words or phrases. They also applied cognitive strategy by elaborating the words with the clause nearest, the question, or the options. Although their interpretation is still inadequate, it is proven by how many wrong answers they have chosen during the test. Meanwhile, students with lower abilities need to be trained to activate background knowledge, find keywords, and correctly comprehend text or audio.

Given the results, educational practitioners must consider how students solve the challenges while answering the listening questions. In order to produce more accurate and valid results, further research needs to be conducted to a broader extent with more participants from

various disciplines. More profound interview questions with a complex data analysis should be administered to serve more convincing results.

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