

An Analysis of Students Listening Ability in Recognize English Homophones

Nabila Sadida¹, Otong setiawan Djuharie²
Sunan Gunung Djati State Islamic University Bandung ^{1,2}

Corresponding Author's Email: nabilasadida678@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Listening ability is an essential skill in learning English and plays an important role in daily communication, especially in understanding spoken messages. However, many students still experience difficulties in listening comprehension, particularly in recognizing and distinguishing homophones. This study aims to analyze and describe the listening ability of third-semester students of class 3B, English Education Department, UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, in identifying English homophones. It also examines which homophones most frequently cause errors and identifies the factors influencing these difficulties, as well as the instructional implications. This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach. The data were collected through a homophone listening test consisting of ten multiple-choice questions and five essay questions. The findings reveal that students' ability to recognize homophones varies. Homophones with high phonological similarity tend to cause more errors, especially when they are presented without sufficient contextual support. In addition, factors such as speech rate, speaker accent, cognitive load, and limited listening practice contribute to students' difficulties in understanding homophones. These findings highlight the importance of implementing more contextual and structured listening instruction to help students better understand and distinguish homophones.

Keywords: *Listening ability; Homophones; Listening difficulties.*

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INTRODUCTION

Listening first language skill acquired from early stages of life and remains one of the most frequently used abilities throughout a person's lifetime. This skill involves the process of recognizing and understanding what others say. To listen effectively, an individual needs to be able to perceive the speaker's accent or pronunciation, understand the grammar and vocabulary used, and interpret the meaning of the message being conveyed (Saputra, 2018).

Listening comprehension holds a very essential role in the communication process, as it enables individuals to understand messages delivered by others accurately and completely. Listening is not merely an activity of hearing sounds, but also involves attention, comprehension, and interpretation of the information received. Therefore, listening skills cannot be separated from daily social life, since every interaction whether in family, educational, or broader social settings requires effective listening skills in order to achieve clear and harmonious communication (Bayu Fermadi, Iid Kurniawan, 2024).

However, developing listening skills in foreign language learning is far from simple. Many learners often feel frustrated because they struggle to accurately capture information from what they hear. These difficulties arise from various factors that make the process of understanding spoken language in a foreign context particularly challenging. To obtain information accurately, listeners are required to maintain a high level of concentration. Teaching listening skills to Indonesian students is not an easy task, as most of their attention tends to be directed toward reading and writing skills related to grammatical mastery. As a result, listening skills are frequently neglected (Hermida, 2021).

In addition, many learners experience difficulty in distinguishing sounds, particularly those who are new to learning English, because in English the pronunciation of words does not always correspond to their spelling. As a result, learners often make mistakes in imitating pronunciation or in understanding the meaning of sentences. This issue is closely related to the presence of homophones. Homophones are two or more words that have the same pronunciation but different meanings (rofiah, 2024). Therefore, intensive practice, frequent exposure to spoken English, and a thorough understanding of English phonetic rules are necessary in order for learners to develop confidence in their listening and speaking abilities.

Although homophones have been widely discussed in linguistic literature, studies that specifically emphasize the listening ability of third-semester English Literature students in Class 3B of the 2024 cohort in recognizing homophones remain limited. Most previous studies have focused on English language learning in general or have been conducted at the secondary school level, and therefore do not provide a specific picture of the challenges faced by students at the tertiary level. This gap forms the basis of the present study, which focuses on the listening ability of Class 3B students in recognizing homophones. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study is expected to offer a more in-depth understanding of the difficulties students encounter in distinguishing homophones through listening.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study is focused on addressing several research questions, namely: how the listening ability of Class 3B students from the 2024 cohort enables them to recognize homophones; which types of homophones most frequently cause confusion as well as those that are easier to understand; and what factors influence students' difficulties in distinguishing homophones.

In line with the research questions, this study aims to describe the listening ability of Class 3B English Literature students from the 2024 cohort in recognizing homophones, to identify the types of homophones that most frequently cause confusion as well as those that are relatively easy to understand, and to analyze the factors influencing students' difficulties in distinguishing homophones through listening.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

This study employs a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. This methodological choice aims to provide a detailed depiction of students' listening ability in recognizing homophones. A qualitative approach was selected because the data collected will be analyzed narratively, focusing on the phenomenon of students' difficulties in distinguishing homophones.

A descriptive method is employed in this study to provide accurate and systematic information regarding the phenomenon under investigation, namely how Class 3B English Literature students of the 2024 cohort at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung recognize homophones within the context of English language learning. Through this method, it is possible to identify the homophones that most frequently cause errors, allowing the phenomenon of listening difficulties to be analyzed in greater depth.

The selection of this approach is also based on the fact that listening ability, particularly in distinguishing words that sound the same but have different meanings (homophones), represents one of the most challenging aspects for English learners. With the qualitative data obtained, this study is expected to provide a measurable depiction of students' proficiency, allowing the results to serve as a foundation for developing more effective listening learning strategies. Furthermore, the descriptive-qualitative approach enables the researcher to formulate practical recommendations for both students and instructors, such as focusing on the practice of the most challenging homophones or enhancing English phonetic comprehension more intensively.

The research subjects consisted of third-semester students of Class 3B in the English Language and Literature program from the 2024 cohort. A total of 10 respondents were involved, selected based on specific criteria to ensure the relevance of the study. These criteria included:

1. Students who actively attend listening courses.
2. Willingness to participate in an audio-based listening test and to complete the questionnaire in full.
3. Possession of adequate basic vocabulary knowledge, enabling them to follow the homophone listening test with an appropriate level of comprehension.

The research instrument employed in this study was a homophone listening test specifically designed to assess students' ability to distinguish words that sound the same but have different meanings. The instrument consisted of a multiple-choice test with 10 items and an essay test with 5 items. In the multiple-choice section, each item presented a single word in audio form, while in the essay section, each item provided a sentence with one word deliberately omitted. Students were then asked to select the correct word and fill in the blank according to what they heard. The audio recordings were produced using standard English pronunciation to ensure that each word was clearly articulated and would not cause confusion.

The following are examples of homophones used in the study:

1. Two / Too
2. Flower / Flour
3. Son / Sun
4. Sea / See
5. Write / Right

This instrument was also accompanied by a scoring sheet to record the number of correct and incorrect responses for each participant. The use of a listening test was chosen because it provides an objective representation of students' ability to recognize homophones, while also enabling the researcher

to identify which types of homophones are the most difficult for Class 3B English Literature students to distinguish..

The research procedure was carried out in several stages to ensure that the data obtained were complete and accurate. The first stage was preparation, which involved designing the homophone listening test, recording audio according to standard English pronunciation, and preparing a record sheet to document students' responses. The second stage was the test administration, during which the audio was played to the Class 3B students, who were asked to listen carefully to each word before selecting the appropriate answer. All students took the test under the same conditions to maintain the consistency of the observations. The third stage was data collection, which involved recording students' answers, identifying the homophones that most frequently caused errors, and noting any phenomena or difficulties observed during the test. The final stage was data analysis, in which the researcher described students' abilities narratively, highlighted the homophones that were the most difficult to recognize, and discussed the factors influencing their listening skills.

The data were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis, with the aim of presenting the research findings narratively. The techniques employed included:

1. Presenting students' responses in the form of textual descriptions, illustrating their level of understanding of homophones.
2. Identifying the homophones that were most frequently misrecognized, and comparing them with those that were relatively easier to recognize.
3. Describing patterns of students' difficulties in recognizing homophones, including influencing factors such as sound similarity or vocabulary proficiency.
4. Providing a comprehensive overview of the listening ability of Class 3B English Literature students.

This technique allows the study to provide comprehensive and detailed information about the phenomenon of homophone listening among students, without the need to use numbers, scores, or percentages. The data produced are narrative and descriptive in nature, enabling readers to gain a clear and thorough understanding of students' difficulties and abilities.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1) General Overview of Students' Ability

Based on the results of the homophone listening test administered to Class 3B English Literature students from the 2024 cohort, it was found that students' listening abilities regarding homophones exhibited considerable variation. This variation was evident in the differences in students' capacity to perceive both the sounds and meanings of the words presented in the listening test. Some students were able to recognize homophones accurately, particularly when the words frequently appeared in everyday contexts, while others still experienced difficulties, especially with homophones that sounded similar, even though the words belonged to commonly used basic vocabulary. These findings indicate that not all students are at the same level, and that their listening abilities are influenced by prior learning experiences and habitual exposure to spoken English.

Some students were able to recognize homophones accurately when the context appeared in learning materials and in situations they encountered frequently. Students in this group tended to associate the sounds they heard with the correct meanings, particularly for homophones that were familiar and commonly

used in everyday life. This finding indicates that habitual exposure to spoken English plays a crucial role in enhancing students' listening abilities.

Moreover, differences in students' listening proficiency were evident in the ways they responded to the audio recordings. Some students required more time to grasp the meaning and respond to the words presented, and they tended to hesitate when selecting their answers. In contrast, students with stronger listening skills responded more quickly and were generally confident in choosing their answers. These differences indicate variations in students' levels of self-confidence and cognitive readiness when facing a listening test.

In general, students demonstrated a better understanding of homophones that have clearly distinct meanings and are frequently encountered within simple sentence contexts. However, when homophones were pronounced in isolation without supporting sentence context, some students experienced confusion in selecting the correct word. This finding indicates that context plays a crucial role in helping students comprehend the meaning of the homophones they hear.

2) Homophones That Most Frequently Cause Errors

Based on the results of the homophone listening test and considering the varying proficiency levels of Class 3B English Literature students from the 2024 cohort, it was found that students' ability to recognize homophones exhibited considerable variation. Not all homophones were identified with the same degree of accuracy. Certain types of homophones tended to cause more confusion, both in the multiple-choice and essay sections. These differences in ability were reflected in the ways students responded to the audio recordings: some students were able to immediately identify the correct word, while others required more time and exhibited hesitation when selecting their answers.

The homophones used in the listening test consist of basic English vocabulary that is frequently encountered in daily life and is often introduced at the early stages of learning English. Some of the words included are *here/hear/hair*, *by/buy/bye*, *pear/pare/pair*, *write/right/rate*, and *flower/flour/floor*. These words were selected because they have identical or very similar pronunciations. Nevertheless, each word in the test carries a distinct meaning and performs a different grammatical function within a sentence. This distinction requires students not only to rely on what they hear but also to apply their understanding of meaning and contextual usage. Based on these characteristics, the use of homophones in this study is considered appropriate for assessing students' listening ability, particularly in distinguishing words that sound alike but have different meanings and functions in English.

In the multiple-choice section, each item consisted of three words with similar pronunciations, two of which were homophones, while the third served as a distractor. The homophones that most frequently caused errors were those in which all three words had very similar sounds, making it difficult for students to distinguish the correct pronunciation. Examples include *two/too/to*, *bye/by/buy*, *pear/pare/pair*, and *right/write/rate*. Although these words belong to basic vocabulary, some students still hesitated when selecting the correct answer, particularly when the differences in pronunciation were very subtle.

Another homophone that frequently caused errors was *night/knit/knight*. The difficulty with this group was not only due to the similarity in pronunciation but also to the considerable differences in spelling, particularly with the word *knight*, which contains letters that are not pronounced. This situation caused some students to hesitate when linking the audio sound to the correct written form. In contrast, certain homophones such as *male/mail/mall*, *here/hear/hair*, *straight/strange/strait*, *flower/flour/floor*, and *sea/see/shet* were relatively well recognized by most students. This is likely because, upon careful listening,

the pronunciation of these words can be distinguished. Furthermore, these words frequently appear in English learning contexts and have been introduced since the basic levels, making students more accustomed to differentiating their meanings through context.

In the essay section, errors most frequently occurred when students had to relate the audio sounds to the context of a sentence with a missing word. Although the audio was played clearly, some students still made mistakes in selecting the correct word, particularly on items involving verbs such as *write*, *meet*, and *pour*. These errors indicate that, in addition to the ability to perceive sounds, understanding the sentence context plays a crucial role in accurately recognizing homophones. However, most students were able to answer the essay questions with a higher number of correct responses compared to the multiple-choice section. This was influenced by the fact that the essay items already provided contextual clues. This finding is supported by previous research, which shows that a sentence context known in advance helps listeners comprehend and distinguish meanings of homophones (Ping & Yip, 1998). In addition, prolonged experience in listening to English significantly affects students' ability to understand homophones (Xiaoning & Feng, 2017).

3) Factors Affecting the Difficulty of Homophone Listening

The difficulty in understanding homophones is not caused by a single factor but rather by several interrelated factors. These include phonological aspects, vocabulary proficiency, the role of context, language experience, and cognitive load during the listening process (Muhammad Adi et al., 2021). One factor that contributes to errors in comprehension or failure to recognize homophones is the similarity in pronunciation between words. For example, the words *right/write/rite* and *bye/buy/by* share identical pronunciations. Phonetically, they are represented by the same sounds: /raɪt/ and /baɪ/. Misunderstanding homophones can be explained through the concept of lexical ambiguity, a condition in which a single phonetic form can refer to different words with distinct meanings. This condition often causes confusion for listeners and makes it difficult to comprehend the intended meaning (Amelyana et al., 2022).

Lack of listening practice is the most significant factor in understanding the meaning of homophones, even when the vocabulary used consists of words frequently encountered in daily life. Without consistent practice, students tend to be unaccustomed to associating the sounds they hear with the correct word meanings. Infrequent practice leads students to rely more on guessing or on limited contextual clues when listening to audio, thereby increasing the likelihood of errors in selecting the correct meaning of homophones (Yusuf & Putraidi, 2025).

The speaker's rate of speech and accent are also factors that affect the difficulty of understanding homophones. When audio is presented at a relatively fast pace, students have limited time to process the sounds they hear (Maharani, 2023). This makes it difficult for listeners to distinguish words with high phonological similarity, such as homophones, because subtle differences in pronunciation are often missed. As a result, students tend to rely on guessing or selecting answers based on inferred meaning rather than on accurate sound perception.

In addition to speech rate, the speaker's accent also influences students' ability to recognize homophones. Certain accents can alter stress patterns, intonation, and the pronunciation of vowels and consonants, causing words to sound different from the standard pronunciation typically taught in class. For students who are not accustomed to listening to variations in English accents, these differences can increase confusion when identifying homophones. This finding highlights that exposure to various accents and

speech rates is essential for helping students improve their listening skills, particularly in distinguishing homophones that sound nearly identical but have different meanings.

Listening activities also demand substantial cognitive resources. Cognitive research has shown that a high cognitive load negatively affects word recognition in listening comprehension, as mental resources are simultaneously allocated to processing phonological information and contextual meaning. For instance, one study found that cognitive load imposed prior to hearing speech reduced the accuracy of identifying words spoken within sentences, indicating that the ability to recognize spoken forms becomes more difficult when cognitive capacity is limited (Hunter & Pisoni, 2018)

In the context of learning English as a foreign language, students often face additional cognitive demands, such as limited vocabulary, the speaker's rate of speech, and a lack of supporting context (Hidayah, 2025). These factors further complicate the process of understanding homophones, as listeners must exert greater cognitive effort to link sounds with their correct meanings. Therefore, cognitive load can be regarded as one of the primary factors contributing to students' difficulties in comprehending homophones through listening

Confidence, or self-efficacy, is a psychological factor that plays a significant role in students' success in completing listening tasks. Research indicates that students with high levels of self-efficacy tend to demonstrate better academic performance, show greater readiness before learning activities begin, and engage more actively in the learning process. In contrast, students with moderate or low self-efficacy often contribute less, struggle to manage emotional responses, and perceive challenging tasks as threats that they tend to avoid (Darmawan et al., 2021).

In the context of homophone listening tests, self-confidence affects the way students respond to the questions. Students with high self-confidence tend to remain calm, make decisions without hesitation, and handle similar-sounding words more effectively. In contrast, students with low self-confidence are more likely to be hesitant, uncertain about their answer choices, and easily confused when distinguishing homophones with high phonological similarity.

4) Implications of the Research Findings for Listening Instruction

The findings of this study offer several important implications for English listening instruction, particularly in the teaching and comprehension of homophones. The results indicate that students' difficulties in recognizing homophones are not solely due to phonological similarity but are also influenced by other factors, such as limited vocabulary, lack of supporting context, the speaker's rate of speech and accent, language experience, and students' level of self-confidence. Additionally, students often require more time to process the words they hear in order to achieve optimal comprehension (S. et al., 2020). Therefore, listening instruction should be designed in a more structured and contextualized manner to effectively assist students in overcoming these difficulties.

The first implication concerns the role of instructors in listening instruction. Lecturers need to give special attention to homophones as part of listening practice, considering that words with identical sounds but different meanings still cause confusion among students. Listening exercises should not only emphasize the recognition of isolated sounds but also present them within meaningful sentences or contexts. In this way, students can associate the sounds they hear with the appropriate meanings based on the sentence context, rather than relying solely on auditory perception.

In addition, variations in accent and speech rate in audio materials should also be considered. The findings of this study indicate that students tend to experience difficulties when exposed to speech that is

too fast or accents that are unfamiliar. This situation often causes students to miss important information, particularly for words with similar sounds, such as homophones. Therefore, instructors are advised to use listening materials with gradually increasing levels of difficulty, starting from standard pronunciation at a moderate pace and progressing to materials featuring more diverse accents. This step-by-step approach can help students adapt gradually to differences in pronunciation, reduce anxiety while listening, and enhance their sensitivity to subtle phonological distinctions in English. Students' ability to comprehend English utterances in various communicative situations is expected to develop more optimally.

The next implication relates to the role of students in enhancing their listening skills. Students are expected to actively engage in listening activities outside the classroom, such as following conversations, podcasts, or other English-language media. Regular listening practice can help students expand their vocabulary, improve their sensitivity to language sounds, and reduce cognitive load when encountering homophones in listening tests. In addition, students' self-confidence should be fostered through repeated practice and positive learning experiences, enabling them to make choices confidently when answering listening questions.

The final implication relates to listening instruction strategies in general. Listening instruction should be guided by a more communicative and contextual approach, providing students with opportunities to discuss word meanings after listening activities (Hadijah & Shalawati, 2018). Such discussions can help students gain a deeper understanding of homophone meanings and reinforce their comprehension through interaction. By implementing a teaching strategy that emphasizes context, consistent practice, and the strengthening of self-confidence, listening instruction is expected to become more effective in helping students recognize and understand homophones in English.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that the listening ability of Class 3B English Literature students from the 2024 cohort in recognizing homophones varies considerably. While some students can accurately identify frequently used and familiar homophones, others still face challenges, particularly with words that sound highly similar or are presented without supporting context.

Certain homophones are more prone to errors, which are not solely due to limited vocabulary but also involve the processing of phonological information, phonological similarity between words, and reliance on context to determine meaning. This underscores that understanding homophones in listening requires the integration of vocabulary knowledge, contextual cues, and language experience.

Students' difficulties are further influenced by multiple interrelated factors, including speech rate and accent, cognitive load, limited targeted listening practice, and self-confidence. These factors demonstrate that the development of homophone listening skills requires deliberate and continuous practice.

Therefore, listening instruction should prioritize homophones through contextualized and communicative approaches, providing opportunities for active practice and reflection. Exposure to authentic English in varied contexts can enhance students' sensitivity to differences in homophone meanings. Consistently designed listening activities are expected to support students in achieving a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of homophones.

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