

## Exploring Students' Strategies in Dealing with Unfamiliar Vocabulary during a Listening Task in Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

Vocabulary is an essential component in listening comprehension. However, learners are often confronted with unfamiliar words that can hinder their overall understanding. This research aims to explore the strategies used by English as a foreign language (EFL) learners when they encounter unfamiliar vocabulary during listening tasks in the first semester of the English education department at Islamic University of As'adiyah, Sengkang. This qualitative research with a case study approach involved 13 first-semester students from the English Education study program. Data was gathered using a combination of think-aloud protocols (where students verbalized their thoughts while completing the task), listening to task recordings, and semi-structured interviews. Students listened to three authentic audio texts with varying levels of difficulty and challenging vocabulary. Thematic analysis revealed five main strategies used by students: (1) Contextual Inference (using clues from surrounding sentences or paragraphs), (2) Focus on Familiar Elements (ignoring unfamiliar words and concentrating on understood words/sentences), (3) Utilizing World Knowledge (connecting the content to their background knowledge), (4) Recording Keywords (writing down words that are thought to be important for later analysis), and (5) Searching for Phonological Cues (identifying words that sound similar to their native language or English that they know). Although contextual inference is the most common strategy, its effectiveness varies greatly depending on the language proficiency of the learners and the clarity of the context provided.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension abilities hold a crucial and essential role in the acquisition of foreign languages, particularly English (Edele & Stanat, 2016; Wallace, 2022). Listening, as a receptive skill, constitutes the fundamental basis for the enhancement of other language abilities and acts as the conduit for learners to acquire authentic language information (Polat & Erişti, 2019; Rakhimova, 2024). In both academic and social

spheres, the capacity to comprehend spoken communication is essential for success, encompassing attendance at lectures, participation in discussions, and involvement in daily contacts.

Nonetheless, despite its essential function, hearing in a foreign language is sometimes seen as the most challenging skill and induces significant anxiety among learners (Csizér & Kontra, 2020; Jin et al., 2021; Kimuru, 2017). The ephemeral and rapid characteristics of auditory stimuli present distinct problems not faced in reading proficiency (Siegel et al., 2025). Learners lack the ability to independently "repeat" utterances as they can with phrases in written texts. In this swift exchange of verbal information, any moment overlooked can trigger a cascade of misinterpretation (Rost, 2014).

A preliminary study by the author found that among the numerous challenges encountered by first-semester English language students at Islamic University of As'adiyah, issues such as speaking speed, accent, intricate sentence structure, and insufficient background knowledge, lexical challenges, or unfamiliar vocabulary, frequently present themselves as the most prominent and immediate impediments. An unrecognized word serves as a "stumbling block" that interrupts cognitive processes. Students often concentrate on the new term, attempting to recall it or infer its meaning, distracting themselves from subsequent critical information. This results in a comprehension gap, causing uncertainty, dissatisfaction, and ultimately, an inability to understand the overarching meaning (Bailey, 2020; Trang, 2021).

Despite the acknowledged significance of vocabulary acquisition, many learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) confront listening scenarios with restricted vocabulary knowledge (Amiruddin & Satriani, 2022; Reynolds et al., 2022; Uchihara, 2025; Wang & Treffers-Daller, 2017; Zhang & Graham, 2020). They encounter a disparity between their known terminology and the vocabulary employed in genuine audio materials (Li, 2019; Masrai, 2020; Nushi & Orouji, 2020; Teng, 2018). Consequently, the capacity to adeptly manage these new terms is an essential metacognitive and compensating skill. This capability enables learners to bridge gaps in comprehension, sustain listening fluency, and persist in verbal communication activities (Bagheri & East, 2025; Tabassum & Naveed, 2024).

Prior research has thoroughly investigated general listening learning procedures (Jiang et al., 2021; Li et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2021; Wang & Treffers-Daller, 2017) and the challenges encountered by learners. There is an opportunity for a more thorough, contextual, and detailed study of how learners, particularly in the Indonesian context, spontaneously address lexical challenges during a listening task. A comprehensive mapping of the methods employed and the cognitive processes underlying their selection remains necessary.

This research was conducted based on this background. This qualitative study examines the tactics employed by first-semester EFL students majoring in English education at the Islamic University of As'adiyah to navigate foreign language. The central research question of this study is, "What strategies do EFL learners employ to manage unfamiliar vocabulary during listening tasks?" Answering this topic aims to

yield significant insights for designing more effective listening instruction and empowering learners to become more autonomous and resilient listeners.

## 2. METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth and contextual understanding of the strategies used by students. The students in this research consisted of 13 first-semester students in the English Education Study Program, Islamic University of As’adiyah. They were selected purposively to ensure that they represented the population of new students who were building their English language skills. The following presents the case study model used in this research in Figure 1.

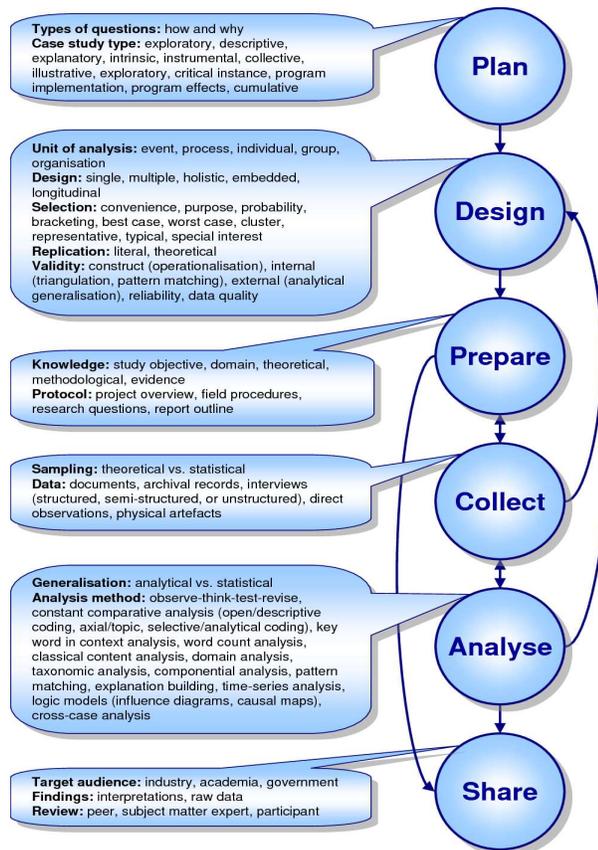


Figure 1. Case Study Model

Data was collected through three main methods to ensure triangulation and depth of data. (1) Think-Aloud Protocol: Students are asked to verbally report all thought processes that come to mind as they work on listening tasks. This provides direct access to their cognitive processes when encountering unfamiliar words. (2) Listening Task Recording: Students listen to three authentic audio texts recorded from sources such as news podcasts and informal dialogues. These texts are selected with varying levels of difficulty and contain challenging vocabulary that is predicted to be unfamiliar to students. (3) Semi-Structured Interviews: Following the listening task, interviews were

conducted to explore in greater depth the strategies they were aware of, the difficulties they faced, and the reasons behind their choice of specific strategies.

Data from think-alouds, task notes, and interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The process involved transcribing the data, repeated reading, creating initial codes, searching for themes, and finally formulating the main themes that represented the strategies used by the students.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Results

This study primarily seeks to discover and conduct an in-depth analysis of the specific methods employed by beginner-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners when confronted with challenges posed by foreign vocabulary during listening activities. This research, through thematic analysis of think-aloud protocols, listening task recordings, and semi-structured interviews, found five primary methods employed by students to manage foreign terminology during listening tasks.

#### Contextual Inference

The strategy most commonly used by almost all students (10 out of 13 people) was contextual inference. Students actively tried to guess the meaning of new words by relying on clues from the preceding and following sentences, or from the overall context of the discourse. For example, one participant S13 said in their think-aloud session,

*"I don't know the meaning of 'curb'... but the previous sentence mentioned 'government' and 'virus', so maybe it means something like controlling or restricting."*

Field notes show that students often paused briefly after hearing a difficult word, then voiced their guesses based on the context. This proves that the Contextual Inference strategy is an active deductive process, not just guessing, and its success depends heavily on the learner's ability to quickly activate and integrate their general knowledge schema.

#### Focus on Familiar Elements

A total of 8 students reported and demonstrated behavior of deliberately ignoring unfamiliar words. Instead of fixating on those words, they focused their attention on words, phrases, or sentences they understood in order to build a general picture (gist) of the topic of conversation. In his interview, S6 explained:

*"My strategy is, if there is an unfamiliar word, I skip it first. I focus on words that I understand, such as 'flood', 'rain', 'people'. Rather than losing everything, it's better to just take the gist."*

This strategy is a form of attention and cognitive management to prevent a blockage in understanding. Additionally, this statement demonstrates highly rational metacognitive decision-making on the part of beginning learners. They recognize their cognitive limitations and choose the strategy of taking the gist rather than risk losing the entire message by dwelling too long on a single unfamiliar word. Easily accessible

words (flood, rain, people) serve as comprehension anchors that allow them to continue processing incoming information.

### **Utilizing World Knowledge**

Some students (7 people) connected the audio content with their background knowledge and personal experiences (world knowledge). They used existing schemata in their minds to predict the meaning of words or the overall content of the text. S3, for example, stated in an interview:

*"When I heard 'job interview', I immediately remembered a YouTube video I had watched. So words like 'applicant' and 'qualification' were easier to guess because the topic was familiar."*

This shows that understanding does not depend solely on linguistics. This quote provides strong empirical evidence that (1) Learners use lexical triggers (job interviews) to activate stored schemas or background knowledge (YouTube videos). (2) Once schemas are activated, topic-related vocabulary (applicant, qualification) becomes easier to access and infer, even though the words may be unfamiliar individually. Non-linguistic knowledge (understanding of the job interview process from the videos) provides a strong semantic framework, allowing learners to fill in lexical gaps. (3) This confirms that listening comprehension is an interactive process; it does not depend solely on word recognition (linguistic), but also on learners' ability to relate audio input to real-world contexts they already know.

### **Recording Keywords**

This metacognitive strategy was used by 7 students who actively noted down keywords during the listening session, including words they did not understand. These words were then used as markers to reconstruct meaning after the audio playback was complete. S12 showed his notes containing the words "deforestation" and 'ecosystem' and said:

*"I wrote down the big words that were mentioned frequently. Even though I didn't understand them at first, later, from the combination of these words, I was able to guess that the topic was about forests and the environment."*

This note-taking served as an external memory aid. By taking notes, learners dispensed with the need to instantly recall difficult words, thereby reducing working memory load during listening. Field notes that note-taking served as an external memory aid were supported by learner statements. The noted words (big words) were then used as cumulative data points after the listening session was completed. Learners used combinations of frequently occurring and noted words to draw larger conclusions, identifying the overall topic (forests and the environment). This was a form of metacognitive inference after the audio input had ceased.

### **Looking for Phonological Clues**

A small number of Students (4 people) tried to identify unfamiliar words by looking for similarities in sound. These associations were made with words in Indonesian (their

native language) or with other English words they already knew. S6 exemplified this in a think-aloud,

*"The word 'phenomenon'... it sounds like 'fenomena' in Indonesian, so maybe it means the same thing."*

In cases like 'phenomenon' and 'phenomena', phonological and lexical similarities serve as valid shortcuts, efficiently breaking lexical barriers. This proves that L1 can be a powerful cognitive asset in L2 comprehension. However, this strategy was not always successful. S13 admitted to being misled,

*"I thought 'fabricate' had something to do with 'fabric' (cloth), but it turned out not to be the case at all."*

The examples of 'fabricate' and 'fabric' demonstrate that relying solely on sound or form without contextual confirmation can lead to significant misinterpretation. This confirms that phonological strategies, while fast, have unstable validity and must be balanced with contextual inference.

Thematic analysis of the data revealed five primary strategies used by students to maintain listening comprehension despite being hindered by unfamiliar vocabulary. The following is a summary of the thematic analysis results in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Thematic Analysis Results (Primary Strategies Used by Students)

No.	Strategy	Learner Action Description
1	Contextual Inference	Using linguistic (surrounding sentences and phrases) and non-linguistic clues from the text heard to infer or guess the meaning of unfamiliar words.
2	Focus on Familiar Elements	Prioritizing understanding familiar words/sentences and deliberately ignoring unfamiliar words. This strategy is used to capture the general meaning (Gist) without relying on word-for-word comprehension.
3	Utilizing World Knowledge	Connecting the topic or content heard with personal, cultural, or general background knowledge (schema) to fill in gaps in meaning caused by unfamiliar vocabulary.
4	Recording Keywords	Writing down words deemed important (even if their meaning is uncertain) to analyze or look up their meaning after the listening task is completed. This is a post-listening compensation strategy.
5	Searching for Phonological Cues	Identifying unfamiliar words that have sound similarities to words in their native language (L1) or other English words they have already mastered (e.g., looking for cognates or sound similarities).

The findings showed that first-semester EFL learners used a variety of cognitive and metacognitive strategies when facing unfamiliar vocabulary challenges in listening tasks. Although contextual inference was the most frequently used strategy, its success was closely related to the individual's language proficiency and the quality of contextual clues. This underscores the importance of training learners to effectively use this strategy while being aware of its limitations.

## Discussions

The results of this study indicate that first-semester EFL learners used a variety of cognitive and metacognitive strategies when facing unfamiliar vocabulary challenges in

listening tasks. Although contextual inference was the most frequently used strategy, its success was closely related to individual language proficiency and the quality of contextual clues. This finding underscores the importance of training learners to effectively use this strategy while being aware of its limitations.

### **Dominance and Mechanisms of Cognitive Strategies**

#### ***Contextual Inference as an Active Deductive Process***

The most dominant strategy used was contextual inference (used by 10 of the 13 students). This finding is consistent with the literature confirming that inference is the human brain's default mechanism for filling lexical gaps in language comprehension (Gu et al., 2025; McNamara et al., 2007; Prior et al., 2014). Previous research (e.g., work focused on reading strategies) also places inference as a primary compensatory strategy (Mekuria et al., 2024; Tonks et al., 2021). However, this study provides stronger evidence in a listening context through a think-aloud protocol. Quotes such as "I don't know the meaning of 'curb'... but the previous sentence mentioned 'government' and 'virus,' so maybe it means something like 'controlling' or 'restricting'" demonstrate that inference is not simply guesswork but an active deductive process in which learners quickly integrate linguistic clues with general knowledge schemas. The brief cognitive pauses recorded by field notes visualize the moments at which cognitive load is activated to make this deduction.

#### ***The Role of World Knowledge (Schema)***

The strategy of Utilizing World Knowledge (used by 7 students) proved highly effective. This reinforces the top-down model of listening comprehension. The results of the S3 interview, "When I heard 'job interview,' I immediately remembered a YouTube video I had watched. So words like 'applicant' and 'qualification' were easier to guess because the topic was familiar," providing empirical evidence that non-linguistic knowledge (stored schemas from videos) serves as a powerful semantic framework. This confirms that comprehension does not depend solely on linguistics but is an interactive process between audio input and real-world contexts already known to the learner (Amiruddin et al., 2022; Tai & Chen, 2024; Ye & Kaplan-Rakowski, 2024).

### **Metacognitive Strategies and Compensation**

#### ***Cognitive Attention Management***

The Focus on Familiar Elements strategy (used by 8 students) functions as a highly rational metacognitive mechanism. Beginner learners are aware of their working memory limitations and make strategic decisions to avoid blockages in understanding. As S6 expressed, "Rather than losing everything, it's better to just take the gist." Accessible words (flood, rain, people) act as comprehension anchors, which are especially important in listening contexts that do not allow for repetition.

### ***External Memory Strategies***

The keyword note-taking strategy (used by 7 students) is a form of post-listening compensation. Data indicate that this note-taking acts as an external memory aid, reducing the load on working memory during listening. The quote from S12, who successfully deduced the topic (forests and the environment) after listening to a combination of noted words, demonstrates that note-taking enables delayed thematic inference. This practice expands the traditional view of inference as occurring only in real time.

### ***L1 as a Risky Asset***

The Phonological Clue Searching strategy (used by four students) highlights the role of the mother tongue (L1) as a resource. This strategy works well when there are true cognates (like "phenomenon" to "phenomenon"), but it also has a high chance of false cognates (like "fabricate" to "fabric"). This points out the value of training phonological sensitivity while pointing out that it requires contextual confirmation to prevent significant misinterpretations (Brooks et al., 2025; Han et al., 2025; Mahdi et al., 2024; Wardana et al., 2022).

This study makes a significant contribution, particularly in the context of EFL teaching in Indonesia. It not only lists strategies but also uses think-aloud protocols and interviews to elucidate the cognitive mechanisms behind them (e.g., how 'curb' inference works, how note-taking reduces memory load). This study demonstrates that even first-semester learners can make rational metacognitive decisions (choosing gist over word-for-word accuracy), challenging the assumption that sophisticated strategies are only possessed by advanced learners. The finding that the effectiveness of contextual inference correlates closely with individual language proficiency suggests that strategy training should include improving lexical and syntactic foundations, not just guessing techniques.

This research substantiates that strategies for managing foreign vocabulary exist on a continuum, ranging from cognitive comprehension techniques (inference) to cognitive management approaches (emphasis on familiar elements) and memory aids (highlighting keywords), all of which are essential for successful listening in EFL contexts.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

This study, involving 13 first-semester EFL learners in the English Language Education Department of As'adiyah Islamic University, Sengkang, confirmed that unfamiliar vocabulary is a significant barrier to listening comprehension. Thematic analysis revealed five main strategies used by students to overcome this lexical barrier, indicating that their listening comprehension process is interactive and adaptive. Learners actively used two main strategy categories: (1) Active Cognitive Strategies (Inference): The most common strategy was contextual inference (10 of 13 students). This is a deductive process that integrates linguistic clues with general knowledge schemas. However, its effectiveness is highly dependent on the individual's language

proficiency and the clarity of the context. (2) Metacognitive and Compensatory Strategies: Students demonstrated high cognitive management skills. They used Focus on Familiar Elements (8 students) to prevent blockage and opted for general meaning (gist).

Furthermore, in the context of the Role of External Knowledge and L1, World Knowledge (7 students) proved crucial, where schema activation (such as experience watching YouTube videos) enabled the inference of topic-related vocabulary (e.g., applicant and qualification). This confirms that listening comprehension is not solely dependent on linguistics. The Phonological Clue Searching Strategy (4 students) demonstrated the potential of the Mother Tongue (L1) as an asset (phenomenon to phenomenon), but also the serious risk of false cognates (fabricate to fabric). Furthermore, the Keyword Noting Strategy (7 students) functioned as an external memory aid, enabling post-listening analysis to summarize the overall topic (forests and the environment). Overall, this study concludes that first-semester EFL learners are adaptive and strategic learners, actively balancing risky/high-cognitive inference attempts with compensatory strategies that ensure continued comprehension.

As a recommendation, lecturers need to explicitly teach students how to use contextual inference critically. Practice should include assessing the quality of contextual clues and quickly integrating linguistic clues with world knowledge (schemas). Future research is recommended to use quantitative methodologies to measure the direct correlation between learners' language proficiency levels (before intervention) and the success rate of each strategy (especially contextual inference) to provide more predictive data. In addition, classroom action research is needed to develop and test the effectiveness of teaching interventions that explicitly train these five discovered strategies..

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