



UNDERSTANDING BARRIERS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF KOREAN LISTENING SKILLS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: *The growing influence of the Korean Wave has significantly increased interest in learning the Korean language in Indonesia. However, many learners continue to face notable challenges in mastering Korean listening skills. This study investigates the specific difficulties encountered by beginner-level learners using a qualitative exploratory design. Data were collected through a questionnaire completed by 16 students and in-depth interviews with five selected participants. The findings reveal five major barriers: difficulty processing fast speech, limited comprehension of unfamiliar topics, challenges in recognizing accents and pronunciation variations, heavy reliance on visual or textual support, and struggles with vocabulary retention. These difficulties indicate that listening comprehension is a multifaceted skill requiring more than exposure to Korean media. The study concludes that targeted instructional strategies are essential to strengthen phonological awareness, vocabulary mastery, and independent listening skills among Korean learners in Indonesia.*

Abstrak: Pengaruh *Korean Wave* yang semakin berkembang telah secara signifikan meningkatkan minat mempelajari bahasa Korea di Indonesia. Namun, banyak pembelajar masih menghadapi berbagai tantangan dalam menguasai keterampilan menyimak bahasa Korea. Studi ini menyelidiki kesulitan khusus yang dialami oleh pembelajar tingkat pemula melalui desain penelitian kualitatif eksploratori. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner yang diisi oleh 16 mahasiswa dan wawancara mendalam dengan lima partisipan terpilih. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan lima hambatan utama: kesulitan memproses tuturan cepat, keterbatasan memahami topik yang tidak familiar, tantangan mengenali aksen dan variasi pelafalan, ketergantungan tinggi pada dukungan visual atau teks, serta kesulitan dalam retensi kosakata. Kesulitan ini menunjukkan bahwa pemahaman menyimak merupakan keterampilan multifaset yang membutuhkan lebih dari sekadar paparan media Korea. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa strategi pembelajaran yang terarah sangat diperlukan untuk memperkuat kesadaran fonologis, penguasaan kosakata, dan kemampuan menyimak mandiri pada pembelajar bahasa Korea di Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is among the countries most profoundly affected by the Korean Wave. Its influence began to be felt in 2002 during the Korea–Japan World Cup when Indonesian television stations started broadcasting Korean dramas (Maulidita et al., 2024). The first drama aired locally was *Mother’s Sea* on Trans TV on 26 March 2002 (Putri et al., 2019). The early 2010s saw explosive growth, with more than 50 Korean dramas broadcast on Indonesian television in 2011 alone and major K-Pop concerts such as 2PM (2011), Super Junior (2012), and SM Town Live World Tour III held in Jakarta (Maulidita & Darmanto, 2024; Kumparan, 2018).

This proliferation of Korean cultural content has contributed to a growing interest in learning the Korean language. Several Korean expressions have naturally become part of the everyday lives of Indonesian young people (Darmanto et al., 2025b). Basic expressions such as “*annyeonghaseyo*” (hello), “*gomapseumnida*” (thank you), and “*saranghae*” (I love you) clearly reflect this cultural influence (Mutiara et al., 2023). Research also shows a positive correlation between enthusiasm for Korean popular culture and the motivation to study the Korean language more deeply, indicating a strong intrinsic motivation among learners (Mutiara et al., 2023; Darmanto et al., 2025b). This heightened interest is also reflected in the increasing number of learners enrolling in Korean language courses, both in formal educational institutions and in community-based learning centers across Indonesia.

In addition to cultural factors, economic motivations play a significant role (Darmanto et al., 2025a). The number of Indonesian participants in the EPS-TOPIK UBT Manufacturing Sector examination in 2025 reached 38,263 (BP2MI, 2025), reflecting a substantial interest in learning Korean for employment opportunities in South Korea. This is due to the requirement that Indonesian workers seeking employment opportunities in South Korea must pass the Employment Permit System Test (EPS-TOPIK) (Izzulhaq et al., 2025). Dewi and Yusuf (2019) similarly found that many learners enrolled in Korean language courses in Indonesia pursue Korean language training primarily to improve their economic conditions through overseas employment. These trends indicate that Korean language learning in Indonesia is also increasingly shaped by socioeconomic considerations, particularly the pursuit of stable income and long-term financial security abroad.

However, the increasing number of learners does not necessarily eliminate the challenges they face. Korean learners still face challenges due to the structural

differences between Korean and Indonesian (Kyeongjae et al., 2025), as well as the inherent complexity of Korean vocabulary (Zhang, 2024). As a result, many Indonesian students struggle not only to comprehend Korean sentences but also to construct them accurately. According to Heo et al. (2024), the objective of Korean language education is to enable learners to understand the language and communicate naturally. To achieve this goal, listening is a core skill that Korean learners must master (Heo et al., 2024). Therefore, it can be said that listening is a fundamental receptive skill that plays an essential role in the process of language acquisition.

Unlike productive skills, listening requires learners to process and interpret incoming information, making it a core component of linguistic development. Research indicates that listening strongly correlates with the development of other language competencies and is considered foundational in the acquisition of both first and second languages (Bozorgian, 2012; Sekhri & Singh, 2018). Moreover, listening plays a significant role in grammar acquisition and speaking fluency by providing learners with exposure to natural and authentic linguistic input (Kizi, 2025). Therefore, strengthening listening competence is vital for achieving effective communication and enhancing learners' broader language abilities.

Considering the central role of listening skills, it becomes crucial to understand the specific challenges faced by learners in acquiring these skills. Despite the growing enthusiasm for the Korean language in Indonesia, many learners continue to experience difficulties in processing spoken input, interpreting meaning, and responding appropriately in communicative contexts. These obstacles highlight the need for empirical investigation into the barriers that hinder effective listening comprehension. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the challenges Indonesian learners encounter in mastering Korean listening skills, with the aim of providing insights that may inform more effective instructional strategies and support their overall language learning success.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design, an exploratory approach used to investigate the complexities of human experiences, linguistic behavior, and meaning making within social contexts (Cahyo et al., 2025). Qualitative inquiry enables researchers to examine phenomena in depth and from subjective perspectives, generating nuanced interpretations rather than broad generalizations (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024;

Tracy, 2024). In this research, qualitative methods were used to analyze the learners' experiences and perceptions regarding the challenges they face in mastering Korean listening skills.

Data collection began with a questionnaire consisting of both closed- and open-ended questions. The questionnaire served as an initial screening tool to obtain general information and identify preliminary patterns prior to conducting in-depth interviews. Responses to the open-ended questions were also incorporated into the analysis, particularly for participants who were not selected for interviews. The questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms to 16 students from the Department of Korean Language at Universitas Madani Indonesia who were enrolled in the Korean Listening 1 course. As a widely used research instrument, questionnaires enable researchers to gather both quantitative and qualitative data and obtain accurate information regarding participants' characteristics, perspectives, attitudes, experiences, and demographic backgrounds (Saadi, 2025).

In qualitative research, interviews are defined as purposeful conversations conducted to obtain meaningful information (Rachmawati, 2007). In this study, interviews were used to explore participants' experiences, challenges, and strategies related to listening comprehension in Korean. There were five respondents selected for the interview. All interviews were conducted online through WhatsApp video calls to accommodate researchers and participants' time and location constraints. This method was chosen due to its efficiency, flexibility, and its ability to generate in-depth data aligned with the research objectives. Therefore, method triangulation was employed to ensure the credibility of the study by using a questionnaire for initial screening, followed by in-depth interviews with selected respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on an initial questionnaire distributed to 16 respondents, a general overview was obtained regarding their experiences in learning Korean, particularly in relation to listening skills. The participants consisted of 6 male and 9 female students, most of whom were between 20 and 29 years old, reflecting a typical age range for undergraduate learners. Thirteen students reported relying primarily on the Korean-language textbook provided in their Listening 1 class as their main learning resource. However, their exposure to the Korean language extended beyond classroom materials, as many also engaged with a variety of Korean media, including songs, dramas, variety

shows, and films. Such media consumption serves as an important source of informal language input.

The majority of students indicated that they listened to Korean-language content for approximately two to five hours per week, suggesting moderate exposure outside formal learning contexts. This pattern shows that although structured materials form the foundation of their learning, learners still seek additional exposure through popular Korean media to support their listening development. This combination of formal instruction and informal media exposure reflects the blended learning environment commonly experienced by beginner Korean learners in Indonesia. Despite relatively high exposure to listening input, most respondents still reported difficulties. These difficulties included the fast speech rate of native speakers, the large number of unfamiliar vocabulary items, and challenges posed by dialectal differences. This pattern indicates that listening frequency does not necessarily correlate with comprehension ability. Table 1 presents the overall findings regarding learners' difficulties in mastering Korean listening skills. The scale consists of five categories, where 1 indicates "strongly disagree," 2 "disagree," 3 "neutral," 4 "agree," and 5 "strongly agree."

Table 1. Difficulties in Korean Listening Comprehension

No	Questions	Score				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	I often find it difficult to understand conversations in Korean in general.	1	1	7	5	2
2	I find it difficult to distinguish sounds or pronunciation of words in Korean.	1	1	9	4	1
3	I find it difficult to understand when the speaker talks too fast.	0	1	2	7	6
4	I find it difficult to understand conversations without text/subtitles.	0	1	8	3	4
5	I find it difficult to understand accents/dialects (satoori) in Korean.	0	2	3	8	3
6	I find it difficult to understand daily conversations in Korean without visual support.	0	4	8	2	2
7	I find it difficult to understand the context of conversations in audio when the topic is unfamiliar to me.	0	0	3	8	5
8	I find it difficult to understand Korean audio even after listening to it repeatedly.	2	1	9	3	1
9	I find it difficult to distinguish words that sound similar in Korean.	2	2	5	6	1
10	I find it difficult to remember the vocabulary I hear in listening exercises.	1	2	5	5	3

Source: Processed data, 2025

Based on interviews with five selected respondents, the findings reveal five major difficulties in mastering Korean listening skills. These challenges include difficulty processing fast speech, understanding unfamiliar topics, and recognizing accents, dialects, and pronunciation variations. Additionally, respondents reported limited comprehension without visual or textual support and continued struggles with retention and vocabulary recognition. These difficulties collectively highlight the multifaceted nature of listening comprehension and demonstrate the need for more targeted instructional support, particularly for beginner-level learners.

Difficulty Processing Fast Speech

One of the strongest patterns emerging from the data is the learners' difficulty in processing fast-paced Korean speech. A total of 13 out of 16 students rated this item as difficult or very difficult, indicating that speech rate remains a major barrier to comprehension. This difficulty is likely linked to limited exposure to natural speed spoken Korean and the absence of automaticity in decoding linguistic input. When speech is delivered too quickly, learners struggle to segment words, identify grammar structures, and extract meaning in real time, leading to frequent breakdowns in comprehension.

Interview data further reinforce this pattern. Many respondents reported difficulty understanding conversations when speakers talked too rapidly. Participant X5 explained that she often struggled to grasp the overall message when encountering fast speech, especially in unscripted or spontaneous interactions. Similarly, participant X2 noted that rapid speech—whether encountered through audio materials or direct communication—made it challenging to follow the content and interpret key information. These accounts illustrate how fast speech not only increases cognitive load but also limits learners' ability to process linguistic cues effectively, underscoring the need for structured listening practice at natural speed.

Challenges Understanding Unfamiliar Topics

Another prominent theme concerns comprehension breakdown when listening tasks involve unfamiliar topics. The item "I find it difficult to understand the context of conversations in audio when the topic is unfamiliar to me" shows that 13 students selected high-difficulty levels, highlighting the significant role that background knowledge plays in listening comprehension. Without sufficient contextual or thematic familiarity, learners face increased cognitive load, which makes it more challenging to

interpret meaning, infer intentions, or anticipate relevant vocabulary and expressions. This suggests that topic familiarity is not merely supportive but often essential for effective comprehension, particularly for beginner-level learners.

Interview data further illuminate this challenge. Participant X1 explained that he struggled with Korean expressions not commonly encountered in daily life, such as formal language, political terminology, or news-related vocabulary. Given that X1's exposure to Korean was primarily through dramas, variety shows, films, and songs, it was natural that more complex, formal, or specialized forms of Korean posed additional difficulties. Moreover, X1 had been studying Korean for only six months or less, demonstrating that frequent exposure through entertainment media does not automatically lead to comprehension of advanced language registers. These findings underscore the importance of incorporating diverse and context-rich listening materials into instruction to help learners build the background knowledge necessary for understanding a wider range of topics.

Difficulty with Accents, Dialects, and Pronunciation Variations

Learners also reported substantial difficulty in understanding Korean dialects (satoori) and pronunciation variations. A total of 11 students rated dialect comprehension as difficult, and 14 students indicated that distinguishing sounds and pronunciation patterns was challenging. These findings highlight the significant phonological complexity of Korean—such as consonant clusters, vowel length distinctions, linking sounds, and dialectal intonation—which poses a major barrier to comprehension. Such challenges are common among beginner and intermediate learners who have not yet developed strong phonological awareness or auditory discrimination skills.

The interview data provide further insight into these difficulties. Participant X3 explained in the open-ended questionnaire that distinguishing between single consonants (e.g., ㄷ) and double consonants (e.g., ㄷㄷ) was particularly challenging because the sounds often seemed similar. X3 also noted that “batchim” pronunciation (final consonants at the bottom of a Hangeul syllable block) was frequently unclear, making it difficult to differentiate words accurately. This reflects a common issue among learners, as batchim rules involve sound neutralization, assimilation, and unreleased final stops—features significantly different from Indonesian phonology.

Dialectal variation presented an additional layer of difficulty. In the interview, participant X2 described struggles in understanding Korean conversations that use

satoori. Because regional dialects rarely appear in mainstream Korean media, X2 had limited exposure to their distinct intonation patterns, vocabulary choices, and pronunciation features. Consequently, conversations containing dialects were harder to follow, even when the learner could understand standard Korean. This suggests that most learners' listening proficiency is closely tied to the linguistic patterns they are most frequently exposed to.

Participant X3 also highlighted challenges related to Korean intonation patterns, which differ considerably from those in Indonesian. Korean employs a wide range of intonation variations that serve grammatical and pragmatic functions. For instance, declarative sentences typically end with a lower intonation, while interrogative sentences tend to rise at the end (Mubin & Huntley, 2021). These differences made it difficult for X3 to interpret speakers' intentions accurately, especially in spontaneous spoken interactions. Together, these findings demonstrate that phonological features—whether segmental (individual sounds) or suprasegmental (intonation, stress, rhythm)—play a central role in learners' listening difficulties.

Limited Ability to Comprehend Without Visual or Textual Support

A clear pattern emerges in learners' reliance on visual cues or subtitles. In the item "I find it difficult to understand conversations without text/subtitles," seven students rated it as difficult and four rated it as very difficult. This indicates that learners heavily depend on subtitles as a scaffold for meaning making during listening activities. When visual or textual support is removed, comprehension declines sharply, suggesting that learners have not yet developed strong bottom-up processing skills—such as phoneme recognition, lexical retrieval, and syntactic parsing—required for independent auditory comprehension.

A limited Korean vocabulary further contributes to this reliance. Even among respondents who regularly listened to Korean content, most reported that they still depended on subtitles to support understanding. In the interview, participant X1 explained that she found it challenging to grasp the meaning of conversations without subtitles. Consequently, she preferred to wait for subtitled versions of videos before rewatching them. This behavior reflects a common pattern among beginner learners, who often compensate for lexical gaps by relying on written or visual aids. It also reinforces the notion that vocabulary depth and listening proficiency are closely interconnected:

without sufficient lexical knowledge, learners struggle to decode spoken input and instead resort to subtitles as an essential support mechanism.

Struggles With Retention and Vocabulary Recognition

The data also reveal substantial difficulties with remembering vocabulary encountered in listening tasks. Eleven students rated this issue as moderately to highly difficult, indicating a gap in lexical retention that directly affects their ability to interpret meaning in real time. Moreover, the challenge of distinguishing words that sound similar—rated as difficult by seven students and very difficult by one—suggests that both vocabulary acquisition and phonological discrimination remain underdeveloped. These findings reflect a common pattern among L2 learners whose lexical knowledge is not yet automatized, making immediate comprehension during listening tasks significantly harder.

Interview data further illustrate how learners cope with these challenges. Participant X4 described a compensatory strategy in which she rewound sections she did not understand and looked up translations of unfamiliar vocabulary. This approach shows active problem-solving but also highlights the gaps in lexical knowledge that impede smooth comprehension. Interestingly, this strategy resembled that of participant X2, although X2 relied more heavily on Korean subtitles. X2 explained that direct translation from audio was difficult due to limited listening proficiency; therefore, he preferred to read and translate Korean subtitles first to better understand the context.

Unlike many respondents, X2 adopted a more selective and context-dependent approach to subtitle use. He reported being able to understand content without subtitles as long as the vocabulary used was common in everyday communication. As a result, he did not rely heavily on subtitles when watching variety shows, which typically use casual, familiar language. However, when watching dramas that often contain more complex or specialized vocabulary, X2 still needed subtitles to comprehend the storyline fully. This contrast illustrates how vocabulary familiarity strongly influences the degree of support learners require during listening activities, and it underscores the role of lexical mastery in achieving independent listening comprehension.

CONCLUSION

This study identified five major areas of difficulty experienced by beginner-level learners: processing fast-paced speech, understanding unfamiliar or specialized topics,

recognizing accents and dialectal variations, relying heavily on visual or textual support, and retaining vocabulary heard in audio input. Interview data further revealed that learners often employ compensatory strategies—such as rewinding audio, relying on subtitles, or translating written text—to cope with comprehension breakdowns. These patterns indicate that exposure alone is not enough to develop strong listening proficiency; rather, learners require systematic support to develop phonological awareness, lexical depth, and context-driven comprehension skills.

Based on these findings, targeted pedagogical interventions are essential for improving listening competence among Korean language learners in Indonesia. Instruction should incorporate diverse listening materials, including content with varied speech rates, dialectal features, and formal registers, to build greater familiarity with authentic language use. Activities that strengthen bottom-up processing—such as phoneme discrimination, batchim recognition, and vocabulary-building tasks—are also necessary. Moreover, guiding learners toward more effective listening strategies can help reduce overreliance on subtitles. Ultimately, addressing these challenges through structured instructional support can enhance learners' overall communicative ability and better prepare them for continued Korean language development.

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