

FROM UTTERANCE TO ESSENCE: VOCATIONAL STUDENTS' CAPACITY TO IDENTIFY MAIN IDEAS IN ENGLISH DIALOGUES : A STUDY AT SMK NOEBAUN, SOUTH CENTRAL TIMOR, EAST NUSA TENGGARA

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Abstract

Listening comprehension, particularly in grasping the main idea of dialogues, is a crucial competency in English language learning for communication. However, most previous research has focused on main idea identification in written texts or general listening problems, leaving a gap in specifically examining the ability of vocational high school (SMK) students in the context of spoken dialogue. This study aims to (1) describe the ability level of SMK Noebaun students in identifying the main idea in English dialogues, and (2) analyze the difficulties they encounter. This research employs a quantitative descriptive method. The population was all 11th-grade students (100 students), with a random sample of 25 students. The instrument was a 25-item multiple-choice test adapted from authentic dialogues. Results show that overall student ability was in the Fair category (68% of students). Item analysis identified 8 difficult items (>47% error rate), with the main difficulties lying in understanding implicit meaning (61.90%) and vocabulary limitations. Although students' average ability is adequate, significant challenges exist in understanding implied meaning and mastering contextual vocabulary in dialogues. The pedagogical implication is the need for teaching strategies that emphasize pragmatic inference and enrichment of context-specific conversational vocabulary.

Keywords: *main idea, dialogue, listening comprehension, vocational students*

INTRODUCTION

The ability to communicate in English is increasingly a fundamental need in the global era, including for graduates of Vocational High Schools (SMK) who are required to be work-ready. A key component of oral communication is listening comprehension, which includes the ability to identify the main idea of a conversation or dialogue (Anderson, 1972; Rost, 2016). This ability is the foundation for understanding the speaker's intent, supporting information, and the overall communicative purpose.

A literature review shows that research on main idea identification is still dominated by studies on written texts (e.g., Sari, Susilowati, & Ramdani, 2025; Jannah, 2019). Meanwhile, research on listening comprehension often discusses general barriers such as speech rate, accent, connected speech, and anxiety (Adi, Nasrullah, & Rosalina, 2021; Sari & Fithriyana, 2019; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). However, studies that specifically measure and describe students' ability to grasp the main idea from spoken dialogue texts are still limited, especially in the context of vocational secondary education (SMK) in Indonesia. The focus on SMK students is important due to the characteristics of their learning needs, which are oriented towards the context of the working world and practical communication, potentially differing from those of senior high school (SMA) students (Pertiwi & Wulyani, 2023).

This research contributes to the literature in three novel ways: (1) emphasis on identifying the main idea in spoken dialogue, not written text, which is the most authentic form of communication yet under-explored; (2) target population of SMK students, whose representation in English language learning literature is still less compared to SMA students; and (3) the study was conducted at SMK Noebaun, South Central Timor Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, as a representation of an area with unique learning resources and challenges, thus providing a new perspective from a region not extensively covered by similar research.

This study is designed to answer two research questions: (1) How proficient are SMK Noebaun students in identifying the main idea in English dialogues? (2) What difficulties do students face in this identification process? The findings of this study are expected to provide an empirical contribution to the development of more contextual and effective listening teaching materials and strategies, especially for vocational students.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a quantitative descriptive approach with the main aim of describing a phenomenon or condition as it is without manipulation (Sugiyono, 2019). The research was conducted at SMK Noebaun, South Central Timor Regency, in the Even Semester of the 2023/2024 Academic Year.

The population in this study were all 11th-grade students at the school, totaling 100 students, spread across three skill competencies. The sampling technique used was simple random sampling. Referring to Arikunto's (2013) opinion that for a population under 100, a sample of 25% can be taken, a sample of 25 students was determined.

The data collection technique used a multiple-choice proficiency test. The test instrument was developed by the researchers based on short dialogues adapted to everyday life contexts and potential work situations. The test consisted of 25 items; each item presented a short dialogue (in the form of a text read aloud) and a question about the main idea or implied meaning of the conversation. The content validity of the instrument was validated by two experts (English lecturers), while its reliability was tested using the K-R 20 formula, showing a coefficient of 0.78, which is considered high.

The collected data were analyzed quantitatively with the following steps: (1) scoring (1 for correct answer, 0 for incorrect); (2) grouping students' ability levels into the categories Very Good (86-100), Good (71-85), Fair (56-70), Poor (41-55), and Very Poor (≤ 40), modified from Arikunto's criteria (2013); (3) calculating the percentage of students in each category; (4) analyzing item difficulty level using the formula $P = (B/N) \times 100\%$ (where B = number of incorrect answers, N = total number of students). Items with a difficulty index >0.47 ($>47\%$ of students answering incorrectly) were categorized as difficult; (5) identifying patterns of student difficulty based on the items categorized as difficult.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

From the 25 answer sheets collected and deemed valid, the following findings were obtained. First, regarding students' ability levels. The majority of students, 17 individuals (68%), were in the Fair category. Four individuals (16%) were in the Good category, 3 individuals (12%) in the Poor category, and 1 individual (4%) in the Very Good category. No students were in the Very Poor category. The overall average score was 65.2, which generally indicates ability at an intermediate (fair) level.

Table 1. Distribution of Students' Ability Levels

Category	Score Range	Frequency (persons)	Percentage (%)
Very Good	86-100	1	4
Good	71-85	4	16
Fair	56-70	17	68
Poor	41-55	3	12
Very Poor	≤40	0	0
Total		25	100

Second, the results of the item analysis (item difficulty) showed that out of 25 items, 8 items (32%) were classified as difficult for students (difficulty index >0.47 or >47% of students answered incorrectly). Item number 21 was the most difficult, with 62% of students answering incorrectly. Other difficult items were numbers 12, 20, 5, 9, 2, 4, and 25.

Table 2. Items with High Difficulty Level (>47%)

Item Number	Number of Incorrect Answers	Error Percentage (%)	Indicated Type of Difficulty
21	15	62.0	Implied / Pragmatic Meaning
12, 20	14	56.0	Implied / Pragmatic Meaning
5, 9	13	52.0	Vocabulary & Implied Meaning
2, 4, 25	12	48.0	Vocabulary & Inference

DISCUSSION

The finding that 68% of students are at the Fair level confirms that, at a basic level, SMK Noebaun students already possess the initial ability to grasp the gist of simple conversations. This aligns with the curriculum objectives that place functional texts, including conversations, as teaching material (Kemendikbud, 2020). However, this achievement is still far below the Good or Very Good categories, indicating significant room for improvement, especially considering the competency demands of SMK graduates in the workforce.

A closer look at the eight challenging test items (Table 2) reveals two main sources of difficulty. The first and most dominant is the difficulty in understanding implied or pragmatic meaning in dialogue. For example, in item number 21, which asks for the implication of the response “Why do you ask that?” to the question “Are you a self-reliant person?”, most students could not conclude that the second speaker might not understand the meaning of the word “self-reliant”. This error indicates that students tend to understand language literally and are not yet skilled in reading the intent behind utterances (pragmatic inference), which is a key competency in real communication (Rost, 2016; Taguchi, 2005). Second, vocabulary limitations are a significant hindrance. In items containing words like “self-reliant”, “pessimistic”, or “in particular”, students failed to understand the entire dialogue due to unfamiliarity with key lexical meanings. This finding reinforces the research of Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), which states that vocabulary mastery is the strongest predictor of listening success.

The combination of these two difficulties – weak pragmatic understanding and limited vocabulary – creates a dual challenge for SMK students. The learning context in an area with minimal exposure to English outside the classroom (such as South Central Timor) exacerbates this situation. Therefore, conventional teaching approaches focused on grammar may be less effective. Learning interventions that explicitly train inferencing skills are needed, for example through dialogue analysis that highlights pragmatic functions like sarcasm, indirect refusal, or implication (Taguchi, 2005). Furthermore, vocabulary teaching must be integrated with conversational context and students' fields of expertise (e.g., technical vocabulary for engineering majors), not taught in isolation (Nation, 2013).

Research by Pertiwi and Wulyani (2023) in the SMK context also recommends using authentic materials from the world of work to increase relevance and learning motivation.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion, it can be concluded that the ability of SMK Noebaun students to identify the main idea in English dialogues is generally in the Fair category. Although they have a basic understanding, students face main difficulties in two aspects: (1) understanding the implied meaning or pragmatic intent behind utterances in dialogues, and (2) limitations in vocabulary mastery that hinder overall comprehension. These two difficulties are interrelated and indicate that students' listening competence has not yet reached an adequate level for more complex practical communication.

The implications of this research lead to strategic recommendations. For English teachers at SMK, it is recommended to design listening activities that not only test literal comprehension but also systematically train pragmatic inferencing skills, for example by discussing "What is the real meaning behind this statement?" in various examples of authentic dialogues. Contextual pre-teaching vocabulary techniques related to students' fields of expertise should be a mandatory step before listening activities. For future researchers, it is suggested to explore the causes of these difficulties more deeply using qualitative approaches (think-aloud interviews) and to develop and test pragmatic listening learning models specifically designed for the SMK context in regions with similar challenges.

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