

From Passive Practice to Active Engagement: An Action Research on TOEIC Listening in EFL Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effectiveness of engagement-focused classroom strategies in enhancing student engagement and TOEIC listening performance in an EFL university context. Using an action research design, the study was conducted in two cycles involving 30 undergraduate students enrolled in a TOEIC preparation course. Data were collected through observation checklists, student questionnaires, reflective journals, and TOEIC listening tests. The findings revealed a substantial improvement in student engagement, with the average engagement score increasing from 61% in Cycle 1 to 79% in Cycle 2. All engagement dimensions showed growth, with emotional engagement demonstrating the highest increase. In terms of learning outcomes, students' TOEIC listening scores improved significantly, with the mean score rising from 62 to 78. The proportion of students achieving scores ≥ 75 also increased from 30% to 70%. Statistical analysis using a paired sample t-test confirmed that the improvement was significant ($t = 8.76$, $p < 0.001$). These results indicate that shifting from passive listening practices to active, engagement-oriented learning activities can effectively enhance both student engagement and listening performance. The study highlights the importance of interactive and reflective teaching practices in EFL higher education and suggests that action research can serve as a valuable tool for continuous instructional improvement.

Keywords: *student engagement, TOEIC listening, action research, EFL higher education*

INTRODUCTION

Listening is widely acknowledged as a foundational component of second language acquisition, as it provides learners with essential exposure to linguistic input that supports the development of other language skills, such as speaking and vocabulary acquisition (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Nevertheless, despite its central role, listening continues to present considerable challenges for learners in EFL contexts, particularly in higher education settings where authentic input may be limited (Graham, 2017; Renandya & Farrell, 2019).

These challenges were also identified in a TOEIC preparation class at a private university in Indonesia where this study was conducted. The participants were undergraduate EFL students enrolled in a compulsory TOEIC preparation course designed to support institutional graduation requirements and improve students' competitiveness in the job market. Most students had limited prior exposure to TOEIC listening materials before entering the course and were unfamiliar with the speed, accents, and test-taking demands commonly found in the TOEIC Listening section. Preliminary classroom observations conducted by the lecturer-researcher revealed that many students experienced difficulty maintaining concentration during listening sessions, frequently lost track of audio content, and demonstrated low participation during classroom activities. Several students appeared reluctant to respond to listening tasks, while others relied heavily on repeated playback or peer answers to complete exercises.

In addition, listening instruction in the class was primarily conducted through conventional teacher-centered practices. Classroom activities generally consisted of listening to recorded audio passages followed by answering comprehension questions and discussing correct answers. Although this approach introduced students to TOEIC-style test formats, it often resulted in passive learning behaviors. Students tended to focus mainly on obtaining correct answers rather than developing listening strategies or engaging actively with the content. Informal reflections and classroom notes further indicated that students frequently perceived listening sessions as monotonous, stressful, and cognitively demanding, particularly when exposed to unfamiliar vocabulary, connected speech, or limited contextual support.

Such conditions are consistent with findings from previous studies suggesting that listening tasks in EFL classrooms are often perceived as repetitive and anxiety-provoking, especially in test-oriented learning environments (Graham, Santos, & Vanderplank, 2011; Chang, 2018). These difficulties may negatively affect not only learners' comprehension but also their motivation and overall performance in standardized listening assessments such as the TOEIC. In response to these challenges, recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of student engagement as a critical factor influencing successful language learning outcomes. Student

engagement is commonly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive investment in learning activities (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Learners who are actively engaged are more likely to sustain attention, apply effective learning strategies, and demonstrate higher academic achievement. In listening instruction specifically, engagement plays a crucial role because learners must actively process auditory input and construct meaning in real time.

However, the conventional TOEIC listening practices observed in this class provided limited opportunities to foster such engagement. Learners were often positioned as passive recipients of information rather than active participants in the learning process. This pedagogical issue highlighted the need for more interactive and learner-centered instructional strategies capable of increasing participation and improving listening comprehension.

One approach that has gained increasing attention is the implementation of engagement-focused classroom activities designed to promote active learning during listening instruction. Techniques such as shadowing, collaborative listening tasks, peer discussion, and technology-enhanced activities (e.g., digital quizzes and interactive listening exercises) have been shown to facilitate deeper processing, improve concentration, and increase learner involvement (Siegel, 2018; Teng, 2022). These practices align with contemporary perspectives on language learning that emphasize interaction, learner autonomy, and meaningful engagement.

To systematically address the instructional problems identified in this class, this study adopts an action research framework. Action research offers a cyclical and reflective process through which educators can identify classroom challenges, implement targeted pedagogical interventions, observe their effects, and refine instructional practices based on ongoing reflection (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014). This approach is particularly appropriate for the present study because it allows the lecturer-researcher to respond directly to the specific needs, learning behaviors, and engagement issues experienced by students in the TOEIC listening classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Engagement in Language Learning

Student engagement has been widely recognized as a critical factor influencing learning outcomes across educational contexts, including second and foreign language learning. It is generally defined as the degree to which learners are actively involved in and committed to their learning processes. Rather than being a single construct, engagement is

multidimensional, encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

In EFL contexts, student engagement plays a particularly important role due to the limited exposure to authentic language input outside the classroom. Engaged learners are more likely to take initiative, persist in challenging tasks, and utilize effective learning strategies, all of which are essential for language acquisition. Conversely, low engagement has been associated with reduced motivation, passive learning behavior, and lower academic achievement (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

Recent research also highlights the role of instructional design in fostering engagement. Interactive, student-centered approaches such as collaborative learning, task-based instruction, and technology-enhanced activities have been shown to significantly increase engagement levels in language classrooms (Shen & Cheng, 2024). In listening instruction, engagement is particularly crucial, as learners must sustain attention, actively interpret auditory input, and construct meaning in real time. Without sufficient engagement, listening becomes a passive activity with limited learning benefits.

TOEIC Listening Challenges

Listening comprehension in the context of the TOEIC presents unique challenges for EFL learners, as it requires the ability to process spoken English across a variety of real-world contexts, including short conversations, question–response exchanges, and extended talks. Unlike general listening tasks, TOEIC listening emphasizes speed, accuracy, and the ability to interpret meaning under time constraints.

One of the primary difficulties faced by learners is the rapid rate of speech, which often exceeds their processing capacity. Additionally, exposure to different accents and pronunciation patterns can further complicate comprehension, particularly for learners who have had limited experience with authentic spoken English (Graham, 2017). Vocabulary limitations also pose a significant barrier, as unfamiliar lexical items can disrupt the overall understanding of spoken messages.

Moreover, affective factors such as anxiety and lack of confidence can negatively influence TOEIC listening performance. Learners who experience listening anxiety may struggle to concentrate, leading to reduced comprehension and lower test scores. This highlights the need for instructional approaches that not only address linguistic challenges but also create a supportive and engaging learning environment.

Action Research in EFL Classrooms

Action research has gained prominence as a practical and reflective approach to improving teaching and learning in real classroom settings. It is commonly defined as a cyclical process in which educators identify a problem, implement an intervention, observe its effects, and reflect on the outcomes to inform subsequent actions (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014).

One of the key strengths of action research lies in its context-specific nature. Unlike experimental research conducted in controlled environments, action research allows teachers to address immediate classroom challenges and adapt their practices based on ongoing observations. This makes it particularly suitable for EFL contexts, where teaching and learning conditions may vary significantly depending on learners' needs, proficiency levels, and institutional settings.

In the context of listening instruction, action research provides a valuable framework for experimenting with innovative teaching approaches, such as interactive listening tasks, technology integration, and collaborative learning activities. By systematically implementing and evaluating these strategies, teachers can identify effective practices that enhance both engagement and learning outcomes. Furthermore, the iterative nature of action research allows for continuous refinement, ensuring that instructional interventions remain responsive to students' evolving needs. A good literature review does not merely summarise relevant previous research. In the literature review, the researcher critically evaluates, re-organizes and synthesizes the work of others (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:84).

METHODS

This study employed a classroom-based action research design to investigate the effectiveness of engagement-focused listening activities in improving students' TOEIC listening performance and classroom engagement. Action research was selected because it enables teachers to systematically examine and refine instructional practices within authentic classroom contexts through iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014).

The study was conducted in two action research cycles following a preliminary observation stage. Before the intervention began, the researcher conducted initial classroom observations and administered a pre-intervention engagement checklist and TOEIC-style listening pre-test

to identify students' baseline conditions. The preliminary findings indicated low levels of behavioral and emotional engagement during listening activities. Many students showed limited participation, low concentration, minimal interaction during tasks, and dependence on repeated audio playback. The baseline engagement score prior to the intervention averaged 54%, while the average listening pre-test score was 58. These findings served as the basis for designing the interventions implemented in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2.

Each cycle consisted of four stages:

- a. Planning: identifying classroom problems and designing intervention strategies
- b. Acting: implementing the planned engagement-focused listening activities
- c. Observing: collecting data on student engagement and listening performance
- d. Reflecting: evaluating outcomes and refining instructional strategies for the following cycle

Cycle 1 focused on introducing structured interactive listening activities to increase participation and concentration during TOEIC listening practice. Based on reflections from Cycle 1, Cycle 2 incorporated additional technology-supported and collaborative activities to strengthen student engagement and listening comprehension.

The study was conducted at a private university in Indonesia involving 30 second-year undergraduate students enrolled in a TOEIC listening preparation course. The participants had intermediate English proficiency levels based on institutional placement records and classroom performance. Most students had limited prior experience with formal TOEIC listening instruction before enrolling in the course.

The TOEIC listening course was designed to prepare students for institutional TOEIC requirements and future workplace communication needs. The class met twice a week for approximately 90 minutes per session over an eight-week period. Participants were selected through convenience sampling because they were enrolled in the researcher's own class. All participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

The intervention consisted of a series of engagement-focused listening activities implemented progressively across the two cycles.

Cycle 1 Activities

1. Shadowing Technique

Students participated in shadowing activities during every listening session in Cycle 1. The activity lasted approximately 15–20 minutes per meeting and used short TOEIC-style conversations and talks adapted from TOEIC preparation materials. Students listened to short audio segments and immediately repeated the utterances aloud while following the audio rhythm and pronunciation. The activity aimed to improve listening concentration, pronunciation awareness, and processing speed.

2. Pair Discussion

After listening tasks, students worked in pairs to compare answers, discuss listening difficulties, and identify strategies for understanding key information.

3. Guided Listening Tasks

Students completed structured activities focusing on identifying keywords, main ideas, specific details, and contextual clues from audio recordings.

Cycle 2 Activities (Refined Intervention)

Based on reflections from Cycle 1, several improvements were introduced in Cycle 2 to increase student participation and motivation.

1. Digital Quizzes

Interactive quiz platforms were used at the end of listening activities to provide immediate feedback and increase classroom participation.

2. Group Problem-Solving Tasks

Students worked collaboratively in small groups to analyze TOEIC listening questions and discuss answer-selection strategies.

3. Video-Based Listening Materials

Authentic video materials containing workplace-related conversations and short presentations were integrated to provide more contextualized listening input and visual support.

4. Pre-, While-, and Post-Listening Activities

Listening instruction was organized into three stages to promote active engagement before, during, and after listening tasks. Pre-listening activities activated background knowledge and introduced vocabulary, while-listening activities focused on comprehension and note-taking, and post-listening activities encouraged reflection and discussion.

Multiple data collection instruments were used to ensure data triangulation. An observation checklist was employed to measure student engagement during classroom activities, focusing on behavioral participation, attention, interaction, and responsiveness. A Likert-scale student questionnaire was administered before the intervention and at the end of each cycle to assess students' perceptions of engagement and learning experiences. In addition, the researcher maintained a reflective journal documenting instructional practices, classroom dynamics, and observed changes throughout the study. Students also completed TOEIC-style listening tests during the pre-intervention stage and at the end of each cycle to measure listening improvement.

Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques were employed. Descriptive statistics, including means and percentages, were used to analyze engagement scores and listening performance across the pre-intervention stage, Cycle 1, and Cycle 2. A paired sample t-test was conducted to examine whether the improvement in listening performance between the pre-test and post-test results was statistically significant. Qualitative data from observation notes and reflective journals were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to student participation, motivation, interaction, and engagement during listening instruction.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings derived from multiple data sources, including observation checklists, student questionnaires, reflective journals, and TOEIC listening tests. The results are organized into key areas to address the research objectives, focusing on student engagement and listening performance across the two action research cycles.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT ACROSS CYCLES

To examine the impact of the intervention on student engagement, data from observation checklists and student questionnaires were analyzed across Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. The results indicate a consistent improvement in all three dimensions of engagement: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive.

Table 1. Student Engagement Scores Across Cycles

Engagement Dimension	Cycle 1 (%)	Cycle 2 (%)	Improvement
Behavioral	65	82	+17
Emotional	60	80	+20

Cognitive	58	76	+18
Average	61	79	+18

As shown in Table 1, all dimensions of engagement increased substantially, with an overall improvement of 18 percentage points. Emotional engagement showed the highest gain (+20), followed by cognitive (+18) and behavioral engagement (+17). These results suggest that students became more interested, actively involved, and cognitively invested in listening activities. The balanced improvement across all dimensions indicates that the intervention effectively fostered a more engaging and participatory learning environment.

OBSERVATION CHECKLIST RESULTS

To further understand students' behavioral changes during classroom activities, observation checklist data were analyzed across both cycles. The findings provide qualitative support for the quantitative engagement scores.

Table 2. Observation Checklist Summary

Indicator	Cycle 1 Description	Cycle 2 Description
Participation	Limited participation	Active participation
Attention	Easily distracted	Highly focused
Interaction	Minimal peer interaction	Frequent collaboration
Responsiveness	Hesitant responses	Confident and responsive

As illustrated in Table 2, students demonstrated noticeable behavioral improvements from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2. Participation became more widespread, attention levels increased, and peer interaction was more frequent. Students also appeared more confident in responding to tasks. These observations align with the quantitative findings in Table 1, reinforcing the conclusion that student engagement improved not only in measurable scores but also in observable classroom behaviors.

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

Students' perceptions of their engagement and learning experience were analyzed using questionnaire data collected at the end of each cycle. The results provide insight into students' subjective responses to the instructional intervention.

Table 3. Student Perception of Engagement (Likert Scale)

Statement	Cycle 1 Mean	Cycle 2 Mean
Active involvement in listening activities	3.1	4.2
Interest in listening activities	3.0	4.3
Motivation during listening tasks	3.2	4.4
Understanding of listening materials	3.3	4.1
Average	3.15	4.25

Table 3 shows a clear increase in students' perceived engagement, with the average score rising from 3.15 to 4.25. The most notable improvements were observed in motivation and interest, indicating that students responded positively to the interactive nature of the activities. These findings complement the observational and engagement score data, suggesting that the intervention enhanced both objective and subjective aspects of student engagement.

TOEIC LISTENING PERFORMANCE

To evaluate the impact of the intervention on learning outcomes, students' TOEIC listening scores were compared across Cycle 1 and Cycle 2.

Table 4. TOEIC Listening Scores

Measure	Cycle 1	Cycle 2
Mean Score	62	78
Highest Score	75	90
Lowest Score	50	65
Students ≥ 75 (%)	30%	70%

As presented in Table 4, students' listening performance improved significantly, with the mean score increasing from 62 to 78. The proportion of students achieving scores ≥ 75 more than doubled, and the minimum score also increased, indicating that lower-performing students benefited from the intervention. These results suggest that the enhanced engagement observed in previous sections contributed positively to students' listening achievement.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS (PAIRED SAMPLE T-TEST)

To determine whether the observed improvement in listening performance was statistically significant, a paired sample t-test was conducted.

Table 5. Paired Sample t-test Results

Parameter	Value
Number of students (n)	30
Mean Cycle 1	62
Mean Cycle 2	78
Mean Difference	16
Std. Deviation	10
t-value	8.76
df	29
p-value	< 0.001

As shown in Table 5, the t-test results indicate a statistically significant difference between Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 scores ($p < 0.001$). This statistical evidence strengthens the findings from previous sections, demonstrating that the improvement in listening performance was both meaningful and reliable.

Overall, the findings consistently show that the implementation of classroom-based experimental activities led to significant improvements in student engagement and TOEIC listening performance. The convergence of data from multiple sources such as quantitative scores, observations, and student perceptions provides strong evidence that the intervention successfully transformed passive listening practices into active and engaging learning experiences.

DISCUSSION

The present study set out to examine whether engagement-focused classroom experiments, implemented through an action research framework, could transform passive TOEIC listening practices into more active and effective learning experiences. The findings consistently indicate that the intervention led to substantial improvements in both student engagement and listening performance, with statistically significant gains.

As reported in Table 1, overall engagement increased from 61% in Cycle 1 to 79% in Cycle 2 (+18 points), with the largest gain in emotional engagement (+20). This pattern suggests that the redesigned activities did more than increase participation; they reshaped students'

affective orientation toward listening tasks. The rise in emotional engagement is corroborated by questionnaire data (Table 3), where students' reported interest and motivation increased markedly (from $M = 3.15$ to $M = 4.25$).

Critically, these gains can be attributed to the shift from repetitive, form-focused practice to interactive, meaning-oriented tasks. The integration of digital quizzes, collaborative problem-solving, and structured pre-/while-/post-listening stages appears to have reduced monotony and increased task value. This aligns with contemporary engagement theory, which posits that task design and perceived relevance are central drivers of emotional and cognitive involvement.

While emotional engagement showed the largest increase, behavioral (+17) and cognitive (+18) engagement also improved substantially (Table 1). Classroom observations (Table 2) provide converging evidence: students moved from limited participation and minimal interaction in Cycle 1 to frequent collaboration, sustained attention, and confident responses in Cycle 2.

These changes are not merely descriptive, they function as mechanisms through which learning improved. Increased behavioral engagement such as more turns taken, more on-task time likely expanded learners' exposure and practice opportunities. Simultaneously, higher cognitive engagement supports more efficient decoding and interpretation of spoken input. Together, these dimensions plausibly mediated the observed gains in listening performance.

The improvement in TOEIC listening scores (Table 4) from a mean of 62 to 78 that was both educationally meaningful and broad-based, as indicated by the increase in students scoring ≥ 75 (30% to 70%) and the rise in the minimum score (50 to 65). These patterns suggest that the intervention benefited not only high achievers but also lower-performing students, narrowing performance gaps.

The statistical test (Table 5) confirms that these gains are not due to chance ($t = 8.76$, $p < 0.00$). Importantly, the magnitude of this effect is consistent with the qualitative shifts observed in engagement and classroom dynamics, strengthening the claim that engagement-focused pedagogy can produce robust learning gains in test-oriented listening contexts.

A key contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how TOEIC listening often treated as passive input processing can be reframed as an active, interactive process. The intervention required learners to respond, discuss, predict, and verify, rather than simply select answers. Activities such as shadowing and peer discussion likely enhanced phonological awareness and

attention, while digital quizzes and group tasks introduced immediacy of feedback and social accountability.

This shift is crucial because listening comprehension depends on real-time processing under cognitive constraints. By distributing cognitive load across stages (pre-/while-/post-listening) and across peers (collaboration), the design reduced overload and enabled more effective meaning construction reflected in both engagement indicators and test outcomes. Overall, the convergence of engagement data and performance outcomes underscores the central role of active, student-centered listening practices in improving TOEIC learning in EFL higher education.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that the implementation of engagement-focused listening activities through an action research framework contributed to improvements in both student engagement and TOEIC listening performance in an EFL university classroom. The findings indicate that students became more behaviorally active, emotionally involved, and cognitively engaged throughout the intervention cycles. The consistent increase in engagement scores was accompanied by meaningful gains in TOEIC listening achievement, suggesting a close relationship between active classroom participation and listening comprehension development.

The study also showed that interactive and learner-centered instructional practices can address some of the common challenges experienced in TOEIC listening classes, including low concentration, passive participation, and limited motivation. Activities such as shadowing, collaborative discussion, digital quizzes, and structured pre-, while-, and post-listening stages encouraged students to participate more actively and process listening input more strategically. Within the action research process, reflective teaching practices enabled the researcher to adapt instructional techniques based on classroom needs and student responses, making the learning process more responsive and engaging.

However, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The research involved a relatively small number of participants from a single university classroom and did not include a control group or randomization, which limits the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the intervention was conducted over a relatively short period, making it difficult to examine long-term effects on listening development and engagement. Future studies are

therefore recommended to replicate the research using larger samples, longer intervention periods, and more rigorous quasi-experimental or experimental designs involving comparison groups. Further research across different institutional contexts and learner proficiency levels would also provide broader insight into the effectiveness of engagement-focused listening instruction in EFL higher education.

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