

AN INVESTIGATION INTO KEY A2 LISTENING TEST PROBLEMS OF THE FIRST-YEAR NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS IN HIGH-QUALITY CLASSES AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION, VIETNAM

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Abstract

Listening skills are important for face-to-face communication, meetings, conferences, telephone conversations, etc. A person with good listening comprehension skills will be able to participate more effectively in communicative situations. In Vietnam, listening is always considered “a key language skill”, which Vietnamese learners of English will be working with before and after they finish their study at universities. The first-year non-English major students in high-quality classes at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA) share the same situation. Out of all the different tests to certify the level of English, the Key A2 test is the most practical in terms of its contents and format. Therefore, to standardize the output quality of students, in most universities including TUEBA, Key A2 is decided to be a common standard of measurement for evaluation of students’ fluency in English in the professional context. However, when taking the Key A2 test, especially the Key A2 listening comprehension section, many students usually complain that they lacked knowledge, skills and strategies about listening comprehension to complete the test well. Understanding these problems, the researchers investigate Key A2 listening comprehension problems encountered by a group of first-year non-English major students of TUEBA. 60 first-year non-English major students at TUEBA who were studying in the first term joined the study. Data was gathered by means of questionnaires. The research findings showed that test-taking strategies, general background knowledge, linguistic ability, insufficient learning facility and teaching methods were the major problems encountered by TUEBA’s students. Some measures are made for addressing problems regarding how teachers can help their students overcome Key A2 listening comprehension problems.

Keywords: *listening skill, factors, Key A2, non-English majored students, difficulties*

I. INTRODUCTION

Listening is one of the important skills in foreign language learning and no one can deny its importance. However, the process of studying English in Vietnamese education system still places less emphasis on listening and speaking skills and more emphasis on the use of grammar, writing and reading skills. English is taught by having students memorize new words and sentence structures and then responding to the teacher only when they are called. Therefore, students have very little exposure to spoken English, both inside and outside the classrooms. As a result, students seem to have poor listening and speaking skills.

Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA), established in 2004, focuses on accounting, business administration, finance and banking majors. Students at TUEBA are all non-English majored and they have different English learning background since the majority of them experienced 7 years learning English in primary schools while some of them only had a 3-year English program in high schools. For this reason, Their English competences are varied, which causes great difficulties for TUEBA teachers and administrators in categorizing students, building teaching program and curriculum, evaluating and grading students.

In this study, the researchers investigate Key A2 listening comprehension problems encountered by a group of 60 first-year non-English major students of TUEBA. This is the group that has been put great emphasis on because they are focusing on learning only English in two terms of the first year. Moreover, they are required to pass Key A2 test (the second level of English in the Common European Framework of Reference) after their first term. With the findings, some recommendations are proposed for tackling problems regarding how teachers can help their students overcome Key A2 listening problems.

This research was carried out to find proper answers to the questions:

1. What difficulties do first-year non-English major students in high-quality classes at TUEBA face in Key A2 listening comprehension?
2. What could be done to help students overcome these problems?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The nature of listening comprehension

With regard to the term “listening comprehension” in language learning, scholars have proposed a number of different definitions. Saricoban (1999), for example, noted that listening comprehension is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This involves understanding a speaker’s accent or pronunciation, his or her grammar and vocabulary, and grasping the meaning conveyed. A similar view is proposed by Buck (2001, p.31), who defined listening comprehension as the result of an interaction between a number of information sources, which include the acoustic input, different types of linguistic knowledge, details of the context, and general world knowledge. Listeners use any information they have, or any information that tends to be relevant to aid them in interpreting what a speaker is saying.

2.2. Problems in listening comprehension

Underwood (1989) outlines seven potential problems that could hinder listening comprehension. First, the speed of delivery is beyond the control of listeners. Underwood says, “Many language learners believe that the greatest difficulty with listening comprehension, as opposed to reading comprehension, is that listener cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks” (Underwood, 1989, p.16).

Second, it is not always possible for learners to have words repeated. This is a major problem in learning situations. In the classroom, it is the teacher who decides whether or not a recording or a section of recording needs to be replayed. It is “hard for the teacher to judge whether or not the students have understood any particular section of what they have heard” (Underwood, 1989, p.17).

Third, the small size of the learner vocabulary frequently impedes listening comprehension. The speaker does not always use words the listener knows. Sometimes when listeners encounter a new word, they stop to figure out the meaning of that word, and they therefore, miss the next part of the speech.

Fourth, listeners may not recognize the signals that the speaker is using to move from one point to another, give an example, or repeat a point. Discourse markers which are utilized in formal situations (i.e., firstly, and after that) are relatively clear to listeners. However, in informal situations, signals such as gestures, increased loudness, or a clear change of pitch are very ambiguous, especially to L2 learners.

Fifth, it can be very challenging for listeners to concentrate in a foreign language. It is generally known that in listening, even a slight break or a wander in attention can impede comprehension. When the topic of the listening passage is interesting, it can be easier for listeners to concentrate and follow the passage; however, students sometimes feel that listening is very challenging even when they are interesting in the topic because it requires a lot of effort to figure out the meaning intended by the speaker.

Sixth, learning habits emphasized in the classroom such as a desire to understand the meaning of every word. Teachers oftentimes want students to understand every word they encounter while listening by pronouncing and repeating words clearly and carefully, and by speaking slowly and so forth. As a result, students tend to feel worried when they fail to recognize what a particular word means and may further be discouraged by the failure. Students should therefore, be instructed to tolerate incompleteness and vagueness of understanding.

Seventh and last, comprehension problems arise when students lack contextual knowledge. Even if students can understand the main idea of the text, they may still find it difficult to comprehend the whole meaning of the text. Listeners from different cultural backgrounds can also misinterpret nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, or tone of voice.

In order to overcome these listening comprehension problems, learners need to develop techniques known as “listening strategies. These strategies are mental processes that enable learners comprehend the aural text despite their lack of knowledge. Listening strategies include inferring, elaboration, and regulating and monitoring comprehension, and they are discussed in detail in the next section.

2.3. Key A2 listening test

2.3.1. Overview of Key A2 test

Key A2 was developed between 1991 and 1994, and tests competence in reading, writing, listening and speaking. It is aligned to the Council of Europe Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages Level A2. Key A2 was most recently updated in March 2004, following an extensive review involving key clients and stakeholders. Cambridge ESOL examinations reflect a view of language proficiency in terms of a language user’s overall communicative ability; at the same time, for the purposes of practical language assessment, the notion of overall ability is subdivided into different skills and subskills. This ‘skills and components’ view is well established in the language research and teaching literature.

Each of the four skills tested in Key A2 provides a unique contribution to a profile of overall communicative language ability that defines what a candidate can do at this level.

Table 1: Key features of Key A2 test

Paper 1	1 hour 10 minutes	Reading and Writing	9 parts	50% of total marks
Paper 2	Approx. 30 minutes	Listening	5 parts	25% of total marks
Paper 3	8-10 minutes	Speaking	2 parts	25% of total marks

The Reading and Writing paper carries 50% of the total marks, while the Listening and Speaking tests carry 25% each. There are two pass grades ('Pass with Merit' and 'Pass') and certificates are normally issued to candidates who achieve these grades. A 'Pass' grade usually corresponds to approximately 70% of the total marks, and 'Pass with Merit' to approximately 85%. There is no minimum pass mark for individual papers. Candidates who achieve a 'Narrow Fail' or 'Fail' are judged not to have reached the required standard for Key A2.

2.3.2. Key A2 listening section

This section of the test aims to test candidates' ability to understand and respond to dialogues and monologues, including telephone conversations and recorded messages, in both informal and neutral settings on a range of everyday topics. The texts will be delivered at a pace which is slow but not unnaturally so. Candidates should be able to extract relevant factual information from what they hear.

The listening section is about 30 minutes, including 8 minutes to transfer answers. Each item carries one mark. This gives a total of 25 marks, which represents 25% of the total marks for the examination.

Table 2: Key features of Key A2 listening section

Part	Task type and format	Task focus	Number of questions
1	Three-option multiple choice. Short, neutral or informal dialogues. Five discrete three-option multiple-choice items with pictures (plus an example).	Listening to identify key information (times, prices, days of week, numbers, etc.).	5
2	Matching. Longer informal dialogue. Five items (plus an integrated example) and eight options.	Listening to identify key information.	5
3	Three-option multiple choice. Longer informal or neutral dialogue. Five three-option multiple choice items (plus an integrated example).	Taking the role of one of the speakers and listening to identify key information.	5
4	Gap-fill. Longer informal or neutral dialogue. Five gaps to fill with one or more words or numbers (plus an integrated example). Recognizable spelling is accepted, except with very high-frequency words or if spelling is dictated.	Listening and writing down information (including spelling of names, places, etc. as dictated on recording).	5
5	Gap-fill. Longer informal or neutral monologue. Five gaps to fill with one or more words or numbers (plus an integrated example). Recognizable spelling is accepted, except with very high-frequency words or if spelling is dictated.	Listening and writing down information (including spelling of names, places, etc. as dictated on recording).	5

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Subject of the study

60 students who are in the first semester of the academic year 2019-2020 at TUEBA were chosen for the study. Their ages are more than 18 years old, of whom the number of females and males are nearly equal. They have different attitudes and preferences towards listening skills in general and Key A2 listening test in particular.

3.2. Data collection instruments

To obtain the information for the study, the researchers decided to employ the questionnaire. This instrument is probably the most common data collection technique used. The questionnaires are frequently a very concise, preplanned set of questions designed to yield specific information to meet a particular need for research information. Additionally, it can be given to large groups of subjects at exactly the same time. Therefore, the data is more uniform, standard and accurate.

In order to fulfill the aims of the study as presented, the study has carried out with the quantitative method by collecting data from questionnaires on 60 first-year non-English major students in high-quality classes at TUEBA. The first part of the questionnaire was about the students' demographic information about gender, age, number of

years they have been learning English. In the second part, different questions were categorized in groups following the research questions.

3.3. Data collection procedure

The questionnaires were delivered to 60 first-year non-English major students from 2 different high-quality classes with the help of their teachers. The participants were clearly explained the purpose of the research before they fulfilled the questions. They were also encouraged to ask the researchers for any explanation. The students were instructed to take as much time as they needed to complete it. After that, data from responses of the students and teachers in the questionnaires were sorted and analyzed to get the answers to the research questions.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Students' attitude towards Key A2 listening test

Student's opinion	Number of responses	Percentage (%)
Very important	51	85%
Important	9	15%
Not important	0	0%
Not very important	0	0%

Table 3: Students' opinion about the role of Key A2 listening test

Student's opinion	Number of responses	Percentage (%)
Very difficult	48	80%
Difficult	10	16.7%
Suitable	2	3.3%
Easy	0	0%

Table 4: Students' opinion about the difficult level of Key A2 listening test

Student's opinion	Number of responses	Percentage (%)
Part 1: Multiple choice (picture)	7	11.7%
Part 2: Matching	38	63.3%
Part 3: Multiple choice (word)	11	18.3%
Part 4 & 5: Gap-filling	4	6.7%

Table 5: Students' opinion about the difficulty of each part in Key A2 listening test

Table 3, 4 and 5 aim at asking students about their opinions of Key A2 listening test. Most of the students (85%) were aware of the importance of Key A2 listening test. In table 4, it can be seen that the Key A2 listening test is usually difficult for their English level while the rest (3.3%) say that the test is suitable and none of them finds it easy. 63.3% report that Part 2 (Matching) is the most difficult while 6.7% think that it is Part 4 & 5 (Gap-filling).

Based on the results, the authors of the study can draw a conclusion that Key A2 test plays an important role in evaluating students' English proficiency. However, students are still facing some problems with the test. Hence, teaching and learning skills to take Key A2 test at TUEBA is highly appreciated, especially listening comprehension because of its difficulty. With well-prepared skills, students will not only self-assess their level of English proficiency but also familiarize with the format of the Key A2 test.

4.2. Students' opinions of Key A2 listening problems

Problems	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
1. Unfamiliar vocabulary	0	0	11	42	7
	0%	0%	18.3%	70%	11.7%
2. Difficult grammar structures	0	3	20	33	4
	0%	5%	33.3 %	55 %	6.7%
3. Unfamiliar topics	0	2	39	19	0
	0%	3.3%	64%	32.7%	0%
4. Long listening texts	0	0	2	55	3
	0%	0%	3.3%	91.7%	5%
5. Various speakers' accents	0	0	45	10	5
	0%	0%	75%	16.7%	8.3%
6. Speakers' fast speed	0	1	5	47	7
	0%	1.7%	8.3%	78.3%	11.7%

Table 6: Students' opinions of Key A2 listening problems

Item 1 was given to know whether unfamiliar vocabulary, including new words and idiomatic expressions affect the students' listening comprehension. All the students (including 18.3% sometimes, 70% often, 11.7% always) responded that unfamiliar vocabulary interfered with their listening comprehension. This finding shows that the major problem was that the students' vocabulary was too limited to understand the spoken text. Therefore, lack of vocabulary is a big obstacle to most students in Key A2 listening comprehension.

Additionally, most of students 95% (33.3 % sometimes, 55 % often, 6.7% always) reported that complicated grammatical structures caused problems to them. They usually stop listening and think about the structures. This interrupts the flow of speech and thus the students may miss some essential information while they are still thinking about the grammar structures. Hence, difficult grammatical structures can also be seen as an obstacle for students in listening.

As can be seen from item 3, it seems reasonable to recognize that unfamiliar topic causes difficulty to the listening comprehension of the students with 64% of the respondents sometimes and 32.7% often have problems with unfamiliar listening topics. The Key A2 listening material may contain a variety of topics about study, life or society. For instance, it is likely a weather forecast or a daily conversation which confuse the listeners.

The long listening text is supposed to be an obstacle to students. 91.7% of the students often have to deal with long listening text while 5% of them find the texts always long each time they do the test. The length of time students listen is clearly a big problem to students because they tend to lose their concentration in the task when they must listen for a long time. Furthermore, listening for a long time requires a good note-taking skill, which many students are not really good at.

Variety of accents causes difficulties to students in listening comprehension since they do not have much exposure to different accents. The result from table demonstrates that 8.3% always and 16.7% often, 75% sometimes of the students experience this kind of problem. Students have tendency to get familiar with the accents which they mostly listen. If listeners are exposed to standard British or American accents, they will face problems in understanding other accents.

The last cause of listening problems was the speed of delivery. 11.7% always find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast while only one student is not interfered by speech rate. As a result, the students absolutely encounter certain difficulties in listening comprehension since they lack control over the speed at which the speakers speak (Underwood, 1989).

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

With an aim to find the answers for the research questions set at the beginning of the study, the data was collected from questionnaires with the involvement of 60 first-year non-English major students who were studying in the first term at TUEBA. Listening comprehension in A2 Key test seems to be the weakest skill and students encounter various kinds of A2 Key listening problems. This study is done in the hope of finding out the factors causing their listening comprehension problems and contributing some recommended strategies for teachers and students to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning A2 Key listening comprehension.

5.2. Recommendations

5.2.1. Recommendations for teachers

- Improving listening materials

It is obvious that students differ in their learning styles and ability. Therefore, teachers should adopt and adapt their listening materials to match their students' interest and background since the listening materials only become stimulating and motivating them when they are slightly challenging to what they have already known and suit their interest.

- Improving teachers' classroom techniques

With the fact that students encounter various kinds of listening problems such as unfamiliar vocabulary, variety of accents, the fast speaking speed, difficult grammar structures, the study recommends some classroom techniques which can solve students' listening problems.

Teachers can encourage students to think about and discuss what they already know about the content of the listening text. Teachers can also provide the background for students to understand the text.

Students are asked to predict what the text is about or what the speaker is going to say next. Besides, students can be asked to predict the grammar structures and vocabulary that are likely to be used in the listening text. By this way, students are led to be familiar with vocabulary and grammar before the listening tasks.

5.2.2. Recommendations for students

There are many ways for students to solve their listening comprehension problems which will be discussed in detail below.

- Improving English proficiency

To overcome listening difficulties, students themselves must try to improve their English. If their language proficiency is improved, they are likely to overcome the difficulties such as variety of accents, speech of delivery or vocabulary and grammar structures. In class, students should participate in the lesson and get involved in extracurricular activities outside the classroom. Moreover, students can get access to authentic sources of

communication themselves by watching TV or listening to the radio. By doing so, they could get used to the lively contexts in which spoken language is used.

- Improving listening strategies

When students know appropriate listening strategies, they will be able to improve their listening practices and overcome listening difficulties. Below are some of the most important strategies, which should be employed by the students while tackling a listening task.

Listening for main ideas: students focus on the meanings, not just words.

Guessing from the context: students guess the meaning of unfamiliar words or phrases by looking at the context and use their logic and knowledge of the world to figure out the meaning of the word.

Predicting: students use clues from context and prior knowledge to predict general content before listening and predict what speakers are going to say.

Taking note: students write down important content words to help them overcome memory problems, especially when listening to a long text.

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