

# DIFFICULTIES IN LISTENING OF ENGLISH MAJORED FRESHMEN AT TAY DO UNIVERSITY IN VIET NAM

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## ABSTRACT

*Listening skills are one of the most necessary skills to communicate in real life. In learning foreign languages, major students have to pay more attention to this skill. This survey research entitled "Difficulties in Listening of English-Majored Freshmen at Tay Do University" was conducted to figure out common problems in the listening of English-majored Freshmen. The participants of the study are 60 freshmen from classes majoring in English. The questionnaire and interview are used as two instruments to collect the data. The results of the research will point out the difficulties in listening English that majored freshmen face as background knowledge, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.*

**Key words:** *listening, difficulties, freshmen, university*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Rationale

Nowadays, English has become the global language, it is spoken as a second language in the majority of countries throughout the world. More and more people are dedicating time to study English. Furthermore, many countries include English in their school syllabus, and children are starting to learn it at a younger and younger age. Knowing English can help to get advance in career and personal life. In reality, fluent English allows to compete in the global job market, advance career abilities, and engage with individuals from all over the world.

Listening plays a vital role in daily lives. Listening skill is the building blocks of a language. Without the ability of listen effectively, messages are easily misunderstood and the sender of the message cannot be effective. Listening is far more difficult than many people can image because "It involves attractive process of deciphering and constructing meaning from both verbal and non-verbal messages." (Nunan, 1998). Listening is a skill that underpins all positive human relationships. People listen for different purposes, such as entertainment, academic purposes, or obtaining necessary information. All language learners are supposed to acquire the four language skills-listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening is believed to be the most challenging form of learning in a second or foreign language.

Listening skills have recently received a lot of attention in foreign language training which is the most important skill in communication in real life. The two most important aspects of communication are listening and speaking. They are inextricably linked. Rubin and Thompson (1994) stated, "Listening, quite possibly, is the most important of the language skills since people spend approximately 60% of their time listening, etc." Furthermore, listening is an effective way of providing understandable material which is an important part of the language acquisition process.

Learning listening skills is the most difficult part in learning a foreign language. Listening is assuming greater and greater importance in foreign language classrooms. Rost (1994) emphasized that, "Listening can be regarded as a necessary skill in the preparation of foreign language students and can even be considered a good predictor of language achievement. Listening, like reading, is a receptive skill, but it is often the most daunting for students." When participating in meetings, talks, lectures, or conversations, it is necessary to have good listening skills to be able to understand and catch up with the speaker. Consequently, listening plays a vital role in foreign language learning.

## 1.2 The significance of study

The study is done with many significances. Firstly, the study is carried out in order to survey and find out the causes of difficulties in listening skills. Secondly, most freshmen have difficulty learning listening skills, common difficulties that students face when they learn English listening skills are also mentioned. Finally, on the basis of the findings, students would be more aware of the difficulties and find appropriate methods for them. From that point, students can enhance their English listening skills.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Definitions of listening

Listening is the key to keep the conversation going. Purdy (1997) defined listening as, "The active and dynamic process of attending, perceiving, interpreting, remembering, and responding to the expressed (verbal and nonverbal), needs, concerns, and information offered by other human being." It helps us understand the point of view of others better. Listening skills require recognizing speech sounds and converting them into words and sentences. Using ears to receive individual sounds (letters, stress, rhythm, and pauses) and we use our brain to convert these into messages that mean. Listening in any language needs concentration and effort. It is a skill at which some individuals need to put more effort than others. There are many definitions of listening by several linguistics scholars.

According to Brown (2001), "Listening comprehension is not merely the process of the unidirectional receiving of audible symbols, but an interactive process." Rost (2002) defined, "Listening as a process of receiving what the speaker actually says, constructing and representing meaning, negotiating meaning with the speaker and responding, and creating meaning through involvement, imagination, and empathy." Listening is capable of identifying and knowing what other people say. Listening includes the comprehension of the spoken dialect, the grammar, the vocabulary, and the comprehension of the context of speaker. These four tasks can be done at the same time by an able listener.

Listening is one of the most important skills for learning both a native and a second or foreign language. The process of learning a language begins with hearing. Pearson (1983) stated, "Listening involves the simultaneous organization and combination of skills in phonology, syntax, semantics, and knowledge of the text structure, all of which seem to be controlled by the cognitive process." Listening skills are critical in acquiring language proficiency.

According to Howatt and Dakin (1974), "Listening is defined as the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, his grammar and vocabulary, and grasping his meaning." Listening means trying to understand the oral messages people are conveying. There are a wide variety of listening definitions suggested by various individuals.

To summarize, all of the definitions are given in order to understand the nature of the listening skill that is required for the acquisition of a native or foreign language.

### 2.2 The importance of listening

Listening is one of the necessary life skills. This skill can provide a better perspective on life, and allow to maintain a higher awareness of both yourself and the world. As reported by Morley (1991), "Listening is the thing that people do most of their time."

The importance of listening in second foreign language learning is summarized in a recent publication by Rost (1994) as, "Listening is vital in the language classroom because it provides input for the learner. Without understandable input at the right level, any learning simply cannot begin." As an integrative skill, listening plays an important role in the process of language learning or acquisition, facilitating the emergence of other language skills. Therefore, listening is very necessary when studying any language. If students do not learn to listen effectively, they will not be able to take part in oral communication because, according to Underwood (1989), "Merely to hear what a speaker says is insufficient for communication to occur." It implies that communication has broken down when nobody listens to a speaker or when a listener fails to understand the message. It is one of the most vital ways that human beings feel life and live. Everyone, in real-life, often listens more than they speak, read, or write. We listen everywhere and every time. We listen to everything and everybody.

One of the most difficult aspects of teaching and learning English as a foreign language is teaching and learning listening. The importance of listening must be taken into consideration by anyone who wants to learn English with great success. A lack of listening skills creates a lot of difficulties in discussion and communication. Further, Nunan (2003) added that, "Listening is assuming greater and greater importance in foreign language classroom. This relies on several facts including role of input from

listening. This skill gives students valuable input from what they hear directly or indirectly from native and non-native speakers.”

Therefore, to succeed in communication, participants need to be active in listening. Listening is an important way of acquiring the language and a good way of picking up vocabulary and structures. Teaching listening to a spoken language is therefore of primary importance. It helps students make the transition from classroom English to real-life English more easily and effectively.

### **2.3 Difficulties in listening**

Listening to English well is not easy. Until now, students have faced many factors that affect their ability to listen to English. In particular, English-major freshmen face many difficulties in listening: background knowledge, vocabulary, grammar structures, and pronunciation.

#### **2.3.1 Background knowledge**

Foundational knowledge is the information needed to understand a situation, either through learning such as information, ideas, knowledge on social topics, etc.

According to Rubin (1994), "Background knowledge has a lot of impact on understanding the subject of listening." Lack of information is one of the obstacles that students face when listening. If students do not have complete information, they will not hear the message of the communication. When students participate in the discussion, the lack of information on the topic causes them to stop and search for background information on social networking sites. Boyle (1984) said that, "Knowledge about a particular subject or topic is a factor influencing foreign language listening comprehension." The more expanded information you have, the better you can capture the point. If students listen to an unfamiliar subject, they will be frightened and confused. Therefore, they cannot listen.

Background knowledge is not scientific knowledge expressed outside of letters and numbers, as school theory teaches. It is general and theoretical knowledge that goes deep into understanding human nature. As found by O'Malley and Chamot (1989), "The effective listener was the one who was able to draw on their knowledge of the world, on personal experiences, and on questions about themselves." Ideas are knowledge from personal experience and the world. The limited idea can interfere with listening. Students may find some topics confusing if they do not have the necessary ideas that are relevant to the conversation or communication. Knowledge of ideas also helps students draw inferences and infer the speaker's ideas. If the ideas are rich, students can make inferences, thereby developing listening skills that make listening and understanding easier. It should be more interesting. When they can initiate a conversation and link it to their own experiences or existing knowledge, they are more likely to communicate better.

Anderson and Lynch (1988) noted that, "The lack of social-cultural, factual, and contextual awareness of the target language may be a barrier to understanding because language is used to communicate its culture." Students struggle at school because they do not have the background knowledge needed to engage in conversations about real culture, history, society, etc. They have gaps in their learning or they only have a superficial understanding of the content rather than a deep understanding of the concepts. As Soureshjani (2011) affirmed, "Having background knowledge is a key feature to the successful understanding of any kind of reading and listening materials, so language learners willing to improve their reading and listening comprehension should have greater exposure to reading and listening materials." Without background knowledge, they struggle with listening with more complex concepts and skills.

In summary, background knowledge is the most important factor in determining a student's listening and the foundation for all achievement.

#### **2.3.2 Vocabulary**

As the foundation of all languages, vocabulary plays a crucial role in communication. It is an ingredient that can be used to convey information, express emotions, and develop good listening skills. Therefore, students often have difficulties when listening to English, such as word choices, similar-sounding words, and specialized terminology vocabulary.

Richard and Renandya (2002) assumed that, "Vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basic for how well language learners listen, etc." In the process of listening practice, the difficulty that students face is word choice. For English words, a word has many meanings. Students must choose the word that matches the context of the dialogue. Memorizing a large number of vocabulary in any language can help communicate with people effectively. Yang and Dai (2012) reported that, "Learning a mother tongue or any foreign language,



vocabulary is the most significant component." Furthermore, when listening, students are also influenced by their mother tongue when choosing words.

Common barriers for freshmen are having difficulty hearing similar-sounding words. Underwood (1989) also argued that, "For people listening to a foreign language, an unknown word can be a suddenly dropped barrier, causing them to stop and think about the meaning of the word and making them miss the next part of the speech." Students get confused when they hear similar-sounding words. Sometimes, students encounter unknown words in the listening passage that make them stop and think about the meaning of that word. That is why they often miss the main idea when practicing engaging in conversation or taking the class tests. Therefore, vocabulary knowledge is a key factor in helping students recognize words easily, playing an important role in listening.

Most of the students have difficulty with specialized terminology vocabulary. They do not have enough fluent vocabulary which leads to poor communication. Language acquisition cannot take place without learning its specialized words, with meanings changing unlimitedly due to different context variables. Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) pointed out that, "Vocabulary knowledge has been identified as the most important indicator of language proficiency, etc." If their language proficiency in specialized vocabulary is good, their listening will improve. Understanding the meaning of specialized vocabulary can stimulate learning in students and lead to a positive impact on their listening ability.

Therefore, vocabulary is important for effective communication. The lack of vocabulary leads to poor listening skills, particularly since the majority of second and foreign-language speakers struggle to listen to the language due to insufficient vocabulary.

### 2.3.3 Grammar knowledge

Grammar is the basis of the language, especially as English as a second or foreign language is not acquired naturally. Through grammar, learners will learn to operate at the sentence level and study tenses, singular and plural phrases, and word forms.

Due to the influence of their mother tongue, tenses in English are one of the grammatical difficulties encountered when listening to students. Nguyen (2007) asserted that, "The grammar of their mother tongue seems to be deeply rooted in their minds, so students tend to infer their mother tongue structure to the structure of the foreign language." English has 12 different tenses. If students do not master the tenses of grammar, listening will be more difficult. Therefore, students often misunderstand what the speaker wants to convey.

Furthermore, students also have trouble understanding singular and plural phrases due to their limited knowledge of grammar. "Grammatical knowledge acts as solid ground in referencing when linguistics becomes ambiguous." Debata (2013). Students often make mistakes when listening to English because of the fact that the grammar of their mother tongue has a strong influence on learning another new language. In the Vietnamese language, there is no singular or plural division. Although it is argued that the knowledge of singular and plural phrases is the basis of grammar, it cannot be denied that freshmen can acquire and use the English language fluently, precisely, and fluently.

Hinkel and Fotos (2002) said that, "A speaker can organize and express ideas in his mind with grammatical knowledge." During the listening process, students face difficulties in word forms due to the influence of the Vietnamese language. They often misplace words and misunderstand the meaning and context of sentences in the conversation. Communicative proficiency involves knowledge of and application of grammar and the use of the appropriate vocabulary of the language to convey meanings in a socially acceptable way. It focuses on three aspects of grammar: form, meaning, and usage, and gives learners the attention they need to help them progress in their language abilities.

Listening skills require students to have knowledge of grammatical competence. This is also the reason why grammar teaching is considered imperative. Some grammatical structures, such as tense, singular and plural phrases, as well as word forms, may aid comprehension of the listening materials. Thus, grammar knowledge is essential for enhancing listening abilities since it provides the foundation for understanding language.

### 2.3.4 Pronunciation

Second language listening skills need to pay attention to pronunciation because it is very important for the ability to correctly receive messages in communication. Messages are readily misconstrued, communication breaks down, and the hearer becomes confused or annoyed without the capacity to listen properly. Students face many difficulties in listening to English, such as mispronouncing, accents, and the speaker's speed.

Pronunciation is undeniably important, and it inevitably determines the majority of oral languages. Students are confused when they misunderstand a speaker's meaning because they often mispronounce it. Pronunciation plays an important role in communication, and pronunciation is an essential factor in the field of foreign language teaching. Teachers must attribute proper importance to teaching pronunciation in their classes. Perceptual comprehension of speaker and listener is required for communication, which necessitates intelligible pronunciation. In the view of Gebhard (1996), "There is a close link between pronunciation and listening comprehension, etc."

Students need to master "good pronunciation" especially the accent. Lundsteen (1979) stated that, "Listening is the first language skill to appear." Brown and Yule (1983) stated, "Most foreign language students perceive that native speakers speak too fast, and that makes it difficult for them to follow." Similarly, Butt et al. (1983), "Has the same idea in terms of the negative impacts of native speakers on listening comprehension." Buck (2001) suggested that, "Crucial problems in hearing would occur as listeners hear an unusual accent, such as Indian English, for the first time since they learn only American English." This will definitely disrupt the entire phase of listening because, at the same time, an unusual accent makes it impossible for listeners to comprehend.

The speed of the speaker also hinders students in their efforts to learn English because they do not keep up with the message while listening. It is not the same as leaving the reading content on the page for them to access at any time. Brown and Yule (1983) stated, "Most foreign language students perceive that native speakers speak too fast, and that makes it difficult for them to follow." According to Underwood (1989), "There are some barriers to an effective listening process. Listeners cannot control the speed of speech. The biggest problem with listening is that listeners are not able to control how quickly speakers talk."

#### 2.4 Related studies

Based on the search of relevant previous research, the researcher found some relevant researches. Previously, many researchers have some related studies in English- listening problems as well as difficulties that English-major freshmen faced. However, the topics are not completely the same and the participants may be from different levels. The related studies below may provide the supporting shreds of evidence for this research.

One of the previous studies was conducted by Sitti Hadijah and Shalawati (2015-2016). Their research, titled "A Study on Listening Skills and Perspectives to First-Year Students at English Department of Academic Year" gathered data on their perspectives on listening and difficulties in listening to students. A set of listening tests and a questionnaire were distributed. Both quantitative and qualitative data were studied to identify the underlying matters in students' listening skills, addressing challenges, main listening hindrance factors, and learning experiences. The findings of this study revealed that the students faced problems with listening because they still could not complete the basic listening skills in the test. Furthermore, most of them consider that the listening classes are challenging for them due to some problems and difficulties during the teaching and learning activities. Besides that, there were five factors that influenced the students' listening skills; lack of practice, limited vocabulary mastery, native speakers' accent, pronunciation, and uninteresting learning materials. Moreover, their knowledge of English structure and good facilities in listening classes supported them to be able to figure out some challenges in listening activities. In addition, the students realised the importance of the listening activities, but assistance from the teachers and some other students was still needed during the teaching and learning activities. In conclusion, having good listening skills still appeared as a challenge for the first-year students at the English Department of Academic Year.

In the study by Ahkam Hasan Assaf (2015) titled "The Difficulties Encountered by EFL Learners in Listening Comprehension as Perceived by ELC Students at the Arab American University-Jenin" to investigate the difficulties EFL students encounter in listening comprehension as perceived by ELC students at the AAUJ. The aims of the study were to identify the difficulties students face in listening comprehension and to study the relationship between the difficulties encountered by EFL students with their academic level, academic year, gender, type of school, and number of school years studying English. In order to achieve the study objectives, the researcher developed two different data collection instruments: a questionnaire and an interview. The study's findings revealed that a lack of background information about the topic, noises around, poor quality listening equipment, and not enjoying the listening excerpt all had a high effect degree. In addition, speed of speech and gliding over words while speaking, which had a moderate effect degree in the questionnaire results, were the problems students stated in the interview. Besides, the researcher found out that there were no significant differences in the difficulties students encountered in listening comprehension due to academic level, academic year, gender, type of school, and number of school years studying English.

In Vietnam, Thai and Nguyen (2018) study "Listening comprehension: First-year English-major students' perceptions and problems" to investigate the first-year English-major students' perception of the role of listening skill development and find out the problems that they have to face while learning listening comprehension. The descriptive study was conducted with 115 of the freshmen who are studying at some universities in the Mekong Delta. The data was collected from questionnaires, interviews, and observations. According to the study's findings, most students had a positive

attitude toward the role of listening skill development, and the major listening comprehension problems encountered by first-year English major students included accent, pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, different accents of speakers, lack of concentration, anxiety, and poor recording quality.

Consequently, the findings of these studies reveal some of the common problems and difficulties that students experience when listening. There are problems with the interference of background knowledge, vocabulary, and pronunciation. In their study, the researchers used questionnaires, interviews, and tests, among other methods. These studies provide the foundation and principles for the current research.

### **3. RESEARCH AIMS, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESIS**

#### **3.1 Research aims**

When learning English, students face many difficulties in the process of listening. This is the reason why student's listening skills are not good. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the difficulties in the listening of English-majored freshmen at Tay Do University so that students can re-evaluate their own learning English methods and find appropriate ways to improve listening.

#### **3.2 Research question**

This research is required to answer the following research questions:

1. Do English-majored freshmen at Tay Do University have difficulties in listening English?
2. What difficulties do English-major freshmen at Tay Do University face in listening to English?

#### **3.3 Hypothesis**

Most students majoring in English at Tay Do University believe that listening skills are the most important and difficult skill. Based on the literature review and the research question, it is hypothesized that English-majored freshmen can face more or fewer difficulties in listening to English. These difficulties can be caused by internal causes related to background knowledge, vocabulary, grammatical structures, and pronunciation.

### **4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **4.1 Design**

The research will be carried out to answer the research questions and test the hypothesis. The subjects in this research are English-majored freshmen at Tay Do University. Data from the 60 participants included open and closed questions for easy collation and analysis. Paper interviews are created and allow 20 students to freely answer questions mentioned on paper. The data collected will be analyzed to show the difficulties of listening English for English-majored freshmen.

#### **4.2 Participants**

The participants of this research are 60 English-majored freshmen, course 16 at Tay Do University. The main materials for English listening are the books: listening and speaking now 1. They will be given questionnaires and be interviews in order to get information about the difficulties they have faced in learning English listening skills.

#### **4.3 Instruments**

In this research, a questionnaire and an interview are used as important instruments. The reason why researcher used a questionnaire as a vital instrument since it provided a relatively cheap, quick, and efficient way of obtaining large amounts of information from a large sample of people.

#### **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire consists of two parts. Part 1 includes 10 questions that investigate students' backgrounds and attitudes toward listening. In part 2, there are 16 statements about problems in learning English listening. Students show their own ideas by checking only one column for each statement according to the 5-degree scale.

## Interview

The paper interview is designed to get specific information from the freshmen about their listening skills. It consists of four questions. The aim of this instrument is to understand the freshmen's attitude towards English listening and to confirm problems in learning English listening.

## 5. EXPECTED OUTCOME

Listening is an important skill for majoring freshmen in English at Tay Do University. However, students majoring in English usually face many problems when practicing listening English. The major purpose of this proposal research is to help them recognize their problems in English listening skills, particularly in background knowledge, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

### 5.1 Background knowledge

Background knowledge is one of the difficulties for students when listening. Students often lack information and have limited ideas when hearing about unfamiliar topics, and it takes a long time to think and guess what the speaker is saying. In addition, without knowledge of social topics, they will not be able to understand the meaning of topics such as culture, the economy, and so on. Therefore, poor background knowledge will cause many difficulties for students.

### 5.2 Vocabulary

Vocabulary plays an important role in English listening. However, a lack of vocabulary is one of the biggest challenges that students are facing. They have difficulty hearing about word choice and similar-sounding words. Insufficient vocabulary makes students unable to listen well to conversations and tests in class. Moreover, specialized terminology vocabulary does not merely have a meaning, but it probably has many different meanings in particular contexts. This leads students to feel confused and lose confidence when participating in and taking the test.

### 5.3 Grammar knowledge

Students still have many difficulties with grammatical structures while listening. The grammatical rules of the English language are not the same as those of Vietnamese grammar. English has tenses and singular and plural phrases. Moreover, students also have difficulty with word forms in English because English differs from their mother tongue. As a result, students face several challenges during communication due to a lack of grammar.

### 5.4 Pronunciation

Pronunciation is a problem for English-majoring students in listening because it directly affects their listening ability. Students cannot recognize some familiar words when listening if they have a mispronunciation of those words. Furthermore, students are perplexed by tone in communication since different intonations can lead to the same statement having distinct meanings. We are all aware that the English language has several dialects in various places, such as British English, American English, Australian English, and so on.

To sum up, it is expected that students of English-majoring freshmen at Tay Do University can recognize the difficulties in listening and can find a solution to improve this skill.

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