

IMPROVE VIETNAMESE FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS' LISTENING COMPREHENSION THROUGH PRE-LISTENING ACTIVITIES AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY, VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

The study was undertaken to improve students' listening comprehension through pre-listening activities. The population of this study were one hundred and thirty (130) first-year students and eight (8) English teachers at Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry, Vietnam. In this study, the action research was used. The data was gathered by survey questionnaire for students and English teachers. Weighted mean and frequency were used to analyze the data. The results showed that the students had improved their attitudes towards learning listening skill after the introduction of varied pre-listening activities. Moreover, teachers play an important role in teaching listening skill. Applying suitable pre-listening activities to teach students helped to engage themselves to purposeful listening activities as well as to take initiative in preparing knowledge related to business issues. Based on the findings of the study, some recommendation was suggested for further research.

Key words: *listening comprehension, listening skill, pre-listening activities, Thai Nguyen Agriculture and Forestry, Vietnamese first-year students*

INTRODUCTION

English has been considered an ideal choice of majority of the Vietnamese and has become compulsory subject in many schools from primary to college. Studying English is not only an opportunity but also the duty of almost Vietnamese students in order to adjust themselves to the changes of the world, the area in general and the country in particular.

At Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry, students have to study English as a compulsory subject right from the first semester and they are evaluated with both communication skill and grammar knowledge. High school graduates come into university with fairly high levels of grammar competence, but often low levels of communication. Students have many difficulties in communicating with other people, especially listening skills. Listening is a crucial element of communication, and it is also an important factor for interaction. A learner can express himself orally but never able to communicate with speakers of English if he is unable to understand what is

said to him. In general, listening is used far more than any other single language skill in our daily lives. We can expect to listen twice as much as we speak, four times than we read, and five times more than we write. [5].

Listening is an essential skill in acquiring a language and it can be defined as the process of understanding speech in a second language or foreign language. Moreover, listening is a key to all effective communication without the ability to listen effectively, messages are easily misunderstood [3].

To catch up with the new trends in language teaching as well as to improve students' listening skills, English teachers at Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry have applied communicative approach and chosen students' textbook that are designed focusing on students' communication; however the students' listening comprehension is still low. There are some reasons for this problem. One of the reasons is that pre-listening activities that teachers have applied or not should be considerable. Pre-listening is that things to do before the students hear the passage, to help them get the out most of what they are going to hear." [4]. Pre-listening is a kind of "preparatory work" which students should be "tuned in" or provided some basic information so that they know what to expect, both in general and for particular tasks [6].

In listening comprehension, pre-listening plays an important role in teaching listening for students because it can make students interested in the listening tasks and they can listen to the tasks better. Pre-listening is a preparation of the listening class. In this stage, teachers tend to arouse learners' expectation and interest of the language text they are going to listen. They can also motivate learners by providing background knowledge of the text; organizing learners to discuss a picture or a related topic which involves in the text; asking some related questions to the text. In general, pre-listening plays a role in warming-up and the main aim of this stage is to make learners focus their attention on the following while-listening stage and decrease the difficulties of the text. These activities can also promote an active and flexible learning environment, help increase learners' motivation for learning, motivate learners by giving a reason for listening and provide them with some language for the listening.

In conclusion, pre-listening stage is very essential in the process of teaching listening. Pre-listening activities also help students prepare for what they are going to hear and helps mitigate the anxiety which comes from listening in a foreign language, by providing a clear context. Moreover, pre-listening activities can offer opportunities for class discussion and more interaction among students. There are certain pre-listening activities such as brainstorming, class discussion, pictures, prediction of content, pre-teaching of new words and difficult key words ...which can be adapted easily for different classes and levels, as well as for general English and listening lessons. Based on the benefits of pre-listening activities, this study was conducted to improve students' listening comprehension through pre-listening activities for first-year students at Thai Nguyen university of Agriculture and Forestry.

SUBJECTS AND RESEARCH METHODS

Subjects of the study

The respondents of the study were 130 first-year students that the researcher taught and 8 English teachers at Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry.

Method of the study

The action research was used in this study. Action research involves a self-reflective, semantic and critical approach to enquiry by people who are simultaneously members of the context in which the research takes place. The objective of action research is to improve the current state of affairs within the educational context in which the research is carried out [1].

Questionnaire was the data collection instrument. The questionnaire for students was delivered to 130 students to investigate students' motivation and attitudes towards English listening skills. A five-point Likert scale was used to interpret the results.

Options	Ranges	Verbal Interpretations
5	4.50 – 5.00	Strongly Agree
4	3.50 – 4.49	Agree
3	2.50 - 3.49	Disagree
2	1.50 – 2.49	Strongly Disagree
1	1.00 – 1.49	Neither agree nor disagree

Questionnaire for teachers was used to find out the teachers' attitudes towards pre-listening activities, their purposes of using pre-listening activities, the current situation of using pre-listening activities and problems the teachers encounter when using pre-listening activities, their comments and suggestions to improve the pre-listening activities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Data analysis collected from questionnaire for students.

1.1. Students' opinions about pre-listening activities that the teacher applied

Table 1: Students' opinions about pre-listening activities that the teacher applied

Items	Weighted mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. Pre-listening activities are interesting.	4.1	Agree	3
2. Pre-listening activities can expand your vocabulary and structure.	4.1	Agree	3
3. Pre-listening activities extend your knowledge in many fields.	3.6	Agree	4
4. Pre-listening activities are effective for you to complete the listening task well.	4.27	Agree	1
5. Pre-listening activities should be used in the next listening lesson.	4.12	Agree	2
Composite Mean	4.04	Agree	

The table shows the students' opinions about pre-listening activities that the teacher applied in teaching English listening skill. The over-all assessment was "agree (high)" with a composite mean of 4.04. All items were rated "agree". Item 4 "Pre-listening activities are effective for you to complete the listening task well" ranked first with the highest score of 4.27. It means that the majority of students liked the pre-listening activities in the listening lessons, and they thought that these activities were effective to complete the task better. Item 1 "Pre-listening activities are interesting and item 2 "Pre-listening activities can expand your vocabulary and structure" were rated "Agree" with the same mean value of 4.1. It indicates that pre-listening activities are very interesting and suitable to expand vocabulary and structure in learning English. The item "Pre-listening activities extend your knowledge in many fields" was rated "agree" with the lowest mean value of 3.6. It can be concluded that pre-listening stage that teacher applied could help students with positive attitude towards listening lessons.

2. Data analysis collected from questionnaire for teachers

Table 1: Teachers' attitude toward pre-listening activities

<i>1. How do you find the importance of pre-listening activities to students' listening performance?</i>	Frequency	Percent (%)
A. very important	5	62.5
B. important	3	37.5
C. not very important	0	0
D. not important at all	0	0

The table shows teachers' attitude toward pre-listening activities. 62.6 % of teachers found pre-listening activities are very important and three or 37.5% of the teachers claimed that it is important. None of them thought pre-listening stage is useless. Being aware of this, the teachers at University of Agriculture and Forestry often take consideration in choosing pre-listening activities in listening lessons.

Table 2: Teachers' purposes of using pre-listening activities

<i>2. What are your purposes in using pre-listening activities? (You can tick more than one)</i>	Number	Frequency (%)
To provide background knowledge about the topic of the text.	6	75
To motivate students to participate in the lesson.	5	62.5
To teach new vocabulary and structures which appear in the listening text	5	62.5
To help students to predict the content of the listening text.	4	50
To help students be more confident in listening lessons.	2	25

The table illustrates the teachers' purposes of using pre-listening activities. Six or 75 % of the teachers were for the purpose of providing background knowledge about the topic of the listening passage, which made up the most percentage of the purposes of using pre-listening activities. The same percentage belonged to the purpose of motivating students to participate in the lesson, followed by the purpose of teaching new vocabulary and structures which appear in the listening passage with 62.5. Four teachers used to help students predict the content of the listening passage. The least number of responses was help students to be more confident in listening lessons. In short, most of the teachers aimed at providing background knowledge about the topic of the text and motivating students to participate in the lesson when using pre-listening activities. Besides, teaching new vocabulary and structures appearing in the listening passage and helping students predict the content of the listening passage are also much paid attention to.

Table 3: Teacher's frequency of using pre-listening activities.

3. How often do you use the following pre-listening activities?	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Prediction of the content of the listening passage	55%	30%	15%	0%	0%
Pre-teaching new vocabulary or grammatical structures	25%	45%	30%	0%	0%
Using audio-visual aids to introduce the topic of the passage	10%	30%	60%	0%	0%
Discussion	10%	35%	55%	0%	0%
Previewing the listening tasks	75%	15%	10%	0%	0%
Questioning	15%	55%	20%	10%	0%

As shown in the table, teacher's choices of pre-listening activities in class were quite different. It is clear that each activity had its own benefit so that the teachers had different options for each class. Noticeably, 75 % of the teachers previewed the listening task before going to the main listening task, this have been mentioned in . It is very useful indeed for the students to see the questions before they begin listening to the text. Not only do they know what they have to seek from the text, but they also benefit from the reading itself [6]. It is extremely important to preview the content of the listening because it helps to predict the answers for the listening.

Secondly, the most frequently used pre-listening activities used by the teachers are discussion and questioning which were the same accounted for 55 % *often* and *sometimes* categories. Next, the percentage of the teacher used questions and discussion is 20 and 10 % respectively. Finally, 60% of the teacher sometimes used Using audio-visual aids to introduce the topic of the passage, only 10% of them always used this activity.

It can be concluded that teachers often used various pre-listening activities such as predicting the content of the listening vocabulary and grammar pre-teaching, using audio to introduce the topic of the lesson, discussion, questions to motivate students in the listening lesson. However, most of the teachers used previewing the listening; the reason is these activities are available in the textbook so they would like to make use of them. Moreover, pre-teach vocabulary and grammar, predicted the content of the listening are teacher's favorite activities before listening task.

Table 4: Teachers' opinions of the most effective pre-listening activity to the students

4. Which pre-listening activity do you think is the most effective to the students?	Number	Frequency
Prediction of the content of the listening passage	4	50
Pre-teaching new vocabulary or grammatical structures	0	0
Using audio-visual aids to introduce the topic of the listening passage	3	37.5
Discussion	1	12.5
Previewing the listening tasks	0	0
Questioning	0	0

It can be seen from the table that the purposes of pre-listening were different. Four or 50 % of the teachers thought that the most affective pre-listening activity is predicting the content of the listening. 37.5% of the teachers applied using audio-visual aids to introduce the topic of the listening passage. The teachers also provided the answers that these pre-listening activities help the students do the tasks better and get students into the listening

lesson. pre-listening activities help facilitate comprehension, generate students' interest and activate students' background knowledge. Prediction can facilitate comprehension of the listening passage. Audio-visual aids may draw students' attention and generate their interest [2]. Only 1 or 12.5 % of the teacher agreed that Discussion is the most effective to the students. Noticeably none of the teachers thought Pre-teaching new vocabulary or grammatical structures, previewing the listening tasks, and questioning are the most effective to the students. Although it was thought that reading and studying the task are not the most effective ways, in current teaching most of the teachers require their students to do it before listening.

Table 5: Teacher's problems in using pre-listening activities

5. What problem(s) do you come across when using pre-listening activities?	Number	Frequency
It is difficult to design them	0	0
Designing them is time-consuming	4	50
Doing pre-listening activities in a listening lesson is time consuming	1	12.5
Handling them is sometimes out of control	1	12.5
Sometimes the activities used are not of the students' interests.	2	25

From the table, 50% of the teachers agreed that designing pre-listening activities is time consuming. 25% of the teachers claimed that sometimes the activities used are not of the students' interest. 25% of them thought that pre-listening activities is time consuming and sometimes out of control. And there was no one thinks that designing these activities is difficult. From the result, it can be said that most of the teachers did not have any big problems about pre-listening activities except for time consuming in designing.

Table 6: Teachers' opinion to improve pre-listening tasks in the textbook

In your opinion, what should be done to improve pre-listening tasks in the textbook?-	Number	Frequency
Add more various kinds of pre-listening activities	5	62.5
Omit some pre-listening activities	0	0
Illustrate each listening lesson with more beautiful picture	3	37.5
Other ideas (please specify).....	0	0
Total	8	100

Most of the teachers think that pre-listening activities in the textbook were suitable with students' background and levels; however, there should be more activities for students and the task should be illustrated in visual to give learners more motivation in listening skills. To be specific, 62.5% of the teachers still suggest that more various kinds of pre-listening activities should be added. In addition, 37.5% of the teachers would like to have each listening lesson illustrated with more beautiful pictures. In that case, the teachers do not have to spend much time designing pre-listening activities to meet students' needs and beautiful pictures may draw student's attention and easily, lead them to the content of the listening passage. Moreover, students will have more opportunities to join in variety of activities, which motivates students in learning listening. None of the teacher has other ideas or think about omitting some pre-listening activities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Results also showed that the students had improved attitudes towards learning listening skill after the introduction of varied pre-listening activities. They showed great interest in pre-listening activities. They felt more confident to work in group, pairs to discuss their ideas about the topic before listening to the audio. Besides, the results indicated the teachers' attitude, teachers' purposes, teachers' frequency, teachers' problems in using pre-listening activities as well as teachers' opinion to improve listening tasks in textbook have an effect in teaching process. It emphasizes the roles of teachers in organizing interesting and suitable activities in the listening lesson. The lecturer's role in the classroom is essential in maintaining the interest and motivation of students to participate in listening classes. Choose suitable pre-listening activities for teaching students' listening skill help to engage themselves to purposeful listening activities as well as to take initiative in preparing knowledge related to business issues.

Recommendations

In order to get better results for students in listening lessons, there are some recommendations. Firstly, teachers should be considered when investigating into the factors causing low listening comprehension. It is significantly important to raise students' awareness of the importance of pre-listening stage so that they would involve in this stage to improve their listening skills. Secondly, when designing pre-listening activities, students' proficiency should be noticed, the activities should not be too challenging, that can make students lose motivation when dealing with other stages of the listening lesson. The pre-listening activities should not only activate student's knowledge but also raise their interest. Next, the students should show their cooperative attitude with the activities the teachers designed in the classroom. They should pay attention to the activities and take the initiative in asking teachers and classmates when the lesson and instructions are not explicit instead of keeping silent. This can help them involve in the while listening, they may know more about the content of the listening task so their listening result can be better.

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