

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

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ABSTRACT

Listening is an important skill for English learners which is very necessary in the communication process. In learning English, major students must pay more attention to this skill. The research is conducted to find out the difficulties in listening skills of freshmen majoring in English. The data is collected from fifty freshmen majoring in English, course 17 at Tay Do University. Two tools for data collection are questionnaires and interviews. The results will show the difficulties in English listening as background knowledge, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation of listening.

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

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rational

Nowadays, English has become the lingua franca of the world used globally. In fact, English is an extremely useful and important language to help people chat and make friends with foreigners without any barriers. More and more people are taking the time to learn English because of its importance in society. Moreover, many countries in the world have introduced English into the school curriculum for children at an increasingly younger age. English will help to expand knowledge of the countries' cultures and give the opportunity to advance in career.

Listening is the most important skill to succeed in communication. *"Listening skill is the building blocks of a language."* (Hosseinn Bozorgian, 2014). If students do not have good listening skills, the message conveyed is easy to be misinterpreted. In addition, *"It involves attractive process of deciphering and constructing meaning from both verbal and non-verbal messages."* (Nunan, 1998). Listening is one of the essential soft skills of communication. People have different listening purposes such as entertainment, study and work. To have a good language, all language learners need to have enough skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening is arguably the key to all effective communication.

Today, people focus on training listening skills, this is an extremely important tool to be able to communicate. Listening and speaking are two important skills, they are always closely linked in the communication process. Rubin and Thompson (1994) wrote, *"Listening, quite possibly, is the most important of the language skills since people spend approximately 60% of their time listening."* Listening is the process of focusing on receiving information actively and selectively which is an important process in language acquisition.

It is said that not being able to hear is a huge obstacle when learning English because it makes communication difficult. Therefore, it is very important for students to have good listening skills.

To learn a foreign language, listening skills are the most important part. In foreign language classes, listening skills are always essential. Rost (1994) said 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." The students need to have good listening skills to be able to receive information correctly during meetings, presentations or assignments. Therefore, listening skills are an indispensable part of foreign language learning.

1.2 The significance of study

The goal of this study is to find out the difficulties in learning listening skills of English-majored freshmen at Tay Do University. Firstly, the study is carried to find out the causes of difficulties in listening skills. Then based on the results found, students will recognize the difficulties they have and find the right methods for themselves to improve English listening skills.

2. LITERATURE VIEW

2.1 Definitions and the importance of listening skills

2.1.1 Definitions of listening skills

When learning a foreign language, we cannot ignore listening skills, because without it we cannot understand what other people want to convey. Listening skills have been typically defined by many researchers. Chastain (1971) defined listening *"as the ability to understand native speech at normal speed"*. According to Postovsky (1975), *"Listening differs in meaning from sound discrimination to aural comprehension."* In addition, Goss (1982) defined *"Listening as a process of understanding what is heard and organizing it into lexical elements to which meaning can be allocated."*

According Clark and Clark (1977), for us, listening consists of processing information which the listeners get from visual and auditory clues in order to define what is going on and what the speakers are trying to express. In order to listen well, language learners need to monitor their attention and interpretation of these clues. Listening is also the "key" to connect people with each other and a way to learn and learn new knowledge. Purdy (1997) expressed 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."* Listening also helps to build strong relationships, because when listening, it helps the other person feel respected. Listening skills are not simply hearing a sound that "touches" hearing, but also the process of receiving and analyzing that sound. We use our ears to absorb information then use our analytical brains to produce a meaningful message. In the process of communicating, to be able to listen well, it is needed to have focus and effort. Listening is a skill that takes a long time to master, which means that we need to put in a lot of effort.

According to Brown (2001), *"Listening comprehension is not merely the process of the unidirectional receiving of audible symbols, but an interactive process."* Furthermore, Rost (2002) emphasized, *"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."* In addition, Thomlison (1984) demonstrated that, *"Listening is capable of identifying and knowing what other people say."*

It can be said that listening skill is very important because it helps to learn all kinds of languages. To start learning a certain language we first need to use hearing. Pearson (1983) said that, *"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 make up the majority of learning a language.

Howatt and Dakin (1974) assumed that, *"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 is an active process, focused and eager to understand the speaker's content. Different individuals claim that listening has a lot of meanings.

In short, there are numerous definitions by many linguists, but they share the same opinions that listening is the process of receiving and interpreting information. It enables us to maintain meaningful relations with others. Listening, therefore, functions to serve basic human needs. Specifically, listening serves the purpose of learning, establishing and maintaining relationships and is crucial in many other important activities each day.

2.1.2 The importance of listening skills

By listening, people can make life better. Listening skills help to build and develop relationships. As reported by Morley (1991), *"Listening is the thing that people do most of their time."* As Guo and Wills (2006) stated, *"It is the medium through which people gain a large proportion of their education, their information, their understanding of the world and human affairs, their ideals, sense of values."* According to Mendelson (1994), *"of the total time spent communicating, listening takes up 40-50%; speaking 25-30%; reading 11-16%; and writing about 9%."* Emphasizing the important of listening in language speaking, Perterson (2001) stated that, *"No other type of language in put is easy to process as spoken language, receive through listening ... through listening, learners can build an awareness of the inter working of language system at various levels and thus establish a base for more fluent productive skills."*

Listening has an important role not only in daily life but also in classroom setting. Anderson and Lynch (1988) stated that, *"We only become aware of what remarkable feats of listening we achieve when we are an unfamiliar listening environment, such as listening to a language in which we have limited proficiency."* Most people think that being able to write and speak in a second language mean that they know the language; however, if they do not have the efficient listening skill, it is impossible to communicate effectively. *"That is listening is the basic skill in language learning and over 50% of the time that students spend functioning in a foreign language will be devoted to listening."* (Nunan, 1998)

Listening skills are very important in foreign language learning as Rost (1994) said, *"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."* Listening skills are an essential foundation to improve foreign language skills that allow other skills to emerge. Therefore, to be able to learn a foreign language the most important skill is still listening. If students do not learn to listen well, it will be difficult to communicate because, according to Underwood (1989), *"Merely to hear what a speaker says is insufficient for communication to occur."* It means poor communication is because students do not understand the message or cannot hear what the speaker is saying. In real life, people often listen more instead of choosing to speak, read or write. When talking less, listening will be more.

Learning to listen is the most difficult problem for a foreign language learner. Listening test is very important because it is the foundation for learning a foreign language well. Without this skill we will have a lot of difficulty in delivering. Similarly, Nunan (2003) stated that, *"Listening is assuming greater and greater important in foreign language classroom. This relies of 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."*

In short, in language learning, listening skill is an indispensable skill that learners cannot ignore. If they listen well, they will be confident and get motivation when learning a new language. Listening is a key factor to the success of learning another language, especially in studying English. That is the reason why learners have to pay attention to this skill.

2.2 Difficulties in listening

Listening to English well is not an easy matter. Until now, students always have many problems related to English listening ability that not only happens to non-English majors, but especially to first-year English majors, some general problems as background knowledge, vocabulary, grammar structure, pronunciation, and length and speed of listening.

2.2.1 Background knowledge

The knowledge base is one of the extremely important factors, the basis for creating a solid development for English listening, it is based on information and ideas, knowledge on 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 difficulties that students often face. Without enough information they will not be able to hear the complete message they need to hear. When discussing an issue, the lack of information will cause discouraged. Boyle (1984) said that, *"Knowledge about a particular subject or topic is a factor influencing foreign language listening comprehension."* The more information students have, the easier it will be to grasp the problem. When students hear an unfamiliar topic, they become scared and confused. That makes them unable to hear.

Scientific knowledge based on numbers, words and theories imparted by schools is considered background knowledge. It is general knowledge to be able to learn more deeply about 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 information and knowledge based on actual experiences. When limited to ideas, it will hinder students' listening. Not having the necessary ideas related to a certain problem will make students feel very difficult to understand. If students have knowledge of ideas, it can help to deduce the speaker's ideas then the communication will improve when they start a conversation with the information and knowledge they have.

Anderson and Lynch (1988) affirmed, *"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."* Background knowledge is very necessary for students to be able to participate in school interactions related to culture, history, ect. For those who have gaps in knowledge in learning will unable to understand the lesson in depth. As Soureshjani (2011) noted that, *"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."* Students will have a lot of trouble listening without background knowledge.

In short, background knowledge can be considered an important factor determining listening ability, it is also the foundation for the development of other skills.

2.2.2 Vocabulary

Vocabulary is the foundation for developing skills in listening process. While in the classroom, learning the vocabulary is taught implicitly with other skills. Lack of vocabulary is the biggest difficulty for most learners. In the learning process, learners need to practice to improve vocabulary so that they can avoid problems when communicating. Wilkins (1972) noted that, *"Without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed."*

In addition, 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."* Today, students have a lot of difficulty in choosing vocabulary. In English, there are some words that have so many meanings that cause difficult for students to choose the right one for the communication context. Therefore, to be able to communicate flexibly, students need to memorize a large amount of vocabulary. Yang and Dai (2012) reported that, *"Learning a mother tongue or any foreign language, vocabulary is the most significant component."* Not only that, students also have difficulty in listening due to the influence of their mother tongue.

For freshmen, when they hear similar sounding words, most of them get confused. Underwood (1989) informed 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."* When students have to listen to a dialogue, they encounter unknown words that force them to pause to think about what the word means. That causes them to miss the main idea when participating in a conversation. Therefore, knowledge of vocabulary is an important issue for students to improve listening skills.

Furthermore, specialized terminology causes many difficulties for English learners because specific words are only used in specialized fields. When there is not enough vocabulary, students have poor communication skills. To be able to acquire language, students need to learn specialized words with many different meanings and contexts. Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) pointed out that, *"Vocabulary knowledge has been identified as the most important indicator of language proficiency, et c."* The listening ability will be improved if students have enough knowledge of specialized words. When they can understand the meaning of specialized vocabulary, it will be a driving force to promote learning and improve listening level.

In short, vocabulary greatly affects to communication. When there is not enough knowledge of vocabulary, it will lead to poor listening skills, especially when using a non-native language as a communication tool, it is even more difficult. Then it requires a process of training to practice using vocabulary regularly.

2.2.3 Grammar knowledge

In English, grammar plays an extremely important role, it helps to create a foundation for developing skills. Students must learn grammar especially tenses, singular and plural phrases, and word forms to understand sentence levels then the whole context while listening.

When listening, the grammar of mother tongue is sometimes a barrier that students encounter. 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."* To improve listening levels, students must master tenses 12 tenses in English. If not it is difficulty to communicate because they misunderstand what the speaker wants to convey.

In addition, many students have difficulty in singular or plural phrases because they do not have enough knowledge. Debata (2013) noted that, *"Grammatical knowledge acts as solid ground in referencing when linguistics becomes ambiguous."* Due to the influence of the mother tongue, Vietnamese learners often make grammatical mistakes. Unlike Vietnamese, nouns in English have two different forms: singular and plural. Learners cannot overstate the importance of knowledge of plural and plural phrases, as they can help to improve listening skills.

Furthermore, Hinkel and Fotos (2002) said that, *"A speaker can organize and express ideas in his mind with grammatical knowledge."* Most students suffer from the influence of mother tongue which interferes with listening. In conversations, students often use the wrong words, misinterpret the meaning and context of the sentences. Knowledge of grammar as well as using appropriate vocabulary to convey the correct meaning can help to improve communication.

In short, grammar knowledge is the foundation of listening skills. This is also the reason why schools make it compulsory to learn grammar. Grammar structures such as tenses, singular and plural phrases, and word forms can help students master knowledge. Therefore, to improve listening skills, it is important to have knowledge of grammar.

2.2.4 Pronunciation

Pronunciation is also an important part of listening to a second language. Without the ability to listen, listeners become confused by misinterpreting the meaning. Wrong pronunciation, stress, and accent of the speaker are three factors that affect the listening ability of many students.

Pronunciation is an integral part of spoken language. When the speaker mispronounces, making it impossible for students to understand the speaker's meaning. In the field of teaching, pronunciation is an important part of improving listening skills. Teachers need to have the right pronunciation teaching methods so that students can improve pronunciation knowledge. In order for the process of communication and exchange of information to take place continuously, there must be easy pronunciation between the speaker and the listener. Gebhard (1996) said that, *"There is a close link between pronunciation and listening comprehension, etc."*

Stress is one of the most important aspects if students want to learn how to pronounce English correctly and like a native. Lundsteen (1979) stated that, *"Most foreign language students perceive that native speakers speak too fast, and that makes it difficult for them to follow."* Similarly, Butt (2010), had the same idea in terms of the negative impacts of native speakers on listening comprehension.

Accent is a way of pronouncing a language, it is a means of helping students to communicate well. 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 interrupt communication and the speaker may become frustrated and annoyed when the listener cannot understand because of an unusual accent."* To be able to understand others and communicate intelligibly, a language learner needs to come into contact with different accents and be sensitized to the differences in pronunciation, so that they can cope in the real world where they will constantly be coming into contact with different accents.

In short, pronunciation is an extremely important factor. Correct pronunciation has always played an important role in learning English communication. If you are good pronunciation will help others hear and understand you even more clearly. Therefore, to improve listening level, students need to practice correct pronunciation.

2.3 Previous studies

There have been some previous studies related to the difficulty of freshmen in listening. However, the topics are not exactly the same and the participants may be of different levels. This research paper builds on the support of the following related studies.

One of the previous studies was written by Hadijah and Shalawati (2016). Their research, titled "A Study on Listening Skills and Perspectives to First-Year Students at English Department of Academic Year" presented data showing their views on listening and students' difficulties in listening. 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. Research results show that students who could not listen well are because they could not perform basic listening skills in a listening lesson. Moreover, today's students always find taking classes more challenging. Difficulties when practicing English listening that every student often encounters: lack of concentration when practicing listening, not recognizing English sounds, not keeping up with the speed of the speaker, limited vocabulary to use in daily life, insufficient vocabulary and sentence structure. Although students can already perceive the great influence of listening, they still need the support of teachers and those around them. In conclusion, having good listening skill still appeared as a challenge for the first year students at English Department.

In the study by Assaf (2015) titled, "The Difficulties Encountered by EFL (English Foreign Language) Learners in Listening Comprehension as Perceived by ELC (English Language Center) Students at the Arab American University-Jenin" to find out the difficulties that EFL students have in listening comprehension as perceived by ELC students at the AAUJ (the Arab American University-Jenin). 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. Research results have shown that the lack of background information about the topic, background noise, poor quality listening equipment and not enjoying the listening excerpt all have a high degree of influence. In addition, the speed of speaking and skimming while speaking also moderately affects the survey results, which are the issues that students raised in the interview. Furthermore, the author considers that there is no significant difference in the difficulty that students face in listening comprehension due to education level, school year, gender, type of school and number of years of English study.

In Vietnam, Thai and Nguyen (2018) studied "Listening comprehension: First-year English-major students' perceptions and problems" to see the first year English major students' perception of the importance of developing listening skills and find out the difficulties they face when learning listening comprehension. A descriptive study was carried out at a number of universities in the Mekong Delta with 115 freshmen students. From questionnaires, interviews and observations the researcher collected all the data. According to the research results, the students have a positive attitude towards the importance of developing listening skills and the listening comprehension difficulties encountered by first-year English majors include how accent, pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, different accents of speakers, lack of concentration, anxiety and poor recording quality.

The results of these studies reveal some of the importance and barriers that students face in listening. There are problems with the combination of background knowledge, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. In the study researchers used questionnaires, interviews and tests to be able to collect data. These studies are fundamental because they provide the foundation and principles for current research

3. RESEARCH AIM - RESEARCH QUESTION – HYPOTHESIS

3.1 Research aim

This study aims to find out the difficulties in English listening skills of English- major freshmen at Tay Do University. Thanks to the results, the students can recognize difficulties in listening and find out suitable methods to improve listening skills. At the same time, teachers can base on this study to find out good solutions which help much in teaching methods.

3.2 Research question

This study is conducted in order to answer the following questions:

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

3.3 Hypothesis

The objective of this study is to find out the difficulties in listening skills of English- majored freshmen at Tay Do University. Therefore, based on references and related research questions, it is hypothesized that first-year English majors at Tay Do University have many difficulties in listening skills stemming from factors related to language and listening comprehension as background knowledge, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Based on these difficulties, students can know the difficulties they face in listening skills, thereby having ways to overcome difficulties and be motivated to improve listening skills.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research design

The research will be done to answer research questions and test hypothesis. The subjects of the study are 50 first-year English majors at Tay Do University. To collect information about their English listening difficulties, a questionnaire and paper interviews are created and they allowed students to freely answer the questions mentioned on the paper. All collected data will be analyzed to show the difficulties in English listening of first-year English majors.

4.2 Participants

In our study, there are 50 participants, they are freshmen students studying English linguistic majors from 17A and 17B at Tay Do University. Their ages ranged from 18 to 20. All of them speak Vietnamese as their mother tongue and English as a foreign language. They will be given a questionnaire and fifteen of them completed interview paper in order to get information about problems in listening skills.

4.3 Instruments

Questionnaire, and interview paper are the main instruments. The questionnaire is used to gather students' background information and the difficulties in listening skills. Furthermore, the interview paper is also designed to get detailed information about the difficulties.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consists of two parts. Part 1 includes 10 questions that explore the background and difficulty of listening. In part 2, there are 20 sentences about problems in learning English listening evaluated based on 5 scales: Strong agree (5), Agree (4), Neutral (3), Disagree (2), Strong disagree (1). They are listed in the following table.

Table 1: The gist of questionnaire

Question/Statement	Summary of question's/ Statement's content
From 1 to 10	Students' background
From 11 to 14	Background knowledge
From 15 to 18	Vocabulary
From 19 to 22	Grammar

From 23 to 26	Pronunciation
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Interview

The paper-based interview is designed to gather specific information from first-year English majors. It consists of four questions about the difficulty in listening. The objective of this tool is to understand deeply first-year students' attitudes toward English listening, identify difficulties in English listening skills as well as the suggestion for studying listening better.

4.4 Data analysis

Following data collection, the questionnaire results will be evaluated using SPSS software (description test, reliability test). The qualitative analysis method is mostly used to explain data from interview sheets and observations. All of the information gathered will be aggregated and calculated.

5. EXPECTED OUTCOME

Listening is one of the indispensable skills of students majoring in English at Tay Do University. However, they still face many difficulties. The main purpose of this study is to find out difficulties in listening skills, especially in background knowledge, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

5.1 Background knowledge

It can be said that background knowledge is very important in listening. Students often spend too much time listening but lack information. They have limited ideas so they cannot hear well. Moreover, students do not listen well to topics related to culture and society without knowledge of social topics. Therefore, good background knowledge goes hand in hand with good listening skills.

5.2 Vocabulary

Vocabulary is one of the difficulties for students when listening. Students have difficulty in word choice and similar-sounding words. Students cannot listen well to conversations and lectures in class because there are many gaps in knowledge of vocabulary. Not only that, specialized terminology vocabulary is also a huge obstacle. That makes students lack confidence when listening, which will affect the quality of the test.

5.3 Grammar knowledge

Grammatical structures are always a problem affecting students' listening process. In which an important factor to mention is the difference in grammar between English and Vietnamese. English is always accompanied by tenses, singular and plural phrases. Moreover, students also have difficulty with word forms in English different plus from the mother language which leads to these common mistakes. Lack of knowledge of grammar is a barrier to listening skills.

5.4 Pronunciation

English pronunciation is one of the most important aspects affecting to hearing well. Students find it difficult to understand what the other person is saying. If students mispronounce, students will not be able to recognize

familiar words. In English, students are confused about communication stress because of the emphasis on certain syllables in a word or certain words in a phrase or sentence. Furthermore, having an accent affects our ability to pronounce consonants and vowels in English or any other second language.

In summary, listening is a very important skill not only in language learning but also in daily communication. Students should spend time improving their skills, learning more listening patterns and learning tips or strategies through each self-study. It is hoped that English-majored freshmen at Tay Do University can find out the difficulties in listening and have methods to listen better.

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