

FACTORS AFFECTING LISTENING COMPREHENSION ON IELTS TESTS OF STUDENTS IN DONG NAI UNIVERSITY

¹Bui Hong Ha, ²Nguyen Xuan Anh Thu, ³Ngkiem Thi Thanh Xuan

Faculty of Foreign Languages
Dong Nai University, Vietnam

ABSTRACT

Listening skills, particularly listening comprehension, play a crucial role in the process of acquiring a foreign language in general, and specifically in learning English. Recently, there has been increasing concern about learning and teaching English listening skills in Vietnam. However, there is still limited research on the factors influencing English listening comprehension among students in Dong Nai University (DNU). Consequently, this study aims to investigate the challenges encountered by DNU students in their listening comprehension. Questionnaires serve as the primary data collection method. Based on the findings, the study provides recommendations for both teachers and students to enhance the development of more effective learning strategies and ultimately improve English listening comprehension skills.

Keywords: *listening, listening comprehension, difficulties, strategies, IELTS test, ELF learners*

1. Introduction

In this day and age, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is increasingly ubiquitous. It is also indispensable to university students pursuing higher education or employment opportunities in English-speaking countries. In fact, the IELTS test holds a high societal position for students who major in English or wish to develop themselves abroad. Undoubtedly, listening comprehension is a crucial skill in language learning and plays a pivotal role in language proficiency tests. Therefore, listening comprehension in the second language plays an even more important role in the IELTS listening test. The students' listening capacity and how effectively they understand English recordings and conversations are evaluated in the IELTS listening test. However, various factors can impact their listening comprehension abilities and performance on the test.

Listening is a receptive skill that helps learners receive information and from there can transmit that information back out. Vandergrift and Goh (2012, as cited in Chen et al., 2023) described listening comprehension as using linguistic knowledge, pragmatic knowledge, prior knowledge, and discourse knowledge to interpret and understand the spoken information, making it a problem-solving activity. Although listening comprehension skills are essential, most Dong Nai University students usually score very low on the listening tests and must restudy a lot. This context informs the research being done to determine whether learners have learned to listen properly and what factors have been influenced by the listening process.

This research aims to investigate the key factors contributing to the listening comprehension difficulties experienced by DNU students during their IELTS tests. Specifically, the paper attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main factors that affect the listening comprehension performance of DNU students on IELTS tests?
2. How do these factors impact the listening comprehension abilities of DNU students?
3. What strategies can be implemented to improve the listening comprehension skills of DNU students for their IELTS tests?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The search process

In the search for relevant related studies, three main search engines - Google, Bing, and Google Scholar - were used. An important source was the use of digital databases, including Semantic Scholar. All the search was done using the

following keywords: listening comprehension, IELTS listening test, difficulties in IELTS listening test, listening skill, and listening difficulties. In addition, other related articles were searched from online journals such as European-American Journal, Journal of Educational and Instructional Studies in the World, English Community Journal, English, Teaching, and Learning & Research Journal.

2.2 Result of the search

While learning a foreign language, listening is remarked to be the most crucial of the four main communication skills - speaking, reading, writing, and listening. (Gilakjani and Ahmadi, 2011; Ali, 2020; Teo et al., 2022; Golchi, 2012; Saraswaty, 2018). Bingol et al. (2014) revealed that students may encounter several significant challenges when completing a listening comprehension task. Golchi's (2012) previous study also found that such difficulties may be harder during international examinations. In relation to the listening section of IELTS, Rasti (2009) stated that most IELTS candidates find listening one of the most difficult sections of IELTS. Similarly, Saraswaty (2018) found from her research that ELF learners struggle tremendously with listening comprehension in English due to several obstacles.

According to Hardiyanto et al. (2021), a limited vocabulary bank in their memory is the reason for the student's difficulties when it deals with listening. Goh provided support for it in Yilmaz and Yavuz (2015) when he stated the most common difficulties employed by students in listening are rapidly forgetting what they have heard, comprehending the content but not the intended meaning, having trouble identifying words they are familiar with, and skipping over the next section while considering the meaning.

Moreover, the failure to concentrate might hinder lower-level EFL learners as they must absorb information quickly and listen to oral passages in real time, leaving a mental representation of the content when the text is over (Vandergrift, 2004; Walker, 2014). In addition, Anderson and Lynch's (1988) research reported that a lack of background knowledge triggered difficulty in listening comprehension and they claimed that a community uses language to express its cultural beliefs, facts, ideas, norms, attitudes, and way of life (pp. 35-37). As a result, L2 learners are somewhat lacking in their understanding of the target cultures. If L1 learners are unaware of the various facets of L2 culture, they may have difficulty with listening comprehension.

Juan and Abidin (2013), argued that given that various speakers have varying accents, students are occasionally difficult to understand, especially when the speaker has an unclear pronunciation.

The last difficulty faced by the learners may be the quality of the recorded materials, in this case relating to the environment and surroundings of EFL learners at the time. According to Bingol et al. (2014), learners' listening skills may be impacted by the poor quality of some recorded materials or sound systems utilized in the classroom. The recording may have background noise, which lowers the audio quality and makes the listening experience more difficult.

3. Methodology

3.1 Quantitative Method

A quantitative research design is used to analyze the data collected for this study. Data were gathered via the dissemination of questionnaires.

3.2 The Research Subjects

The purpose of this study is to examine the elements that impact listening comprehension during the listening tests of IELTS and also propose potential solutions to surmount. The participants in this study include all students at Dong Nai University, from freshmen to seniors, who intend to take the IELTS exam for any purpose. The subjects ranged in age from 18 to 25, including a variety of disciplines, and all genders. The research sample comprises 124 DNU students.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

The survey was created by the authors, and it was evaluated by gathering options from students at Dong Nai University. Students received surveys with questionnaires regarding the factors affecting listening comprehension in the IELTS listening exams and possible approaches to overcome them. The questions were divided into two parts. While part A consisted of questions about respondent demographics such as name, age, gender, and major, part B focused on principal questions.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

The following steps were used to complete the data collection process. The researcher created a survey of 11 questions for research purposes. After the research participants were determined, the URL to the Google form, titled the Survey for "Factors Affecting Listening Comprehension on IELTS Tests of DNU Students.", was provided. This was

accomplished on social networking sites via E-mail addresses, Zalo, and Facebook Messenger. Participants submitted their responses to the form's creators for synthesis and analysis. As a consequence, the survey received 124 responses.

3.5 Data Analysis

In this study, the data was gathered by quantitative analysis. The Google form collected the participants' responses after the survey was submitted. To assemble the statistics, Google Forms generated a summary of the responses. Then, the researchers utilized Excel to transform the data from the responses into table and charts. In this study, the variables included name, age, gender, major, subjective and objective factors that affect listening comprehension ability in the test, and potential solutions to surmount. However, not all of the data were investigated. Therefore, the authors just picked the table and charts that covered the data satisfying the topical requirements "Factors Affecting Listening Comprehension on IELTS Tests of Students in Dong Nai University".

4. Findings

4.1 Sample Characteristic

Of the 124 responses, more than half of the participants were female (71%), male participants accounted for 27.4%, and the rest of the participants did not want to mention gender (1.6%).

The age of Dong Nai University students participating in the survey ranged from 18 to more than 21. The majority were 20 years old, constituting 69.4% while 12.9% of the total number of students participating in the survey were at the age of 19. The smaller part was 18-year-old students, occupying 8.1%. 6.5% of students participating in the survey were at the age of 21. Only 4 out of the 124 participants (3.2%) were over 21. The clearer information is illustrated in table 1.

Table 1: Gender and range of age

		Frequency (N) N=124	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	34	27.4
	Female	88	71
	Rather not say	2	1.6
Age	18	10	8.1
	19	16	12.9
	20	86	69.4
	21	8	6.5
	>21	4	3.2

4.1 Results of the study

The question about whether students have ever participated in the IELTS test was asked in the survey. Most students answered that they had never taken the IELTS exam. More specifically, up to 72.6% out of 100% of students participating in the survey (90 out of 124) have never taken the IELTS exam. Meanwhile, 34 students have taken the IELTS exam (accounting for 27.4%). These data are demonstrated in chart 1.

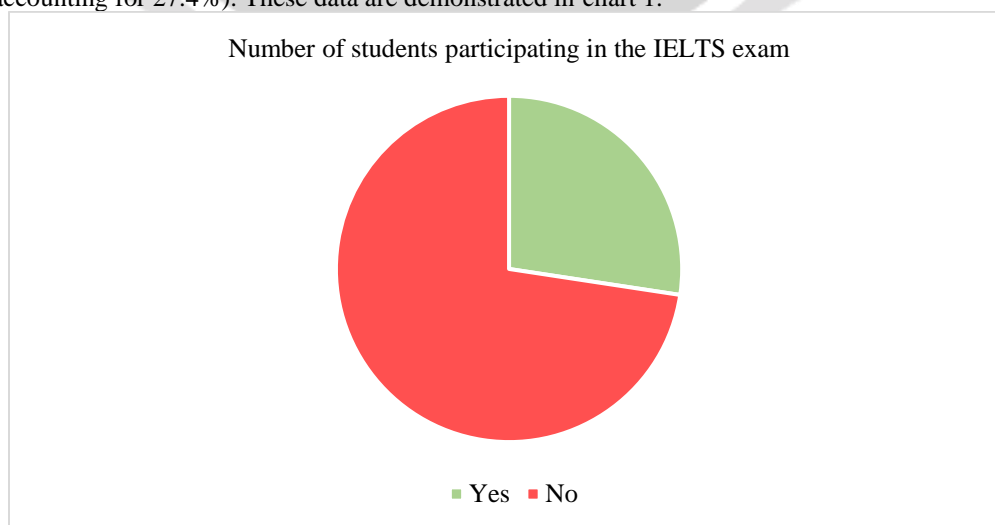


Chart 1: Number of students participating in the IELTS exam

The participants in the study were also questioned about the band score they would achieve if they had taken the International English Language Testing System exam. The analysis results show that out of a total of 34 students who participated in the exam, 14 students achieved a band below 6.5 (11.3%). We also recorded that about 8 students achieved band 6.5 (6.5%). Up to 4.8% of students scored above 7.5. Meanwhile, 3.2% of students achieved a band score of 7.0 (4 out of 34). Only 2 students scored 7.5 (1.6%) (see chart 2). The results of the study indicated that the IELTS exam sees a limited number of students participating and attaining high band scores. To make it clear, the information is provided in chart 2.

Band score that students achieved in the IELTS exam

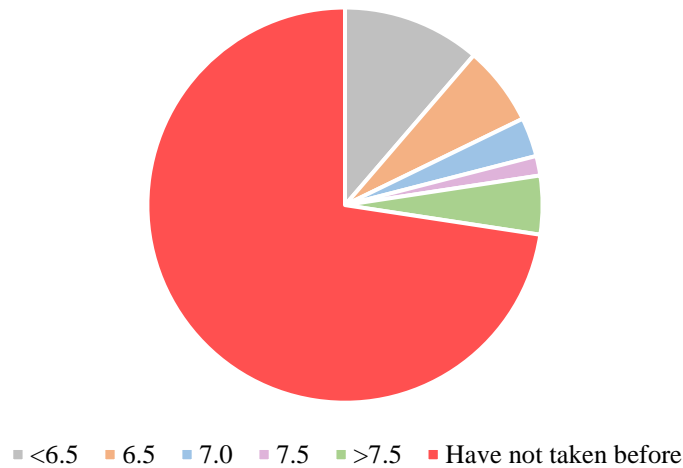


Chart 2: Band score that students achieved in the IELTS exam

Another question for research is to ask students to indicate the most difficult skill in the IELTS test. The majority of students chose the most difficult skill among the four skills, which is listening skill (56.5%) while only 1.6% of students participating in the survey chose reading skills to be the most intricate (2 out of 124). (see chart 3)

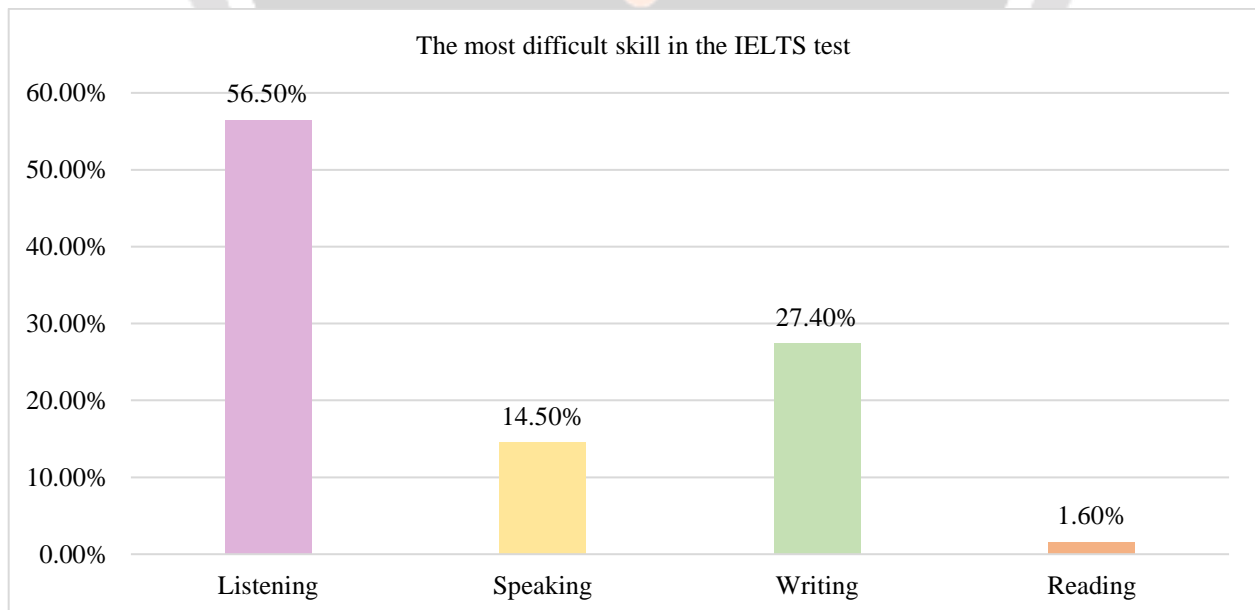


Chart 3: The most difficult skill in the IELTS test

One of the important questions is which subjective factors affect students' listening comprehension ability. Out of the 124 students who participated in the survey, 92 (74.2%) identified a lack of vocabulary and grammar as a subjective reason for their listening comprehension ability. Among the options provided by the surveyor, only 12.9% of students expressed that neglecting the specific task requirements is a subjective cause that hinders their listening comprehension. Interestingly, one student offered an alternative choice, highlighting the low-quality audio tracks played on a crappy jukebox what they referred to as "traditional education". The data are revealed in chart 4.

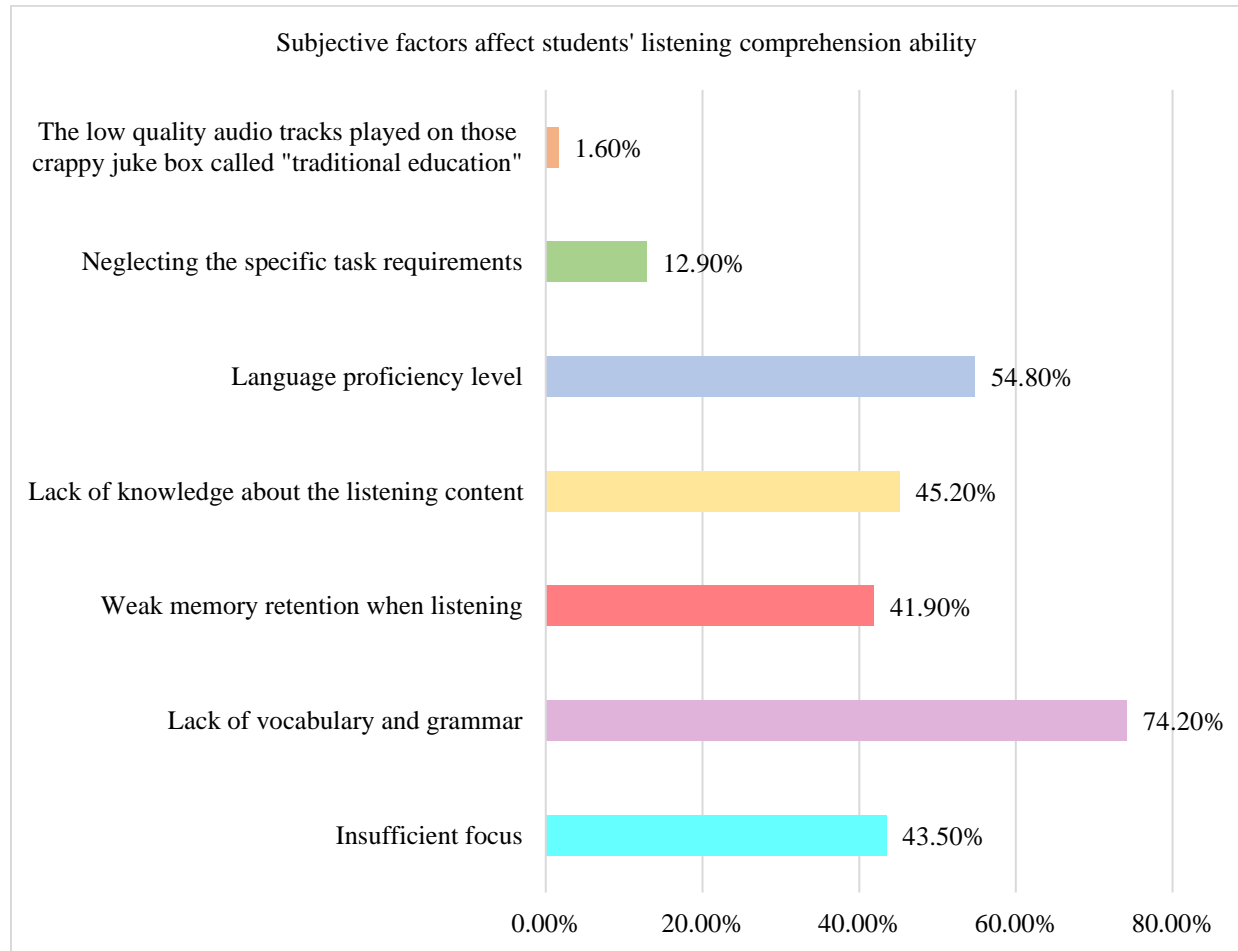


Chart 4: Subjective factors affect students' listening comprehension ability

Another crucial aspect contributing to the research is the exploration of objective factors that impact students' listening comprehension. A significant majority of students (66.1%) experience the influence of environmental factors, including noise and interference, on their listening comprehension. Notably, two options that received an equal number of votes are unfamiliar or difficult-to-understand pronunciation and the speed of the audio. Both options were chosen by 74 out of 124 students (59.7%) as objective factors that affect their listening comprehension abilities. (see chart 5)

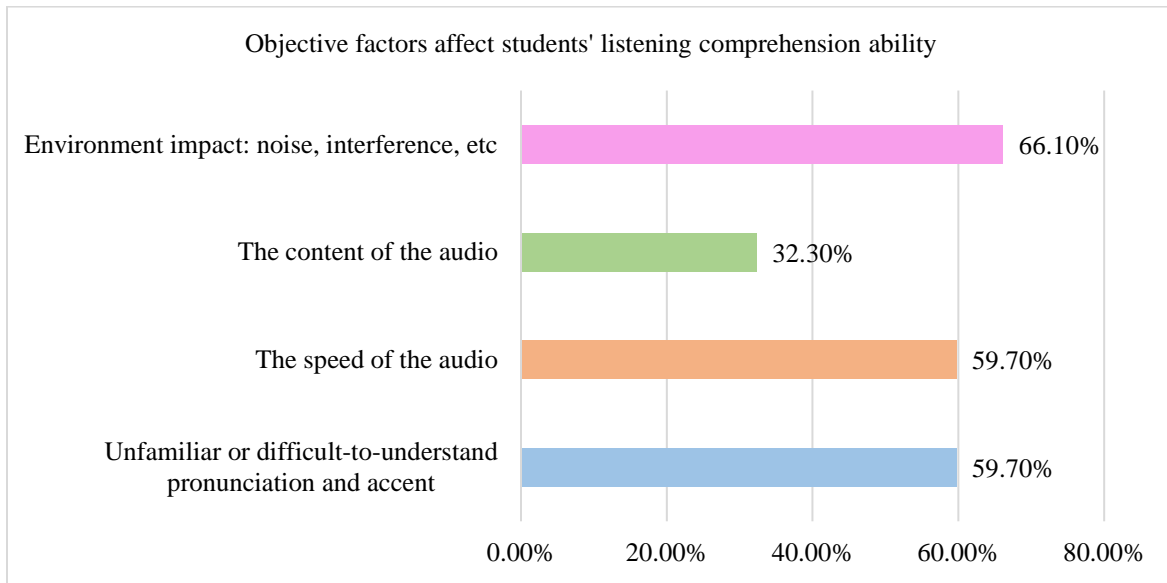


Chart 5: Objective factors affect students' listening comprehension ability

Furthermore, researchers provide valuable recommendations to support learners in enhancing their listening skills and improving their comprehension abilities. A significant majority of students (72.6%) opt to engage in regular listening practice as a means to improve their comprehension skills. Additionally, 48 students (38.7%) choose to focus on learning standard pronunciations and employ the method of practicing spelling dictation to enhance their listening abilities. These data are demonstrated in chart 6.

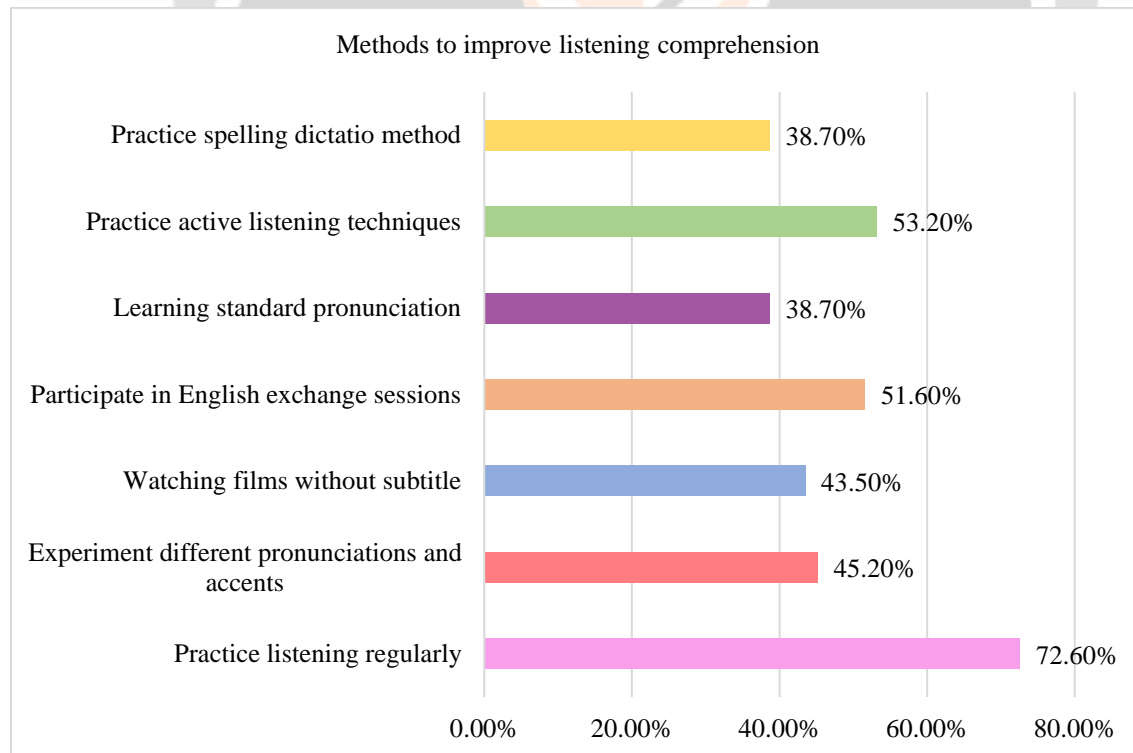


Chart 6: Methods to improve listening comprehension

5. Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

The findings of this study align with the current literature on the issues, which include unfamiliar vocabulary (Hardiyanto et al., 2021; Bingol et al, 2014), lack of contextual knowledge (Gilakjani, A. P., & Ahmadi, S. M., 2011; Nguyen, X. 2020), and inability to concentrate (Vandergrift, 2004; Walker, 2014). Although these findings are similar to existing literature, the study was slightly different from prior studies in ignoring the task's particular demands. As a result, during examinations, specifically in international examinations, students may provide incorrect answers to questions despite their listening comprehension of the audio. Other reasons for their subpar performance in listening comprehension include inadequate memory retention when listening and low-quality audio.

5.2 Recommendations

The findings of the study indicate that the teaching approach to listening skills in Vietnam fails to yield satisfactory results for language learners (Nguyen, M. T., 2020). The overemphasis on grammar and translation exercises in English classes impedes Vietnamese students' ability to develop their listening proficiency. In order to improve listening comprehension, it is crucial for teachers to create an English-speaking environment and design instructional materials and classroom activities using an effective approach. In fact, teachers, curriculum planners, and textbook writers should take these factors into consideration to enhance the listening performance of Vietnamese students. In addition to teachers' guidance and support, students themselves need to enrich their vocabulary mastery and practice active listening regularly. For instance, outside the classroom they can make full use of some books related to IELTS vocabulary, watch videos or TV and listen to audiobooks in English for autonomy.

5.3 Conclusion

Extensive research has been conducted on various aspects of listening comprehension skills, including the main factors influencing students' performance in listening comprehension, students' listening performance in the IELTS test, and some strategies to improve listening comprehension skills. However, little is known about Vietnamese students' listening comprehension, especially the major problems that they face. This study identified listening as the most difficult skill in IELTS tests, seven subjective reasons that affect their listening comprehension, four objective reasons, and several methods to improve listening comprehension. Based on the findings, this study recommends that, in addition to the guidance provided by teachers, learners should also endeavor to expand their vocabulary and reinforce their background knowledge. Furthermore, it is incumbent upon each individual to identify and adopt a suitable method for practicing listening skills. Establishing a consistent practice routine for listening exercises not only facilitates the enhancement of students' listening comprehension abilities but also contributes to the overall improvement of their English proficiency.

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