

STUDENTS' ANXIETY IN TAKING THE LISTENING TEST

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ABSTRACT

It is undeniable that English has become the most popular foreign language in Vietnam. Of the essential skills in learning a foreign language, listening is often considered as the most difficult skill. This study aimed to find out how anxiety affects students in taking the listening tests. Data were collected from ten English majors from Tay Do University. The researcher used six open-ended questions to find out whether the students had difficulty in taking the listening test due to their anxiety. The results showed that students majoring in English were often worried and nervous in the listening tests. Test anxiety also resulted in students' other physical symptoms such as a racing heartbeat, handshaking, lightheadedness, and even nausea. In the worse situations, these symptoms led the students to the bad results and losing motivation. Through this research, a few suggestions were given to help the students to overcome such negative emotions in the listening test or exam.

Keyword: *Listening anxiety, Listening skill, The influence of test anxiety*

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, listening plays an important role in everyday life. First of all, listening is the most important skill in practical communication. We can speak sensibly when we understand what is being said to us. If we do not understand the spoken language, we may miss important information and respond in a funny way. Furthermore, in language learning, the hands-on approach is a useful means of providing students with easy-to-understand input. And teaching listening skills in the classroom helps students switch from classroom English to real-life English more easily and effectively.

However, listening is arguably the most difficult due to the complex and delicate nature of listening comprehension in a second or foreign language. Listening, like reading, is an easy skill to learn but it is often the most difficult for students. Listening is even more difficult than reading. When reading, the reader often has many opportunities to review the text to clarify understanding. But the listener can't do that in most listening contexts such as a TV show, meeting, discussion, photograph, or conversation. Moreover, the biggest problem they students often face in the listening tests or exams is that they often get so nervous and anxious that their psychology can affect their listening performance. The purpose of this study was to investigate how anxiety influenced the students when taking the listening tests.

Research question

This study was conducted in order to answer the following research question:

How does anxiety influence English-majored students when taking the listening tests?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definitions of listening

Listening has been defined by many researchers. Chastain (1971) defined listening as the ability to understand native speech at normal speed. Morley (1972) said listening involves auditory discrimination, aural grammar, selecting necessary information, remembering it, and connecting it to the process between sound and form of meaning. According to Postovsky (1975), listening differs in meaning from sound discrimination to aural comprehension. Goss (1982) defined listening as a process of understanding what is heard and organizing it into lexical elements to which meaning can be allocated. Bowen, Madsen, and Hilferty (1985) demonstrated that listening is understanding

the oral language. Students hear oral speech, divide sounds, classify them into lexical and syntactic units, and comprehend the message. Listening is a process of receiving what the speaker says, making and showing meaning, negotiating meaning with the speaker and answering, and creating meaning by participation, creativity, and empathy. Listening is the key to all effective communication, without the ability to listen effectively, messages can be easily misunderstood. If there's one communication skill you should aim to master, it's listening.

2.2 The effects of anxiety on listening comprehension

When anxiety is present in the listening testing room, it may have negative effects on the students. Anxiety makes them nervous and afraid, which contributes to poor listening performance. And in the worse situations, the students' anxiety can even create more anxiety and worse performance. Anxiety may be the cause of distracted thinking. The students may find themselves anxiously thinking about numerous things and forget that they need to concentrate on the listening test. In this way, distracted thinking makes it very hard to listen and give the correct answers in the tests or exams.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

The participants in this research were ten students who were English majors from Tay Do University. They were four males and six females. Their ages ranged from 19 to 21. All of them were randomly selected. They had studied four semesters with foreign teachers and were looking for more ways to improve their English.

3.2 Instrument

The purpose of this research was to find out how anxiety influenced the students when taking the listening tests. The researchers interviewed ten English majors at Tay Do University with 6 open-ended questions. These interview questions were mainly about students' pressure and anxiety when doing the listening tests and how these psychological factors affected their listening performance.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Students' pressure and anxiety when taking the listening tests

The data obtained from the interviews showed that a majority of the students felt worried and nervous before and while taking the listening tests.

"When I listen to words that I don't understand, I feel worried. This leads to my anxiety and makes me misunderstand the meaning of the listening test." (Female, English translation)

"Most students are afraid of the listening part because their listening skills are very weak and worried about accent and speed." (Male, English translation)

"Listening is the skill that makes me worried the most whenever I have to take a test or an exam. The native speakers speak too fast and it's hard to understand their main ideas." (Male, English translation)

"I often feel worried a lot before taking the exam. Even when I can listen to all the speakers said, I sometimes cannot give the correct answers because there are so many distractors in the test." (Female, English translation)

Although most of the students were nervous, there were also students who were very calm and mastered the tips for the listening tests.

"I feel comfortable. I only worry when I can't recognize all the words that bring me." (Female, English translation)

"I try to keep calm and use the listening strategies I have trained in class to get the best results." (Male, English translation)

"Practice makes me more confident. The more I practice, the less calm and confident I feel." (Female, English translation)

It can be seen that worrying was the common emotion among the students when taking the listening tests. Besides, practicing regularly before the exam was also a strategy used successfully by several students to control the negative feelings during the exam.

4.2. The effects of anxiety on students' listening performance

Six over ten students admitted that they used to be affected by anxiety and pressure in the listening tests. Consequently they got poor results and even failed the exam.

"That was the final listening exam in my first year at the university. I felt a bit nervous because my listening skill was not good. I was thinking around and couldn't concentrate on the listening test. So my grades were quite low." (Female, English translation)

"I took the listening test with my fear of poor grades because I didn't want to lose my fame of the top-ranking student in my class. This pressure made me have a headache during the test, and I think this affected my final listening results a bit." (Male, English translation)

Test anxiety also resulted in students' other physical symptoms such as a racing heartbeat, handshaking, lightheadedness, and even nausea. And in the worse situations, these symptoms could lead the students to the bad results and losing motivation.

"When listening to native speakers, they speak very fast, so I cannot keep up. I usually get nervous and have a racing heartbeat in the last minutes in the tests. My hands begin to shake and I cannot do anything." (Female, English translation)

"I often thought that I am not good at listening, so in the listening tests I feel like scared because I don't understand what the native speakers say. The more I am anxious, the more I cannot do the test well. Then I feel bored and don't want to study listening anymore." (Male, English translation)

Fortunately, most of the participants recognized the problem and knew how to overcome the negative feelings by doing different ways. The followings were some methods applied to limit psychological problems in the listening tests.

"I reviewed the material I had studied, and when I took the test, I reviewed the question over and over." (Female, English translation)

"When I take the listening test, I often feel worried, then I try to hear the main ideas and content in the given passage but forget the important words. So when I have to answer the questions, I cannot do it well. That really shows skills needed to be good at listening, so it is really necessary and we should practice more to have a good listening skill." (Female, English translation)

5. CONCLUSION

In short, the results of this study showed that anxiety had a negative effect on students in the listening tests. The students faced some physical symptoms like racing heartbeat and handshaking, leading to the bad results and even losing motivation in learning listening skill. Through this study, the researcher hopes that the teachers can support their students so that they will feel more interested in learning listening and less strenuous. Furthermore, they can assist students in listening strategies by introducing, guiding, and explaining to students. For learning, the researcher recommends that students listen to more audio books. Thus, they not only improve their difficulties but also reduce anxiety when taking the listening tests. Furthermore, students can consult the listening strategies of the lecturer or on the Internet. These suggestions will be of great help to students in finding the best way to help them improve their listening skills and feel less stressful in the listening tests.

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