



Difficulties in English Listening Comprehension for Non-English Major Students at University of Transport and Communication Ho Chi Minh City Campus

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Article History

Received: 02.02.2024
Accepted: 11.03.2024
Published: 04.05.2024

Abstract: Nowadays, English plays a crucial role in many fields in Vietnam as well as globally. Therefore, having a good level of English proficiency is advantageous for many people in terms of studying, researching, and working. Among the English skills, listening is important but also poses challenges for learners. The purpose of this study is to identify the current situation and difficulties in English listening comprehension among non-major students, in order to find appropriate solutions to help learners improve their listening skills. The survey sample consists of 188 first-year students majoring in Accounting and Business Administration at university of transport and communication ho chi minh city campus. A listening skills test was administered after students had almost completed their English course with TOEIC orientation. The research results indicate several difficulties students encounter in listening, including: (1) Lack of vocabulary knowledge, (2) Weak ability to perceive and differentiate sounds, (3) Limited ability to infer and use listening strategies such as predicting or taking notes, and (4) Lack of concentration. Additionally, the results also highlight certain issues that educators should consider to help learners enhance their listening skills.

Keywords: English listening comprehension, non-English major students.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the realm of English skills, listening is considered a vital skill in communication as it enables learners to comprehend information about the surrounding world. According to Mendelsohn (1994), listening accounts for 40% to 50% of daily communication activities, while speaking comprises 25 to 30%; reading, 11 to 16%; and writing, only about 9%. Therefore, when unable to understand what they hear, learners may find it challenging to communicate effectively.

However, as Buck (2001, p.247) points out, "Listening is a complex activity requiring the listener to process the data, the sound signals received, and interpret

them based on linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge." Many studies have shown that English learners encounter difficulties with listening skills (Goh, 2000; Hassan, 2000; Liu, 2002).

In his study, Nguyen Ngoc An (2011) suggests that listening comprehension is regarded as one of the most challenging skills among the four language skills for non-major students in universities and colleges today. According to Hamouda (2013), English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners often struggle with listening comprehension because schools tend to focus more on teaching grammar, reading, and vocabulary. Listening skills are not emphasized in most teaching materials, and teachers do not focus on developing these skills in the

Citation: Thai Thi Xuan Ha & Nguyen Kim Vu Bao (2024). Difficulties in English Listening Comprehension for Non-English Major Students at University of Transport and Communication Ho Chi Minh City Campus. *Glob Acad J Linguist Lit*; Vol-6, Iss-3 pp-93-96.

classroom. He also emphasizes that understanding what others say is a challenging activity for learners. Learners face many issues when listening. If teachers want to help learners improve their listening skills, they need to understand the common difficulties learners encounter and devise suitable listening strategies or effective remedies.

There are several reasons why learners find listening challenging. According to Ur (1996), English learners often encounter difficulties in listening, such as: (1) Failure to recognize the sounds native English speakers make, (2) Having the habit of needing to understand every word in a sentence to grasp the content, (3) Difficulty in understanding when native speakers speak English fast and naturally, (4) Needing to listen repeatedly to understand, (5) Finding it challenging to capture all information and predict what the speaker is about to say, and (6) Feeling tired and unable to concentrate if they have to listen for an extended period

Regarding listening comprehension, Rubin (1994) identifies five influencing factors. These include (1) Characteristics of the listening material such as speaking speed, pauses, stress, and intonation.

Yagang (1994) suggests that to determine whether a listening task is difficult or easy, four factors should be considered: (1) the listening message, (2) the speaker, (3) the listener, and (4) the listening context. Yagang's opinion is somewhat synthesized and similar to

that of Rubin (1994) and Ur (1996). In general, if the listening message contains unfamiliar content, dense information density, listeners may find it difficult to comprehend and remember it all. To help learners find effective solutions to improve listening skills, this study primarily focuses on understanding the subjective factors of the listener, specifically the sub-listening skills that students have not yet applied effectively.

2. METHODOLOGY

The participants in the study included 188 first-year students majoring in Accounting and Business Administration. They have learnt English level A2 in the course.

The descriptive statistical study was conducted to identify the difficulties in English listening comprehension among non-major students. The data collection tool was a listening skills test administered to students after they had nearly completed the TOEIC-oriented English course. The test was designed following the TOEIC format, selected from the Starter TOEIC (3rd Ed) book by Anne Taylor and Casey Malarcher (2016), closely resembling the listening exercises students were exposed to in class with equivalent difficulty levels. The test lasted 560 seconds (nearly 10 minutes), comprising 20 multiple-choice questions (with Part 2 having only 3 choices, while the other parts had 4 choices), divided into 4 sections, each containing 5 questions, as described in detail in the following table:

Table 1: Listening skill in TOEIC test

Section	Part	Content	# of Items	Duration	Scores
Listening Comprehension	1	Photographs	6	45 mins.	495
	2	Question-Response	25		
	3	Conversations	39		
	4	Short Talks	30		

The listening test was conducted with the researcher's efforts to minimize the specific influences of external factors. Specifically, the format of the listening test resembled the exercises students encountered during their classroom lessons. The content revolved around common topics found in the TOEIC test with similar durations. The speakers did not have overly unusual or distinctive accents. The listening environment was free from background noise or distractions.

3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The listening test consisted of a total of 20 questions, with one point awarded for each correct answer and no points deducted for incorrect answers. The results of the test were analyzed using the SPSS

software, with a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .642, indicating that the scale was sufficiently reliable for use in the survey. One-sample t-tests were conducted to examine whether the overall average score and the scores for each section differed significantly from the sample mean of 0.5. The average scores for Part 1 and Part 2 were 0.73 and 0.76, respectively, above the sample mean of 0.5, with both p-values (pP and pR) equal to .00 (MDP = 0.23, MDR = 0.26). The average scores for Part 3 and Part 4 were 0.40 and 0.38, respectively, below the sample mean of 0.5, with both p-values (pC and pT) equal to .00 (MDC = -0.10, MDT = -0.12). The results indicate that the overall average score of the listening test for the 188 students was 0.57, which is only slightly higher than the sample mean of 0.5, with MDtt = 0.07.

These findings suggest that the listening ability of students after nearly completing the TOEIC-oriented English course was only slightly higher than the sample average, with no significant difference ($p = .00$), despite the test being similar to the course content in terms of format and difficulty. Specifically, students' ability to comprehend disconnected sentences was better than their ability to understand dialogues or monologues, particularly when listening to monologues (continuous speech by one person), as evidenced by the lowest score in Part 4 (MT = 0.38).

In Part 1 (Picture description), students listen to 4 simple sentences and choose 1 sentence that corresponds to the given picture. According to the results, the percentage of students who correctly understood the sentences in Part 1 was higher than 50%. However, among them, the differentiation between action verbs and positions was better than distinguishing nouns indicating places and objects because the percentage of students answering correctly for sentences 3, 4, and 5 was higher than the percentage of students answering correctly for sentences 1 and 2, with a difference of approximately 15% to nearly 30%. This indicates that students may have a passive or incomplete understanding of this vocabulary or lack vocabulary altogether. Their ability to perceive sounds may also be weak, causing them to recognize these words when reading but not when hearing them or combining them with written words or their meanings

In Part 2 (Questions - Responses), students listen to a question and choose a corresponding response from 3 options provided. According to the results, the percentage of students selecting the correct response for question R1 was only 44.7%, the lowest among the 5 questions. This suggests that students may have difficulty distinguishing similar sounds such as "at" and "It's," possibly due to lack of attention or critical thinking skills needed to predict and select the correct response

In Part 3 (Short conversations), students listen to two short dialogues and answer questions based on them. The results indicate that students' listening ability for the dialogues was not very good, with the average scores for most questions being below 50%. Students encountered difficulties in understanding detailed information (48.9% correct for question C1), especially when there were similar-sounding words (39.9% correct for question C5). Students were better able to recognize answers when they closely resembled the words used in the dialogue and were reiterated using related terms (75.5% correct for question C4). The lowest scores were for questions requiring students to comprehend information combined with inference (12.2% correct for question C2 and 23.9% correct for question C3). Thus, despite the overall poor performance in listening to the dialogues, students were better at grasping detailed information when combined with inference. This could

be due to students lacking inference skills or not applying listening sub-skills effectively

In Part 4 (Short talks), students listen to two monologues and answer questions based on them. The scores for this section were quite low, with only question T4 reaching an average level (58.5% correct), while the remaining questions were all below 40%. The higher score for question T4 compared to the others is likely because the answers are based on simple, short, and less informative sentences. Similar to the results in Part 3, questions requiring inference combined with listening comprehension had relatively low scores (30.3% correct for question T1 and 33% correct for question T2). The average scores for question T3 and T5 were also around 30% because the answers involved longer, more detailed sentences or information near the end of the listening passage when students' ability to concentrate decreases, and information is mentioned only once.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The research results indicate that the listening ability of the study participants is only at an average level despite the listening passages not being particularly difficult and containing content similar to what was taught in class. These results also help identify some of the difficulties students face when listening and the reasons behind these difficulties. Specifically, (1) students are better at distinguishing action verbs than nouns indicating places or objects, possibly due to vocabulary knowledge gaps. (2) Their ability to differentiate certain words is limited, and they struggle with distinguishing similar sounds, which may stem from vocabulary knowledge gaps, lack of critical thinking skills for inference, or ineffective listening techniques. (3) Students perform better at understanding individual sentences than longer passages, indicating slower sound recognition, limited concentration, note-taking, and retention skills. (4) Listening to repeated information is better retained than information mentioned only once, suggesting limited concentration, note-taking, and retention skills, possibly because students expect to hear information multiple times. (5) Students are better at grasping detailed information than inferring, indicating poor application of inference skills while listening. These results align with what expert Ur (1996) outlined in her language teaching book. Thus, the results show that language learners often encounter difficulties while listening, which may be due to (1) Vocabulary knowledge gaps, (2) Poor sound recognition and differentiation, (3) Limited use of listening strategies such as inference, note-taking, and retention, and (4) Lack of concentration.

To help learners improve their listening skills, teachers need to address the following issues: Learners should regularly supplement their vocabulary knowledge. Practicing listening and spelling, as well as practicing distinguishing homophones, are also considered necessary activities. Learners need to develop

their critical thinking, inference, interpretation, and prediction skills before, during, and after listening. Listening and note-taking are also important skills to improve concentration and information retention.

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