



A Survey on Difficulties in Learning Listening Skill of English Majored Students at Tay Do University, Viet Nam

Phan Thị Minh Uyên¹, Nguyễn Thị Thúy Hằng², Phạm Thị Mỹ Huyền³

^{1,2,3} Tay Do University, Vietnam

ABSTRACT

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Though listening ability is one of the important skills in foreign language learning, there has been relatively little research in this specific area. The present study attempts to investigate the listening problems encountered by 50 students from Bachelor of English class at Tay Do University. In study process, questionnaire is used as an instruments to collect the data. The results of the research will point out some listening problems that students usually face in their learning process. The expected outcomes will be relevant the students in recognizing their listening problems.

Keywords:

Listening, English majored students, university

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

English plays an important role in our everyday life. There is great utility of English in modern world. English is used popularly to communicate in several areas such as business, diplomacy, tourism and so on. English is also essential to the field of education. In many countries, children are taught and encouraged to learn English as a second language. Even in countries where it is not an official language, such as Vietnam, a lot of syllabi in science and engineering are written in English. Because it is the dominant language in the sciences, most of the research and studies that find in any given scientific field will be written in it as well.

At the university level, students in many countries study almost all their subjects in English in order to make the material more accessible to international students. Besides, in Vietnam, English is taught widely as a foreign language in order to help students meet their own purposes. Certainly, English is one of the necessary requirements for those who want to get a good job or continue to study in higher education. For some lecturers when learning foreign language, students often concentrate on four basic skills, they are speaking, listening, reading and writing. Among these skills, listening is an important skill which needs to be developed.

Corresponding Author: Phan Thị Minh Uyên

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According to Nunan (1998) listening is the basic skill in language learning. Without listening skill, learners never learn to communicate effectively.

However, it is not easy to develop listening skill because there are a ton of difficulties that students English majored still face in listening subject. Learners have serious problems in English listening subject due to the fact that universities pay more attention to English grammar, reading and vocabulary. Listening and speaking skills are not important parts of many course books or curricula, and teachers do not seem to pay attention to these skills while designing their lessons. Most teachers take it for granted and believe that it will develop naturally within the process of language learning. Persullessy (1988:50) stated that one of the reasons listening is a skill that tends to be neglected is the feeling among language teachers that this skill is automatically acquired by the learner as he learns to speak the language.

Another reason why this skill is not given serious attention is the fact that incompetence in it is easy to hide through nodding and shaking of the head, which may give the impression of understanding, even there is none. Still another reason is that audio-lingual courses give the impression that they are teaching listening when in fact they are teaching other skills. In addition to this, Nobuko Osada (2004) reported that listening has not drawn much attention of both teachers and learners, they are generally less aware of its importance. In classrooms, teachers seem to test, not to teach listening. Meanwhile, students seem to learn listening, not listening comprehension. As a result, it remains the most neglected and the least understood aspect of language teaching (Glisan, 1985). In fact, listening is a complex mental process that involves perception, attention, cognition, and

memory. Comprehending speech in a foreign language is a quite difficult task for language learners. When listening to a foreign language, many language learners face difficulties. In order to help students improve their listening ability, language teachers have to understand students' listening difficulties in comprehending spoken texts, and instruct effective listening strategies to help students solve their listening difficulties.

Taking into consideration the importance of the listening ability to language students, this study aims to identify listening subject problems as perceived by the English majored students at Tay Do University. It is hoped that findings from this research will provide insights for the teaching and learning skill.

1.2 The significance of study

The research is conducted to help the students majoring in English recognize the difficulties in listening subject. Through the research results, they can realize that listening subject is not easy to learn. They should pay attention to avoid some basic problems. In addition, they also can decide a way to improve their listening skill.

1.3 The organization of the proposal

The proposal consists of five chapters

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Literature review

Chapter 3: Research Aim-Research Question-Hypothesis

Chapter 4: Research methodology

Chapter 5: Expected outcome

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definitions of listening

Listening is the act of hearing attentively. We listen more than speak. If this listening skill is used in a proper way we can master the tools of communicative skills. Listening is difficult, as human mind tends to distract easily. A person who controls his mind and listens attentively acquires various other skills and is benefited.

The term of listening can be defined by several ways. Listening skill can be defined as, the act of hearing attentively. It is also a process similar to reading which should possess knowledge of phonology, syntax, semantics and text understanding. Thomlison (1984) defines listening as "active listening, which is very important for effective communication. Listening skill makes you successful in workplace, family and in the society. Listening is also helps people understand what was said so that they can have an appropriate reply to each other. The term of listening can be defined by several ways. According to the ILA (international Listening Association, 1996) listening is *"the process of receiving constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages"*. Listening is the ability to accurately receive and interpret messages in the communication process. In addition, *"listening is the conscious processing of the auditory stimuli that have been*

perceived through hearing" (West, Richard; Turner, Lynn (2010). Listening is not an easy process of communication because *"listening in any language requires focus and attention. It is a skill that some people need to work at harder than others"*.

Moreover, Howatt and Dakin (1974) define that *"listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This involves understanding a speaker accent or pronunciation, his grammar and his vocabulary, and grasping his meaning"*. Wipf (1984) also states that listening is an invisible mental process, making it difficult to describe. Listeners must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intention, retain and interpret this within the immediate as well as the larger socio-cultural context of the utterance". However, according to Bulletin (1952: para. 6), *"listening is one of the fundamental language skills. It is medium through which children, young people and adults gain a large portion of their education-their information, their understanding of the world and of human affairs, their ideals, sense of values, and their appreciation."*

Although listening plays an important role in learning English as well as in daily life, people cannot distinguish listening from hearing. They sometimes think that listening is hearing. Nevertheless, "there are a lot of differences between listening and hearing." (G.K. Chesterton). Hearing is one of the five senses of a person and it is the ability to perceive sound by detecting vibrations through an organ such as the ear. Listening also known as „active listening“ is a technique used in communication which requires a person to pay attention to the speaker and provide feedback. Listening is a step further than hearing, where after the brain receives the nerve impulses and deciphers it, it then sends feedback.

Hearing and Listening, though synonymous, are complete different things. You can hear someone without actually listening to anything. Hearing is one of the five senses of a person and it is the ability to perceive sound by detecting vibrations through an organ such as the ear. According to Merriam-Webster, hearing is "the process, function, or power of perceiving sound; specifically: the special sense by which noises and tones are received as stimuli." In hearing, vibrations are detected by the ear and then converted into nerve impulses and sent to the brain. A person who is unable to hear has a condition known as deafness. Hearing occurs even in sleep, where the ear processes the sounds and passes them on to the brain, but the brain does not always react to the sound.

In short, through years, a lot of ways to define listening has been observed. Among these definitions, Wolvin and Coakley (1985) share the idea that listening is "the process of receiving, attending to and assigning meaning to aural stimuli, that is, message transmitted through the medium of

sound". This is the one that considered as a highly acceptable definition.

2.2 The importance of listening

Listening is important in personal lives, daily activities and a career and employment environment. Many top employers spend money to ensure that their employees are able to effectively listen. They provide seminar, classes and training sessions that are geared toward helping employees learn how to listen better in various situations. This does not simply involve the input of information into the ears but allows employees to better interpret what they have heard when someone else is speaking. Knowing how to listen properly will ensure a greater level of success in a career environment. Listening is also important because of some reasons. Firstly, occupies a big chunk of the time we spend communicating in the language. Think about the times you spend listening to others speak or listening to songs, news, lectures, YouTube, etc. Recent advances in technology have served to raise the profile of the listening skill in language teaching. Secondly, provides input that can be very significant for second language acquisition in general and for the development of the speaking skill in particular. Finally, promotes non-linear processing of language and encourages learners to develop "holistic" strategies to texts. As language teachers, we need to think of how we can incorporate listening into our teaching and provide opportunities both inside and outside the classroom for our students to be exposed to significant listening input. However, this represents a challenge as we shall see in the following section.

2.3 Problems in listening subject

2.3.1 Problems pertaining to understanding word by word

Almost students try to understand word by word when they are listening or communicating with foreigners. Therefore, students find it difficult to understand the meaning of every single word in the speech. This supports the claims of Muhammad Naeem Butt et al, (2010) who think that some foreign language learners try to understand every single word of incoming speech, but actually, doing so is both unnecessary and impossible. Moreover, it takes a lot of time and makes them missing the next sentences. It is not even advisable because when they are trying hard to get every individual word or phrase, listeners are not seeing "the forest for the trees."

2.3.2 Problems pertaining to lack of vocabulary

Lack of vocabulary is a reason that students cannot show what they are thinking. They just keep it inside because they do not have enough vocabulary to express their ideas, thoughts and emotion. In addition, they also meet difficulties in the way to choose appropriate word in particular contexts. As Rabab'ah (2003) points out "the students often lack the necessary vocabulary when they are engaged in authentic vocabulary when they communicative situation". Besides, most students don't recognise the words that they know.

Because students might not recognise a word include not distinguishing between different sounds in English (e.g. /l/ and /r/ in "led" and "red" for many Asians), or conversely trying to listen for differences that do not exist, e.g. not knowing words like "there", "their" and "they're" are homophones. Other reasons are problems with word stress, sentence stress, and sound changes when words are spoken together in natural speech such as weak forms. What all this boils down to is that sometimes pronunciation work is the most important part of listening comprehension skills building.

Besides, these students are also facing problems in unfamiliar vocabulary. Hung (1998) informed that listening passages with known words are easier for learners to understand, even if the theme is unknown to them. His research represented that knowing the meaning of the words might arouse students learning interest and lead to a positive effect in listening ability. Another problem is here that many words have more than one meaning and if they are used their less common usage students get confused.

2.3.3 Problems pertaining to variety of accents

In a modern textbook, students have to deal with a variety of British, American and Australian accents. Besides, students are aware of different native-speaker accents. Of course, strong regional accents are not suitable for training in listening, but in spontaneous conversation native speakers do have certain accents. Moreover, the American accent is quite different from the British and Australian. Thus, it is necessary to let students deal with different accents, especially in extensive listening. According to Munro and Derwing (1998) claimed that too many genres of accented speech would result in a significant reduction in comprehension. In this case, teachers has to familiarize the students both British and American accent. It is an endless debate that what is the Standard English? Some says the British English is the standard. But English is spoken all over the world by Indian, Australian, Chinese, Turkish, and so on. Therefore, the best one is the one you can communicate.

2.3.4 Problems pertaining to poor grammar

Grammar structure is an important factor affecting listening skill. According to James (2005:2) "Grammar is a study of the structure of the language and describes the way of putting words together to make meaningful sentences". However, students usually make grammatical errors when they speak such as tenses, word order and punctuation. Their sentences are like translating word-by-word from Vietnamese. Thus, they are confused when they listen to the foreigner. In addition, most students have responded that difficult grammatical interfered with their listening comprehension. The percentages point out difficult grammatical structures cause much trouble to students. This conforms to Vogely's study (1998) which shows that the difficulty in listening comprehension is partly due to the structural component of the text.

2.3.5 Problems pertaining to the length of a spoken text

In addition to the insufficiency of vocabulary and the difficulty of grammatical structures, the length of the listening text was one of the main reasons the students can't understand most of the talk. This confirms Ur's assertion (1984) which justifies that the difficulty in listening comprehension is partly due to. The length of the listening texts itself which bore listeners and distract their concentration. Therefore, it is possible to infer that long spoken texts interfere

2.3.6 Problems pertaining to speed of the listening

The level of students plays a great role when listening long parts and keeping all the information in the mind. It is not easy for the lower level student to listen more than three minutes long listening then completing the desired activities. Short listening texts facilitate listening comprehension and diminish boredom, keep English learners concentration alive (Atkins et al 1995). If the text contains a lot of information, it is not easy to store everything in mind, exceptional listening ability and strategy required to understand (Carroll, 1977). Another reason makes listening text difficult is the speed. If the speakers speak faster than normal listener may have difficulties to catch target words. Underwood states that on the contrary of reading comprehension the listener cannot control speed of the speaker and this cause the greatest difficulty with listening comprehension (Underwood, 1989, p.16). It is clear for most language learners and teachers that a slower speech speed would facilitate beginner learners' listening comprehension (Flaherty, 1979; Griffiths, 1990, 1992; King & Behnke, 1989; Zhao, 1997). Blau (1990) concluded that lessen the input speed is one of the effective technics that helps comprehension for second language learners.

2.3.7 Problems pertaining to basic background knowledge

Background knowledge about a topic is also an important variable that can influence listening. Even if a person has mastered the skill of analyzing speech accurately and automatically, lack of basic background knowledge can cause reduced listening comprehension (Samuels, 1984). With poor background knowledge students cannot build good ideas to attract speakers. They do not know how to express what they want to say because they lack information about the new topics. Moreover, many students use their experience and background knowledge of the topic to understand the spoken text. This finding supports Hasan (2000) who has suggested that associating newly heard information with prior knowledge is a powerful and very frequently used way to guess the meaning of a listening passage.

2.3.8 Problems pertaining to cultural differences

Being unfamiliar of cultural knowledge of language plays a great role understanding the context. The marriage between language and culture is indivisible (Brown, 1994). The speech may contain completely different cultural matter than the students have. In this case students may have difficulties

to imagine what has been told. So that, students have to prepare the knowledge about the topic beforehand.

For instance, if the listening part is about Easter Day and it is not common in the area that language is being taught, students cannot catch some points.

2.3.9 Problems pertaining to noise

Noises is not her environmental barrier to comprehension. Noises including both background noises on the recording and environmental noises. It can take student's mind off the content of the listening passage. With the noise coming from corridors and other classes some students experience difficulty in listening to the teachers' voices. If the listening task is carried out with noises around, it is for sure they will not have a good result in listening.

2.3.10 Problems pertaining to anxiety

Boredom and frustration are other barriers to listening comprehension. Students usually feel boredom and frustration when they are communicating with foreigners. It may strongly affect the content of the speech. Besides, psychological factors are also making students forget anything or they may not be concentrated. Especially, they are always feels nervous and anxious when they don't understand the spoken text. According to Yagang (1993), the listening comprehension process is also a relatively complex psychological process.

2.4 Previous studies

One of previous studies related to this topic is "A study on difficulties and strategies in listening comprehension" conducted by Trinh (2015). Fifty English major from different classes in the faculty of foreign language in Lac Hong University participated in this research. To find out their listening experience as well as the time students spend on self-study, students are asked to put a tick for their best answer. In terms of the method, questionnaire was employed for this study. Questionnaire included closed and open-ended questions. The result showed that it is this stage that students should be equipped with variety of techniques right from their early listening. With appropriate strategies, they will have built up their listening skill by the time. Cause 89.5% of students failed their listening tests. This means that the listening is actually an obstacle to students. In addition, students seem to spend very little time on practicing at home 73.6% (sometimes), 5.2% (never), 10.5% (rarely). For their improvement, students listen to songs (63.2%), tapes and disks of the syllabus in University (43.4%), news in English (57.9%). (89.5%) students lacking of vocabulary that could be a barrier to them. Especially, most participants in this research consisting of 73.6% agreed that they listen to word by word.

One another of previous studies related to this topic is "A study of English listening problems and listening proficiency of business students at Bangkok University" conducted by Suradej Anadapon (2011). This study was conducted with thirty of Business students at Bangkok University with the

aim of investigating their English listening problems and listening proficiency. Questionnaire, IELTS Test, and Interview were used in this study as tools to collect data. As a result, the data will be analyzed by using SPSS. The result showed that the main reason that caused listening problem for the students is the listening text. However, the factors that mostly caused listening problems were lack of practicing listening skill and lack of exposure to different kinds of listening materials. The finding of this study would be great information for teachers to recognize students listening problems. Moreover, this study would be useful to probe the listening problems in a deeper level. On the contrary, this study would be helpful for the material developer to design effective listening materials for university students.

3. RESEARCH AIMS – RESEARCH QUESTIONS HYPOTHESIS

3.1 Research aim

Listening plays an important role in learning a language. Students majoring in English usually face a lot of problems when they communicate with foreigners or in listening tests. This research aims to find out some main difficulties as well as to provide some recommendations for improvement.

3.2 Research question

This research is conducted to answer the following question:
What are the difficulties in learning listening skill of English majored students at Tay Do?

3.3 Hypothesis

This research is hypothesized that English majored students may face difficulties in learning listening skill. This study also hypothesizes that the students may encounter some problems such as understand word by word, variety of accents, speed of listening, background knowledge and anxiety.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Design

The research is carried out to find out the difficulties that students have faced in learning listening subject. The reliability and the validity of the research results are based on the instruments. To achieve the above mentioned purposes, students majoring in English are chosen as the sample to the survey. The data from the participants will be collected through the questionnaire. The collected information will be analyzed to show the difficulties in learning listening subject.

4.2 Participants

The participants of this study are 50 English majored students at Tay Do University. The students come from different areas, both rural and urban. There are 25 boys and 25 girls. Their ages range from 19 to 21. They speak Vietnamese as their mother tongue and speak English as a foreign language. They will be given questionnaires and interview in order to get information about problems they have faced in listening skill.

4.3 Instruments

Questionnaire is used to collect participants' ideas about the difficulties in learning listening skills.

The questionnaire includes 5 questions and 30 statements which are classified into the following groups:

From 1 to 6: Participant's information

From 7 to 12: Difficulties in vocabulary

From 13 to 18: Difficulties in background knowledge

From 19 to 26: Difficulties in grammar

5. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Listening plays an important role in learning a language. Students majoring in English usually face problems when learning it. This study is expected to find out the problems that majored students have faced when they learning listening subject. These problems may include:

5.1 Problems pertaining to understand word by word

It's difficult to understand every single word when they are listening or communicating with foreigners. Students who lack of vocabulary is very difficult show what they are thinking. Students can get some new words and review old words by listening news in English. It is also necessary to learn antonyms, synonyms simultaneously and unfamiliar vocabulary. This a great method to increase vocabulary efficiently in order to support students' listening skill.

5.2 Problems pertaining to variety of accents

Variety of accents causes difficulties to students in listening comprehension since they do not have much exposure to different accents. For this linguistic feature, students need much more exposing to different kinds of accents. Besides, most of people from over the world speak English. That is a big deal for them. Thus, through this study student should try to listen to different kinds of accents through watching movie, BCC News or TEDtalks show.

5.3 Problems pertaining to speed of the listening

The foreigners are usually speaking very fast that students may have difficulties to catch target words and it is not easy to store everything in mind. Therefore, it is necessary to listen to short stories or some articles that can help students don't feel bored and tired anymore. For this reason, students have to practice listening skill every single day.

5.4 Problems pertaining to basic background knowledge

With poor background knowledge students cannot build good ideas to attract speakers. Thus, students should pay attention to reading books and news in English. That is helpful students widen general knowledge competence to contribute a successful in listening. Moreover, they can enhance knowledge about many fields such as society, culture, health, etc, which supply them a lot of necessary information to express their ideas in listening

5.5 Problems pertaining to anxiety

The length of time students listen may cause memory problems or even fatigue and this would distract listeners' attention from grasping the meaning of the text, and learners may miss the rest of the text when there is a lapse in

concentration. This may be attributed to the short memory span for the target language. Students need to feel confident, comfortable and relaxed. Especially, avoiding feel boredom and frustration when they are listening to the tests and communicating with foreigners.

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