

# DIFFICULTIES FACED BY THE FIRST-YEAR NON-MAJOR ENGLISH STUDENTS WHEN LEARNING LISTENING SKILLS: A CASE STUDY AT HANOI OPEN UNIVERSITY

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**Abstract:** *This study is an attempt to reveal the non-major English students' perception of the role of English listening skills and find out the difficulties that they frequently face while learning English listening comprehension; apart from that, some solutions are suggested. Mixed methods are used to conduct this study. The data were collected from 90 first-year non-major English students and 5 teachers of English at the Faculty of Economics, Hanoi Open University. The data were analyzed both quantitative and qualitative methods which include the data from survey questionnaires for students and interview questions for teachers. The results indicated that most of the students had positive awareness towards the role of English listening skills and the listening comprehension difficulties came from the physical setting and listeners/learners themselves. The paper also gives some suggestions for teaching and learning English listening skills for first-year non-major English HOU students in general and at the Faculty of Economics in particular. Hopefully, this study, to some extent, is very useful for teachers and students of English in the process of teaching and learning English listening skills.*

**Keywords:** *listening skills, difficulties, solutions, non-major English students.*

## **I. Introduction**

Among four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, listening skill is considered the key factor in learning a language, especially for learning a foreign language. Because listening comprehension is considered an essential part of communication skills. Ospina (2021) states that listening is the ability to receive, understand, interpret, and respond

to verbal and nonverbal messages from the speaker. Students of a language must master listening skills first, without which students understand nothing. However, for almost all the students, listening is the most challenging skill because of its complex and subtle nature in process of learning a foreign language.

During the process of teaching English for nearly 20 years, the author

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has realized that non-major students of English often face a lot of problems in learning English listening skills due to both subjective and objective reasons. Because of this, teachers should be aware of these difficulties to find out appropriate solutions to help their students to overcome these difficulties. Therefore, this study was aimed at identifying the first-year English non-major students and teachers' perceptions towards English listening skills, finding out some major difficulties in English listening skills encountered by the first-year English non-major students, and suggesting some possible solutions to improve the first-year English non-major students' listening skills.

## II. Literature review

### 2.1. *Listening and listening comprehension*

Howatt and Dakin (1974) consider listening as the ability to identify and understand what others are saying, involving understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, the speaker's grammar and vocabulary, and comprehension of meaning. An able listener can do these four things simultaneously.

Goss (1982) defines listening as a process of understanding what is heard and organizing it into lexical elements to which meaning can be allocated. Besides, Bowen et al. (1985) defined listening as 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.

In terms of listening comprehension, as well as listening, many researchers and scholars provided various definitions. Listening comprehension means that a person understands what he/she has heard. If he/she learns the text through hearing it, he/she will understand it (Brown and Yule, 1983), and comprehension is the ability of one individual to perceive another via sense, (specifically aural) organs, assigning a meaning to the message and comprehending it (Steinberg, 2007). Besides that, listening comprehension is a complex cognitive process in which listeners use their linguistic knowledge to deal with the incoming stimuli, retain what they receive, and interpret it within the sociocultural context of a message. Also, he emphasized that listening comprehension is an active process where learners must distinguish the learners may interpret and respond immediately when they listen to messages (Vandergrift, 1997). This definition refers to the notion that the learners are involved in the listening process. Moreover, said that listening comprehension is the various processes of understanding and making sense of spoken language (Nadig, 2013). These involve knowing speech sounds, comprehending the meaning of individual words, and understanding the syntax of sentences.

Concerning language teaching, listening refers to an activity that allows students to understand a spoken language. Gilakjani & Ahmadi (2011, 978) said that listening is receiving what the speaker states, understanding, expressing,

reasoning the meaning and giving a response, and generating the meaning through participation, imagination, and understanding. From an information processing perspective, the listening comprehension process is described as an active process in which listeners select and interpret information (visual, non-visual, pictorial) that comes from auditory and visual clues to figure out what is going on and what the speakers mean.

### ***2.2. Students' problems in listening***

According to Underwood (1989), there are seven basic problems confronted by listeners which are:

Being unable to fully control the speed of speakers.

Being unable to repeat what has been listened to.

Limited vocabulary range.

Being unable to recognize the signals.

Being unable to interpret.

Being unable to concentrate.

Being unable to form learning habits.

Later, Yagang (1993) claims that there are four sources of listening obstacles, which are: The messages of what students listen to; the speaker; the listener, and the physical setting. He also suggested some solutions to these problems. EFL teachers could provide their students with suitable listening materials, background and linguistic knowledge, comfortable classroom conditions, skills, and valuable drills to encourage effective listening comprehension. During the listening

process, an understanding is connected to several components: listening, the message, the context, the memory, and others. When listening, gestures, postures, facial expressions, other visual factors, and even silences are connected to understanding the message given by the speaker. Listening then means not only hearing but also being able to interpret and analyze the information received, creating one's analysis of the information, and creating one's concepts, opinions, and comments on what is heard. EFL learners have severe problems with English listening comprehension because schools and universities focus more on English grammar, reading, and vocabulary.

In brief, all the above definitions of listening comprehension are various to some extent. In this study, listening comprehension is a complex, unconscious, and unobserved mental operation, and it will develop naturally within the process of language learning. In addition to this, in this study, the difficulties that students face when listening skills are adapted from Yagang (1993)'s point of view. They are concerning the message, speaker, listeners/ learners, and physical setting. All of these are considered as a theoretical framework of the study which is used to design students' survey questionnaires.

### ***2.2. Methods of teaching listening skills***

Different scholars have different ways to mention two approaches to teaching listening. Brown (2003) presented two approaches to teaching listening skills, which are the bottom-up approach and the top-down approach. He

announced that the bottom-up technique typically focuses on the words, sounds, intonation, grammatical structures, and other components of spoken language, whereas, the top-down technique is more concerned with the activation of schemata, deriving meaning, global understanding, and the interpretation of a text. Wilson (2008, 15) shared the common idea with Brown in classifying listening approaches. He insisted that “the bottom-up model emphasizes the decoding of the smallest units - phonemes and syllables - to lead us towards meaning”. In other words, this approach places great importance on identifying discrete units of language in the text. Meanwhile, the top-down model is said to focus on the prediction of the messages based on the use of the listener’s prior knowledge. In other words, the top-down model highly values the comprehension process in the listener’s mind “before the listening has even begun”, whereas the bottom-up approach depends more “on the sounds heard”. According to Wilson (2008, 15), the issue of which model is more appropriate when we listen to foreign languages has long been a subject of debate. Some researchers criticized the bottom-up process because “it was assumed that most errors in listening comprehension were caused by students mishearing individual words - a failure of the bottom-up process. Meanwhile, the top-down process has also been claimed to have caused “mistakes in listening tasks, a typical occurrence being that the students know the topic, hear some familiar vocabulary, and make wild guesses about the content. Brown (2003) also mentioned that learners should

handle their listening process from both directions because both can “offer keys to determining the meaning of spoken discourse.”

### ***2.3. The importance of listening skills in learning English***

Listening is important in social communication, academic success, and language acquisition. Listening effectively is a sufficient condition for the students to take part in oral communication. The communication process will break down when the listeners fail to understand what the speakers say (Underwood, 1989).

In any language classroom, listening skill plays a significant role in the development of other language skills. Vandergriff (1997) claims that listening internalizes not only the rules of language skills but also facilitates the emergence of other skills. To be more specific, listening helps the students to pronounce exactly and recognize the spoken form of words. When learning a new word, students have to listen to it several times before identifying it. It is said that listening provides a comprehensive supplier for understanding and acquiring a new language. Precisely, without receiving the necessary language input at the right level, the learning process cannot take place. In conclusion, listening plays an essential role in second language acquisition. this skill is not only a tool to acquire other sources of knowledge but also provides second language learners with the most important patterns of language.

### **III. Methodology**

The material for teaching first-year non-major English students is New Head

Pre-intermediate, which is an integrated skill textbook. At HOU, the English syllabus for first-year non-major English students is 3 credits which are equivalent to 45 periods, in which only 40 periods in the classroom and 5 periods for midterm and final test. Students have 4 periods of English lessons per week, in which the listening lesson is nearly one period. It is not enough for students to practice 4 skills of English.

In this study, mixed methods are employed. This study was carried out with a quantitative method by designing survey questions for students and teachers of English. The qualitative method is used to describe the data collected from teacher depth-interview to find more about the difficulties faced by first-year non-major English students at HOU.

The first participants of the study are 93 first-year non-major English students at the Faculty of Economics, HOU. All of them are about 18 years old. Most of them come from rural areas. Their English is pre-

intermediate. They have learned English for about 5 – 7 years in high school. But their listening skills are very poor because their learning English at high school only focuses on grammar structures.

The second participants of the study are 5 teachers of English. All of them have an MA degree in teaching English. They have about 15-20 years of English teaching experience.

The instruments for collecting data were students' survey questions with 2 main parts: (i) students' awareness of the importance of listening skills in learning English; (ii) difficulties faced by the first-year non-major English students in learning listening skills which were designed based on the theoretical framework of the study as mentioned above; 4 questions for depth interviewing around the related issues in students' questionnaire.

The data were then analyzed, and the results were presented in the form of descriptive statistics below.

#### IV. Findings and discussion

##### 4.1. Students' perception towards listening skills

*Table 1. Students' perception towards listening skills*

*(percentage)*

No	Degree /frequency	Very	Quite	Enough	Not	Total
1	Importance	61,29	23,65	15,05	0	100
2	Difficulty	18,28	81,72	0	0	100
3	Interesting	77,42	10,75	11,83	0	100
4	Like	80,65	8,6	10,75	0	100
5	Time	3-5 hours	1-2 hours	< 1 hour	0 hour	
		18,28	37,63	29,03	15,05	100

The data from Table 1 showed that most of the students agreed that English listening is an important skill. 61,29 % of the students chose very important and 23,65% of them chose quite important, 15,05 of them chose important and none of them chose not important.

When asked to rate the level of difficulty of listening skills, most of the students (81,72%) chose quite difficult and the other (18,28%) chose very difficult. None of them chose difficult or not difficult.

However, when asked about how interesting listening skill is, luckily 77,42 % of asked students remarked that listening is very interesting, whereas a small number of learners chose quite interesting (10,75%) and interesting (11,83%), none of them chose not interesting.

When investigating the degree of liking to learning listening skills or not, a large number of students chose very like (80,65%), quite like (8,6%), like (10,75%), and none of them chose *not like*.

When asked about the time they spend on learning listening skills, surprisingly a large number of students spend 1-2 hours

(37,63%), 29,03% of not more than 1 hour; 18,28% of 3-5 hours, only a small number of participants spend 0 hours (15,05%) for learning English per week.

In a nutshell, the results of the data show that the majority of the students are aware of the importance and difficulty of listening skills, and they like it so much, however, the time they spend on learning listening skills per week at home is so little. It is quite a problem for them.

#### ***4.2. Students' and teachers' attitudes to the difficulties of students' learning English listening skills***

There are several difficulties that learners may encounter in the listening comprehension processes and the purpose is to be aware of these difficulties and try to solve them. Some of these difficulties were supported by both students' survey questionnaires and teachers' interview.

*Table 2. Students' and teachers' attitudes to the difficulties of students' learning English listening skills*

(percentage)

No	Factors	Students' attitudes		Teachers' attitudes		
		Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	
1	Physical setting	Facilities	88,17	11,83	80	20
		Noise	80,65	19,35	80	20
		Sitting positions	18,28	81,72	20	80
		Materials	81,72	18,28	80	20
		The class time	86,02	13,98	80	20
2	Students themselves	Lack of background knowledge	72,04	27,96	60	40
		Lack of vocabulary and grammar	56,99	43,01	60	40
		Mispronunciation	74,19	25,80	80	40
		Lack of learning strategies	80,65	19,35	60	40
		Psychological factors	46,24	53,76	50	50
		Motivation in learning and practicing	65,59	34,41	60	40

The physical setting is an external factor that influences the students to listen comprehension. What is worth noticing here is that the frequency of poor-quality equipment and facilities receives the highest percentage of agreement with 88,17%. This means that the classroom especially the equipment used for teaching listening skill such as CD players, speakers, headphones, and software... affect the student's performance in listening. In addition, 80,65% of the students agreed that noise was a problem for them. The students would lose their attention when the noise surrounded them; they needed a quiet situation to concentrate on understanding the spoken text. The least influencing problem is sitting at the back of the classroom with 18,28%. It can be drawn that the sitting position in the classroom has a modest impact on getting information process. The teachers interviewed also agreed that listening problems related to the physical setting are poor quality equipment and facilities, and background noises, which accounted for 20%.

In addition to the difficulties coming from the physical setting, potential difficulties also emerged from the materials used for listening. The speaker is a part of the materials which facilitate the students to hear. When the students listened to the speaker, that aspect related to natural speech, pronunciation, varied accents, and voice heard. Over 81% of the students stated that fast speed and different accents caused many difficulties for them in understanding the meaning. Students

felt surprised when they found a new accent that they never heard. Some other difficulties from the speakers are intonation and stress, ending sounds, reduced forms...The content of the materials also caused difficulties. Too much information in the recording, many unfamiliar words, or complex grammatical structures were common difficulties for students. Another external factor that makes students meet difficulties in listening skills is that the time for learning and practicing listening English skills in the class is too short and 86,02% of students agree with this. In the interview, the teachers shared the same opinion that listening problems related to materials are fast speed, different accents, intonation, and stress; and the time for teaching English listening skills in the class is not enough for practicing this skill.

Another factor that made listening skills difficult came from the students themselves. As seen from table 2, students agreed that lack of and vocabulary (56,99%), background knowledge (72,04%) and is the biggest difficulty for them. They considered vocabulary and background knowledge as a key to catching and understanding the coming information. Specifically, they believed that with profound knowledge in other areas such as economics, cultures, and society, it can be easy to guess the information. Another major difficulty for the students was that they (74,19%) found it difficult to recognize the words because of their mispronunciation and because of the natives' speaking English quickly. It can be figured out that correct

pronunciation has a considerable influence on students' listening performances. Students also agreed that lack of listening strategies and learners' psychological factors such as the stress of homework, assignment, or daily life, worry about the examination, or tiredness can affect the listening effectiveness with 80,65% and 46,24% respectively. The most important factor is students' motivation in learning listening skills. Luckily, 65,59% of asked students have the motivation in learning listening skills. It is a good point for teachers, so now they have to find effective methods to encourage students in learning English listening skills. Teachers quite share the same opinions with students. From the interview, all the teachers agreed that students' lack of vocabulary and background knowledge as well as their weakness in pronunciation are the main problems.

#### ***4.3. Suggested solutions helping students overcome these difficulties***

First and foremost, teachers should raise students' awareness of the importance of listening in learning English. Specifically, teachers are the ones who decide the topics, and the activities in the classroom; therefore, they could provide students with supplementary exercises from other sources to practice. Moreover, they could suggest some useful websites to improve listening skills. Secondly, to reduce the negative impacts of inaccurate pronunciation, teachers should correct the students' pronunciation whenever

they make mistakes. Also, integrating pronunciation in teaching speaking, reading, or writing is considered as an effective way of mastering this aspect of language. Thirdly, pre-teach vocabulary, and guiding students to underline keywords and guess the meanings of new words can help the students to familiarize themselves with the topic, activate prior knowledge as well as develop their confidence of students. Last but certainly not least, raising the students' awareness of the benefits of taking notes in general and the advantages of its strategies may be useful in this respect. Moreover, giving students instructions in taking notes using specific strategies is very critical. The most important thing is that the teachers themselves always create a friendly environment to encourage students to take part in their listening lessons so that they can create students' motivation.

Noticeably, to get a positive result in listening skills, the students should have a high degree of autonomy in approaching this skill. This means that students should set a plan of practicing listening at home. Widening vocabulary is extremely important as the limited poses difficulties to most students. Hence, reading English newspapers, and magazines and watching English teaching programs on television are learning strategies for some students. More efficiently, many students can have a habit of checking new words in the English dictionary from the beginning of their learning process. It is advisable that guessing new words, underlining

keywords beforehand, and taking note of the main ideas could help students keep up with the speed of the speakers.

The result of this study can be applied to English language teaching methods, making them much more effective in improving learners' language proficiency, especially in a situational context such as Vietnam, in which EFL learners lack a great deal of authentic interaction in a foreign language. This study provided data that reflects the essential needs of our classrooms.

Therefore, it is of absolute importance to introduce to students that listening comprehension is one of the four skills of learning in interaction with other skills.

Thus, successful listeners have a crucial part to play in the process by activating various types of knowledge, and by applying what they know to what they hear and trying to understand what the speaker means.

In short, to become a fluent speaker of English, learners need to be aware of difficulties in listening skills and find ways to overcome these to develop strong listening skills.

## V. Conclusion

The study tried to investigate the perceptions of students and teachers about listening skills and find major listening difficulties of the students while learning listening comprehension as well as giving some suggestions. The findings of this research indicated that most of the students have positive perceptions of the

role of listening skills. Listening is an important skill since it is also a basic skill that helps students develop other skills. Learners also shared their difficulties when they were in listening lessons. There were some major difficulties related to the physical setting, the students, and the materials such as low quality of equipment and facilities, students' lack of vocabulary and background knowledge, incorrect pronunciation, lack of listening strategies, long and fast listening with different accents, complex grammatical structures, and unfamiliar words... Finally, some useful solutions are hopefully useful for both teachers and students.

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