

THE USE OF PRE-LISTENING ACTIVITIES IN TEACHING LISTENING SKILL TO ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS AT VAN HIEN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

In teaching listening, it is widely known that a good pattern for listening session should include three stages: pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening. The aim of this paper is to investigate the employment of pre-listening activities to help improve English-majored students' listening comprehension at Van Hien University. The paper first defines the listening process and then reviews various pre-listening activities that are used in teaching and learning listening skill. In order to illustrate the importance of the use of pre-listening activities, the experiment was employed with the participation of two separate groups: one experimental group and one control group. Pre- and post-tests were used to explore students' performance before and after the use of pre-listening activities in teaching listening lessons. The results showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups after the experiment. This difference was in favor of the group experiencing pre-listening activities. Finally, from the research findings, recommendations were made in the hope of improving listening practice and teaching.

Keywords: listening skill, pre-listening activities, English-majored students

TÓM TẮT

Sử dụng các hoạt động trước khi nghe trong việc dạy kỹ năng nghe cho sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại trường Đại học Văn Hiến

Kiểu mẫu cho việc dạy kỹ năng nghe được biết đến rộng rãi bao gồm ba bước: trước khi nghe, trong khi nghe và sau khi nghe. Nhiều hoạt động thường được sử dụng ở giai đoạn trước khi nghe. Bài báo này tìm hiểu việc ứng dụng các hoạt động trước khi nghe để giúp cải thiện kỹ năng nghe của sinh viên trường Đại học Văn Hiến. Đầu tiên bài viết định nghĩa tiến trình nghe và tiếp đến tổng hợp các hoạt động trước khi nghe được dùng trong việc dạy và học kỹ năng nghe. Để minh họa tầm quan trọng của việc sử dụng các hoạt động trước khi nghe, nghiên cứu thực nghiệm được áp dụng với sự tham gia của 2 nhóm riêng biệt, nhóm thực nghiệm và nhóm điều khiển. Bài kiểm tra pre-test và post-test được áp dụng để tìm ra kết quả của sinh viên trước và sau khi sử dụng các hoạt động trước khi nghe trong quá trình dạy và học. Kết quả tìm ra cho thấy có sự khác biệt giữa hai nhóm và kết quả tốt thiên về nhóm thực nghiệm. Cuối cùng, từ kết quả này, nhiều đề nghị được đưa ra với hy vọng cải tiến việc dạy và học kỹ năng nghe.

Từ khóa: kỹ năng nghe, hoạt động trước khi nghe, sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh

1. Introduction

English has become an international language in this globalization era. In Vietnam, English has maintained its dominant role as the first foreign language for the last fifteen years. It is now increasingly used in nearly all aspects of daily life. In order to have a good job, one of the most important things Vietnamese students

have to do is studying English well. This is the reason why more and more students choose English as their major when they enter university. Most of the English-majored students at Van Hien University come from rural areas where English skills such as Listening and Speaking are not emphasized in high schools. As a consequence, they find it difficult to be good at lis-

tening and speaking skills which are separated subjects in university. After teaching listening skill to English-major students for over two years at Van Hien University, the researcher has recognized that the majority of students were aware of the importance of listening and they have always wanted to listen well and try their best. However, they could not get much improvement. They were then confused and became less confident and discouraged. Therefore, they lost interest in listening learning and are not willing to participate in listening activities because of their lack of prior knowledge of the topic. In other words, students found it hard to pay attention to the complete listening process. As a result, this skill has become the most challenging for them to develop.

According to Oxford (1993), listening is the most fundamental skill to develop the other three (speaking, reading and writing) skills. Rost (1994) also pinpointed the importance of listening in the language classroom as the plier of the input for students. Additionally, among the four language skills, listening is the most difficult skill to obtain (Eastman, 1987).

In teaching listening, Underwood (1989), Richards and Renandya (2002) have suggested that a good pattern for listening session should include three stages: pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening. According to Underwood (1989), pre-listening stage is extremely essential for teaching-learning listening. Also Ehsanjou and Khodareza (2014) indicated in their study that pre-listening activities are effective in teaching listening comprehension. In many listening classes in university, however, few activities which are not enough to make the class more interested are used at the pre-listening stage. Nguyen Thi Thuy Loan (2008, p. 2) showed in her study that pre-listening activities are not exploited sufficiently and appropriately to prepare students some idea of what they expect to hear. In addition, Tran Thi Phuong Tham (2011, p. 2) found in her study that pre-listening activities influenced positively her students' performance.

In order to help students at Van Hien

University with listening learning, this paper will discuss the use of pre-listening activities to facilitate the process of teaching and learning listening comprehension. Hopefully, this paper can make a meaningful contribution to the improvement of students' listening ability. The following research question leads the paper:

To what extent can pre-listening activities improve students' listening comprehension

2. Literature review

2.1. Definitions of listening

Pearson and Fielding (1983) define that listening involves the simultaneous orchestration of skills in phonology, syntax, semantics, and knowledge of text structure—all of which seem to be controlled by the same set of cognitive processes. Coakley and Wolvin (1986) suggest that listening comprehension in a second language is the process of receiving, focusing attention on, and assigning meaning to aural stimuli. It includes a listener, who brings prior knowledge of the topic, linguistic knowledge and cognitive processes to the listening task, the aural text, and the interaction between the two.

Later, according to Buck (2001, p. 2), listening comprehension is really a bidirectional process of acquisition. This is a combination of both listening and exposing the information or data with comprehending-decoding the acoustic signals and then catching the content of the data and scoring in the long-term memory. Listening, then, is a complex, active processive interpretation in which listeners match what they hear with what they already know.

2.2. Listening as a bottom-up and top-down process.

Nunan (1999, p. 200) states that there are two views of listening that have dominated language pedagogy over the last twenty years. These are the "bottom-up" processing view and the "top-down" interpretation view. The following sub-sections are a discussion of these views. As the study focuses on pre-listening activities, we will look more closely at top-down processing view.

2.2.1. Listening as a bottom-up process

The first model of listening to be developed

was the bottom-up model. It was developed by researchers in the 1940s and 1950s (Richard, 2005, p. 24). Since then, several linguists and researchers have studied this model. Nunan (1999, p. 200) said that the process view of bottom-up listening comprehension is a linear one, in which ‘meaning itself is derived as the last step in the process.’. Buck (2001, p. 200) presented that bottom-up processing refers to the use of incoming data as a source of information about the meaning of a message. It involves identifying and distinguishing sounds, words, structures, grammar, and other features of the message such as stress and intonation. This process is closely associated with the listener’s linguistic knowledge. However, bottom-up processing has its weak points. If the listeners understand very few words from the incoming signal, they often revert to their knowledge of the topic and situation, they use top-down processing to compensate for difficulties in bottom-up processing.

2.2.2. Listening as a top-down process

Top-down processing view suggests that the listener actively constructs the original meaning of the speaker using incoming sounds as clues (Nunan, 1999, p. 200). The listener uses background knowledge or previous experience of the situation, context, etc. to arrive at comprehension. In terms of listening, the listener actively constructs (or reconstructs) the original meaning of the speaker employing new input as clues. In this reconstruction process, the listener employs prior knowledge of the context and situation within which the listening occurs to understand what he/she hears. Similarly, Nation and Newton (2008, p. 40) state that top-down processing involves the listener in going from the whole – their prior knowledge and their content and rhetorical schemata – to the parts. In other words, the listener uses what they know of the content of communication to predict what the message will contain, and uses parts of the message to confirm, correct or add to this. Buck (2001, p. 3) has a well-known example to make it clearer. If we hear the following uncompleted sentence, ‘*she was so an-*

gry, she picked up the gun, aimed and _____’ (adapted from Grosjean, 1980), we know what is going to happen, and we probably need very little acoustic information to understand the word, be it ‘*fired*’, ‘*shot*’ or whatever. As we listen, we will expect a word such as *fired*, and we will probably process only enough of the sound to confirm our expectations, or we may not even bother to listen to the last word at all. Our background knowledge about guns and what angry people do with them help us to determine what the word is.

2.3. Definition of pre-listening

This is a stage when the context of the listening text is established, the task explained and assistance offered as necessary (Underwood, 1989, p. 28). According to him, it is unfair to plunge students straight into the listening text as this makes it extremely difficult for them to use the natural listening skills (which we all use in our native language) of matching what we hear with what they expect to hear and using their previous knowledge to make sense of it. Therefore, before listening, students should be ‘tuned in’ so that they know what to expect, both in general and for particular tasks. This kind of preparatory work is generally described as ‘pre-listening work’ or just ‘pre-listening’.

Similarly, Harmer (1998, p. 100) hold that students need to be made ready to listen. This means that they will need to look at pictures, discuss the topic, or read the questions first, for example, to be in a position to predict what is coming. Teachers should do their best to get students engaged with the topic and the task so that they really want to listen.

2.4. The importance of pre-listening

Pre-listening is a very important stage for it aims to generate interest, build confidence and to facilitate comprehension (Berman, 2003). Many students are fearful of listening, and can be disheartened when they listen to something that they have little understanding and interest. So pre-listening firstly aims to spark interest and motivate students to do listening tasks from the spoken message. When students are able to relate the listening experience to their

own lives, they are more eager to listen actively to what the speaker has to say. Secondly, pre-listening aims to build learners' confidence. For students, a large number of unknown words will often hinder listening, and certainly lower confidence. Therefore, students need to brainstorm language beforehand, and then perform the scene. Additionally, according to Lindsay and Knight (2006, p. 49), pre-listening helps focus students' attention on the topic, activate any knowledge they have about the topic and make it clear what they have to do while they listen.

2.5. Pre-listening activities

Pre-listening is a stage the learners prepare before listening, so the activities used at this stage are considered to provide an opportunity to gain some knowledge which will help the learners follow the listening text. According to Underwood (1989), pre-listening activities usually have two primary goals: (1) to bring to consciousness the tools and strategies that good listeners use when listening, and (2) to provide the necessary context for that specific listening task. He also holds that it is helpful to focus at first on providing considerable pre-listening support so that the students can achieve a high level of success and thus become confident that they can listen effectively. In this way we can help our students to comprehend the listening text better. Researchers investigated various different pre-listening activities which second language learners use when listening. The following will present pre-listening activities of different researchers.

Brainstorming: Underwood (1989) states that brainstorming some vocabulary for the students to study before listening helps students concentrate on the overall meaning because they know the meaning of vocabulary. Wilson (2008) presents that the first goal of brainstorming is to generate large numbers of ideas based on a topic or a problem. Initially, all contributions are accepted without criticism. The next stage involves whittling the ideas down to those which may be practically applicable. Brainstorming is a particularly useful thing to do before listening to factual passages with one main topic (Wilson,

2008). It is also considered that brainstorming is a good way to activate the students' schemata.

Informal teacher talk and class discussion: According to Underwood (1989, p. 43) this is a very common form of pre-listening activity. Teachers generally give their students some background information, begin to talk about the topic and indicate what the students should expect to hear. A pair-work or group-work discussion will bring students into the topic, and make them more willing to listen. On the other hand, teachers can use this activity to motivate the students by making them feel that the actual listening text is really interesting/ exciting/ amazing. Additionally, Lindsay (2006) suggests teachers give students information about the context, for example, who is talking, where they are.

Setting questions beforehand: According to Wilson (2008, p. 75) setting questions beforehand is the most common way of establishing a reason for the students to listen. There are, of course, many different types of questions we can set. One particularly useful type is sometimes known as a signposting question. Just like a real signpost, this points the students in the right direction and ensures that no one gets lost. Signposting questions make listeners aware of the key points of the text and guide the students through it.

Looking at pictures before listening: According to Underwood (1989), looking at pictures may raise student's interest or remind them of something relating to the topic. Furthermore, Wilson (2008) states that pictures can be used to help students recognize the lesson theme. He also adds that in a coursebook there may be no overt reference in the rubric to any pictures on the page, but a picture still sends out a message about the topic of the lesson. The students can simply look at the picture and guess what the listening text will be about.

Giving some background information: Underwood (1989) states that teachers can provide the appropriate background information including information about the speaker, topic of the presentation, purpose of the presentation, and the concepts and vocabulary that are likely to be

embedded in the presentation.

Speculating on what students will hear: According to Underwood (1989) students can be told something about the speaker(s) and the topic and then asked to suggest what they are likely to hear in the listening text. He also adds that this is a useful activity with adult students who are perhaps more interested in speculating on the likely behaviour of individuals in particular situations. Besides, Berman (2003) states that predicting the themes and vocabulary of a lecture before listening can help to improve students' comprehension of difficult listening texts. When they are listening they generally have an idea about what they are going to hear, whether it is the answer to a question they have asked, or part of a talk or lecture in an area they are studying.

Following the instructions for the while-listening activity: Underwood (1989) states that the instructions may provide an overview of the presentation, its main ideas, questions to be answered while listening, a summary of the presentation, or an outline. In addition, Linsay (2006) suggests making sure learners understand what they have to do while they are listening, i.e. do they have to do something, write something, draw something, and so on? If teachers give them some comprehension questions to answer, they need to read them and check they understand them before they hear the text.

The choice of these activities depends on a number of factors such as the time available, the material available, the ability of the class, the interest of the class, the interest of the teacher, the place in which the work is being carried out, and the nature and content of the listening text itself (Underwood, 1989, p. 33). Of these factors, the nature and content of the listening text is very important. When choosing pre-listening activities, therefore, the teacher needs to be creative and flexible to select activities appropriate to these factors, especially to the nature and content of the listening itself. Additionally, the teacher needs to prepare the activities of pre-listening step as carefully as possible. Learners have to be equipped with a variety of activities

bringing advantages for the next steps. Moreover, the pre-listening process should not last longer than the actual listening activity. Finally, the activities should not be too demanding, otherwise the students will lose their interests.

3. Research Methods

The study was conducted at Van Hien University in the first term of the school year 2017-2018 with the participation of fifty English-major students who come from rural areas and are at the same levels. These students belonged to the two classes of ENG43101 and ENG43102 which were assigned into two separated groups of experiment and control, respectively, by the researcher. They were chosen from the three classes which the researcher was in charge of listening subject. They did not attend any English classes at the language center. Their scores of the three last terms were on average and both classes used Q: Skills for Success 1: Listening and Speaking as the main textbook. This indicated that there was no significant difference among their language proficiency. Class ENG43101 was the group which was taught listening lessons with pre-listening activities designed by the researcher while Class ENG43102 was the group which was taught listening lessons with pre-listening activities in the textbook such as providing vocabulary and asking questions.

In the process of collecting data, the experiment was employed and lasted for eight weeks. During eight weeks, each group had eight 60-minute meetings for listening comprehension. In the experiment, pre- and post tests were used to explore students' performance before and after the use of pre-listening activities in teaching listening lessons. The pre- and post-test scores of the control group were then compared with those of the experimental group to see the difference between the two groups.

In each listening lesson, only the students in the experimental groups were supplied with three or four pre-listening activities designed by the researcher to practice the activities as presented. The main pre-listening activities consisted of the following as: Being comfortable

and self-confident, Setting purpose, Activating existing knowledge, Predicting, Getting ready to listen.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Pre-test result

In this section, the scores from the pre-tests of each group are calculated in terms of percentage, score frequency and mean. These values of both groups are then compared with each other to find out whether there occurred any difference in the students' listening performance.

As displayed in Table 1, the majority of the

students in the both groups got the average listening scores (76% in the control group and 80% in the experimental group). 12% of the students in the control group got 7 points (fair scores) in the listening test, but merely 8% of the experimental group obtained fair scores. No one in both groups got good score. This indicates that there was no much difference in the pre-test scores between the two groups. Moreover, the means of the two groups were not different from each other. In fact, the mean scores of the control group was the same as that of the experimental group ($M = 5.0$).

Table 1. Results of the pre-test

Listening scores	Control group			Experimental group		
	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	Frequency	Percentage	Mean
Under average	2	0		0		
	3	1	12%	2	12%	
	4	2		1		
Average	5	11		12		
	6	8	76%	8	80%	5.0
Fair	7	3	12%	2		
Good	8	0	0%	0	0	
Excellent	9	0	0%	0		

4.2. Post-test result

As observed from Table 2, nearly half of the students (48%) in the control group obtained average scores while only 32% of the students in the experimental group got the average ones. For fair scores, nearly the same number of the students in both groups got 7 points (40% in the control group and 48% in the experimental group). However, merely 4% of the students in the control group obtained good scores while 16% of the students in the experimental group got good ones. Moreover, no one in the control group got excellent scores whereas 4% of the

students in the experimental obtained excellent ones. Additionally, the the mean scores of the experimental group ($M = 7.0$) was higher than that of control group ($M = 6.0$). It can be said that the results showed a positive trend towards the experimental group.

The results from the pre- and post-tests have been pointed out that through the pre- and post-tests there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups after the experiment. This difference was in favor of the group experiencing pre-listening strategies. In other words, this group made progress in their c

Table 2. Results of the post-test

Listening scores	Control group			Experimental group		
	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	Frequency	Percentage	Mean
Under average	2	0		0		
	3	0	8%	0	0%	
	4	2		0		
Average	5	4	48%	2	32%	7.0
	6	8		6		
Fair	7	10	40%	12	48%	
Good	8	1	4%	4	16%	
Excellent	9	0	0%	1	4%	

prehension in the post-test after the teaching program. That is, the findings found in the experiment showed that pre-listening strategies helped improve students' listening skill.

The study demonstrates the effectiveness of pre-listening activities by using pre-listening activities designed by the researcher on the students' listening comprehension. For this to happen, the employment of these strategies was systematically reinforced. As a result, the students were familiar with them. The pre-listening strategies employed in this study helped the English-majored students at Van Hien University to use their previously acquired knowledge, build up new background knowledge, give them a purpose for listening, and make them confident and ready for listening.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Through the statistically-analyzed pre- and post-test scores, we can see that the listening performance of both groups was almost similar at the beginning of the experimental time. However, after the teaching program, there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups. This difference reveals a positive trend toward the group exposed to the pre-listening activities. Indeed, this group was by far improved with the students' progress in their scores. This result is consistent with Underwood's finding

that the students can achieve a high level of success if the teacher focuses at first on providing considerable pre-listening support. Thus it can be said that the result presented above has helped to answer the research question. That is to say, the pre-listening activities used can help to contribute to the improvement of students' listening skill. Therefore, teachers should hold activities that contribute to the improvement and the enjoyment of listening learning. Appropriate pre-listening activities should be used in listening classes to spark students' interest and curiosity and more importantly, to activate students' background knowledge right at the pre-listening stage.

Pre-listening activities proved themselves to be effective in improving students' listening skill. Thus, teachers are recommended to help students practice these strategies. When doing this, they should give clear instructions on pre-listening strategies by explaining clearly why, when, and how to use them. Specially, if students seem not to have much background knowledge about the topics in the textbook, teachers need to let them know the importance of activating their existing knowledge before they listen.

In addition, since listening is considered as the most difficult skill among the four linguistic skills and students lack interest and investment

in their listening learning, it is necessary for teachers to develop their interest and investment in learning listening. They should hold activities that contribute to the enjoyment of listening. Besides, teachers are recommended to create a joyful atmosphere in a listening class by using activities such as games, songs, films, videos, quizzes, pair work, and group work.

Conflicts of Interest:

The author declare no conflict of interest

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