

# Listening skills of Non – English Major freshmen at Dong Nai Technology University Problems and Solutions

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**Abstract:** English has been more significant in many industries in Vietnam and throughout the world in recent years. As a result, many people find that being proficient in English makes it easier for them to study, do research, and find employment. Not only are listening skills critical, but they can also be challenging for students. The goal of the study is to identify the challenges associated with listening abilities of non - English major freshmen in order to find appropriate solutions to help learners improve their listening proficiency. The survey sample included 190 first-year students at Dong Nai Technology University. The listening test is used after learners completed the TOEIC - oriented English module. Research results show some students' problems including (1) lack of vocabulary, (2) poor ability to recognize and distinguish sounds, (3) limited both logical thinking skills and listening techniques include making judgments, making notes, and memorization; and (4) inattention. Simultaneously, the aforementioned findings highlight some concerns that educators must address in order to assist students in developing their listening abilities.

**Keywords:** Listening skills, non-English major students, problems, solutions

## 1. Introduction

Mendelsohn (1994) estimated that speaking makes up 25–30% of everyday communication activities, listening makes up 40–50%, reading makes up 11–16%, and writing makes up just 9%.

Buck (2001), however, argues that listening is a complex process that requires both verbal and non-verbal language comprehension. Numerous researches have demonstrated that listening comprehension is a challenge for English language learners (Goh, 2000; Hassan, 2000; Liu, 2002). According to An's (2011) research, listening comprehension is regarded as one of the hardest language skills for non-majors in universities and colleges nowadays. Hamouda (2013) claims that because schools frequently place a greater emphasis on teaching grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary, students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) frequently struggle with listening comprehension.

Ur (1996) states that listening comprehension is a common challenge for English language learners.

Five important criteria are identified by Rubin (1994) when talking about listening comprehension. They are: (1) speaking speed, pauses, stress, rhyme, differences between first and second language, etc.; (2) interlocutor characteristics; (3) exercise characteristics; (4) listener characteristics; (5)

information processing during listening, such as using listening strategies.

According to Yagang (1994), there are four aspects to be considered when determining the difficulty or ease of a listening lesson: (1) the listening content; (2) the person speaking; (3) the person who listens; and (4) the listening situation.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research questions

The goal of this research is to identify the sub – skills that students still struggle with when listening to TOEIC – oriented English for non – English major students, in order to develop effective listening training approaches to assist students enhance their listening capacity. Particularly, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is the current state of listening proficiency of non – English major students at Dong Nai Technology University?

- Which listening sub – skills do the students not apply well when listening to English according to TOEIC orientation?

### 2.2. Participants

Research participants included 190 non – English major freshmen at Dong Nai Technology University. Students have studied 50 lessons in the TOEIC 1 Orientation English program with Anne Taylor and Garrett Byrne's book Very Easy TOEIC (2nd Ed.)

was published by Ho Chi Minh General Publishing House in 2006. Thus, these learners are familiar with TOEIC exam questions, although at a basic level, the number of questions for each listening part is lower than the number of questions students must answer while taking the normal international TOEIC test.

**2.3. Research method**

Descriptive statistical research was conducted to find out the English listening difficulties of non – major students. The data collection tool is a test of students’ listening skills after they are about to complete the TOEIC – oriented English module 1. The exam is prepared with a TOEIC orientation and is based on the Starter TOEIC book (3rd Ed) by authors Anne Taylor and Casey Malarcher (2016). It is similar to the sort of listening exercises students learn in class and has an analogous difficulty level. The exam lasts 560 seconds (almost 10 minutes) and consists of 20 multiple – choice questions (part 2 only has 3 options, whereas the rest sections all have 4), separated into 4 sections, each with 5 sentences, as indicated in the table below.

*Table 2.1. Test description*

Part	Number of questions	Content	Aim
Part 1 (Picture description – P)	5	Listen to single sentences and choose the correct picture	To test students’ ability to distinguish types of vocabulary (places, objects, positions, actions).
Part 2 (Questions – Responses – R)	5	Listen to the question and choose the correct answer	To test students’ ability to distinguish similar sounds, and different types of question (yes – no questions, Wh – questions).
Part 3 (Short conversations – C)	5	Listen to the dialogs and answer the questions (2 dialogs)	To test students’ capacity to listen for specifics, make conclusions, and discern between words with similar pronunciations.
Part 4 (Short talks – T)	5	Listen to the monolog and answer the questions (2 monologs)	To test students’ listening ability combined with reasoning, listening to detailed ideas together with memorizing or taking notes (The content emerges in long statements with several concepts; no words represent the same notion appear in the text).

The listening test was carried out with the researchers’ attempts to limit the particular effects of environmental circumstances. especially the listening exam structure is comparable to what students were exposed to throughout the session. The material is based on typical TOEIC test themes and has a similar duration. The speaker’s voice does not sound too weird or unusual. The listening setting is noise-free.

**3. Findings and discussion**

The listening test has a total of 20 questions, each correct sentence is counted as one point, each incorrect sentence is zero point. The test results were processed using SPSS software, with Cronbach alpha reliability of .642, proving that the scale is qualified for survey use. One sample t-test is performed to check whether the overall average score and each section is different from the sample average of 0.5.

**3.1. Students’ ability to listen to the TOEIC – oriented test**

*Table 3.1. The results from the listening test*

Part	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation	Mean Difference (MD)	Significant Difference (p)
1 (P)	0.72	0.24	0.23	.00
2 (R)	0.75	0.19	0.26	.00
3 (C)	0.42	0.22	-0.11	.00
4 (T)	0.40	0.27	-0.13	.00
Total (tt)	0.57	0.23	0.06	.00

The combined results of the students’ listening test are shown in Table 3.1. The average scores for part 1 and part 2 are 0.72 and 0.75, above the sample average of 0.5 with significance levels  $p_p$  and  $p_R$  both = .00 ( $MD_p = 0.23$ ,  $MD_R = 0.26$ ). The average scores for parts 3 and 4 are 0.42 and 0.40, below the sample average of 0.5 with significance levels  $p_C$  and  $p_T$  both = .00 ( $MD_C = -0.11$ ,  $MD_T = -0.13$ ). The results showed that the average score of the entire listening test on 190 students reached 0.57, not high, only 0.5 higher than the sample average with  $MD_{tt} = 0.06$ . The aforementioned scores indicate the learners’ listening proficiency after completing the TOEIC 1 – oriented English course is only slightly higher than the sample average, with no significant difference ( $p = .00$ ) regardless of the test despite the educational material regarding its format and level of challenge. In particular, students’ capacity to listen to separate statements is more effective than listening to discussions or monologs, especially when listening to monologs (one person speaking continuously) because the score of part 4 is the lowest ( $M_T = 0.40$ ).

**3.2. Sub – skills that students have difficulty with when listening according to TOEIC orientation**

*Table 3.2. Specific results of Part 1*

Question	Percentage of correct answers	Details
P1	59.1	Identify places
P2	56.3	Identify objects
P3	88.7	Identify prepositions of places
P4	70.2	Identify action verbs
P5	85.6	Identify action verbs
Average	72	

Students’ difficulties in each section are shown specifically in the following tables. In part 1 (Picture description), learners listen to 4 simple statements to choose 1 statement that has the correct meaning for the given picture. Table 3.2 shows the proportion of learners that answered accurately listening to the sentences in part 1 is higher than 50%. However, identifying action verbs and positions of places is better than identifying places and objects because the rate of students answering questions 3, 4 and 5 correctly is higher than the rate of students answering correctly questions 1 and 2, with a score deviation of about 15% to nearly 30%. This demonstrates that learners lack vocabulary or that their vocabulary knowledge is still inactive, and their skill to detect sounds is low; hence, learners can identify these words when reading but not when listening to the sounds, they do not promptly combine with the writing, or the meaning of the above vocabulary.

*Table 3.3 Specific results of Part 2*

Question	Percentage of correct answers	Details
R1	45	Identify similar sounds “at” – “It’s”
R2	82.7	Identify 2 sentences having similar sounds “How old are you?” – “How are you?”
R3	96.5	Identify the answer to Yes – No questions
R4	75.3	Identify the answer to question with “Where”
R5	83.8	Identify the answer to question with “Why”
Average	76.7	

In Part 2 (Questions and Responses), learners listen to the question and select one of three possible answers. According to the statistics in Table 3.3,

the proportion of learners who chose properly in question R1 is 45%, the lowest of the five questions. Learners are not adept at differentiating similar sounds “at” and “It’s”, probably owing to a shortage of concentration and thinking to judge and select answers carelessly or listening techniques are not good. Question 2 requires students to distinguish between two sentences that sound similar: “How old are you?” and “How are you?”. This question had superior results, with 82.7% of learners responding precisely, presumably because the quantity of rhymes in the two statements differs, making it easier for learners to notice. Questions that require students to distinguish answers with clearly different words R3, R4 and R5 scored quite well, equal to 96.5%, 75.3% and 83.8% respectively. Among them, R3 has the highest score, the explanation for this might be that the response to the Yes-No question is brief and easy, allowing most learners to recognize and choose correctly.

*Table 3.4. Specific results of Part 3*

Question	Percentage of correct answer	Details
C1	49.4	Listen to details
C2	11.7	Listen and infer
C3	24.4	Listen and infer
C4	74.5	Listen to details; the listening information is similar to the answer but it is repeated by related words
C5	40.4	Listen to details, 2 confusing sounds
Average	40.1	

In Part 3 (Short conversations), learners listen to two discussions and complete questions. Results Table 3.4 demonstrates that the capacity of learners to listen to discussions is poor, with the mean grade for most phrases falling under 50%. Students have difficulty hearing detailed ideas (49.4% answered question C1 correctly), especially when there are confusing sounds (40.4% answered question C5 correctly), students only recognize well when the answer is “yes”. The content closely resembles the words spoken in the discussion and follows up with associated phrases (74.5% had the correct response for question C4). The two questions that asked learners to hear facts and make inferences had the lowest scores (11.7% responded question C2 properly and 24.4% answered question C3). Therefore, eventhough listening to conversations is

not very effective, learners listen to detailed ideas better when listening combined with inferences. This may be because students lack reasoning skills or do not apply listening sub – skills well.

Table 3.5. Specific results of Part 4

Question	Percentage of correct answer	Details
T1	29.5	Listen and infer
T2	31	Listen and infer
T3	32.2	Listen to details; the answer is in long and complicated sentences
T4	60.1	Listen to details; the answer is in short and single sentences
T5	37.3	Listen to details; the answer is at the end of the listening; the information is short; no similar expressions in the listening
Average	38	

In part 4 (Short talks), learners listen to two monologs to respond to questions. The score for this section is relatively low; only question T4 is at the average level (60.1% answered correctly), while the rest questions are all less than 40%. The score for question T4 is better than the other questions, probably because the answers fall into simple, short sentences with little information. Similar to the results in part 3, questions that require listening combined with reasoning have quite low scores (29.5% answered correctly to question T1 and 31% answered correctly to question T2). The average score of questions T3 and T5 is also around 32.2% and 37.3% because the answers fall into long sentences with a lot of information or information near the end of the listening passage when the ability to concentrate decreases and the information is only mentioned once.

#### 4. Conclusion

The data presented above also help to highlight some of the challenges learners face when listening, as well as the reasons of these issues. (1) Learners discern words expressing activities more accurately than nouns denoting locations and items. Some words are difficult to discern, and comparable sounds are difficult to separate, judgmental skill, or inadequate listening style. (3) Students prefer to listen to separate sentences rather than paragraphs. (4) Listening to material that is repeated is preferable than information that is mentioned just once, (5) hearing to specific concepts outperforms hearing paired with inference, indicating that pupils have

not used their inference abilities effectively when listening.

Thus, the above findings indicate that language learners frequently struggle with listening, which could be due to (1) a shortage of vocabulary competence, (2) limited capacity for sound recognition and differentiation, (3) a limited ability to use listening strategies such as making judgments, taking notes, and memorization, and (4) a lack of focus. Teachers should focus on the following concerns to assist students develop their listening skills: students should replenish their vocabulary knowledge on a regular basis.

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