

DEVELOPING LISTENING COMPREHENSION SKILL FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS

PHÁT TRIỂN KỸ NĂNG NGHE HIỂU CHO SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN TIẾNG ANH

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Abstract: The study investigates listening comprehension problems encountered by a group of non-English major students of University of Economics - Technology for Industries (UNETI). 120 non-English major students at UNETI who were studying in the second year voluntarily participated in the study. The data was gathered by means of questionnaires. The results of the study showed that the problems causing difficulties related to listening comprehension skill encountered by non-English major students at UNETI. Understanding students' learning difficulties may enable teachers to help students develop effective learning strategies and ultimately improve their listening comprehension abilities. Suggestions are made for addressing problems regarding how teachers can help their students overcome listening comprehension problems. The results of this study may also be useful for those who are interested in this field.

Keywords: Listening comprehension, common mistakes.

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này điều tra các vấn đề nghe hiểu của các sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh tại Trường Đại học Kinh tế - Kỹ thuật Công nghiệp. Tự nguyện tham gia vào nghiên cứu bao gồm 120 sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh của trường hiện đang học ở học kỳ ba. Dữ liệu được thu thập bằng bảng câu hỏi khảo sát. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy những vấn đề liên quan đến kỹ năng nghe hiểu mà các sinh viên không chuyên của trường thường gặp phải. Hiểu được khó khăn đó, các giáo viên có thể giúp sinh viên của mình phát triển các chiến lược học tập hiệu quả và cải thiện khả năng nghe hiểu cho sinh viên. Một số gợi ý cũng được đề xuất nhằm giúp sinh viên vượt qua các rào cản trong quá trình học kỹ năng nghe hiểu. Kết quả của nghiên cứu có thể hữu ích cho những người quan tâm đến lĩnh vực này.

Từ khóa: Nghe hiểu, lỗi thường gặp.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Rationale for the study

Listening is perhaps the most important skill in any language learning which allows us to receive, understand and evaluate information accurately. However, in Vietnam, the education system still faces many challenges.

Although students are taught English from kindergarten level to the university level, they are unable to acquire adequate communicative English proficiency. One of the most common factors causing this phenomenon is the difficulty they face in English listening comprehension. In general, the process of

studying English in Vietnamese system still places less emphasis on listening and speaking skills and more emphasis on the use of grammar, writing and reading skills. English is taught by having students memorize new words and sentence structures and then responding to the teacher only when called upon. Therefore, students have very little exposure to spoken English, both inside and outside their classrooms. As a result, students seem to have poor listening and speaking skills. Being an English teacher at UNETI, I find that students have a big gap in listening comprehension so when approaching LIFE syllabus, they tend to be boring and discouraged. Therefore, my study attempts to investigate listening problems encountered by a group of non English major students at UNETI. Data was gathered by means of questionnaires. I hope that the results of the study will help their students overcome their listening comprehension problems and also help teachers to work out possible solutions to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning listening comprehension at UNETI.

1.2. Scope of the study

The study is conducted at UNETI in order to perceive difficulties in learning listening comprehension of non-English major students. The study focuses on describing the problems and factors causing the given difficulties related to listening comprehension skill and suggest a number of strategies help students overcome the problems.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definitions of listening comprehension

With regard to the term “listening comprehension” in language learning, scholars have proposed a number of different definitions. Saricoban (1999), for example,

noted that listening comprehension is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This involves understanding a speaker’s accent or pronunciation, his or her grammar and vocabulary, and grasping the meaning conveyed.

As Hasan (2000, p.138) pointed out, “listening comprehension provides the right conditions for language acquisition and development of other language skills”. Listening, therefore, is essential not only as a receptive skill but also to the development of spoken language proficiency.

A similar view is proposed by Buck (2001, p.31), who defined listening comprehension as the result of an interaction between a number of information sources, which include the acoustic input, different types of linguistic knowledge, details of the context, and general world knowledge. Listeners use any information they have available, or any information that tends to be relevant to aid them in interpreting what a speaker is saying.

2.2. Potential Problems in listening comprehension

Underwood (1989) gives seven barriers that cause problems in listening comprehension.

First, he mentions about the speed of delivery that is beyond the control of listeners. He says, “Many language learners believe that the greatest difficulty with listening comprehension, as opposed to reading comprehension, is that listener cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks” (Underwood, 1989, p.16).

Second, it seems hard for learners to have words repeated. This is a real problem in learning situations. In the classroom, if necessary teacher is the only one who decides whether to replay a recording or not. “It is

hard for the teacher to judge whether or not the students have understood any particular section of what they have heard. (Underwood, 1989, p.17).

Third, a limited amount of vocabulary affects listeners' listening comprehension skill. The speaker may use strange words the listener doesn't know. Sometimes when listeners encounter a new word, it takes them a little time to find out the meaning of that word, and they therefore, accidentally miss the next part of the speech.

Fourth, listeners may confuse the signals that is being used to move from one point to another, giving an example, or repeating a point. Discourse markers which are utilized in formal situations (i.e., firstly, and after that) are relatively clear to listeners. However, in informal situations, listeners especially less proficient listeners feel ambiguous with signals such as gestures, increased loudness, or a clear change of pitch.

Fifth, to concentrate in a foreign language is not easy for learners. In listening comprehension, even the shortest break in attention can seriously impair comprehension. Listeners can concentrate and be easy to follow listening passages if they find the topics interesting. However, students sometimes feel that listening is very boring even if they are interested in the topic because it requires an effort to follow the meaning intended by the speaker.

Sixth, learning habits such as a wish to understand every word is also a problem. In fact, in class, teachers often encourage students to understand every word they see by pronouncing and repeating words clearly and carefully, and by speaking so clearly and carefully. As a result, students tend to feel embarrassed if they don't understand a

particular word or phrase and may further be discouraged by the failure. Teachers should therefore, instruct their students how to tolerate incompleteness and vagueness of understanding.

Seventh and last, learners may also face with comprehension problems because of incomplete contextual knowledge. Even if listeners can understand the surface meaning of the text, they also find hard to understand the whole meaning of the passage if they are unfamiliar with the context. Listeners from different cultural backgrounds can also misinterpret nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, or tone of voice.

In order to overcome these listening comprehension problems, learners need to develop techniques known as "listening strategies. These strategies are mental processes that enable learners comprehend the aural text despite their lack of knowledge. Listening strategies include inferring, elaboration, and regulating and monitoring comprehension, and they are discussed in detail in the next section.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research setting

The study was carried out at UNETI, Linh Nam street, Ha Noi city. The study was carried out with the participation of 120 non-English major students at UNETI. They were studying in the third term and voluntarily joined for the questionnaires. The LIFE curriculum has been taught since the first term. They have similar background and finished the first term of learning English at UNETI.

3.2. Research approach

The paper is a descriptive and analytical research, in which the qualitative and quantitative approaches are combined to implement this study. In reference with quantitative approach, the study collects data for the study including both English and Vietnamese reliable sources.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

In order to fulfill the presented aims, the study has been carried out by collecting data from questionnaires on 120 non major English students at UNETI. The survey questionnaire was designed reasonably to ensure its reliability.

3.4. Data collection procedures

The questionnaires were delivered to 120 students from 3 different classes (two from Technical Sector and one from Economic Sector. The participants were clearly explained the purpose of the research before they fulfilled the questions. They were also encouraged to ask the researcher for any explanation. The students were instructed to take as much time as they needed to complete it. After that, data from responses were sorted and analyzed to get the answers to the research questions.

3.5. Data analysis

After being fulfilled and collected, the questionnaires were analyzed carefully. The questions of the questionnaires were separated and computed by Microsoft Office Excel to find out the percentage of students' opinions about questioned items. Those data were presented in tables and charts which are shown clearly in the following parts.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Students' attitude towards listening comprehension skill at UNETI

Table 1 aims at asking students about their opinions of listening comprehension skill. Most of students (82.5%) were aware of the importance of listening comprehension skill at UNETI whereas only 17.5% found it not important. In table 2, the data showed that the listening comprehension skill is usually difficult for their English level while the rest (5%) say that they feel normal or comfortable when they carry out listening comprehension skill. None of them finds it easy. Based on the results, the author of the study can come to a conclusion that the students perceived that listening comprehension skill plays an important role in language learning. If you can achieve a high level in listening comprehension, other skills, especially speaking skill will also follow.

Table 1. Students' opinion about the role of listening comprehension skill

Student's opinion	Number of responses	Percentage (%)
Very important	41	34.2%
Important	58	48.3%
Not important	21	17.5%
Not very important	0	0%

Table 2. Students' opinion about the difficult level of listening comprehension skill

Student's opinion	Number of responses	Percentage (%)
Very difficult	30	25%
Difficult	84	70%
Normal	6	5%
Easy	0	0%

4.2. Students' opinions on listening comprehension problems

4.2.1. Problems from listeners

Table 3. Students' opinions of listening problems related to listener

Problems	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
1. I feel serious and discouraged when I don't understand the spoken text	3 (2.5%)	26 (21.7%)	37 (30.8%)	54 (45%)
2. I find it difficult when listening conversations or short talks without transcripts	3 (2.5%)	37 (30.8%)	50 (41.7%)	30 (25%)
3. I find it hard to understand the main idea even if it is a familiar topic	15 (12.5%)	38 (31.7%)	38 (31.7%)	29 (24.1%)

The findings reveal that listening problems related to listener are at a high level. 45% of students agreed that they always feel serious and discouraged when they don't understand the spoken text. Only 2.5% reported that they are never worried when they fail to understand the spoken text. These figures point out that this factor creates psychological problems for learners.

The fact that learners find it difficult when listening to English without transcripts (41.7% often, and 25% always) but 2.5% indicates that written support in the form of transcripts provided before listening exercises never help them understand the text. It is clear that students' learning habit is the main cause to their listening problems. This may be due to the fact that transcripts allow listeners to check and make sure that they have listened to everything on the tape.

Finally, matters of motivation and interest are also important factors in understanding the topic of the spoken text 31.7% often and

24.1% always find it difficult to understand the spoken text which is not of interest to them and 12.5% report they can overcome this difficulty easily. The numbers indicate that students have certain difficulties in understanding the spoken text which is not of interest to them. This may be due to the fact that the types of listening exercises always remain the same; listeners will feel bored because of the repetition of exercise patterns.

4.2.2. Problems from background knowledge and linguistic ability

In this section, the students were asked to point out the difficulties in some aspects of knowledge and linguistic ability and the results are presented in Table 4. In particular, idiomatic expressions, unfamiliar vocabulary, difficult grammatical structures, unfamiliar situations, the length of the spoken text, pronunciation, speech rate, and variety of accents may present students with listening comprehension problems.

Table 4. Problems from background knowledge and linguistic ability

Problems	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
4. Content of conversations with unfamiliar vocabulary including jargon and idiomatic expressions	11 9.2%	17 14.2%	24 20%	38 23.3%	43 33.3%

Problems	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
5. Difficult grammar structures	6 5%	12 10%	30 25%	40 33.3%	32 26.7%
6. Unfamiliar topics	3 2.5%	10 8.3%	18 15%	53 44.2%	36 30%
7. The long listening texts	2 1.7 %	19 15.8%	26 21.7%	31 25.8%	42 35%
8. Speakers speak with variety of accents.	4 3.3%	6 5%	39 32.5%	45 37.5%	26 21.7%
9. Speakers speak too fast	5 4.2%	7 5.8%	15 34.2%	41 34.2%	52 43.3%
10. Be difficult to understand the meaning of words which are not pronounced clearly.	6 5%	10 8.3%	40 33.3%	29 24.2%	35 29.2%

Item 4 was given to know whether unfamiliar words, including jargon and idiomatic expressions interfere with the learners' listening comprehension. The great majority of the students (76.6% including 20% sometimes, 23.3% often, 33.3% always) have responded that unfamiliar words, including jargon and idioms interfered with their listening comprehension. This finding reported that the major problem hindering listening comprehension was that the students' vocabulary was too limited to understand conversations. Therefore, lack of vocabulary is a big obstacle to most students in listening comprehension.

Additionally, most of students 85% (25% sometimes, 33.3% often, 26.7% always) agreed that complex grammatical structures caused much trouble to them. They usually stop listening and think about the structures. This interrupts the flow of speech and thus the students may miss some essential information. Hence, grammatical structures also need more attention while listening comprehension.

As can be seen from item 6, it seems reasonable to generalize that unfamiliar topic

hinders the listening comprehension of the majority of the students. The figure shows that unfamiliar topics sometimes bring about a problem in listening comprehension 15% (sometimes) and 74.2% (often and always) of the students have problems with topics which are unfamiliar to them. The listening material may contain a variety of fields in life or society. For instance, it is likely a business report, a daily conversation or a political issue, etc. which confuse the listener. These conversations may include words, phrases or terms unfamiliar to listeners. They are totally strange to them so it is such a hard job to listen when the message is full of terminology. The solution is to ask the students to practice as much as they can on these various materials. Therefore, they can get used to listening to the variety of topics without any difficulties.

The long listening text is supposed to be an obstacle to students in listening claimed by 60.8% (35% always, 25.8% often). Actually, if the students do the listening for a long time, they will be under pressure. This will not bring out good result. Furthermore, if the listening text is too long, the listener is

required the skill of note-taking. However, the note-taking is not easy for students. Most students find it hard to take note while listening because they are not trained with this skill.

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. (Hasan, 2000: 143)

According item 8, variety of accents causes difficulties to students in listening comprehension since they do not have much exposure to different accents. The result from item 8 demonstrates that 21.7% always, 37.5% often, 32.5% sometimes of the students experience this kind of problem, only small number 8.3% of students said that they never or seldom face the problem. For instance, if learners listen to French people speaking English, they will feel hard to understand him or her as they speak English in a native French intonation. For this linguistic feature, students need much more exposing to different kinds of accents. Students have tendency to get familiar with the accents which they mostly listen. If listeners are exposed to standard British or American accents, they will face problems in understanding other accents.

The next cause of listening problems was the speed of delivery 43.3% always find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast while only a small number (4.2% never, 5.8% seldom) are not interfered by speech rate. As a result, the students absolutely encounter certain difficulties in listening comprehension since they lack control over the speed at which the speakers

speak (Underwood, 1989).

The fact that some speakers pronounced unclearly is also considered as a source of listening problem 29.2% always find it difficult to understand the meanings of words which are not pronounced clearly meanwhile 5% are never in that situation. The numbers above indicates that students' listening problem is partly due to their poor pronunciation.

4.3. Recommendations

This research has finished finding the common problems encountered by a group of non-English major students of UNETI. Based on the fact and figure, a number of following strategies are also suggested to help students develop listening learning.

4.3.1. Improving English proficiency

To overcome listening difficulties, students themselves must try to improve their English. If their language proficiency is improved, they are likely to overcome the difficulties such as variety of accents, speech rate, native speakers' pronunciation, and vocabulary. In class, students should participate actively in the lesson and get involved in extracurricular activities like joining an English club, talking with foreigners and working with a tutor. Moreover, students can get access to authentic sources of communication themselves by watching TV, listening to the radio and logging on the Internet. By doing so, they could get used to the lively contexts in which spoken language is used.

4.3.2. Improving listening strategies

When students know how to use appropriate listening strategies, they will be able to improve their listening practices and overcome listening difficulties. Below are

some of the most important strategies, which should be employed by the students while engaging in a listening task.

- *Listening for main ideas:* students focus on the meanings, not just words. While listening, students note down main points and key words to work out the gist of the talk.

- *Guessing from the context:* guess the meaning of unfamiliar words or phrases by looking at the context of the word (the surrounding words/ideas) and using logic and knowledge of the world to figure out what the word might mean.

- *Making inferences:* students can learn to compensate for their lack of background knowledge by learning to reply on the visual or auditory cues. By paying attention to maps, charts, photographs, illustrations, or the background noise, they will be able to interpret the verbal messages more successfully and draw logical conclusion.

- *Predicting:* Use clues from context and prior knowledge to predict general content before listening and predict what speakers are going to say.

- *Taking note:* write down important content words. This helps students overcome memory problems, especially when listening to a

long-spoken text.

- *Cooperating with peers:* they can work jointly with their classmates to comprehend spoken text and then benefit each other by sharing the strategies they employed during the listening.

5. CONCLUSION

In general, the study has been carried with the aim to investigate the current problems in listening comprehension of non-English major students at UNETI. The paper is relevant to the current situation as there has been a strong tendency to learn English for communication. Therefore, it is necessary to give some suggestions on strategies to improve learning listening comprehension.

Being a teacher at UNETI, I can clearly see that the situation of teaching and learning English. Listening comprehension seems to be the weakest skill and students encounter various kinds of listening problems. This study is done in the hope of finding out the factors causing their listening comprehension problems and contributing some recommended strategies for students to improve the effectiveness of learning listening comprehension

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