

DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING ENGLISH LISTENING SKILLS OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

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Abstract

The study was aimed at exploring the difficulties that first-year students face in the process of learning English listening skills. The participants included 46 first-year English majors and non-English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Technology. The data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. It has been discovered that the students generally encounter a variety of challenges when learning listening skills. However, it is discovered that there is a mostly significant difference in the severity and frequency of challenges between the two student groups. It has been determined from the findings that non-English major students experience problems more frequently than English major students. Significantly, of the five kinds of challenges observed, four groups are mostly considerably different between the two classes in terms of content, linguistics, speaker, and listener. In order to help students' listening comprehension, a number of recommendations are made based on the investigation's findings for teaching and acquiring listening skills.

Keyword: listening skills, difficulties, learning English listening

1. INTRODUCTION

As Vietnam is on the way to integrate with the world, English has become one of the most important subjects in the education system of the country. Listening skill is an extremely important skill in English learning and it is the foundation for learning English reading, writing, and speaking. According to Rost [1], "Listening is very important in language learning because it provides input for learners, and it has also an important role in the development of learners' language knowledge".

However, compared to other fundamental skills, listening skill is less interested, paid attention to in teaching and learning, and even ignored, which leads to many difficulties in the learning listening process of students.

1.1. Listening and the importance of listening skills

1.1.1. Listening

The definition of listening is given by scientists in different ways. In [2] Underwood simplified the definition of listening to "the activity of paying attention to and trying to get meaning from something we hear". According to Purdy [3], he defined listening as "the active and dynamic process of attending, perceiving, interpreting, remembering, and responding to the expressed (verbal and nonverbal), needs, concerns, and information offered by other human beings".

In the definition of listening, many types of listening can be divided, depending on the purpose of the listener, but this study focuses on listening comprehension because when listening to English, it is mainly listening to understand. In [4] the researchers in their book defined listening comprehension as the product of teaching methodology and is matched by terms such as speech understanding, spoken language understanding, speech recognition, and speech perception. O'Malley, Chamot, and Kupper said that: "Listening comprehension is an active process in which the listener constructs meaning by using cues from contextual information and from existing knowledge, while relying upon multiple strategic resources to fulfill the task requirement" [5]. From existing literature, it is indicated that listening comprehension is a very complex skill. The task of listening comprehension is not only to receive sounds, but it also requires analysis and identification of the message of the speech.

1.1.2 The importance of listening skill

Peterson [6] states that “no other type of language input is easy to process as a spoken language, received through listening ... through listening, learners can build an awareness of the interworkings of language systems at various levels and thus establish a base for more fluent productive skills”. In addition, “listening skills for classroom learning are also extremely important. Students often think that being able to write and speak in a second language means that they know the language; however, if they do not have efficient listening skills, it is not possible to communicate effectively. That is, listening is the basic skill in language learning and over 50% of the time that students spend functioning in a foreign language will be devoted to listening” [7].

1.2 Difficulties encountered in the process of learning listening skills

According to Graham[8], “there are some other factors that increase learners’ listening comprehension

problems such as restricted vocabulary, poor grammar, and misinterpretations about listening tasks”. Hasan [9] indicated that unfamiliar words, difficult grammatical structures, and the length of the spoken passages are the most important factors that cause problems for learners’ listening comprehension. One of the most typical classification can be mentioned is the classification of Yagang [10]: “There are four sources for listening comprehension problems. They are the message, the speaker, the listener, and the physical environment”. However, according to this classification, the message factor will be too general and too inclusive, so it can be divided into two smaller factors: the content factor and the linguistic factor. In summary, the difficulties listed above can all be divided into 5 main categories: The difficulties related to the content of the dialogue, The difficulties related to the linguistic factor, The difficulties related to the listener, The difficulties related to the speaker, The difficulties related to the physical setting.

Type of difficulties	Explanation
The difficulties related to the content of the dialogue	Difficulty in terms of content means that in the speech there is one or more content problems that affect the listening process of listeners. It can be a speech with too many new words, complex structure, too long, too boring or too abstract, with many academic elements, ...
The difficulties related to the linguistic factor	Linguistic difficulties are factors caused by the specificity of that language for listeners, which can be linking words, transition words, words starting a part of speech or words to denote the beginning of the main idea,...
The difficulties related to the listener	Difficulties related to listeners are difficulties that come from the listener's own, it can be about background knowledge, judgment ability, ability to remember, ability to concentrate, ability to think systematically, psychological state and listening strategies, etc.
The difficulties related to the speaker	Difficulty related to the speaker is the influence that the speaker exerts on the listener's listening performance. It may be due to the speaker's fast speaking habits, the pronunciation habits of the native speakers, the problem with the voice during the speech, or the speaker's habit of using slang or idioms.
The difficulties related to the physical setting	Physical factors are factors such as poor quality of speakers, radios; bad recording conditions (noise); noise inside and outside the classroom while listening and due to the teacher's teaching method, listening materials, etc.

Table 1. Types of difficulties in learning listening skills

The above groups of difficulties all have a great impact on students in each respect. For example, about

difficulties with the content of the dialogue, Underwood stated that unfamiliar topics and learners’ lack of

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Participants

The subjects of the study were fifteen (15) English-major students in class K57NNA from the Faculty of International Training and thirty-one (31) students in K57TDH from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering. They were between the ages of 19 and 20. They had completed their first year at Thai Nguyen University of Technology. Each student in the two classes had a different background in English, but the common point was that they still faced a lot of difficulties in the process of learning English listening skills. The goal of the study was explained to them, and the researcher hoped to get reliable responses.

2.2. Instruments

A set of multiple-choice questionnaire which consists of 50 Likert-type statements and interview questions with first-year students at Thai Nguyen University of Technology were employed. The questionnaire in this study was adapted from three studies [15, 2, 16]. There was also a Vietnamese translation of the questionnaire to avoid any possible misunderstanding with the non-English major students.

2.3 Data analysis

The data of the study was analyzed through SPSS Version 20 (Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences) in order to obtain statistical findings. The descriptive statistics and a One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were employed. The results from the interviews with the major and non-major students were also quantified based on the interview format and then analyzed with the results from the Questionnaires.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Students' perceptions of the importance of listening skills

Students' perception of the importance of listening skills is presented in Table 3. It can be seen from this table that, the students in both classes thought that listening skills were important ($M=4.53$, $SD= .743$ compared to

background information cause listeners difficulties to approach the meaning of messages [2]. Regarding the group of difficulties related to linguistic factors, according to Munro and Derwing [11] "Too many accented speech can lead to an important reduction in comprehension". About the difficulties related to listeners, Bingol et al. [12] believe that the level of listeners can have an impact on what they can hear. "Good listeners can hear a long message and keep information in their mind for a long time. However, lower-level students will find it exhausted to collect the data from spoken messages". With the group of difficulties related to the speaker, Underwood claimed that passage listening can be challenging at high speeds. If speakers speak excessively quickly, learners may have a difficult time understanding words in L2. Because they can't adjust the speaker's speed in this scenario, listeners may have serious listening comprehension issues [2]. Goh indicated that a speaker's intonation or pronunciation are the most important components that influence listeners' understanding [13]. New intonations can cause genuine problems in listening comprehension. In terms of difficulty related to physical settings, Chetchumlong reported that a large room and surrounding noises make it tough to listen. These elements appear to make it harder for listeners to understand spoken messages. Noises can distract listeners' attention to the content of dialogue. Listeners cannot send sounds into their minds for understanding without the support of necessary equipment [14].

As presented before, the aim of the study is to identify the difficulties faced by first-year students at Thai Nguyen University of Technology in the process of learning English listening skills. Therefore, the first objective is exploring the difficulties experienced by the students, then carrying out a comparison between the major and non-major students in terms of difficulties in listening skills. Thus, the study tried to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the difficulties that first-year students often encounter in the process of listening to English?
- 2) What is the difference in difficulties of learning English listening skills between English major and non-English major students?

M=4.32, SD=1.194). Furthermore, the difference in this opinion between the two classes was not significant ($P = .535 > .05$).

Item	K57NNA (N=15)		K57TDH (N=31)		p.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1	4.53	.743	4.32	1.194	.535

Table 3. Students' perception of the importance of listening skills

3.2 Students' time of learning listening

Table 4 shows the amount of time the students spent learning listening skills. As shown in this table, the majority of students in both groups usually spent less than 1 hour on learning listening skills, a small percentage of students spent 1-2 hours, while the number of students spent 2-3 hours and more than 3 hours was very limited. (M=1.73, SD=1.100 versus M=1.15, SD = .925). In this section, both classes had no significant difference ($P = .553 > .05$).

Item	K57NNA (N=15)		K57TDH (N=31)		p.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
2	1.73	1.100	1.55	.925	.553

Table 4. Students' time on learning listening

3.3 Students' opinions on the difficulty level of English listening skills

Table 5 presents the students' views on the difficulty level of English listening skills. With this issue, the majority of students in both classes agreed that listening is the most difficult skill, only a small percentage of students were not sure and no one disagreed with this idea (M=1.13, SD= .352 vs M=1.42, SD = .502). Comparing the two classes, we can be seen that there was no significant difference ($P = .054$), which meant that most students were aware that listening is a difficult skill.

Item	K57NNA (N=15)		K57TDH (N=31)		p.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
3	2.87	.352	2.58	.502	.054

Table 5. Students' opinions on the difficulty level of English listening skills

3.4 Frequency of students' difficulties in learning listening skills

The frequency at which the students had difficulty learning listening skills is presented in Table 6. From this table, it can be seen that the students in both classes had difficulty in learning listening skills at relatively high frequencies (M=4.47, SD= .915 versus M=3.97, SD = .795). With $P = .064 > .05$, the difference in the frequency of difficulties of students in two classes is not significant.

Item	K57NNA (N=15)		K57TDH (N=31)		p.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
4	4.47	.915	3.97	.795	.064

Table 6. Frequency of students' difficulties in learning listening

To obtain information on the specific difficulties that students often faced, a number of students were interviewed. The results showed that each student had his or her own problems. The main difficulties included not hearing words, not understanding the content due to limited vocabulary and the influence of speech speed or the phenomenon of swallowing sounds, losing focus because of excessive focus on a detail and being nervous before listening.

3.5 The impact of specific difficulties on students when learning listening skills

A. The difficulties related to the content of the dialogue.
 The first group of difficulties related to the content of the dialogue is shown in Table 7. Within this group of difficulties, it can be seen that there is a great difference between the two classes in most items. Specifically, it is noted that the students in class K57NNA only sometimes encountered the difficulties mentioned in items 1 and 2 while class K57TDH encountered them on a regular basis (M=3.00, SD=1.134 vs M=3.94, SD= 0.964) and (M=2.53, SD=1.187 vs M=4.03, SD= .948 respectively, and $P = .006$, and $.000$).

Item	K57NNA (N=15)		K57TDH (N=31)		p.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1	3.00	1.134	3.94	.964	.006
2	2.53	1.187	4.03	.948	.000
3	3.00	1.069	4.00	.966	.003
4	2.60	1.183	3.45	1.060	.018
5	2.40	.986	3.39	1.145	.006
6	2.93	1.280	3.42	1.057	.180
7	2.73	1.100	3.42	1.089	.052

Table 7. The difficulties related to the content of the dialogue

The next difficulties related to the ability to guess the context and the main content also greatly differ, the students in K54NNA class encountered these difficulties less often than those in K57TDH class (M=2.60, SD=1.183 versus M=3.45, SD=1.060) and (M=3.39, SD=1.145 versus M=2.40, SD= .986). All the above-mentioned five difficulties reported with $P < .05$ shows that there were significant differences between the two groups of students regarding these difficulties.

B. The difficulties related to the linguistic factor

The difficulties related to linguistic factor are presented in Table 8. In general, all three difficulties in this group have a significant difference between the two classes. Regarding the new word, class K57NNA encountered this difficulty at a far lower frequency than class K57TDH (M=2.80, SD=1.082 vs M=3.55, SD= .995, $P=.025$). The next item related to the difficulty in recognizing sign words also received a significant different responses from the two classes (M=2.60, SD=1.121 versus M=3.39, SD=1.022, $P=.022$). Finally, stopping listening when there is a problem with listening appeared more often with K57TDH than K57NNA class. All of these difficulties are significantly different between the two classes with the $P < .05$.

Item	K57NNA (N=15)		K57TDH (N=31)		p.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
9	2.80	1.082	3.55	.995	.025
10	2.60	1.121	3.39	1.022	.022
11	2.60	1.121	3.55	.995	.006

Table 8. The difficulties related to the linguistic factor

C. The difficulties related to the listener

The difficulties associated with learning listening skills in relation to listeners is expressed in Table 9. With this type of difficulty, the two groups show differences in most difficulties. Firstly, the students in class K57TDH reported that they often lost their hearing when having problems when listening while class K57NNA only sometimes encountered this difficulty (M=2.87, SD=1.246 vs. M=3.58, SD=1.025). The K57NNA class also only sometimes forgot the previously mentioned content, while the K57TDH class had this difficulty more often (M=2.73, SD=1.163 vs M=3.48, SD=1.092). Besides, the students from K57NNA class felt afraid before listening and frustrated when not listening to the entire listening less often than those from K57TDH (M=2.73, SD=1.163 compared to M=3.55, SD= .961) and (M=2.67, SD=1.047 compared to M=3.55, SD=1.150, respectively). With the values lower than .05, ($P= 0.45$, $P= .038$, $P=0.16$ and $P= 0.16$, respectively), the differences between the two classes in terms of the four mentioned-above difficulties were statistically significant.

Item	K57NNA (N=15)		K57TDH (N=31)		p.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
12	2.87	1.246	3.58	1.025	.045
13	2.73	1.280	3.29	1.006	.115
14	2.87	1.302	3.39	1.086	.160
15	2.73	1.163	3.48	1.092	.038
16	2.93	1.387	3.42	1.057	.194
17	2.73	1.163	3.55	.961	.016
18	2.67	1.047	3.55	1.150	.016
19	2.53	1.125	3.13	1.176	.110
20	2.47	1.246	3.32	1.275	.037
21	2.60	1.352	3.48	1.092	.022
22	2.67	1.175	3.52	1.122	.022

Table 9. The difficulties related to the listener

However, there are similarities between the two classes in some difficulties. The students in both groups reported that they only sometimes had difficulty guessing what will be say next (M=2.73, SD=1.280 vs M=3.29, SD=1.006). Furthermore, both groups reported that they were less worried about associating what was previously heard (M=2.87, SD= 1.302 vs M=3.39, SD=1.086) as well as limiting the number of times listening (M=2.93, SD=1.387 vs M=3.42, SD=1.057). With the

problem of preparing for the listening lesson, both groups only sometimes encountered this difficulty (M=2.53, SD=1.125 compared with M=3.13, SD=1.176). These four difficulties did not have a significant difference between the two groups (P= .115> .05, P= .160> .05, P= .194> .05 and P= .110> .05).

D. The difficulties related to the speaker

The information on difficulties related to speakers is displayed in Table 10. It can be recognized that both classes often encountered difficulty in slang and idioms (M=3.13, SD=1.246 vs. M=3.52, SD= .996). Moreover, both classes sometimes or often found the speaker's voice and unclear pronunciation difficult (M=2.87, SD=1.246 vs. M=3.42, SD= 1.025) and (M=2.87, SD= 1.246 versus M=3.48, SD= .962). There is no difference between the two classes in these three constraints, with P= .267 > .05, P= .117 > .05 and P= .071 > .05).

Item	K57NNA (N=15)		K57TDH (N=31)		p.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
23	2.73	1.280	3.61	1.086	.019
24	2.67	1.175	3.68	.979	.004
25	2.87	1.246	3.48	.962	.071
26	3.13	1.246	3.52	.996	.267
27	2.87	1.246	3.42	1.025	.117

Table 10. The difficulties related to the speaker

However, the K57TDH class often encountered difficulties when the speaker spoke too fast, while the K57NNA class faced this difficulty less often (M=2.73, SD=1.280 vs M=3.61, SD= 1.086). In addition, unfamiliar sounds of speakers caused more difficulties to K57TDH class than the other (M=3.68, SD=.979 compared to M=2.67, SD=1.175). The difference between the two groups in these two difficulties is significant (P= .019 < .05 and P= .004 < .05).

To clarify this difficulty, the students were interviewed to express their views on this difficulty. Through the answers of the students participating in the interview, they all said that slang and idioms are one of the outstanding difficulties that greatly affect their listening results. They all said that they are not good at learning these knowledges. The main reason is that slang and idioms are difficult to learn and remember, and when

they encounter slang and idioms in the listening passage, they often find it difficult to understand, confused, do not understand or misunderstand the content of the talk.

E. The difficulties related to the physical setting

The information on the difficulty related to the physical setting is shown in Table 11. It is revealed that both classes are rather similar in responses. Specifically, the K57NNA class occasionally faced problems in CD quality and listening materials, while the K57TDH class encountered these difficulties often (M=2.67, SD=1.175 compared to M= 3.32, SD= .979) and (M=2.67, SD=1.175 versus M=3.10, SD=1.248). This is similar to the difficulties in teachers' teaching methods and noise (M=2.53, SD= 1.302 vs. M=2.87, SD= 1.408) and (M=2.87, SD= 1.246 versus M=3.45, SD=1.287). With P= .052, P= .270, P= .439, P= .151, respectively. These four constraints have no significant difference between the two classes (P>.05).

Item	K57NNA (N=15)		K57TDH (N=31)		p.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
28	2.67	1.175	3.32	.979	.052
29	2.53	1.302	3.32	1.137	.041
30	2.53	1.302	2.87	1.408	.439
31	2.87	1.246	3.45	1.287	.151
8	2.67	1.175	3.10	1.248	.270

Table 11. The difficulties related to the physical setting

However, the K57TDH class claimed that they encountered difficulties when the audio files were recorded in poor conditions, while the K57NNA class remained only occasionally (M=2.53, SD=1.302 vs M=3.32, SD=1.137). The index P= .041< .05 clearly shows this difference.

Regarding listening media such as speakers, radio, listening materials, some students were interviewed. Most of the students claimed that the quality of speakers, radio, and materials was not good, besides, the noise in the classroom was a problem affecting the students' listening.

4. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Discussion

After analyzing the collected data, the study identified some difficulties of first-year students at Thai Nguyen University of Technology in learning English listening skills.

Firstly, in regard students' awareness of the importance of listening skills, it can be seen that students of both classes have an awareness of the importance of listening skills. Most of the student rate listening skills as very important and important skill. We can conclude that most of you were aware of the importance of listening skills in learning English. With these positive perceptions, students have the basic motivation to improve their listening skills.

Concerning the time students spend learning to listen from the findings, it can be noticed that, in both classes, most students still spend less than 1 hour, the number of students who spend more time learning listening accounts for a relatively low percentage. From that, it can be realized that first-year students still spend little time on learning listening, which leads to slow development of listening skills and it gradually becomes difficult for students.

Regarding students' views on whether listening is the most difficult skill, the majority of students answered "yes". Only a few students are not sure with this opinion. There is no difference in this regard between the two classes. Recognizing that listening is the most difficult skill will create conditions for students to pay more attention to this skill, thereby focusing on learning to improve their own listening skills after this study provides solutions.

Next, in regard to the frequency of facing difficulties in listening, the students in both classes reported that they often encountered difficulties. The results from questionnaire and the interview questions disclose, many problems, of which the biggest difficulties are related to vocabulary and pronunciation. These are common difficulties when learning to listen. Therefore, it is necessary to pay more attention to those problems. As stated in the above section, the difficulties are discussed in 5 main groups: The difficulties related to the content of the dialogue, the difficulties related to the linguistic factor, the difficulties related to the listener, the difficulties related to the speaker and the difficulties

related to the physical setting. The similarities between five groups is that there is a significant difference in the frequency of facing difficulties between the two groups. Specifically, the non-major students experience these problems at higher frequency than the major students in most of the situations. From this result, it is drawn that it is essential to pay more attention to the group of non-major students with reference to teaching and learning English listening skills.

Of these problems, the difficulty related to slang and idiom was found to be the most notable, causing the most difficulty to the students of both groups. Therefore, slang and idioms should be taken into great consideration in teaching and learning listening skills. Significantly, the difficulties related to vocabulary, pronunciation and social knowledge are discovered to be remarkable. Although there is a significant difference between the two classes, these difficulties show a higher frequency than other problems for both classes. These are basic difficulties but are very common to all students as well as all foreign language subjects.

In short, it can be comprehended that the students have positive perceptions about English listening skills, but spending time learning this skill is not appropriate, leading to encountering difficulties at high frequencies when learning to listen. It is also found that the non-English major students face difficulties more often than the English major students. Simultaneously, it the outstanding difficulties, which most affect the majority of the students, are identified in slang and idioms, vocabulary, pronunciation, and social knowledge.

4.2. Implications

On the basis of the research results, some suggestions can be offered to both first-year major and non-major students of Thai Nguyen University of Technology in solving listening comprehension problems.

First, the students need to be seriously aware of the importance and difficulty of listening, so that they can focus more and spend more time on learning to listen. In terms of difficulties related to the content of the dialogue and the linguistic factors, it is required for the students to practice listening more frequently, especially with long listening passages, many new words, difficult grammar structures, and new listening lessons with new topics. There are various ways for the students to employ to increase learning new words, learn grammar

and improve social knowledge, especially for non-major students, who often encounter difficulties with this difficult group.

Second, with the difficulties related to listener, students can also work on improving their own judgment and memory. These skills can be improved through everyday activities, both in school and in social activities. Another important thing is that the students need to learn how to control their psychology and ability to withstand pressure, because psychology and pressure greatly affect the listening process. They can regularly take listening tests with a timer or set specific goals to get used to the pressure of learning to listen as well as recognize psychological weaknesses to find ways to overcome.

In addition, concerning the difficulties related to listener, the students need to find and apply suitable listening strategies. Listening strategies can be learned effectively on the internet or from your teacher. However, there are various strategies, so it is important for students to know how to choose the strategies that are suitable for them as well as the specific listening lesson.

For the university, it is necessary to take remedial measures and improve facilities for students' listening (speakers, radios, CDs,...). At the same time, the school also needs to regularly update and select good quality listening materials, suitable for the level of the students. Teachers need to actively learn and apply new and more interesting teaching methods to create excitement for students in listening.

5. CONCLUSION

In the research, the perceptions, as well as the difficulties encountered by the English majors and non-English majors were investigated, synthesized and analyzed. It has been found that in general, the students face various difficulties in learning listening skills. However, the difference in the degree and frequency of difficulties between the two groups of the students is found to be mostly significant. According to the results, it has been recognized that the non-major students encounter difficulties at higher frequencies than the major students.

In addition, among the five groups of difficulties identified, four groups of difficulties in terms of content, linguistics, speaker, and listener are mostly significantly different between the two classes. Based on the results

of the investigation, several recommendations are given to the teaching and learning listening skills with the hope to help improve the students' listening comprehension.

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