

ENGLISH LISTENING COMPREHENSION OF SECOND YEAR STUDENTS: DIFFICULTIES AND STRATEGIES

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Abstract: *This study investigates the challenges second-year English language students face in developing listening comprehension skill. Through a questionnaire survey, the research identifies key obstacles such as limited vocabulary, unfamiliar accents, cultural differences, and the speed of speech, all of which hinder effective listening. The study also examines the strategies students employ, including note-taking, listening to audio materials repeatedly, and contextual guessing. The findings underscore the need for targeted teaching methods to address these specific challenges and improve students' listening proficiency. The research offers valuable insights for educators to design more effective listening comprehension activities that can better support second-year learners in overcoming listening barriers.*

Keywords: *Difficulties and strategies; English listening comprehension skills; Second-year students.*

1. Introduction

Listening is a fundamental language skill for understanding the world around us and engaging in successful communication. It involves a complex process of identifying, understanding, evaluating, remembering, and responding to spoken language. However, English listening comprehension can be a formidable challenge for many learners, even those who have a strong grasp of the language's grammar and vocabulary, particularly at second-year university students. This difficulty often stems from a variety of factors, including accent variation, rapid speech, colloquialisms, and cultural nuances making it a significant obstacle in their language learning journey. Navigating these obstacles requires a combination of specialised listening skills and a deep understanding of the English language. By examining the factors that hinder listening proficiency and exploring potential solutions, this research aims to contribute to the development of more effective listening instruction and support strategies.

This study investigates the specific listening problems experienced by second-year English language students. Through data analysis and insights from student perspectives, research aims

to identify practical strategies and recommendations for improving listening comprehension. By addressing these challenges, this study seeks to empower English language learners to become more effective listeners and communicators, ultimately enhancing their academic and professional success.

2. Research overview

Rost (2009) asserts that listening serves as a fundamental tool for comprehending the external world and constitutes an indispensable component of effective communication. Thomlison (1984) defines listening as the capacity to accurately identify and interpret the messages conveyed by others. This process necessitates a nuanced understanding of the speaker's accent and pronunciation, their grammatical structures and vocabulary, as well as the underlying meaning. A proficient listener demonstrates the ability to execute these tasks concurrently.

As Howatt and Dakin (1974) posit, listening is a cognitive process that requires the identification and comprehension of spoken language. This entails deciphering a speaker's accent and pronunciation, as well as their grammatical structures and lexical choices.

Ultimately, successful listening involves a

dynamic process of interpretation, whereby listeners correlate auditory input with their existing knowledge to derive meaning from the spoken word.

Listening is an indispensable component of language acquisition, as it provides the essential aural input for language development and facilitates meaningful participation in spoken discourse. Communication necessitates effective listening skills, with a significant portion of communication time dedicated to listening, accounting for approximately 40-50% of the total time, while speaking occupies 25-30%, reading 11-16%, and writing 9% (Mendelsohn, 1994). This data underscores the pivotal role of listening in communication, as it consumes half of the communication time and is a fundamental prerequisite for effective communication. Listening serves as a primary conduit for acquiring education, information, understanding of the world and human affairs, ideas, values, and appreciation. In the contemporary era of mass communication, predominantly oral in nature, it is imperative that students are equipped with the ability to listen effectively and critically.

The process of effective listening can be divided into five sequential stages: reception, comprehension, evaluation, retention, and response. Each of these stages will be examined in greater depth in subsequent sections. A proficient listener must initially perceive and identify the auditory stimuli directed towards them, then interpret the meaning conveyed within those sounds. Following this, the listener must critically assess and evaluate the message, ensuring its accuracy and relevance. Additionally, the listener must retain or remember the information presented, and finally, respond appropriately to the message, whether through verbal or nonverbal means.

Receiving (Hearing)

Hearing, a fundamental physiological process, involves the transduction of sound waves into neural signals by the eardrum. While it may appear self-evident, effective listening necessitates the ability to perceive auditory stimuli. The clarity of sound directly influences the ease with which listening can be accomplished.

Understanding

The ability to comprehend spoken language is essential for daily interactions, especially information acquisition. In various settings, such as workplaces and educational institutions, individuals rely on listening to superiors and teachers for guidance and knowledge. Even political discourse involves listening to candidates' speeches to make informed decisions. However, effective listening requires a deep understanding of the spoken message. One strategy to enhance comprehension is through active questioning. By posing inquiries, listeners can clarify ambiguities and construct a more accurate mental representation of the speaker's intended meaning.

Evaluating

During the evaluation phase of communication, the listener critically assesses the speaker's message. They determine the message's coherence, objectivity, veracity, and relevance. Additionally, listeners analyze the speaker's motivations and the methods used to convey the message. This involves considering factors such as the speaker's personal or professional goals. For instance, a listener might recognize the factual accuracy of a coworker's criticism but also understand that personal stress, such as a sick child, could be influencing their emotional response. Similarly, a voter can evaluate the persuasiveness of a political candidate's speech and decide whether their arguments warrant support.

Remembering

During the cognitive stage of listening, the audience actively categorizes and stores incoming information for subsequent retrieval. Effective recall of prior knowledge is essential for comprehending new material and placing it within a broader context. Conversely, passive or inattentive listening can significantly impair retention, as minimal cognitive effort is needed to process the speaker's content.

Responding

Active engagement in the listening process is crucial for effective communication. Speakers often rely on both verbal and nonverbal cues from listeners to gauge the comprehension and

consideration of their message. This feedback allows speakers to adapt their communication style accordingly.

Language modalities can be broadly categorized into spoken and written forms. While listening and speaking are integral components of spoken language, reading and writing are associated with written language. Despite the widespread desire for English fluency, many learners overlook the importance of developing a comprehensive set of English language skills. Consequently, language instruction often prioritizes spoken language, particularly conversational skills, at the expense of other language modalities, such as listening comprehension. This imbalance may contribute to the challenges individuals encounter when listening to English (Rintaningrum, 2018a).

Second-year students at Thanh Do University face significant challenges in online listening comprehension, a receptive language skill. However, from an information processing standpoint, listening is an active cognitive process in which learners selectively attend to and interpret auditory and visual cues to decipher the speaker's intended message (Thompson & Rubin, 1996). Underwood (1989) identifies several key challenges in listening comprehension, including: difficulty controlling speaking speed, inability to request repetition, limited vocabulary, failure to recognize linguistic cues, interpretive issues, lack of concentration, and established learning habits.

Learners often encounter significant obstacles in comprehending spoken English. Several key factors contribute to these difficulties are as follows:

Audio Quality

The quality of recorded materials used in instruction can significantly impact comprehension. Poor audio quality can hinder students' ability to discern sounds and understand spoken content.

Cultural Context

Cultural differences play a crucial role in language comprehension. If listening materials contain unfamiliar cultural elements, learners may struggle to understand the intended meaning. It is essential for teachers to provide students with relevant cultural background information to

facilitate comprehension.

Accent Variation

Christine Goh (1999) noted that speaker accents can be a major obstacle to listening comprehension. Unfamiliar accents, both native and non-native, can pose challenges for learners. Familiarity with an accent, however, can enhance comprehension.

Vocabulary Familiarity

Learners are more likely to comprehend familiar vocabulary in listening texts. Understanding word meanings can increase interest, motivation, and overall listening comprehension. However, it is important to note that many words have multiple meanings, and learners may become confused if these meanings are not used appropriately in context.

3. Research methods

The questionnaire incorporated both closed-ended and open-ended questions. This mixed approach was adopted to balance the advantages of each format. Closed-ended questions facilitated efficient data collation and analysis, while open-ended questions offered greater flexibility, allowing respondents to provide more detailed and nuanced answers.

The study involved 26 sophomore English majors at foreign language and tourism department of TDU. As second-year English major students, they were likely encountering common academic challenges.

A structured questionnaire was developed to assess the students' listening comprehension challenges and the strategies they employ. The questionnaire was distributed to the students in an online format and took approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. The questionnaire responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics (such as frequencies and percentages) to identify the most common difficulties students face and the most frequently used strategies.

There are two research questions:

- What are difficulties in listening comprehension?
- What should be done to overcome the difficulties?

4. Research results

The analysis of student responses regarding the challenges they encountered in learning English

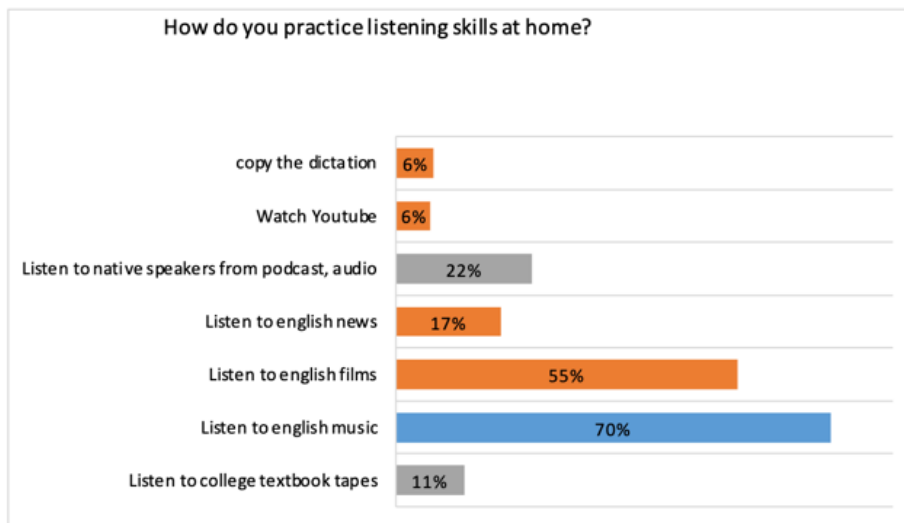
was conducted to address the research questions. According to the survey, a significant majority, 67% of the students, believe that listening skills are difficult to acquire. Meanwhile, 33% of students feel that listening skills are not challenging. This suggests that the majority of students face challenges in mastering listening comprehension, indicating a potential area of focus for educational improvement or support. The high percentage of students struggling highlights the need for strategies to enhance listening instruction and practice.

Regarding the question of whether participants had failed the listening exam in the past, it is evident that half of these students had multiple instances of failure. Following that, nearly 45% of participants reported that they had never failed the exam. Additionally, more than 5% of learners indicated that they had failed the exam only once.

In terms of represents students' responses to whether their instructor provided specific study methods, a vast majority of 94% of students

indicated that the instructor did offer study methods, while only 6% responded negatively. The preponderance of positive responses indicates that a majority of instructors are actively engaged in facilitating their students' academic progress through the implementation of organized learning strategies. The small percentage of students who did not receive specific methods could indicate either a lack of clarity in instruction or individual perceptions of the study guidance given. Overall, the analysis reveals a positive association between instructor involvement and student academic success.

In response to the next question regarding whether students regularly practiced their listening skills at home, half of the participants indicated that they did so frequently. This number nearly doubled the percentage of those who usually do this at home with approximately 28%. Following that, only 16,7% of students responded seldomly. In contrast, the proportion of people practicing the skill daily was just 5,6%.



The diagram above outlines various methods students use to practice their listening skills at home. The most popular method, chosen by 70% of respondents, is listening to English music. This is followed by watching English films, with 55% of students using this method. Listening to podcasts or audio by native speakers is another common practice, with 22% of students choosing this option, while 17% listen to English news. Less common strategies include listening to college textbook tapes (11%), watching YouTube (6%), and copying dictations (6%). These results suggest

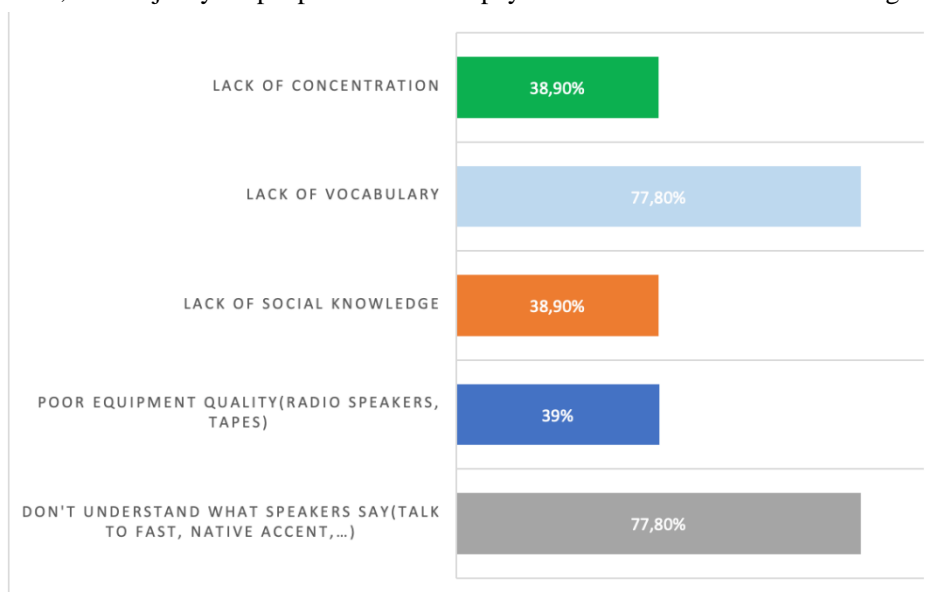
that students prefer more engaging and entertaining mediums like music and films for practicing listening, while more traditional methods like dictation and textbook audio are less favored.

For how much time students spend each day practicing listening skills, it can be seen that 1 hour is the most popular duration, with 55,6% of learners in the survey. The number of individuals who spent more than 1 hour per day on this activity was twice that of those who spent less than 1 hour, reaching approximately 27%.

Subsequently, nearly 17% of participants allocated 2 hours to this endeavor.

Regarding how to tackle the issue of facing new phrasal verbs of vocabulary that students do not understand, the majority of people choose to

predict the meaning, with more than 65%. This is followed by learners ignoring and going on with their listening, at more than 27%. As for the least common solution, only 5.6% of students decide to pay no attention to new words during the tasks.



As for the challenges that students may encounter when practicing listening skills, the two most common problems are limited vocabulary and not understanding what the listener is saying, both taking up 77,8%. At the same time, the figures for problems such as the lack of concentration or social knowledge or poor quality of audio speakers were at nearly 40%. On the contrary, there were no respondents who did not understand the question or the content of the listening text.

5. Discussion

The study revealed that second-year students face several significant barriers to effective listening comprehension. Students who lack sufficient vocabulary often struggle to make sense of spoken language, particularly when listening to authentic materials. Furthermore, unfamiliar accents also emerged as a significant challenge for many students. As English is spoken with various accents worldwide, it is essential for students to develop an ability to understand different pronunciations, intonations, and speech patterns. Another notable challenge identified in the study was speech speed. In real-life situations, native speakers often talk quickly, and this poses a considerable challenge for learners, especially

when they are not accustomed to the natural rhythm and pace of spoken English. Despite these challenges, students in the study employed a variety of strategies to improve their listening comprehension.

Research has consistently demonstrated the efficacy of various listening strategies in enhancing language learning outcomes. Vandergrift (1999) posited that metacognitive strategies, when coupled with cognitive approaches, significantly contribute to listening achievement. Less proficient learners frequently employed cognitive and memory strategies while underutilizing social strategies. Conversely, more proficient learners demonstrated a more strategic approach, often utilizing top-down and metacognitive strategies that align with effective listening skills. In contrast, less proficient learners tended to rely on bottom-up strategies, eschewing top-down approaches.

The questionnaire responses indicate that a significant majority of students favor incorporating English songs into their listening classes. This preference stems from the perceived benefits of familiarizing oneself with song lyrics, which can enhance vocabulary acquisition and foster a more engaging learning environment.

However, the implementation of songs in listening instruction presents certain challenges. The use of popular music, which often lacks pedagogical rigor, can hinder effective learning. Additionally, inadequate audio equipment and diverse musical preferences among students may contribute to difficulties in the listening process. Brown (2006) posits that incorporating popular music into language learning can significantly enhance students' listening comprehension and cultural awareness. Through systematic engagement with song lyrics, vocabulary acquisition, and auditory exposure, learners can develop a deeper understanding of the target language and its cultural contexts. Moreover, songs offer a versatile pedagogical tool with numerous applications. They can serve as a means for introducing new language points, reinforcing existing knowledge, addressing common learner errors, fostering extensive and intensive listening skills, stimulating critical thinking and emotional engagement, encouraging creative expression, and creating a relaxed and enjoyable learning environment.

Collectively, these benefits underscore the potential of music to motivate learners and boost their confidence in their language abilities.

6. Conclusion and implications

Listening proficiency is a cornerstone of both language acquisition and effective interpersonal communication. Despite its significance, students often encounter challenges in this area. These

challenges may stem from insufficient independent study time, ineffective learning strategies, or the quality of the listening materials. To address these issues, learners should engage with a diverse range of listening materials and actively develop effective listening strategies through self-directed practice. It is important to recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to English language instruction. Teachers play a pivotal role in selecting appropriate listening strategies and integrating them into classroom activities. Listening tasks should be sequenced from simple to complex to align with students' evolving language proficiency.

Based on the outcomes of the research, several recommendations were proposed. First, students should engage in regular practice and enhance their vocabulary skills. Moreover, Note-taking is as an effective technique, especially when listening to longer passages or lectures. This strategy helps learners focus on key information and retain important details, aiding in comprehension and recall. Besides, listening to English songs or watching Western movies are effective methods for doing this, as they also expose students to different accents. Even more, lecturers need to develop effective strategies for teaching listening comprehension to boost students' interest in the subject. Additionally, creating a comfortable and positive classroom environment is essential.

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KỸ NĂNG NGHE HIỂU TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM THỨ HAI - KHÓ KHĂN VÀ GIẢI PHÁP

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Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu những thách thức mà sinh viên năm thứ hai ngành Ngôn ngữ Anh tại gặp phải trong việc phát triển kỹ năng nghe hiệu quả. Thông qua các phiếu khảo sát, nghiên cứu khám phá các yếu tố cản trở sự nghe hiểu, chẳng hạn như hạn chế về vốn từ, sự khác biệt văn hóa và ngữ điệu không quen thuộc. Đồng thời, nghiên cứu còn nêu ra các chiến lược mà sinh viên có thể áp dụng để cải thiện kỹ năng nghe. Nghiên cứu chỉ ra những thách thức mà sinh viên gặp phải và nhấn mạnh sự cần thiết của các biện pháp can thiệp để nâng cao khả năng nghe cho sinh viên. Nghiên cứu đóng góp sự hiểu biết sâu hơn về những thách thức mà người học tiếng Anh gặp phải trong việc phát triển kỹ năng nghe và cung cấp những thông tin giá trị cho cả giáo viên và sinh viên.

Từ khóa: Khó khăn và giải pháp; Kỹ năng nghe hiểu tiếng Anh; Sinh viên năm thứ hai.