

# EXPLORING NON-ENGLISH MAJORED SOPHOMORES' DIFFICULTIES IN LISTENING COMPREHENSION AT TRA VINH UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM

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**Abstract** – *Listening is a crucial communication skill that helps learners communicate effectively in various contexts. Learners often encounter listening barriers, which can result in misunderstandings and even disrupt their conversations. This study aims to understand the difficulties in listening comprehension faced by 45 non-English majored sophomores at Tra Vinh University in the second semester of the 2024 academic year. An investigation using a questionnaire that focused on the challenges faced by learners is conducted while listening. The results of the study show that learners encounter various challenges when learning listening skills, including background knowledge, vocabulary, text length, speed, and different accents. The study provides valuable insights into the difficulties experienced by the learners and offers some effective strategies to overcome them. Lastly, some recommendations were suggested based on the findings.*

**Keywords:** *listening comprehension, non-English majored, sophomores.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Listening is really significant in language learning as well as in daily conversations [1]. In other words, understanding plays a vital role in providing substantial and meaningful feedback to help language learners to be able to improve pronunciation, important words, and vocabulary and understand the target message based on the tone, high speed, and important sounds. If learners do not understand the input appropriately and

simply learn, they will not be able to get any improvement in their listening comprehension.

Listening is a vital component of foreign language mastery and recreates a noteworthy part in language programs and daily life. Although listening is considered one of the fundamental skills in foreign language wisdom, teaching listening comprehension has received stunted attention in many EFL programs. The neglect of listening skills accompanied by continued controversy is the most influential for learning a second language L2. The L2 research results of previous studies have shown that when studying a language, it is important to focus on developing one's listening skills as these skills are used frequently in everyday life. According to Hamouda [2], developing strong listening skills can create opportunities to improve one's speaking, reading, and writing abilities.

Learners can benefit significantly from exposure to authentic language input through listening [3]. When this input is comprehensible, it can lead to substantial improvements in different aspects of language learning, such as pronunciation, speaking, reading, and writing. By listening to native speakers or advanced language users, learners can pick up new vocabulary, learn the correct usage of grammar structures, and improve their understanding of the 1 sounds and intonation of the language. This, in turn, can help them to communicate more confidently and effectively in real-life situations. Listening comprehension refers to the ability to comprehend spoken language [4]. This involves paying attention to the different components of language such as phonemes, words, and grammar. Additionally, it takes into consideration the listener's context, prior knowledge, and the situation in which the

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Received date: 26<sup>th</sup> April 2024; Revised date: 05<sup>th</sup> July 2024; Accepted date: 25<sup>th</sup> July 2024

listener is listening.

Learning a foreign language is challenging, especially speech comprehension. However, listening skills tend to be overlooked by both teachers and learners [5]. Despite its significance in the classroom, there is often a lack of awareness and opportunities for students to practice listening. Consequently, listening instruction often ignores and inadequately comprehends in listening practice approach in the classroom [6]. As a result, many students often struggle with their listening skills and get low scores on their listening exams. To assist students in overcoming these difficulties and improving their listening abilities, teachers must be aware of the challenges and implement acceptable listening techniques. Conducting a study to investigate the difficulties that students encounter in this area is crucial. Based on the findings of the study, reasonable and satisfactory methods can be proposed to improve learners' listening comprehension skills.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Definition of listening comprehension

Listening comprehension as a complex process requires the listener to utilize their language knowledge and comprehension skills to understand the content being presented [5]. In other words, listening comprehension refers to the ability of an individual to understand what they have heard. Listening comprehension is the outcome of combinations that are associated with terms such as speech awareness, spoken language comprehension, speech distinction, and source purpose [3]. Additionally, listening comprehension is the ability to comprehend an audio message, particularly in a language that is not one's native language [7]. In simpler terms, listening comprehension is the result of being able to understand spoken language.

Listening comprehension is an essential cognitive process that enables us to actively construct meaning from spoken transmission. It is a complex process that involves a combination of sound prejudice, prior acquaintance, grammatical

setups, emphasis, intonation, and other linguistic or non-linguistic signals.

Successful listening comprehension requires a range of processes such as recognizing speech sounds, grasping the meaning of individual words, and comprehending the syntax of sentences [8]. Therefore, it is crucial to develop and improve our listening skills to effectively communicate and connect with others. The importance of listening comprehension provides valuable insights into the cognitive processes involved [2, 9].

### B. The difficulties of listening comprehension

According to Nguyen et al. [14], listening comprehension in one's native language comes naturally, but for some learners, it can be challenging to fully understand their teacher's listening lessons and explanations. At times, listeners can misinterpret what they hear because of their false expectations about what they will hear. Poor listening skills, resulting from insufficient training in second and foreign languages, can lead to a lack of confidence in listening situations and cause anxiety. Improving listening skills through proper training can help individuals become more confident and accurate in comprehending spoken language.

Learning and using a second language can be a stressful experience for learners, especially when it comes to listening. This is because individuals often lack confidence in their listening skills and depend heavily on the speaker's pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence structures. Inadequate foreign language listening experience can lead to listening anxiety, which can negatively impact the learner's overall success in learning the language [14].

### C. Factors influence learners' listening

#### **Background knowledge**

Effective listening comprehension requires a strong foundation of background knowledge. Background knowledge considers a broad range of non-linguistic knowledge about the world, including knowledge of different cultures, recent

events, politics, and society Buck [10]. Therefore, students should select listening materials that cover various topics, such as political issues, business reports, and daily conversations, to prepare themselves well and ensure a successful learning experience. Cultural, authentic, and situational knowledge is pivotal for effective listening comprehension [3]. Therefore, learners should cultivate a diverse range of background knowledge to excel in listening procedures. By doing so, learners can enhance their understanding of the language, achieve their learning objectives, and improve their listening skills. Language and culture are intertwined, and without background knowledge, it can be difficult to understand beyond the surface level. Non-verbal communication can also be misinterpreted by individuals from different cultures. A learner's background knowledge is essential for successful listening comprehension. Lack of contextual knowledge and unfamiliar words can add to the challenge, as can maintaining concentration throughout the listening passage. However, finding the passage interesting can help improve focus and retention. With practice, listeners can improve their listening skills.

#### **Length and speed of listening**

Long listening sessions can greatly affect the levels of students. According to Azmi et al. [11], this is so difficult for weak learners to listen for a long time. Therefore, it is suggested that learners should be given short listening passages that will be easier to understand. Underwood [12] believed that several obstacles that can hinder the reasonable listening comprehension approach. Listening comprehension can be difficult due to various factors. Listeners cannot control the speaker's pace, and words cannot be repeated, leading to confusion and missed information.

#### **Unfamiliar vocabulary**

Nguyen et al. [14] believed that learners may face difficulties when listening to texts that contain specialized vocabulary. It is impossible for learners to know all the words in a foreign language speech, and unfamiliar words can impede comprehension. Understanding the meaning

of the words can enhance interest and motivation and improve listening comprehension. Many words have multiple meanings, and it is crucial to use them correctly to avoid confusion.

#### **Different accents**

Many people find it difficult to understand speakers with unfamiliar accents. This can reduce comprehension and make it impossible to understand what is being said. Too many accented speeches can also result in a significant reduction in comprehension Munro et al. [13]. In fact, 66% of listeners consider accents to be crucial for understanding speech [8]. Whether the accent is native or non-native, it can cause much trouble for listening comprehension, leading to interruptions in the entire listening process and making it impossible for listeners to comprehend.

In ASEAN contexts, there are numerous related studies on the difficulties that EFL students face in listening comprehension. In Vietnam, a study by Nguyen et al. [14] confirmed that English major students at Tay Do University encountered various challenges related to their background knowledge, vocabulary, text length, speed, and different accents. The research also highlighted that many students struggled due to ineffective listening skills strategies and insufficient background knowledge levels [15]. Similarly, difficulties in Saudi students' listening comprehension were identified by Hamouda [2], who observed issues related to speech speed, diverse accents, and limited vocabulary. The most significant challenges identified in the study included forgetting content when encountering new words, the length of listening texts, lack of effective listening strategies, and unfamiliar intonation patterns [16].

In summary, background knowledge, length and speed of listening, unfamiliar vocabulary, and different accents present significant challenges for learners in listening comprehension.

### **III. RESEARCH METHODS**

#### *A. Research design*

The objective of this research is to identify the difficulties faced by non-English majored sopho-

mores when it comes to listening comprehension. To address this issue, the researcher designed a questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale, ranging from Totally disagree to Totally agree, to allow participants to express their views. The data collected was analyzed using the SPSS software.

### B. Participants

Within this study, a group of 45 non-English majored sophomores were selected in the study. All participants were enrolled at the School of Foreign Languages in Tra Vinh University (TVU) and had completed at least two courses in general English. The study was conducted from March 20 to April 30, 2024. Their prior experience and understanding of the topic enabled them to provide insightful opinions on the difficulties of listening skills as well as their comprehension in the classroom.

### C. Research instruments

The questionnaire ensures the confidentiality of the respondents, thereby enhancing the reliability of the data [14]. In addition, the use of a Likert scale with five agreement levels from the lowest to the highest scale (Totally disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Totally agree) allows respondents to express their opinions in a questionnaire. As a result, this investigation utilized a questionnaire. Also, the questionnaire was designed to gather information about the difficulties faced by students when learning listening skills. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part was aimed at collecting general information about the participants such as their years of English learning, gender, and self-evaluation of listening skills. The second part consisted of 13 items that investigated the difficulties faced by learners when learning listening skills. The questionnaire was adapted from the study of Nguyen et al. [14] on the scope of non-English majored sophomores' background knowledge, length and speed of listening, unfamiliar vocabulary, and different accents in listening comprehension. Each item required participants to provide their opinions and indicate their level

of agreement or disagreement. The questionnaire was carefully designed to ensure participants' opinions and experiences were accurately captured and analyzed.

The analysis mainly mastered the purpose of the research aiming to find out the difficulties experienced in listening comprehension by 45 non-English majored sophomores at TVU.

Table 1: The reliability statistics of 45 participants to 13 items

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.848	13

The reliability of this questionnaire according to Cronbach's Alpha is up to .848 which concluded that this questionnaire is reliable.

### D. Research procedures

In order to achieve the goals of the study, the researchers sought permission from each participant to conduct a survey. After that, the researcher provided each participant with a questionnaire in the classroom. The participants were asked to provide their own opinions on the items in the questionnaire. After all the necessary information was collected, the researchers compiled all the participants' responses and analyzed the reliability of the survey data using SPSS software. Once the legitimacy of the data was confirmed, the mean scores of all the replies were calculated, as well as the overall mean score.

## IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Findings

The study analyzed the collected data from 45 non-English majored sophomores. The results of the study emphasized learners' various difficulties in learning listening skills, including background knowledge, vocabulary, text length, speed, and different accents.

#### Demographics

Regarding the years of English learning among participants, 66.7% of females and 33.3% of males took part in the survey. All of them are sophomores studying General English at TVU

and have been learning English for a period of 6 to 11 years. The majority of learners (60%) have been learning English for ten years, while 18% have been studying English for seven years. Only 4% of learners have studied English for 11 years. Based on this data, it can be concluded that the number of years that learners have spent learning English is a reliable factor for conducting the survey (Figure 1).

**Learners' years of English learning**

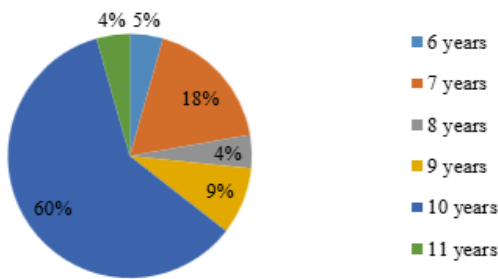


Fig. 1: Participants' years of learning English

**Learners' self-evaluation of listening skills**

According to the findings of Figure 2 below, researchers found that learners were asked to evaluate their own listening skills, 60% of learners admitted to being poor, while 37.8% rated their skills as average, and only 2.2% considered themselves good. None of the learners thought their listening skills were very good. (Figure 2).

**Learners' self-evaluation on listening skill**

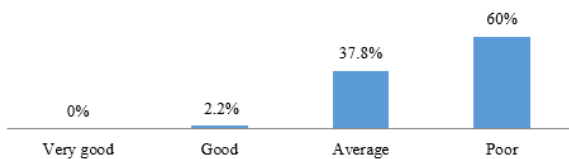


Fig. 2: Participants' self-evaluation of listening skills

**Exploring non-English majored sophomores' difficulties in listening comprehension**

Table 2: Overall mean score of non-English majored sophomores' difficulties in listening comprehension

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Overall	4.2	0.56

Table 2 depicts the overall mean score of thirteen items, indicating the level of difficulty faced by non-English majored sophomores in listening comprehension. The score exceeds level 4 on the Likert scale (M = 4.2, SD = 0.56), implying that the learners perceive their listening comprehension skills to encounter considerable difficulty.

Table 3: Non-English majored sophomores' attitudes in listening comprehension

Items	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
I find that listening skill plays a very important role in learning English language	45	1	5	4.80	.505
My English listening practice time is little compared to other skills in the class	45	1	5	4.07	.809

The results presented in Table 3 highlight a significant shift in non-English majored sophomores' attitudes towards listening comprehension. The mean score increased from M = 4.07 to M = 4.80, indicating a heightened appreciation for the critical role of listening skills in English language learning. The item that received the highest mean score (M = 4.80, SD = 0.51) underscores the importance learners assigned to listening skills in their language learning process. Despite this, the data revealed that learners allocated less time to practicing listening skills compared to other skills in the class. The mean score for this item was M = 4.07, SD = 0.81.

The results outlined in Table 4 underscore the challenges that learners face with respect to listening skills due to their background knowledge.

Table 4: Difficulties in listening skills related to background knowledge

Items	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
I find that learning English listening skills is very difficult because I lack background knowledge	45	1	5	4.44	.867
I find it difficult to understand listening texts when the topic is unfamiliar	45	1	5	4.29	.920
I don't know which strategy to use while listening	45	1	5	4.18	.886

The survey results indicate that learners find English listening skills particularly challenging because of their limited background knowledge, with an average mean score of  $M = 4.44$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ . Moreover, a considerable number of learners struggle to comprehend listening texts when they are unfamiliar with the topic, with an average mean score of  $M = 4.29$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ . Additionally, learners acknowledge their lack of proficiency in selecting an appropriate listening strategy, with an average mean score of  $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ .

Table 5: Difficulties in listening skills related to length and speed of listening

Items	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
I find it difficult to understand when speakers speak too fast	45	1	5	4.42	.839
I cannot concentrate well when listening to a long text	45	1	5	4.00	.929

The data presented in Table 5 provides a detailed insight into the issues that learners face when it comes to improving their listening skills. It is evident from the results that learners encounter difficulties in comprehending the audio materials when the speakers talk too fast. The mean score of  $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 0.84$  suggests that this is a significant problem that requires listeners more attention. Additionally, the research reveals that learners also struggle to concentrate when the listening activity involves long texts. This

is supported by the mean score of  $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ , which indicates that learners find it challenging to maintain their focus for an extended period of time.

Table 6: Difficulties in listening skills related to unfamiliar vocabulary

Items	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
When hearing the new words, I forget the content which was mentioned before	45	1	5	3.53	1.140
When thinking about the meaning of unfamiliar words, I neglect the next part of the listening text	45	1	5	4.00	.953

According to the findings presented in Table 6, learners face challenges in their listening skills when they encounter unfamiliar vocabulary. The results suggest that learners tend to struggle with retaining the content that was discussed prior to the introduction of new words ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ). This means that the learner's ability to follow the listening text is hindered when they encounter new vocabulary. Additionally, the data indicates that learners tend to focus too much on the meaning of unfamiliar words, which leads to neglecting the next part of the listening text ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ).

Table 7: Difficulties in listening skills related to different accents

Items	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
During listening, I cannot recall their meaning immediately although some words sound familiar	45	1	5	4.31	.925
I find that words are not pronounced clearly	45	1	5	4.00	.929
I find that unfamiliar intonation patterns interfere with listening comprehension	45	1	5	4.07	1.074

The data presented in Table 7 highlights the difficulties that learners face in improving their listening skills related to different accents. It

is clear from the results that while listening, students find it challenging to recall the meaning of some words immediately, even though these words sound familiar ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ). With a mean score of  $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ , the research suggests that students find it hard to comprehend words that are not pronounced clearly. Furthermore, the study reveals that unfamiliar intonation patterns tend to interfere with listening comprehension, as supported by the mean score of  $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ .

### *B. Discussion*

The results of a recent study indicate that a majority of learners concur that the development of listening skills plays a vital role in learning the English language. However, the time allocated for this skill's practice is limited in comparison to other language skills. The study's overall mean suggests that learners encounter various challenges when learning listening skills, including background knowledge, vocabulary, text length, speed, and different accents. This finding concurs with the analysis of Nguyen et al. [14]. The most significant challenge faced by learners is their background knowledge. Unfamiliar topics make it challenging for learners to follow and comprehend what the speakers are saying. Additionally, learners lack listening strategies, making it difficult for them to understand listening texts correctly. These results are consistent with Yagang's study [15], which examined the difficulties encountered in the Kurdistan region. The results showed that the primary issues were related to connected speech problems, the lack of appropriate strategies for listening skills, and insufficient general knowledge levels. With respect to length and speed of listening, learners find it challenging to follow and understand when speakers talk too fast, or when the text is too long. These results are consistent with Chao's study [16], which found that the most commonly encountered listening problems include easily forgetting the content, long listening texts, not knowing which strategy to use, unclear pronunciation, and unfamiliar intonation patterns. The research results indi-

cate that non-English majored sophomores face significant difficulties in understanding spoken English. Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of addressing the various challenges associated with listening comprehension, such as vocabulary, grammar, length, background knowledge, linguistic features, and accents. Effective strategies for improving listening comprehension may include targeted vocabulary instruction, explicit instruction in grammar, and pre-listening activities that activate background knowledge and support comprehension. These findings have important implications for educators, who may need to design and provide listening comprehension instruction that caters to the needs of non-English majored sophomores and helps them overcome the challenges they face in this area.

In the teaching process, the researchers have experienced and identified difficulties that learners face in learning listening skills. Therefore, the researchers outline some practical suggestions on this subject and focus on efficient strategies in listening comprehension as follows.

#### **Use different study materials**

In order to enhance the learning experience of learners, it is essential for teachers to offer a varied array of study materials. These could include engaging and informative lectures, informative news broadcasts, thought-provoking television shows, English movies that showcase the language in real-life situations, engrossing storytelling sessions, important announcements in English, and enjoyable English movies that help learners improve their listening comprehension. By incorporating different types of learning materials, teachers can help their learners develop a more comprehensive understanding of the language and their listening strategies in different areas.

#### **Adjust and improve listening materials**

Every learner has their own unique learning style and ability to comprehend information through a variety of listening practices. Therefore, it is the responsibility of teachers to apply and adjust different materials to cater to the specific interests and backgrounds of their

learners when it comes to listening. By doing so, the listening material becomes more engaging, thought-provoking, and informative, making the learning experience more effective and enjoyable for learners.

### **Activate learners' vocabulary**

According to a survey, learners often struggle with their listening comprehension due to a lack of vocabulary. Many learners reported encountering unfamiliar words during listening activities, and some felt that their vocabulary was insufficient to understand what they were hearing. To overcome this obstacle, teachers should provide learners with keywords that are necessary for listening comprehension. Underwood [12] also discovered that a lack of vocabulary can hinder listening comprehension. However, instead of simply explaining the meanings of unfamiliar words to learners, it is better to activate their vocabulary by asking them to guess the meaning of words used in the listening context. This approach allows learners to make connections between what they already know and what they need to listen for, which can enhance their listening comprehension skills.

### **Brainstorm or build initial language and topics for learners**

To engage learners and help them better understand a listening text, teachers can stimulate their minds by encouraging them to think and discuss what they already know about the content. The teacher can also provide basic information that the learners need to understand the text and guide them to take notes on the essential content they need to hear. This approach will help learners anticipate the information that they will hear and aid them in connecting it with the information they already know, which will enhance their understanding and retention.

### **Expect learners' encouragement**

Encouraging learners to relate to a speaker's ideas can help increase their engagement. To achieve this, teachers can utilize a technique during the pre-listening or listening phase. This involves prompting learners to predict the content of the text or speaker's message. The teacher

can give some background information about the topic or the speaker, and the learners can be requested to anticipate key terms or create a list of related words and phrases. This way, learners can become familiarized with the important concepts and vocabulary prior to listening to the spoken text. This technique can help learners to feel more self-assured and involved with the listening experience by connecting it with their own life experiences and better understanding the material.

### **Use visual tools**

Teachers often use visual aids, such as images and diagrams, to help learners better understand the topic being discussed and actively engage with the material. These visual tools capture learners' attention, boost their motivation, and help them connect more deeply with the content of the spoken text. This, in turn, can help learners overcome language difficulties, such as unfamiliar vocabulary, homophones, and subject-specific terms that may be difficult to understand in context.

### **Practice different pronunciations and accents**

Research studies indicate that learners' listening comprehension is greatly affected by their difficulties in recognizing sounds and accents. Therefore, it is important for teachers to first familiarize their learners with the standard pronunciation of native speakers, as it can improve their pronunciation and help them to better understand the language. Additionally, many teachers believe that a learner's ability to pronounce words correctly is a good foundation for them to develop better listening skills. Furthermore, it is important for teachers to help learners recognize the different accents of various accents such as the American, British, and Australian accents. This will enable learners to handle different accents, particularly in the extended listening section of their listening lessons, and practice different voices.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

Listening comprehension is a crucial aspect of language learning and daily communication. If a



person cannot understand what they hear, it can lead to ineffective learning and communication.

The research findings conclusively demonstrated that the participants faced significant obstacles in listening comprehension. These obstacles were attributed to factors such as their background knowledge, vocabulary, the length of the text, speed, and the presence of various accents. In other words, most learners found that their lack of background knowledge was the most challenging factor in the study. As English instructors at TVU, the researchers have noticed that learners often struggle with listening comprehension, which is one of the four basic skills in the English language training program. The purpose of this research is to identify the factors that contribute to the difficulties learners face in listening comprehension and suggest effective solutions for both teachers and learners to improve their teaching and learning outcomes. Listening instructions provide learners with valuable knowledge that enhances their overall English comprehension ability, which is beneficial to their writing and other language skills. The findings of this study will enable instructors to develop appropriate teaching strategies that address the listening comprehension challenges faced by learners. By providing effective listening instruction, instructors can enhance learners' comprehension abilities, thereby facilitating their learning experience and promoting academic success.

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