

# The Saigon International University

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## **SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH**

***Topic:*** AN INVESTIGATION ON THE  
DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING THE  
LISTENING SKILLS OF ENGLISH-  
MAJORED FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS AT  
THE SAIGON INTERNATIONAL  
UNIVERSITY

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\_\_\_\_\_ *Hochiminh City, 2020* \_\_\_\_\_

**TABLE OF CONTENT**

**ABSTRACT** .....2

**INTRODUCTION**.....2

**1. Rationale** .....2

**2. Research goals** .....3

**3. Significance of the research**.....4

**4. Limitation** .....5

**5. Research question** .....5

**THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**.....5

**1. Definition and significance of listening skills** .....5

**2. Definition of mixed-method** .....7

**3. Previous studies on students’ difficulties in listening** .....8

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY** ..... 10

**1. Participants**..... 10

**2. Data collection** ..... 10

**3. Data collection instrument** ..... 10

**4. Data analysis**..... 11

**5. Result**..... 11

**CONCLUSION**..... 16

**REFERENCES** ..... 17

**APPENDIX** ..... 19

# **AN INVESTIGATION ON THE DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING THE LISTENING SKILLS OF ENGLISH- MAJORED FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS AT THE SAIGON INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY**

## **ABSTRACT**

This study attempts to survey The Saigon international university's freshmen's opinion regarding the causes of their low performance in the listening skills, 41 students including 12 males and 29 females were chosen as the research subject. The instrument which was used to gather data in this research is the student questionnaire. Six factors are considered as the cause of students' low performance: students' L2 prior knowledge, students' motivation, students' learning strategies, the teachers' teaching method, classroom environment, and classroom facilities. After collecting data, we used SPSS software to analyze the qualitative data, and to find means of six factors. The major aim of this research is to help students overcome their difficulties, reflect themselves after an academic year at The Saigon international university, and have better preparations for the next semester.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1. Rationale**

Listening has always played a vital role in daily life since the past till now. English consists of four main skills: writing, speaking, reading but listening plays one of the most

important roles when we study English. We use it unconsciously in our daily life such as listening to entertainment, academic purpose and obtaining necessary information.

There are several reasons why we decided to conduct a research on the topic about difficulties in listening skills.

First of all, listening is the most important skills in communication in real life. Listening and speaking are two major factors when communicating. They are closely interdependent. It has been since the dawn of time that we are able to hear and speak ever since we were born. If we fail to understand spoken language, we may miss crucial information leaving gaps in our knowledge. Moreover, in learning a language, to guarantee the benefit students gain from learning English, listening is the easiest and effective way to approach and to solve this problem. And we hope through this research teacher and student will pay more attention to listening more.

The second reason is that many students are not interested in learning listening skills. They find listening classes boring and frustrating since they cannot comprehend what they are listening to. Moreover, practice to improve listening is a frustrating and difficult process, it consumes a great amount of time. That is why in the research we would like to find out and suggest some solution on how to address this issue.

## **2. Research goals**

Nowadays, because in our country, the English study process does not focus on listening and speaking skills much, so the students have a tendency to not be good at both these skills. This research is going to find and identify several main problems of freshmen in

SIU are encountering such as getting left behind trying to work out what a previous word meant, problems with different accents and trying to understand every word. Furthermore, to help them be able to understand what they learn during study listening English skills, this research will provide some suggestions and correct student's pronunciation. Because when the students do not have correct pronunciation, they cannot hear a word correctly. Besides, being confident is a part of this research which may help them become more confident when they have a conversation with foreigners. Through that, they will improve their communication skills.

### **3. Significance of the research**

Through this research, several benefits are helpful for students in their study career. They can recognize their weakness which leads to poor listening skills. As a result, many lessons learned can be drawn which helps students raise awareness in studying listening.

In this study, aware students' weaknesses and adjusting appropriate teaching methods are two advantages which help teachers in their teaching career. These techniques can be a motivation to encourage their students to study well. From that, teachers can be more creative in their lessons to attract student's interest. Teaching listening by applying these techniques is attractive which may be able to enhance student's interest.

Not only for improving their listening skills but also it can be applied in speaking skills. Because when they pronounce a word correctly, they are able to listen exactly to what they hear. Therefore, they also can apply in communication with foreigners easily. The

foreigners will be able to understand what they say, and they also understand what foreigners say.

#### **4. Limitation**

The research will be mainly a focal point on the problem freshmen are facing while studying at the Saigon International University. This research will only focus on a total of 41 students, 12 males, and 29 females who join in with the interview. In addition, only surround on exploring common difficulties some students get in listening skills. Moreover, the study cannot cover all freshmen in SIU due to lack of time, knowledge and reference to cover this study.

#### **5. Research question**

The purpose of the study is to investigate the difficulties that English-majored freshmen are facing in listening skills.

This research will answer the following research question:

What are the difficulties that English-majored freshmen are struggling with at the Saigon International University?

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **1. Definition and significance of listening skills**

Listening has been defined by many researchers. Rost (2002) demonstrated that listening is a complicated technique of interpretation where listeners fit what they hear with what

they already recognize. Besides, Mendelsohn (1994) illustrated listening as the capability to apprehend the spoken language of local speakers. Purdy (1997) defined listening as "the lively and dynamic method of attending, perceiving, decoding, remembering, and responding to the expressed (verbal and nonverbal), desired, issues, and data presented by way of other human beings." To sum up, listening is the process of hearing and perceiving information from the speaker.

Listening is the most regularly used language ability (Morley, 1999; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Bird (1953) found that female students spent 42 percent of their general verbal exchange time in listening while they spent 25 percent in speaking, 15 percent in reading, and 18 percent in writing. Wolvin and Coakley (1988) concluded that both inside and outside of the classroom, listening consumes more of daily verbal exchange time than other forms of verbal communicate. A number of studies indicated that efficient listening skills had been extra vital than reading skills as an element contributing to educational achievement (Coakley & Wolvin, 1997; Truesdale, 1990). However, Dunkel's (1991b) study reported that worldwide students' educational achievement in the United States and Canada responded more to reading than listening comprehension, primarily for the one students in engineering, psychology, chemistry, and computer science. As a result, the significance of listening in the classroom guidance has been much less emphasized than reading and writing. Although it is obvious that listening performs a sizable position in the lives of human beings, listening is even greater vital for the lives of students due to the fact listening is used as a number one medium of gaining knowledge in any respect levels of education. In conclusion, listening plays a vital role and is integral to our lives.

However, it depends on the requirements of specialized subjects at school without using listening skills much.

## **2. Definition of mixed-method**

According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998), subjective analysts push the socially developed nature of reality, the hint relationship between the investigate and what is considered, and the situational limitations that shape request. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They look for answers to questions that push how social involvement is made and given meaning. In contrast, quantitative considers emphasize the estimate and investigation of causal connections between factors, not forms. Request is implied to be inside a value-free framework.

As cited from Maykut and Morehouse (1994) ,quantitative research is a process which based on observations that are transformed into discrete units which can be used to compare to other units by using statistical analysis...Qualitative research, in contrast, aimed to testing people's worlds and actions in narrative or descriptive ways more closely representing the situation as experienced by the participants...These two paradigms are depend on two different and competing ways of compassionating the world...{which} are linked in the way the research data is collected (words versus numbers) and the opinion of the researcher (opinion versus objective) [and] discovery versus proof.



### **3. Previous studies on students' difficulties in listening**

Goh (2000) studied cognitive perspective and listening comprehension problems on language in a group of foreign tertiary-level students from the People's Republic of China. During the study process, the researcher found that students encountered problems such as limited vocabulary due to low language proficiency, the problem with inadequate parsing. Besides, learners' attitudes to their listening are also of concern.

According to Bennui (2006), the cause of their low performance in the listening component of the English II course of Thaksin University's first-year students are all affected by factors. There are students' L2 prior knowledge, students' motivation, students' learning strategies, the teachers' teaching methods, classroom environment, and classroom facilities. Through the survey process, the students' prior L2 knowledge and the students' learning strategies are two significant factors that cause their low listening performance.

Hamouda (2013) investigated the listening problems encountered by a group of first-year English major students of Qassim University. The results of the study showed that the major listening comprehension problems encountered by EFL Saudi learners such as accent, pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, the different accent of speakers, lack of concentration, anxiety, and bad quality of the recording. Therefore, there are some suggestions for teachers and students to improve this problem. As for teachers, adapting and improving listening materials, and improving teachers' classroom

techniques. Meanwhile, students should improve listening strategies to alleviate their difficulties.

Nowrouzi, Tam, Zareian, and Nimehchisalem (2015) studied Iranian tertiary level first-year EFL learners and their major was English. They found that students learn English for about six years in secondary and high school before they go to university. The main knowledge of the English courses which students have to learn is on language structure, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and translation skills. Besides, most students were not learning listening skills. As a result, when they studied at university, they had to face a lot of difficulties in listening. The major problems were a distraction and missing or misperceiving sounds and words related to perception, chunking difficulties, and sentence forgetting concerned with parsing and confusion about the main idea pertaining to utilization.

Ulum (2015) states that listening is clearly the weakest skill of EFL students. He studied in a group of first-year university students whose English proficiency level is elementary. The results of the study showed students find it difficult to understand the listening text when speakers speak with varied and unfamiliar accents. Besides, they do not understand the meaning of words because they are not pronounced clearly. During the listening process, they cannot remember quickly the words or phrases they have just heard.

In short, problems, as well as difficulties in listening which first-year students often encounter, have been studied by many researchers. However, the issues have not been

implemented much in Vietnamese context, including at The Saigon International University (SIU).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **1. Participants**

There are 41 first-year students including 12 males and 29 females from the English major at the Saigon international university chosen as the research subject. We have decided to choose freshmen because they are just switched to university life and in many high schools, teachers just focus on teaching grammar and writing, which are tested in national exams. In addition, this can be considered as an opportunity for students to reflect on themselves and prepare better for upcoming semesters.

### **2. Data collection**

The actual data collection happens for one-week long. The final version of the questionnaire was delivered to two classes of respondents with the support from teachers at the Saigon international university. There are two ways of data collections, the first one was to deliver an online platform to 2 classes and have them filled in the form, the second way was to come to the two classes and spread the forms for students. On 14 July, all the questionnaire copies were returned to the researcher.

### **3. Data collection instrument**

The instrument that is used in this research is a questionnaire, which will be provided in the appendix. This questionnaire was developed by Bennui (2005). We used this because

the study was conducted in Thailand, which has a similar social context with Vietnam and they also use English as a foreign language. However, we made some adaptations to the original survey. Specifically, we removed the section of the open-ended question due to our time limit and human resources. We also changed some words to make the questions suitable for our context.

#### 4. Data analysis

The process of analyzing data started on 16th, July 2020. The SPSS program was used for this process to analyze statistical data and calculate the mean of questions that students answered.

#### 5. Result

**Table 1: Students' L.2 Prior knowledge**

	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5	Question 6
Mean	2.15	2.20	2.46	2.78
N	41	41	41	41
Std. Deviation	.882	.813	.840	.852

In the first section on Students' L.2 Prior knowledge, looking at the table more closely, the statistic above shows that the mean of question number 6 accounted for 2.78 compared to other questions. Thus, it can be seen that "I had previously learned reading-writing rather than listening-speaking skills" is one of the biggest issues that students recently faced.

**Table 2: Students' Motivation**

	Question 7	Question 8	Question 9	Question 10
Mean	2.32	1.88	1.59	2.41
N	41	41	41	41
Std. Deviation	.907	.678	.774	.921

According to the table above, In the section of students' motivation, it is obvious that there are no means that the figure reaches 2.5. But the remarkable value is seen from "My classmates and close friends rarely motivate me to practice my listening skills" so this could be the problem that students usually encounter.

**Table 3: Students' Learning Strategies**

	Question 11	Question 12	Question 13	Question 14	Question 15	Question 16
Mean	1.80	1.80	2.24	2.56	2.51	2.10
N	41	41	41	41	41	41
Std. Deviation	.813	.843	.916	1.001	.711	.860

	Question 17	Question 18	Question 19	Question 20
Mean	2.29	2.56	2.34	2.46
N	41	41	41	41
Std. Deviation	.716	.896	.794	.869

According to the two tables, we can see three values shown as higher than the other and especially they reach the peak at 2.56, 2.51 and 2.56 respectively those are “I have never attended activities in English launched in Vietnam or other foreign countries”, “I have a short concentration while listening” and “I do not have knowledge of the specific topic of listening tasks while listening to the CD-ROM”. These are the troubles that we can easily see among Vietnamese students.

**Table 4: The Teachers' Teaching Methods**

	Question 21	Question 22	Question 23	Question 24	Question 25	Question 26
Mean	2.15	2.15	1.88	2.12	2.12	2.20
N	41	41	41	41	41	41
Std. Deviation	.615	.654	.678	.678	.714	.641

	Question 27	Question 28	Question 29	Question 30	Question 31	Question 32
Mean	1.88	1.95	2.12	1.93	1.90	2.22
N	41	41	41	41	41	41
Std. Deviation	.600	.773	.714	.608	.700	.571

In the section of teachers' teaching methodology we can figure out the problem is not coming from this section due to the fact that all the figures are shown less than 2.5, as the highest figure only reaches 2.22 and the lowest is just 1.88.

**Table 5: Classroom Environment**

	Question 33	Question 34	Question 35	Question 36
Mean	2.49	2.20	2.44	2.54
N	41	41	41	41
Std. Deviation	.840	.843	.808	.869

From the table above regarding the section of "classroom environment" there is only a significant figure come from "Some students talk or make noises while the teachers are playing the CD-ROM and I cannot hear the CD-ROM properly" with the figure 2.54.

This is usually seen in classrooms in remote areas of Vietnam where the classroom environment does not always warranty the best performance for students.

**Table 6: Classroom Facilities**

	Question 37	Question 38	Question 39	Question 40	Question 41
Mean	2.15	2.37	2.29	2.39	2.17
N	41	41	41	41	41
Std. Deviation	.823	.767	.680	.737	.667

According to the table above, we can figure out the problem is not coming from this section due to the fact that all the figures are shown less than 2.5, as the highest figure only reaches 2.39 and the lowest is just 2.15.

In brief, it is easy to see from the above table that the respondents showed lots of listening problems that the issues encountered by students while learning to listen such as lack of concentration, lack of motivation from their classmates. Coupled with that, students have never attended activities in English launched in Vietnam or other foreign countries. This is a problem that we can easily see among Vietnam students. Another problem, some students talk or make noises while the teachers are playing the CD-ROM and I cannot hear the CD-ROM properly is a remarkable issue. Moreover, lack of background knowledge is also the main problem that we need to concern because most of the students



were only focused on learning writing and reading skills rather than listening-speaking skills when they learned at high school. Thus, students do not have enough background knowledge to listen effectively.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the survey, in general, listening skills have been considered to be a major issue to students, as a result, students have not given equal opportunities to participate with English related activities launched in Vietnam. Henceforth, lack of contact causes students to be unfamiliar with the intonation of foreigners, idioms, and collocations which later on play a crucial part in helping students fully comprehend listening lessons. Furthermore, concentration while listening is also worth mentioning in these issues. They usually have a short focus on listening lessons, they easily lose concentration when they see other things. For example, a strange student walks through their class or their friend just only drops a pen, they lose their concentration on the listening lesson. Besides, there are a lot of specialized words that require listeners to have a wide range of knowledge in order to understand the listening sections completely. As a consequence, vocabulary is also a big problem for students. There are a number of ways to remember a word, students can learn new words by cards or write repetitively. However, how many words do they remember, and how long will they remember these words? They usually have a tendency to forget everything which they learned two weeks ago or even last week. If we have the opportunity to make another research, we will study the effects on comprehension and vocabulary acquisition of students.

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## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire

This is not a test, there are no correct or incorrect answers. It is your personal and honest answer. We will appreciate your answers. I will make sure that your responses will be used with the strictest confidence in accordance with research ethics. Thanks for your assistance.

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Opinions</b>			
	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
<b>1. Students' L2 Prior knowledge</b>				
<b>1.1 Previously I never learnt and practiced listening skills.</b>				
<b>1.2 My previous grades of English courses were poor, so I don't think I can now improve my listening comprehension.</b>				
<b>1.3 My English background on vocabulary, grammar, and sound systems is quite poor.</b>				
<b>1.4 I had previously learnt reading-writing rather than listening-speaking skills.</b>				
<b>2. Students' Motivation</b>				
<b>2.1 I do not have opportunity to practice listening skills.</b>				

<b>2.2 I am not interested in listening skills in English.</b>				
<b>2.3 I think listening skills are not important, so I am not self-motivated.</b>				
<b>2.4 My classmates and close friends rarely motivate me to practice listening skills.</b>				
<b>3. Students' Learning Strategies</b>				
<b>3.1 I never listen to songs, radio news, and cassette tape or CD-ROM in English.</b>				
<b>3.2 I never watch television programs in English.</b>				
<b>3.3 I never talk to native speakers of English or foreigners.</b>				
<b>3.4 I have never attended activities in English launched in Thailand or other foreign countries.</b>				
<b>3.5 I have a short concentration while listening.</b>				
<b>3.6 I always get headaches when listening in English.</b>				
<b>3.7 I do not have knowledge of the specific topic of listening tasks while listening to the CD-ROM.</b>				
<b>3.8 I rarely take notes while listening to the CD-ROM</b>				
<b>3.9 After listening, I can not perform listening exercises without discussing in</b>				

<b>pair or group of the same or different majored classmates.</b>				
<b>3.10 I have never consulted with the teachers on my listening problems inside and outside the classroom.</b>				
<b>4. The Teachers' Teaching Methods</b>				
<b>4.1 The teachers speak English too fast.</b>				
<b>4.2 The teachers' pronunciation is not clear and accurate.</b>				
<b>4.3 The teachers never teach listening strategies.</b>				
<b>4.4 The teachers do not give instructions properly before listening to the CD-ROM.</b>				
<b>4.5 The teachers use too much Thai to explain the listening tasks.</b>				
<b>4.6 The teachers seldom give the low-level students the opportunities to answer the questions and discuss the listening tasks.</b>				
<b>4.7 The teachers have never encouraged the students to practice listening skills as self-study.</b>				
<b>4.8 The teachers have never helped me with my listening problems inside and outside the classroom.</b>				
<b>4.9 The teachers enjoy speaking English without caring about the students' interest and understanding.</b>				

<b>4.10 The teachers do not repeat the CD-ROM and moves on to other listening activities very fast.</b>				
<b>4.11 The teachers never use English songs and listening games to motivate the students.</b>				
<b>4.12 There are not enough pair and group work listening activities taught by the teachers.</b>				

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Opinions</b>			
	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
<b>5. Classroom Environment</b>				
<b>5.1 I am too shy, worried and unprepared to answer the teachers' questions after listening to the CD-ROM among other classmates with different majors and faculties.</b>				
<b>5.2 Other students laugh at me if I answer the question wrong.</b>				
<b>5.3 If my neighboring classmates do not pay attention to the CD-ROM, I will not either.</b>				

<b>5.4 Some students talk or make noises while the teachers are playing the CD-ROM and I cannot hear the CD-ROM properly.</b>				
<b>6. Classroom Facilities</b>				
<b>6.1 The classroom size is too large; many students in a group have a few opportunities to participate in listening activities.</b>				
<b>6.2 The classroom is very noisy.</b>				
<b>6.3 The time allocated for listening activities is limited.</b>				
<b>6.4 The use of microphones and loud speakers in the classroom is not effective.</b>				
<b>6.5 The use of computer to play the CD-ROM is not effective.</b>				

Adopted from Bennui (2005)