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Listening comprehension: First year English-major students' perceptions and problems

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ABSTRACT

This article is to report on a study which attempts to investigate the first year English-major students' perception of the role of listening skill development and find out the problems that they frequently encounter while learning listening comprehension. The participants are 115 of the first year English-major students who are studying at some universities in the Mekong Delta. The data were collected from questionnaires, interviews, and observations. The results indicated that most of students held positive awareness toward the role of listening skill development and the listening comprehension problems including accent, pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, different accent of speakers, lack of concentration, anxiety, and bad quality of recording were the major ones encountered by the first year English-major students.

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1 INTRODUCTION

As for foreign language learning, listening is of paramount important since it provides the language input (Rost, 1994). Without understanding input appropriately, learning simply cannot get any improvement. According to Krashen (1985) and Hamouda (2013), listening skill is an important element in obtaining understandable input. Learning will not occur if there is not any input. Practically, many language students as well as the first year English-major students in particular have to encounter significant problems in their learning listening comprehension because of the fact that schools pay more attention to structure, writing, reading and vocabulary. In addition, listening is almost ignored in both secondary and high school, where students spent seven years in English language learning. This results in poor listening skill when they become English major students. As compared with other language skills, listening is considered the most challenging language skill.

The efforts have been made by a number of researchers to identify the first year English-major students' perceptions of the roles of listening skill development, the problems that the students face in their learning listening comprehension and how they deal with the problems. From that, the study gives some suggestions to help them to overcome their listening comprehension problems.

1.1 Perception

Like most concepts within the social science disciplines, perception (or what other scholars refer to as social perception) has been defined in various ways. Thus, priorly and most simply, perception is understood as the ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses. Following, it is the state of being or process of becoming aware of something through the sense and simultaneously, it is considered as a way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something and a mental impression (Oxford, 2012).

Moreover, Robert (1969) stated that perception is man's primary form of cognitive contact with the

word around him. According to Gregory (1980), perception in the process of becoming aware of objects, qualities, or relation via the sense organs involves the reception, processing, and interpretation of sensory impressions.

In Narayan's (1988, pp. 320-329) words, "perception is the process whereby people select, organize, and interpret sensory stimulation into meaningful information about their work environment". In addition, many researchers argued that perception is the single most important determinant of human behavior, stating further that there can be no behavior without perception. Thus, perception refers to the process by which we form impressions of other people's traits and personalities. Through this, perception helps us to gather data from our surrounding, process the data and make sense out of it.

By and large, perception is cognition which is produced through a sense-organ coming into relation with an object. At the same time, it is the set of processes by which an individual becomes aware of, organizes and interprets information or his/her sensory impression in order to give meaning to the environment.

1.2 Listening

Listening has been defined by many researchers. Howatt and Dakin (1974) defined listening as the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This process involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, the speaker's grammar and vocabulary, and comprehension of meaning. An able listener is capable of doing these four things simultaneously. Moreover, Chastain (1971) said that listening is the ability to understand native speech at normal speed.

According to Postovsky (1975), listening differs in meaning from sound discrimination to aural comprehension. Goss (1982) defined listening as a process of understanding what is heard and organizing it into lexical elements to which meaning can be allocated. Besides, Bowen *et al.* (1985) demonstrated that listening is understanding the oral language. Students hear oral speech, divide sounds, classify them into lexical and syntactic units, and comprehend the message. Listening is a process of receiving what the speaker says, making and showing meaning, negotiating meaning with the speaker and answering, and creating meaning by participation, creativity, and empathy.

In short, listening has been recast as an activity central to the second language (L2) acquisition process (Krashen, 1985; Dunkel, 1993; Rost, 2002),

and a skill integral to overall communicative competence (Savignon, 1991; Brown, 1994). According to Krashen (1994), listening is now treated as a much more complex activity and one that is the cornerstone of language acquisition

1.3 Listening comprehension

Many researchers and scholars provided various definitions of listening comprehension. According to Brown and Yule (1983), listening comprehension means that a person understands what he/she has heard. If he/she learns the text through hearing it, he/she will understand it. Steinberg (2007) stated that comprehension is the ability of one individual perceiving another via sense, (specifically aural) organs, assigning a meaning to the message and comprehending it.

Besides, Vandergrift (1997) has claimed listening comprehension as a complex cognitive process in which listeners use their linguistic knowledge to deal with the incoming stimuli, retain what they receive, and interpret it within the sociocultural context of message. Also, he emphasized that listening comprehension is an active process where learners must distinguish the learners may interpret and respond immediately when they listen to messages. This definition refers to the notion that the learners are involved in the listening process. Moreover, Nadig (2013) said that listening comprehension as the various processes of understanding and making sense of spoken language. These involve knowing speech sounds, comprehending the meaning of individual words, and understanding the syntax of sentences.

In brief, the definitions above of listening comprehension are various to some extent. Listening comprehension is a complex, unconscious and unobserved mental operation, and it will develop naturally within the process of language learning. Thus, successful listeners have a crucial part to play in the process by activating various types of knowledge, and by applying what they know to what they hear, and trying to understand what the speaker means (Anderson and Lynch, 1988).

1.4 The roles of listening skill development

In the L2 learning, Dunkel (1993) stated that helping ESL and EFL learners develop their listening comprehension has become a major focus of teaching language. Besides, listening plays a key role in the development of a learner's first language (L1), and listening is believed, by extension to play a prime role in the development of a learner's L2. Thus, listening plays an important role in second-

language instruction (Rost, 2002). According to Renukadevi (2014), many studies relating to acquiring language skills showed that listening plays an important part in effective communication because “when we communicate, we gain 45% of language competence from listening, 30% from speaking, 15 % from reading, and 10% from writing”. Moreover, developing listening skill or developing listening comprehension skill helps learners to succeed in language learning to enhance comprehensible input. Since learners’ self-reliance in listening comprehension will be increased, they will be motivated to have access to spoken English such as conversations with native speakers (Kurita, 2012).

In short, to become a fluent speaker in English, learners need to develop strong listening skills. Listening not only helps them to understand what people are saying to them but also helps them to speak clearly to another people. Moreover, it helps learners to learn how to pronounce words properly, how to use intonation, and where to place stress in words and sentences. This makes their speech easier for other people to understand.

1.5 Problems in learning listening comprehension

Underwood (1989) highlighted the seven causes of problems in learning listening comprehension. First, the speed of delivery caused difficulties to listeners because they cannot control how fast the speakers will speak. Second, listeners cannot always have words repeated. Third, listeners have a limitation on vocabularies. When listeners listen to the recording, sometimes they encounter an unknown word, they stop listening to think about the meaning of that word and they can miss the next part of speech. Fourth, listeners may fail to recognize the signals which indicate that the speaker is moving from one point to another. Nonverbal clues such as facial expressions, nods, gestures, or tone of voice can also be easily misinterpreted by listeners from different cultures. Next, it can be difficult for listeners to concentrate in a foreign language; usually inattention for a short time may cause misunderstanding. Lastly, listeners may have established certain learning styles, which may worry them, such as they need to understand every word. When they miss a word, they are inclined to feel disappointed.

According to Seferoglu and Uzakgoren (2004), some other listening comprehension problems are classified into eight main factors: (1) pronunciation and accent of speaker, (2) rate of delivery, (3) the effect of tape recorder, (4) lack of vocabulary, (5)

lack of proficiency, (6) lack of concentration, (7) lack of practice, and (8) situational factors. Bloomfield et al. (2010) and Walker (2014) also shared the view that one of the serious problems of listening comprehension is related to the pronunciation of words that is different from the way they appear in print. Due to the fact that the spoken language varies to the form of the written language, the recognition of words that make the oral speech can create some difficulties for students.

In general, among studies into listening comprehension problems shared by these authors, a large number of researchers indicated that the most of listening comprehension problems are related to the listening materials, the linguistic features, the different aspects of listening comprehension process, the speaker from the listening materials, the listener, the psychological characteristics, and the concentration.

The review of relevant literature has provided sufficient background for conceptual framework for this study. This paper is aimed to investigate the first year English- major students’ perception toward the role of listening skill development and find out the problems that they have to face while learning listening comprehension. It aims to address to the following research questions:

- What are the first year English-major students’ perceptions of the role of listening skill development?
- What problems do students face while learning listening comprehension?

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research design

In the light of the nature of the questions given above, a combined quantitative-qualitative method was employed for the study. The quantitative method is questionnaire-based survey of 115 the first year English-major students at some universities in the Mekong Delta. The qualitative method is observations and a semi-structured interview for students was used to enrich the quantitative data.

2.2 Instruments

The instruments include questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and observations. The questionnaire with 48 questions are classified into two parts: Part I contained 6 questions asking for students’ background information; Part II of eight sections is the main part of the questionnaire including the questions about the first year English-major students’ perception toward the role of

listening skill development. The semi-structured interviews were conducted to 24 the first year English-major students to collect data. The observation was obtained from video clips and student’s notes were recorded during the four lessons.

2.3 Data analysis

For data analysis, the soft-ware SPSS (Statistics Package for the Social Science) was used. The reliability of the questionnaire was computed. Descriptive Statistics were used to determine the mean scores of the students’ perception toward role of listening skill development and listening problems. Moreover, a one sample T- test was conducted to

check the significant differences among the actual mean scores.

3 FINDINGS

3.1 Students’ responses to the questionnaire

Descriptive statistics test was run to measure the mean scores about the perceptions of the first year English-major students towards the role of listening skill development and the listening problems that the students face while learning listening comprehension.

Table 1: Descriptive analysis of the students’ perceptions towards the role of listening skill development

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
The first year English-major students’ perceptions towards the role of listening skill development	115	2.67	4.56	3.73	0.41

As presented in table 1 it can be clearly seen that participants mostly showed positive perception toward the role of listening skill development because

the total mean score of this cluster (M = 3.73, SD = 0.41) is higher than the scale 3 in the five-degree scale.

Table 2: Descriptive analysis of the listening problems that the students face while learning listening comprehension

Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Listening problems related to the listening materials	115	1.67	4.50	3.59	0.55
Listening problems related to linguistic features	115	1.00	4.60	3.23	0.64
Listening problems related to the different aspects of listening comprehension process	115	1.50	5.00	3.58	0.67
Listening problems related to the speaker from the listening materials (DVD, CD)	115	1.00	5.00	3.77	0.64
Listening problems related to the listener	115	1.00	4.17	3.64	0.67
Listening problems related to psychological characteristics	115	1.83	4.00	3.32	0.99
Listening problems related to the lack of concentration	115	2.40	4.20	3.95	0.65

Among the listening problem factors that the first year English-major students have to face while learning listening comprehension was shown in Table 2, the problems related to the lack of concentration had highest mean score(M = 3.95, SD = .65), followed by the listening problems related to the speaker from the listening materials (DVD, CD) (M = 3.77, SD = 0.64), the mean score of listening problems related to the different aspects of listening comprehension process (M= 3.59, SD = 0.55), the mean score of listening problems related to the different aspects of listening comprehension process (M= 3.58, SD = .67), and the mean score of

listening problems related to psychological characteristics(M = 3.32, SD = 99), finally the mean score of listening problems related to Linguistic features is lowest mean score.

3.1.1 Perceptions about the role of listening skill development

As in Table 1, among the 115 participants, the participants’ score is 2.67 while the highest mean score is 4.56. The total mean score of students’ perceptions of the role of listening skill development (M= 3.73) is higher than the scale 3 in the five-degree scale.

Table 3: Perceptions about the role of listening skill development

	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
The first year English-major students’ perceptions of listening skill development	18.87	114	0.00	0.726	0.651	0.804

From Table 1, the result of the one sample T-test indicates that the Mean scores of students' perceptions toward the role of listening skill development ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.413$) was significantly different from the test value 3.0 ($t = 18.87$, $df = 114$, $p = 0.00$).

The result supports the conclusion that the perceptions' the first year English-major students toward the role of listening skill development were higher than that of accepted mean.

3.1.2 Listening comprehension problems

Listening materials

Table 4: Listening problem about the listening materials

	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Listening problem related to the listening material	11.52	114	0.00	0.591	0.496	0.693

From Table 2, the result of the one sample T-test indicates that the Mean ($M = 3.73$, $SD = .413$) was significantly different from the test value 3.0 ($t = 11.52$, $df = 114$, $p = .00$).

The result supports the conclusion that the listening problems related to the listening materials were higher than that of accepted mean.

Linguistic features

Listening problems related to linguistic features were found as a problematic issue of the participants. These problems included ordering colloquial

The listening materials may be the main sources of listening comprehension problems. In particular, unfamiliar words, difficult grammatical structures, and the length of the spoken text may present students with listening problems.

As reported in Table 2, the participants' lowest mean score regarding the listening problems related to the listening materials is 1.67 while the participants' highest mean score is 4.50. The total mean score of students' perceptions of the role of listening skill development ($M = 3.59$) is higher than the scale 3 in the five-degree scale

language, slang linguistic challenges, etc. This result is in line with a study by Brown (1973) listing several linguistic sources which make listening difficult: (1) the use of colloquial language and slang, (2) the use of reduced forms, (3) the "prosodic features" of the English language, and (4) the differences both accents and pronunciation.

As illustrated in Table 2, the participants' lowest mean score regarding the listening problems related to the linguistic features is 1.0 while the participants 'highest mean score is 4.6. The total mean score of the listening problems related to the linguistic features ($M = 3.23$) is higher than the scale 3 in the five-degree scale.

Table 5: Listening problems about the linguistic features

	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Listening problem related to the linguistic features	9.24	114	0.00	0.576	0.452	0.699

From Table 2, the result of the one sample T-test indicates that the Mean ($M = 3.73$, $SD = .413$) was significantly different from the test value 3.0 ($t = 9.24$, $df = 114$, $p = .00$).

The result supports the conclusion that the listening problems related to the linguistic features face were higher than that of accepted mean.

Different aspects of listening comprehension process

In listening comprehension process, students have to face with lots of difficulties before, while, and after listening. As many students said that it is difficult for them to predict from the visuals what they will hear. Besides, students may find it difficult to understand the requirements of the task.

Moreover, it is difficult for students to guess the meaning of unknown words by linking them to known words. Furthermore, it is hard for them to evaluate the overall accuracy of their comprehension after listening

As showed in Table 2, the participants' lowest mean score regarding the listening problems related to the

different aspects of listening comprehension process is 1.50 while the participants' highest mean score is 5.00. The total mean score of the listening problems related to the different aspects of listening comprehension process (M= 3.58) is higher than the scale 3 in the five-degree scale

Table 6: Listening problems about different aspects of listening comprehension process

	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Listening problems related to the different aspects of listening comprehension process	9.24	114	0.00	0.576	0.452	0.699

From Table 2, it is seen that result of the one sample T-test indicates that the Mean (M = 3.58, SD = 0.413) was significantly different from the test value 3.0 (t = 9.24, df = 114, p = 0.00).

The result supports the conclusion the listening problems related to the different aspects of listening comprehension process were higher than that of accepted mean.

The speaker from the listening materials (DVD, CD)

According to the study, the respondents also pointed out that the speaker was one of the factors

that affected the listening comprehension. Problems of listening comprehension related to speaking can be seen in relation to natural speech, pronunciation, varied accents, and a voice heard only on an audio-tape cassette recorder without seeing the speaker.

From Table 2, the participants' lowest mean score regarding the listening problems related to the speaker from the listening materials is 1.00 while the participants' highest mean score is 5.00. The total mean score of regarding the listening problems related to the speaker from the listening materials (M= 3.77) is higher than the scale 3 in the five-degree scale.

Table 7: Listening problems about the speaker from the listening materials (DVD, CD...)

	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Listening problems related to the speaker from the listening materials (DVD, CD)	12.86	114	0.00	0.770	0.652	0.889

From Table 2, it is seen that result of the one sample T-test indicates that the Mean (M = 3.77, SD = .64) was significantly different from the test value 3.0 (t = 12.86, df = 114, p = .00).

The result supports the conclusion the listening problems related to the speaker from the listening materials (DVD, CD) were higher than that of accepted mean.

The listener

Through the survey questionnaire, the students revealed that their problems may arise from their inability to recognize the main words in listening comprehension and understand the spoken text from the

first listening. Besides, the students were not sure what mostly affected them in listening. However, they felt that it was quite difficult to understand the text from the first listening.

As can be seen from Table 2, the participants' lowest mean score regarding the listening problems is 1.00 while the participants' highest mean score is 4.17. The total mean score of the listening problems related to the listener (M= 3.64) is higher than the scale 3 in the five-degree scale.

From Table 2, the result of the one sample T-test indicates that the Mean (M = 3.64, SD = .413) was significantly different from the test value 3.0 (t = 10.25, df = 114, p = .00).

Table 8: The listening problems about the listener

	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Listening problems related to the listener	10.25	114	0.00	0.638	0.514	0.761

The result supports the conclusion the listening problems related to the listener were higher than that of accepted mean.

Psychological characteristics

According to Yagang (1994), the listening comprehension process is also a relatively complex psychological process. In psychology, it is stated that when a person feels nervous or anxious he or she may not

be concentrated. When one felt uncomfortable, his or her ability to listen is greatly reduced.

As presented in Table 2, the participants' lowest mean score regarding the listening problems related to psychological characteristics is 1.83 while the participants' highest mean score is 4. The total mean score of the listening problems related to the listener (M= 3.32) is higher than the scale 3 in the five-degree scale.

Table 9: Listening problems related to psychological characteristics

	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Listening problems related to psychological characteristics	3.43	114	0.001	0.318	0.134	0.500

From Table 2, the result of the one sample T-test indicates that the Mean (M = 3.32, SD = .99) was significantly different from the test value 3.0 (t = 3.4, df = 114, p = .001).

The result supports the conclusion the listening problems related to the psychological characteristics were higher than that of accepted mean.

Lack of concentration

This factor affects the students' listening comprehension process. During their listening lessons are required to be attentive since in a very restricted

time, they are required to process and understand a strand of newly introduced information. Failure to concentrate will result in the students missing some of the lecture content, which will eventually affect their understanding of the whole lecture.

From Table 2, the participants' lowest mean score regarding the listening problems related to lack of concentration is 2.4 while the participants' highest mean score is 4.2. The total mean score of the listening problems related to lack of concentration (M= 3.95) is higher than the scale 3 in the five-degree scale.

Table 10: Listening problems related to the lack of concentration

	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Listening problems related to the lack of concentration	8.88	114	0.00	0.955	0.742	1.168

From Table 2, the result of the one sample T-test indicates that the Mean (M = 3.95, SD = 1.15) was significantly different from the test value 3.0 (t = 8.88, df = 114, p = 0.00).

The result supports the listening problems related to lack of were higher than that of accepted mean.

3.2 Results from the interviews

The answers from the interviews are classified into 5 themes. Most of the students from the interviewers were aware of the importance of listening skill development. A common view is shared by most students: “listening skill development is very important because it help to develop other language skills”.

However, the participants mainly discussed problems related to listening skill development. Student 3 said,

“Listening skill development is very difficult, it is very boring and not interesting”.

Another student shared that,

“I feel it is very hard for me to develop my listening skill because listening skill development is very difficult, it is very boring and not interesting, I do not have enough vocabulary to listen the dialogue, and I do not practice listening skill more often”. (Student 13)

To mention the listening problems that the first year English –major students have to face while learning listening comprehension, many students said that they were not successful since it was impossible for them to make out what the speakers said because of their lack of pronunciation ability. For example, Student 5 said,

“When I studied at high school, we pronounce the words one by one. The pronunciation is strong but, within a sentence, the words change and it becomes impossible to hear them”.

Besides, lack of vocabulary was another major problem that impedes students’ listening comprehension. This is clear in the comment of the interviewed students, Student 9 said,

“My vocabulary is poor; it is very difficult for me to understand what the conversation is, especially when the word that I don’t know is a key word. Though I have tried to look it up in the dictionary, it’s sometimes useless. I guess it’s because my pronunciation is not good enough, too”.

Students 9 suggested overcoming the problem of lacking vocabularies.

“we need to enhance the vocabulary when we learn listening skill by listening English music, watching English television and so on”.

Another problem that bothered the interviewees was the speed of speech. Some students thought it was especially difficult to understand native speakers. For instance, Student 22 said,

“Both the teacher in the class and native speakers in the listening task speak too fast, I sometimes I could not understand what they are talking”.

Moreover, many students said that psychological characteristics are one of main listening problems while they learn listening comprehension. As Student 24 highlighted,

“Any time when I learn listening, I feel nervous and worried when I don’t understand the spoken text, I often think that I cannot understand what I will hear, but I cannot control my feeling”.

Furthermore, the students realized that attention was fundamental to listening and identified their lapses in concentration as another listening problem. Student 7 said,

“Well, the main problem is that I can’t concentrate well on the serious topic, maybe I need practicing more often to improve my listening skill”.

Another student also stated that whenever her attention was diverted from the input, she would miss a lot of information,

“Because I did not concentrate too much I missed some points” .

In brief, the respondents showed lots of listening problems that they have to face while leaning listening comprehension such as lack of vocabularies, different accents and pronunciation, lack of concentration and so on. Moreover, lack of background knowledge is also main problem that we need to concern because most of the students were only focused on learning writing and reading skill when they learned at high school. As a result, they do not have enough background knowledge to listen effectively.

3.3 The class observations on students

The data from class observation were obtained from video clips and teacher’s notes. The three classes taking part in the main study were recorded during the four lessons. However, except for class B16MA3, video-clips of class 11N2 were not fully recorded. The analysis of observation-data for four lessons will be presented one by one. According to main theme that were used to analysis the observation data, there has lots of achievements as well as drawbacks.

The data from the class observation showed most of the students had positive manners to learning listening comprehension. In the pre-stage, many students actively volunteered to answer the questions. However, there are also lots of listening problems that during learning process in the class. Actually, during four times of observation, some students were busy talking to each other. In observation 3, during the class while most of the students listened to their teacher, three students were talking to each other, another student was looking outside, and another student was painting the picture. In observation 4, the students were still talking together while the teacher asked one student to answer the questions,

and one student who was sleeping was sitting at the end of the class. There may be several possible explanations for class environment. It is likely that during the time of learning, the students do not have concentration in the lesson or lack discipline in class. Another possible explanation for this might be that these students were not interested in the class.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The current study tried to investigate the perceptions of students about the role of the listening skill development and find out all listening problems that the students have to face while learning listening comprehension. The two research questions are fully examined and addressed. The findings of this research indicated that most of the students have positive perceptions toward the role of listening skill development. However, they have to face lots of difficulties while learning listening comprehension. These main listening problems are related to the listening materials, linguistic features, listening process, speakers, listeners, psychological characteristics, and lack of concentration. It includes unfamiliar vocabularies, pronunciation and accent of speakers, the effect of tape recorder, lack of vocabularies, lack of concentration, and lack of practice.

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