

INVESTIGATING FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS' VIEWPOINTS ON DIFFICULTIES DEVELOPING LISTENING SKILLS IN BUSINESS COURSE

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT
Received:	17/4/2024	When mentioning teaching and learning English at all levels of education in countries where English is classified as English as a Foreign Language, four principal skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – have been widely researched. Listening has long been recognized as a challenging skill for teachers, students, and researchers in non-English native language contexts. This cross-sectional study investigated the perspectives of sixty first year students at Academy of Development and Policy regarding challenges they experienced while learning to improve their listening skills regarding the contexts in English for specific purposes during the second term of the academic year 2023-2024. The findings from the researcher-made questionnaires indicate that the participants confronted the challenges of improving their English listening skills for specific purposes, particularly business English. Moreover, they had the same opinions of having difficulty developing their listening texts; thus, there is no need to consider implementing particular listening policies applied to the students. The study supplies a new outlook for more studies in the future relating to improving listening skills of English for specific purposes.
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KEYWORDS

Factors
Listening techniques
Gender differences
Challenging skills
Receptive skills

KHẢO SÁT QUAN ĐIỂM CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM THỨ NHẤT VỀ KHÓ KHĂN ĐỐI VỚI VIỆC PHÁT TRIỂN KỸ NĂNG NGHE HỌC PHẦN TIẾNG ANH KINH TẾ

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO		TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài:	17/4/2024	Khi đề cập đến dạy và học tiếng Anh ở mọi cấp độ giáo dục tại các quốc gia tiếng Anh được coi như là ngôn ngữ nước ngoài, bốn kỹ năng chính – nghe, nói, đọc, và viết – được tiến hành nghiên cứu một cách rộng rãi. Kỹ năng Nghe từ lâu được cho là kỹ năng khó đối với giáo viên, sinh viên và những người nghiên cứu không phải là những người bản ngữ. Nghiên cứu hỗn hợp xem xét quan điểm của 60 sinh viên năm thứ nhất tại Học viện Chính sách và Phát triển trong học kỳ II năm học 2023-2024. Kết quả từ phiếu trả lời do người nghiên cứu thiết kế đã chỉ ra rằng người tham gia nghiên cứu gặp khó khăn trong việc nâng cao kỹ năng nghe tiếng Anh chuyên ngành, cụ thể đó là tiếng Anh chuyên ngành kinh doanh. Hơn nữa, sinh viên cũng có chung quan điểm về khó khăn của việc phát triển kỹ năng nghe chuyên ngành, từ đó có kết luận rằng không cần thiết phân loại sinh viên nam-nữ để áp dụng các phương pháp giảng dạy kỹ năng nghe riêng biệt cho từng nhóm đối tượng sinh viên. Nghiên cứu đã đưa ra một cách nhìn mới cho nhiều nghiên cứu hơn trong tương lai liên quan đến việc cải thiện kỹ năng nghe tiếng Anh chuyên ngành.
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TỪ KHÓA

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1. Introduction

Four basic skills of the English language – listening, speaking, reading, and writing - are classified into two branches. In particular, reading and listening are classified as receptive skills, while writing and speaking are categorized as productive skills. In comparison with the other language skills, listening, nonetheless, has its distinctive characteristics. Typically, during the process of listening to a piece of second language (L2) speech, one listener tries to focus on the speech they hear in L2 to recognize certain words, grammar, and structures through which they can construct meaning, understand paralinguistic elements such as stress and intonation to arrive at an interpretation, and hold them in their short-term memory long enough to integrate the information archived in the long-term memory as background knowledge and a strategy for achieving an overall understanding of the text [1]-[3]. Compared with reading skills, students can read the written texts as many times as they want to get information, they also see how the written texts are organized and existed in some forms of appearance. In contrast, listeners cannot do the same with verbal communication, as listening involves producing speech, not a textual transformation. Moreover, word boundaries in listening text are not as easily distinguishable as in written texts because the spaces between words cannot be seen, so it is very difficult for learners, especially beginners, to segment the stream of speech into individual words within a limited period of time [4]. Different theories of listening comprehension, although diverse, all share the common view that listening comprehension includes a series of complex, dynamic and integrated activities that require the simultaneous activation of different mental abilities. Researchers [3], [5], [6] have identified many factors that may make listening comprehension difficult for L2 learners. Regarding knowledge factors, speech rate or speed of delivery of texts is considered one of the typical factors affecting listening comprehension significantly. Different speakers might produce a variety of speech rates, which heavily depends on the territory or living place they come from. Besides, the challenges of listening may be attributed to phonological features. For native English speakers, it is pretty common for them to naturally drop and add sounds in connected speech, which leads to the combination of sound and the varied rhythm of speech. This naturally connected speech means that most of the words are not fully articulated, so their sound seems very different from when they are pronounced in isolation [7]. Concerning personal factors, poor lexical knowledge might negatively influence listening comprehension. The variety of listening themes requires listeners to have a good command of vocabulary to understand what is communicated in speech. This is also affected by a lack of prior knowledge relating to the spoken texts. Actually, if the presumptions made in the text do not match the listeners' prior knowledge, the listeners may face difficulty comprehending the text. In addition, the limited capacity of short-term memory is another factor that affects listening comprehension. Short-term memory, which divides the chunking of utterances into manageable sizes in accordance with syntactic rules, plays an important role in interpreting meaning from verbal communication. The different stages of comprehension, such as perception, analysis, and use, can overlap, so even though learners are trying to store what they have perceived, they may have to pay attention to the input of information. Short-term memory is constantly being replaced naturally by new information, and unless some link with the information in long-term memory is formulated, the new information is likely forgotten unconsciously [1], [8], [9]. Personal factors such as high levels of anxiety can also lead to difficulty in understanding listening comprehension due to contracted forms, ungrammatical forms, pauses and speech errors, speech rate, rhythm and stress, cohesive and cohesion devices, and content [10].

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a tailored approach to teaching English that concentrates on the specific needs of students, often related to their potential professional or academic fields. While ESP can be highly effective, students frequently encounter many challenges, particularly in developing listening skills. In practice, listening is regarded as a fundamental skill in English language learning, particularly for ESP learners, who need to

understand and process language related to specific fields or professions. Moreover, it is used more frequently than the other basic English language skills, namely speaking, reading, and writing. However, learning ESP listening skills presents a range of challenges; for example, memory retention and vocabulary limitations, the need for appropriate materials and pedagogical expertise, the demand for authentic materials, the balance between different types of processing, the importance of active engagement and strategy use. By employing strategies such as using levelled texts, teaching active listening skills, and ensuring the use of authentic materials, teachers can help students overcome these obstacles [5], [11], [12]. Besides, continuous professional development and collaboration are also crucial to adapting to the evolving demands of ESP teaching and learning [13], [14]. Although many studies examine the challenges of listening skills in general English, ESP listening skills have not been paid attention to until now. This study, conducted by a mixed-methods approach, aimed to investigate seventy-five English major students' perspectives on the challenges in developing their business listening course during the second term of the academic year 2023-2024 at the Academy of Development and Policy.

1. What factors affect the first-year English major students' listening challenges of at the Academy of Development and Policy?

2. Is it necessary to have different listening techniques for the first-year English major students at the Academy of Development and Policy regarding gender differences?

The research findings would contribute resourceful references for higher education institutions in terms of formulating or renovating ESP training policy, providing different ideas for improving ESP listening skills for teachers and students, and serving as valuable resources for future studies.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Research design

The cross-sectional study was conducted using a five-point Likert scale questionnaire with sixty business English major students. The study utilized the researcher-made instruments to explore business English major students' viewpoints on the challenges of developing English listening skills related to business English. After receiving permission from university administrators, the researcher personally floated the questionnaire and conducted the unstructured interview. The collected data were scrutinized by the data screening step to validate the reliability of the results. After that, the IBM SPSS v.25 computing application was used to analyze five-point Likert scale questionnaires. Based on the results from the questionnaires, the research questions were thoroughly answered.

2.2. Research instruments

A five-point Likert scale questionnaire included twenty-five statements masked in four categories, namely six statements relating to process, eight ones about input, four items belonging to task, and seven statements for listeners. The research instrument was constructed according to the factual and attitudinal criteria set by Dörnyei & Taguchi [15], and the questionnaire was conducted in a pilot study with 20 students to assure its suitability and reliability. The researcher chose twenty-five statements in compliance with the high confidence level (0.73 - 0.95) [16]. After that the research instrument was sent to 3 experts on ESP teaching for their content validation.

2.3. Participants and Procedures of data collection

The study employed non-probability sampling methods by means of convenience sampling among the fourteenth course to choose purposefully 60 participants to take part in answering the survey questionnaire. Among 60 participants, the sample involved 49 female students, accounting for 65.3%, and 26 male respondents, representing 34.7%. Additionally, most of the participants came from rural areas ($n = 37$; equivalent to 49.3%); succeeding this rank were 31 participants

from urban areas, making up 41.3%. The least number of students lived in mountainous/remote places, making up 9.3% or seven students. Remarkably, six students out of 75 samples pursued a dual degree program.

2.4. Data analysis

The collected data from the questionnaire were screened and interpreted to address descriptive statistics to decipher the five-point Likert scale statements, which explained for the elaboration of the means and standard deviations relevant to the interval scales such as strong disagreement (1.0 - 1.80), disagreement (1.81 - 2.60), uncertainty (2.61 - 3.40), agreement (3.41 - 4.20), and strong agreement (4.21 - 5.0). In addition, Independent-Samples T-Test was used to compare if the male and female participants had the same or different perspectives on the challenges of learning business English.

3. Results and Discussion

The results, as seen in Table 1, indicate that the participants encountered listening problems as mentioned in this table. In particular, the process described the experience of the students in developing listening skills; almost all the participants ($M = 4.11$; $SD = 0.77\%$) agreed that word boundary caused the most difficulty in this regard, so the students had to be given time and background knowledge to mentally activate the lexical ability to complete the listening task. The participants found it hard to keep track of the recording because they lost track of signals during the recording ($M = 4.03$; $SD = 0.66\%$). This is one typical feature of recording, which is different from reading texts, where readers could read again to look for information needed. Similarly, the students mistakenly try to understand every word or phrase while listening ($M = 4.08$; $SD = 0.82\%$). This situation is somewhat similar to previous studies [1], [13], [14] in which the participants were deeply concerned about losing track while listening to the recording. It is best to advise listeners to concentrate on the content words, not much on the functional words because the speakers seem to articulate with more stress on the keywords. When asked about the whole chunks of a listening text, the students felt it challenging to catch the entire meaning of a long text ($M = 3.80$; $SD = 0.63\%$). In this case, listeners are advised to practice listening carefully to a long sentence and then repeating it at the beginning phase of practice; they are expected to gradually increase longer paragraphs or practice simultaneous reading with the recording. As a matter of fact, the participants had difficulties guessing the missing information in a text when they could not hear clearly ($M = 3.67$; $SD = 0.78\%$). Students should infer from the context of one listening situation that it is advisable for them to visualize the whole picture of what takes place from the recording. As concluded in the previous study [8], [11], [12], asking students to imagine and retell the listening events improves their short-term memory, which helps them predict the missing pieces of information in the recording. The participants claimed not to have difficulties evaluating the overall accuracy of their comprehension of a listening text ($M = 2.41$; $SD = 0.71\%$). In fact, they could recognize their progress in listening abilities by the completion of listening tasks. Students were encouraged to utilize online websites to develop their listening skills with a variety of forms of listening evaluation. In general, the students had much difficulty developing their listening comprehension during the process of listening.

Regarding the listening tasks, the participants confessed to having problems with a prolonged listening text ($M = 3.93$; $SD = 0.69\%$). Commonly, listening tasks, as in IELTS listening parts, last approximately five minutes long; the participants are probably not used to listening to lectures or speeches in English, so they should try some forms of mass media to listen to the news in English. Furthermore, the students ran into problems with multi-tasks while listening to a recording, such as listening to the texts and doing exercises simultaneously ($M = 3.90$; $SD = 0.76\%$) and combining information to make generalizations ($M = 3.62$; $SD = 0.64\%$). These challenges commonly happen to listeners, especially those who have just acquired a foreign

language. The previous studies [5], [7], [14] share the same findings as this study, they suggest taking notes while listening to a text to retain information to fulfill the required tasks. However, the participants did not have difficulty using details to support the main ideas of the listening text ($M = 2.06$; $SD = 0.80\%$). This result sounds contradictory to the findings in this group in that the participants experienced challenges in multi-tasking performance.

As presented in Table 1 about the listeners' issues, the respondents found it hard to connect the information in a listening text; this means that the students encountered the challenging situation of short-term memory ($M = 3.78$; $SD = 0.84\%$). This finding is consistent with that of another study [10], which mentioned such tension among the students while listening to a text that they nearly forgot what they had listened to in the recording. Besides, they were so puzzled by the meaning of unfamiliar words that they failed to listen to the next part of a listening text ($M = 3.63$; $SD = 0.65\%$). They were, therefore, unable to summarize the listening information successfully ($M = 3.75$; $SD = 0.87\%$). It is pretty easy to realize that when the students could not keep track of a listening text, they failed to complete the expected exercises. In addition, the participants believed that new information in a listening text was challenging for them to relate their meaningful personal associations ($M = 3.83$; $SD = 0.72\%$). When listeners are able to associate themselves with the context of the listening situations, they cannot get background information to support the corpus of the listening texts. The students failed to produce the meaning of unfamiliar words even if they linked these new words to the known ones ($M = 3.58$; $SD = 0.89\%$). Lack of a wealth of English lexical ability indicates that listeners have challenges in learning a foreign language, especially in listening skills. This assertion has been proved in previous studies [2], [8], which claim that the necessity of a good command of lexicology leads to the limitation of understanding what is communicated in all languages. Moreover, the students were distracted if the surroundings were noisy ($M = 3.76$; $SD = 0.65\%$). The result denotes that it is essential to have a good condition for developing listening skills. Nonetheless, students ought to be trained to listen to foreign languages in different situations so that they get accustomed to listening to outside conversations. The participants were supposed to use the right listening strategies and be guided on practical strategies for listening well ($M = 3.50$; $SD = 0.85\%$). Similarly, appropriate strategy plays a vital role in significant English listening skills; thus, students should be provided with some listening tactics, such as top-down and bottom-up listening strategies. In particular, top-down listening uses background knowledge and contextualizes words to aid comprehension, while bottom-up listening uses sounds, phrases, and other small units to create meaning. Overall, the participants had personal matters to improve their listening skills.

Concerning input factors in Table 1, the students found it challenging to do listening comprehension. In particular, the students reported needing clarification on the listening texts with unfamiliar topics ($M = 4.13$; $SD = 0.67\%$). It is usual for language learners when they start learning new issues. As claimed in the previous study [11], the students blamed a lack of background knowledge relating to the listening texts for not being able to complete the listening tasks successfully. Besides, they ran into the problems of the incorrect lexical pronunciation ($M = 3.56$; $SD = 0.79\%$). This issue is dilemmatic as people might use different accents or be influenced by the local areas, which have their dialects, so listeners are advised to listen to different voices from all over the world thanks to the development of online instruments for developing listening skills. Accordingly, too many unfamiliar words hindered the understanding of a listening text ($M = 3.82$; $SD = 0.75\%$). For other skills, such as speaking skills, students acknowledge that they need help producing fluency and cohesion if they encounter many unfamiliar words. To tackle this problem, students have to enrich their vocabulary so that they are able to overcome such situations. Like the previous statement, the participants underwent challenges in understanding a listening text containing colloquial language, slang, and idioms ($M = 3.81$; $SD = 0.81\%$). For those difficulties, students are taught to learn by heart, or they are supposed to have a note-taking book and gradually learn by rote. One more thing relating to

complex grammatical structures, the participants asserted that they could not do listening tasks well because of encountering these challenges ($M = 3.98$; $SD = 0.83\%$) as complex grammatical structures belong to the function words, which are normally unstressed syllables so that students often struggle to figure out the meaning of a piece of listening information via the contextual situations. Additionally, the participants experienced problems with a high speech rate ($M = 3.53$; $SD = 0.78\%$). Even in general English, speakers' speech rate possibly creates many challenges for listeners, especially in listening to the recording, as reported in the previous study [7]. In this study, the results reveal that listeners find it hard to keep track of speakers' speech rates without seeing face-to-face. Their conclusion is similar to this research finding. Furthermore, the respondents reported being confronted with unfamiliarity with English stress and intonation patterns ($M = 3.55$; $SD = 0.88\%$) and unfamiliarity with different accents ($M = 3.73$; $SD = 0.70\%$). Different language systems have distinctive features, so these varieties often create challenges for other speakers of a foreign language. In summary, the participants faced difficulties with input factors.

Table 1. Factors affecting students' perspectives of listening difficulties

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Process				
1. It is difficult to recognize the signals indicating that the speaker is moving from one point to another.	60	4.03	0.66	Agreement
3. It is difficult to identify word boundaries in a listening text.	60	4.11	0.77	Agreement
8. I lose the flow of speech because I concentrate very hard on understanding every word or phrase while listening.	60	4.08	0.82	Agreement
10. It is difficult to decide whether I have correctly understood the meaning of the whole chunks of a listening text.	60	3.80	0.63	Agreement
13. It is difficult to use the context to guess those parts of the listening text I cannot hear clearly.	60	3.76	0.78	Agreement
18. It is difficult to evaluate the overall accuracy of their comprehension of a listening text.	60	2.41	0.71	Disagreement
Weighted means		3.69		
Task				
4. I find it challenging to stay focused on a prolonged listening text over five minutes when I have problems understanding the meaning of it.	60	3.93	0.69	Agreement
6. It is not easy to find out the details that support the main idea of a listening text.	60	2.06	0.80	Disagreement
11. I find it difficult to concentrate when I have to listen to the text and look for answers simultaneously.	60	3.90	0.76	Agreement
16. I find it challenging to do listening tasks that require combining information to make generalizations while listening to the text.	60	3.62	0.64	Agreement
Weighted means		3.37		
Listener				
5. It is challenging to relate what I hear to the content of the earlier parts of the listening text.	60	3.78	0.84	Agreement
9. When focusing on the meaning of unfamiliar words, I neglect the next part of a listening text.	60	3.63	0.65	Agreement
7. It is difficult to summarise information drawn from the listening text mentally.	60	3.75	0.87	Agreement
12. Making meaningful personal associations with the new information in a listening text is difficult.	60	3.83	0.72	Agreement
14. I feel disappointed when I cannot fully comprehend a long listening text because of noises around.	60	3.76	0.65	Agreement
17. Learners need help comprehending a listening text because	60	3.50	0.85	Agreement

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
they need to use the appropriate strategy.				
25. It is difficult to guess the meaning of unknown words by linking them to known words.	60	3.58	0.89	Agreement
Weighted means		3.69		
Input				
2. Unfamiliar topics make it difficult to understand a listening text.	60	4.13	0.67	Agreement
15. I find it challenging to understand the meaning of words that must be pronounced correctly.	60	3.56	0.79	Agreement
19. I struggle understanding a listening text with too many unfamiliar words.	60	3.82	0.75	Agreement
20. I find understanding a listening text with complex grammatical structures challenging.	60	3.98	0.83	Agreement
21. I struggle to comprehend a listening text with a high speech rate.	60	3.53	0.78	Agreement
22. The unfamiliarity with stress and intonation patterns of English interferes with my comprehension of a listening text.	60	3.55	0.88	Agreement
23. The unfamiliarity with different accents interferes with my comprehension of a listening text.	60	3.73	0.70	Agreement
24. It is difficult to understand a listening text that contains colloquial language, slang, and idioms.	60	3.81	0.81	Agreement
Weighted means		3.76		
Valid N (listwise)	60			

Table 2 shows the results of the comparison between the students and the challenges they experience with the null hypothesis that the male and female students have different variances in terms of listening texts. By looking at the p-values in Levene's test for equality of variances, the results were all higher than 0,05 in the rows of the equal variances assumed; thus, the p-values of Sig. (2-tailed) in the t-test for equality of means are taken into consideration in the rows of equal variances not assumed. As clearly illustrated in these 'Equal variances not assumed' rows, the p-values were higher than 0.05 indicating that the null hypothesis was rejected. In other words, there is no difference among the male and female students regarding the listening challenges, which demonstrates that the current syllabus implementing to improve ESP listening skills is difficult for both male and female students.

Table 2. Comparison between the gender and listening challenges

		Independent Samples Test						
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Process	Equal variances assumed	.252	.618	.779	58	.439	.30670	.39371
	Equal variances not assumed			.779	46.761	.440	.30670	.39382
Input	Equal variances assumed	.797	.376	2.190	58	.033	.72973	.33314
	Equal variances not assumed			2.249	50.729	.029	.72973	.32451
Task	Equal variances assumed	.284	.596	1.871	58	.066	.47826	.25559
	Equal variances not assumed			2.000	55.836	.050	.47826	.23913
Listener	Equal variances assumed	.114	.737	.341	58	.734	.14689	.43024
	Equal variances not assumed			.342	47.030	.734	.14689	.42959

4. Conclusion

The study investigated English major students' viewpoints on the challenges of ESP listening texts with the first-year English major students at a higher education institution. In general, the

students encounter challenges in listening to ESP texts. For the results of the questionnaires, the participants found it challenging to use input factors with a weighted mean of 3.67, which means they agreed to confront the difficulties of input factors. In addition, they acknowledge encountering problems with process and listener factors with the same weighted mean of 3.69. The students generally have divergent perspectives toward ESP listening texts for listening tasks. The students agree to have problems listening to ESP texts, but one statement has a neutral viewpoint. It is concluded that the students encounter many challenges in improving their ESP listening texts. Regarding the presumption of whether the students need to be differentiated to be given particular teaching and learning listening strategies, the results in Table 2 signify that male and female students share the same challenges, so it is not necessary to classify the students to offer distinctive ways of developing their listening skills.

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