

Perceptions of Can Tho University EFL Students towards Common Problems in Listening Comprehension in Classroom Context

*Thai Cong Dan**, *Huynh Thanh Kieu***, and *Phu Thi Hong Chau****

ABSTRACT

This study sought to discover English listening comprehension problems (Shen, Guizhou, Wichura, Kiattichai, 2007) based on the perceptions (Andrej Démuth, 2012) of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Can Tho University (CTU), Vietnam with an aim to finding out common problems most of the first year English -majored students encountered in listening comprehension. The participants were 126 students majoring in English studies and were taking the listening and speaking course in the academic year of 2015-2016 at CTU. Data were gathered by means of the questionnaire and interviews. The results of this study showed that psychological states, slang, unfamiliar vocabularies, unfamiliar topics and lack of background knowledge on difficult topics were the major listening comprehension problems faced by the first year English -majored students. Based on the finding, this thesis would suggest some implications for EFL students as well as teachers and also provide a direction for further studies in the same field.

Key words: Perceptions, EFL students, English listening comprehension, English listening comprehension problems, Can Tho University

**Thai Cong Dan, PhD, Dean, School of Social Sciences & Humanities, Can Tho University, Vietnam (tcdan@ctu.edu.vn)*

***Huynh Thanh Kieu, BA in English Studies, School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University, Vietnam (kieub1201228@student.ctu.edu.vn)*

****Phu Thi Hong Chau, English lecturer, Chau Thanh Highschool, Kien Giang Province, Vietnam (chaupth.thptct@gmail.com)*

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Nowadays, about two-thirds countries in the world have used English as their mother tongue. English is not only the popular language but it is also the main international language. It is used all over the world and is becoming language of science and technology, commerce and information. English also comes to be compulsory subject in most Vietnamese schools, especially in university. In fact, students often run into difficulties in the process of learning English in which listening comprehension is one of the most challenging skills for every student. As Field (2008) stated that listening tends to be the most challenging skill for many second language learners to achieve and it is perhaps the most difficult skill teach successfully.

As for foreign language learning, the act of listening plays a vital part because listening is a process of receiving and processing information. As Rost (1994) stated that listening is of paramount important since it provides the language input. Hence, if learners cannot understand what speakers want to deliver, learning simply cannot get any improvement. Also, if listening is limit, no communication can be achieved. Besides, English is spoken across the world with different dialects and accents. Therefore, language learners, especially those who learn English in environment which is not vernacular, find it difficult to acquire good listening skill.

English language has the natural sequence of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening skill is ranked at first of all the four folds. Hamilton and Parker (1997) mentioned that listening skill is the most frequently used communication skill as listening occupies 80% of our working hours. However, the most important skill, listening is often the least developed. According to Ina Thomas and Brian Dyer (2007: p1), listening is rarely taught because educators assume listening is synonymous to breathing – automatic.

In this study, the authors believe that like any other skills, effective listening is only achieved through study and practice. Hence, the purpose of this research is trying to discover some common problems in listening comprehension based on learners' perception and simultaneously finding out effective methods to improve listening skill of first year students who are majoring in English of Can Tho University.

Aims of the study

This study generally aims at exploring the English-majored first-year students' perceptions toward common problems in listening comprehension. The specific aims of this study are: (1) to identify what factors make listening difficult for the English major freshmen at Can Tho University, Vietnam and (2) to contribute some pedagogical implications and suggestions to improve the teaching and learning English listening comprehension of the English major students at Can Tho University, Vietnam

Significance of the study

The study points out the listening comprehension problems encountered by the freshmen English major students. It currently shows students' awareness toward those difficulties. Especially, it is done by Can Tho University students so it could be more

appropriate to the situation in CTU. Therefore, the study could help teachers to have a better understanding of their students' listening obstacles and to examine their own teaching methods in order to improve listening comprehension among their students. Learners may use the findings to identify their listening comprehension difficulties to determine what further learning strategies are essential. For researchers who are interested in this area can use the findings as a basic for further studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Listening comprehension

Listening, according to Morley (1984), was commonly characterized as a receptive language skill in which listeners passively assimilate the messages presented to them by speakers. In fact, in order to decode a message that the speaker is delivering, the listeners have to actively contribute knowledge from both linguistic and non-linguistic sources. Therefore, listening involves a more complex process than just hearing (Burlley – Allen, 1982). Byrnes (1984) defined listening as a complex skill in which people have to employ all types of knowledge to interpret the meaning. In addition, a very thorough definition is provided by Wipf (1984) in which he states that listening is a complex problem solving skill that entails receiving, decoding and reacting to sounds being received from a speaker, and finally make retention of what was gathered and being able to contextualize it (p. 345). Purdy (1997) defined listening as “the active and dynamic process of attending, perceiving, interpreting, remembering, and responding to the expressed (verbal and nonverbal), needs, concerns, and information offered by other human beings” (p.8). Specifically, Rost (2002) noted that listening is a process of receiving what the speakers actually says, constructing and representing meaning, negotiating meaning with the speaker and responding, and creating meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy. To sum up, listening is not merely hearing and receives information from the speakers which involves listening for thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Nevertheless, doing so requires active involvement, effort and practice (Shen, Guizhou, Wichura, Kiattichai, 2007).

Comprehension is a complicated process that has been explained in many ways. According to Rost (2002) “comprehension is often considered to be the first – order goal of listening, the highest priority of the listener and sometimes the sole purpose of listening”. From a cognitive or psycholinguistic perspective, comprehension is viewed as a process of constructing meaning in transaction with texts (Goodman, 1996; Smith, 2004). Specifically, the RAND Reading Study Group (2002) stated that comprehension is “the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language” (p.11). To put in another way, Buck (2001: 31) state “comprehension is affected by a wide range of variables and that potentially any characteristic of the speaker, the situation or the listener can affect the comprehension of the message”. In other words, comprehension of a spoken message can either be isolated word recognition within the sound stream, phrase or formula recognition, clause or sentence and extended speech comprehension (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992). Besides, Faerch and Kaspar (1986) note “comprehension takes place when input and knowledge are matched against each other” (p. 264) as cited in O'Malley et al (1989). However, as stressed by these authors, there is rarely a perfect match

between input and knowledge, and this is why special efforts from the teachers may be required (p. 422).

English listening comprehension

From all of the definitions above, the term “Listening comprehension” has been developed and defined in different ways. Neisser (1976) for example considers listening comprehension as a temporally extended activity in which the listener continuously develops anticipation for what will come next. Saricoban (1999) defined listening comprehension as the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This involves understanding a speaker’s accent or pronunciation, his or her grammar and vocabulary, and grasping the meaning conveyed. Listening comprehension can also be defined broadly as the result of an interaction between a number of information sources, which include the acoustic input, different types of linguistic knowledge, details of the context, and general world knowledge (Buck, 2001).

Although these definitions are vary to some extent, listening basically is the method in which listeners employ a variety of mental process in an effort to comprehend what speakers say by selecting and interpreting information that comes from the auditory or visual texts. To sum up, “listening comprehension is not a skill which can be mastered once and for all and then ignored while other skills are developed. There must be regular practice with increasingly difficult material” (Wilga, 1986)

Common problems in English listening comprehension

Listening difficulties are defined as the internal and external characteristics that might interrupt text understanding and real-life processing problems directly related to cognitive procedures that take place at various stages of listening comprehension (Goh, 2000). As listening comprehension is a complex ongoing process, many learners find it difficult to comprehend spoken input. Some studies further clarify the listening problems encountered by students. For example, on the article “Listening Comprehension for Tenth Grade Students in Tabaria High School for Girls” Malkawi (2010) concluded “some of the obstacles that face the respondents in the questionnaire in developing listening comprehension skills include speed speech, limited knowledge of vocabulary, and limited knowledge of the subject in question”. Indeed, it is very difficult for students, especially first year students to follow native speakers’ speed in order to understand what speakers say if they lack of vocabulary and background knowledge around topic which is mentioned. Similarly, “An Investigation of Listening Comprehension Problems Encountered by Saudi Students in the EL Listening Classroom” is conducted by Dr Arafat Hamouda (2013) pointed out the major listening comprehension problems encountered by EFL Saudi learners that were accent, pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, different accent of speakers, lack of concentration, anxiety, and bad quality of recording. Also, in Sriptom ‘s (2011) study, he found that listening text, speaker, listener, physical environment at a high level, slang, idiomatic expressions, the lack of opportunity to use and practice English skills and lazy learning habits affected listening comprehension. From previous studies, there are various factors contributing to listening comprehension problems in language learning. Yet, this study mainly

focuses on ten common problems that most English - majored first-year students usually confront which are as follows unfamiliar vocabulary, slang, idiomatic expressions, unfamiliar topics, speed speech, difficult to get a general understanding from the first listening, lack of background knowledge on difficult topic, lack of listening strategies, detail memory and psychological states.

Perception

According to Krishnananda (2016), perception can be defined as “a process of the consciousness of an object. It is one of the means of valid knowledge in the world and consists in an inseparable relation of the perceptive consciousness with its content”. Besides, a perception, in its essence, is always trying to convince us that something is one way or another. Perception is therefore more or less affirmative and that applies even in cases when it claims that a thing, a characteristic or an event is there or isn’t (Démuth, 2012). In other way, Gregory (1970) stated that perception is a hypothesis. For Gregory, perception involves making inferences about what we see and trying to make a best guess. Prior knowledge and past experience, he argued, are crucial in perception. Similarly, in this study, perception is regarded in respect of the students’ consciousness toward their problems in listening comprehension

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Setting and subject of the study

The study took place during the Second semester of the academic year 2015-2016. This study was carried out with the participation of 126 first-year students majoring in English studies and translation at Can Tho University. Their ages range from 19 to 23 years old. They have studied English at least 3 years at high school. However, they tended to focus on learning grammar and practicing reading skill, rarely did the students have a chance to practice listening skill. As a result, it becomes a big challenge for them in changing learning habits and methods at university. For these reason, the researcher chose first – year students as a research sample in order to help them to realize the problems they confront as soon as possible, as well as to provide insights to support learning and teaching and curriculum planning for further course.

Research question

This paper employs both qualitative research and qualitative research towards the following research question guided the study:

What difficulties do Can Tho University first year English major students encounter in listening comprehension based on their perceptions?

Research instruments

The research employs two following instruments:

Questionnaire

Questionnaire (Table 1) was used to collect information about the problems the first year students faced in EFL listening while taking the listening course at Can Tho University. The question was developed after a review of the literature (Malkawi, 2010; Arafat, 2013; Juan, Abidin, 2013; Rubin, 1994; Sriprom, 2011; Vandergrift, 1999) about factors that influence listening comprehension of similar studies. There are two questionnaires in total and both of them were designed in two parallel languages: English and Vietnamese to ensure that participants could completely comprehend. These questionnaires were divided into 2 main parts: A and B. Part A consisted of four items regarding background information of respondents such as full name, gender, age and course. Part B contained items aiming to investigate the respondents' opinion on listening comprehension problem. Specifically, the first questionnaire includes thirty two True/False statements and one open-ended question. One open-ended question gives students the freedom to pose what other factors causing English listening comprehension problems which are not mention in thirty two statements above. After this survey the researcher picked up 10 problems chosen by most students and put it in randomly into the second questionnaire namely unfamiliar vocabulary, slang, idiomatic expressions, unfamiliar topic, speech speed, difficult to get general information in the first listening, lack of background knowledge on difficult topics, lack of listening strategies, details memory, psychological states. Each problem contains of 3 statements which investigate participants' perception toward common problems in English listening comprehension. Designed in a Liker scale format, participants indicated their agreement or disagreement on each statement by choosing one scale out of those (namely SA = Strongly agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly disagree) in terms of how strongly they agree with those statements.

Table 1 The construction and contents of the questionnaire

Construct	Statements
Unfamiliar vocabulary	There are too many new words I cannot catch
	I am slow to recall the meaning of words that sound familiar
	I can recognize words but I misremember its meaning
Slang	I do not understand slang
	I find it surprising and difficult to deal with slang
	I cannot recognize slang
Idiomatic expressions	I find it difficult to understand listening text in which there are too many idioms
	I can hear every word in idioms but I do not know what they mean
	I do not understand the inference of idioms
Unfamiliar topics	I find it difficult to follow unfamiliar topics
	The ideas are very difficult and I cannot concentrate because as I got lost in the first part of the lecture I could not follow the last part of the lecture
	It is a new subject to me so I find it very difficult to cope with
Speech speed	I find it difficult to understand native speakers speaking at a normal speed
	The speakers do not pause long enough for me having time to follow
	I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast
Difficult to get a general understanding from the first listening	I get confused about the key ideas in the message
	I find it difficult to get the main ideas of what I hear
	At the time of listening I found it difficult to predict what would come next
Lack of background knowledge on difficult topics	I relate new information to my personal experience or knowledge
	Sometimes I cannot understand the meaning of the content even if I know every vocabulary
	I use my experience and background knowledge of the topic to understand the spoken text
Lack of listening strategies	I cannot always remember the inferencing strategy and cannot use it often
	Before listening, I clarify the objective of an anticipated listening task and propose strategies for handling it
	While listening, I write down some ideas and key words
Details memory	I find it difficult to get the details of the text
	I find it difficult to quickly remember words or phrases I have just heard
	I can hear all sentences of the text but I sometimes forget some details
Psychological states	I feel worried when I do not understand what I hear
	If I do not arrive at a total comprehension of an oral text, I feel disappointed
	Before doing listening comprehension tasks, I fear that I cannot understand what I will hear

Interview

Besides questionnaire, interview was the second data gathering instrument which was used in this research to investigate how the listening difficulties which had been identified through questionnaire affected the students' listening comprehension and to simultaneously gain some insights into their understanding and attitude toward these common problems. The researcher designed a list of questions for interview with the number of ten questions which were based on students' perception about their listening comprehension problems. Interviews were conducted in English and ten out of 126 participants who had taken part in questionnaire were accidentally chosen to answer the interview.

Summary of main questions for interview

1. Do you get confused when listening to unfamiliar vocabularies in spoken texts?
2. Can you recognize slang words while listening?
3. Can you understand idiomatic expressions while listening?
4. What do you think about your listening when listening to unfamiliar topics?
5. Can follow foreigners' speech speed?
6. How do you think about your listening ability at the first time? Do you get a general understanding from the first listening?
7. What do you think about your background knowledge on difficult topics?
8. Do you apply listening strategies well?
9. Do you think remember details in spoken texts help you listen more effectively?
10. What do you think about psychological states affect to your listening ability?

Data collection procedure

Questionnaire

The survey was conducted from 25th January, 2016 to 7th February, 2016. Firstly, 69 copies of Questionnaire 1 were distributed to two classes in order to get 10 common problems the students usually face while practicing listening. Afterwards, based on these findings Questionnaire 2 was designed more specifically and conducted with the participation of 59 students of two other classes. Totally, 126 copies of Questionnaires were distributed to participants and taken back by the researcher. On the cover page, the participants were informed about the thesis and the aim of this study and also provided with instructions to complete the questionnaire. In responding to questions, the participants were requested to answer all the questions on the questionnaire during their 10 -15 minute break times in English class under the observation of the researcher.

Interview

In the second step, interviews were conducted to collect additional information on EFL learners with regard to academic lecture listening comprehension. Setting of the interviews depends on interviewees' desire. Ten interviewees were randomly chosen in the volunteered students. Before carrying out the interview, interviewees were informed the

research and its purpose. The answer to the interview questions were writing down using stenography by the researcher.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Questionnaire results towards perceptions of the first year English majored students toward common problems in listening comprehension

This part analyzes data taken from questionnaire as well as points out the overall opinion in English listening comprehension problems of first year English major students at Can Tho University. The details in percentage of problems would be presented in the following table.

Table 2. Overall perceptions of students toward common problems in listening comprehension

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Range	Maximum / Minimum	Variance	N of Items
Item Means	3,426	2,754	4,070	1,316	1,478	,103	30

The Mean score (Table 2) was 3.426 indicated that the students' perception toward listening comprehension was quite high. Specific analysis would be presented in next section.

Table 3. Listening Comprehension Problems Related to the Unfamiliar Vocabularies

Items	Statements	Percentage				
		SD	D	N	A	SA
1	There are too many new words I cannot catch while listening	1.8	8.8	14	52.6	22.8
2	I am slow to recall the meaning of words that sound familiar	0	21.1	21.1	40.4	17.5
3	I can recognize words but I misremember its meaning	8.8	38.6	15.8	35.1	1.8
Total		3.53	22.83	16.97	42.7	14.03

Table 3 showed problems regarding vocabulary, with the results indicate that the number of students agreed with unfamiliar vocabularies affect their listening was over twice the number of students disagreed with that idea, rated 56.73%, 26.36% respectively. Specifically, there were 75.4% students admitted there were so many new words they could not catch while listening. And just 10.6% of students refused new words limiting their listening.

Table 4. Listening Comprehension Problems Related to Slang

Items	Statements	Percentage				
		SD	D	N	A	SA
1	I do not understand slang	1.8	8.8	21.1	50.9	17.5
2	I find it surprising and difficult to deal with slang	1.8	8.8	14	61.4	14
3	I cannot recognize slang	5.3	15.8	19.3	47.4	12.3
Total		2.97	11.13	18.13	53.23	14.6

Table 4 presented problems related to slang, in which there were 67.83% of students agreed that slang was difficult for them to listen. They considered slang was difficult because they did not understand slang (68.4%) as well as they found it surprising and difficult to deal with slang (75.4%) and they also could not recognize slang (59.7%).

Table 5. Listening Comprehension Problems Related to Idiomatic Expressions

Items	Statements	Percentage				
		SD	D	N	A	SA
1	I find it difficult to understand listening text in which there are too many idioms		14	26.3	52.6	7
2	I can hear every word in idioms but I do not know what they mean		22.8	29.8	40.4	7
3	I do not understand the inference of idioms	1.8	17.5	26.3	45.6	8.8
Total		0.6	18.1	27.47	46.2	7.6

As shown in Table 5, 53.8% of students had difficulties in idiomatic expressions while listening. More specifically, 52.6% of students found it difficult to understand listening text in which there were too many idioms. Over 40% of them could hear every word in idioms but they did not know what they meant and they did not understand the inference of idioms. Besides, many of them (27.47%) confused about the problem in idiomatic expressions. Just 18.7% students did not have difficulties in listening idioms according to their perception.

Table 6 Listening Comprehension Related to Unfamiliar Topics

Items	Statements	Percentage				
		SD	D	N	A	SA
1	I find it difficult to follow	3.5	8.8	12.3	49.1	26.3

	unfamiliar topics					
2	The ideas are very difficult and I cannot concentrate because as I got lost in the first part of the lecture I could not follow the last part of the lecture	5.3	29.8	22.8	29.8	12.3
3	It is a new subject to me so I find it very difficult to cope with	3.5	15.8	31.6	38.6	10.5
Total		4.1	18.13	22.23	39.17	16.37

Table 6 presented students' opinion about the problem regarding unfamiliar topics, while the result revealed that 55.54% of respondents found it difficult to listen to unfamiliar topics. Surprisingly, the number of respondents perplexed about unfamiliar topics problem was the same with the number of those who disagreed with this problem (22.23%).

Table 7 Listening Comprehension Problems Related to Speech Speed

Items	Statements	Percentage				
		SD	D	N	A	SA
1	I find it difficult to understand native speakers speaking at a normal speed	1.8	31.6	36.8	24.6	5.3
2	The speakers do not pause long enough for me having time to follow	5.3	17.5	35.1	29.8	12.3
3	I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast	3.5		14	50.9	31.6
Total		3.53	16.37	28.63	35.1	16.4

Table 7 indicated the problem related to speech speed. 28.63% of the respondents remained neutral about this issue, taking the highest percentages of neutral response compared to other items. Anyhow, the number of students who agreed with this problem was still over 50% (51.5%). Finally, there was 19.9% of students did not have trouble in speech speed while listening.

Table 8 Listening Comprehension Problems Related to the Ability of Getting General Understanding at the First Time

Items	Statements	Percentage				
		SD	D	N	A	SA
1	I get confused about the key ideas in the message	1.8	28.1	22.8	42.1	5.3
2	I find it difficult to get the main ideas of what I hear	1.8	29.8	14	43.9	10.5
3	At the time of listening I found it difficult to predict what would come next	1.8	24.6	26.3	43.9	3.5
Total		1.8	27.5	21.03	43.3	6.43

Table 8 revealed the problem about comprehension degree in the first listening. This problem made up the number of respondents who did not find it difficult in getting a general understanding at the first time is quite high (29.3%). 21.03% students confused and 49.73% of those agreed with this problem.

Table 9 Listening Comprehension Problems Related to Background Knowledge on Difficult Topics

Items	Statements	Percentage				
		SD	D	N	A	SA
1	I relate new information to my personal experience or knowledge	3.5	17.5	12.3	57.9	8.8
2	Sometimes I cannot understand the meaning of the content even if I know every vocabulary	12.3	29.8	33.3	19.3	5.3
3	I use my experience and background knowledge of the topic to understand the spoken text		8.8	19.3	64.9	7
Total		5.27	18.7	21.63	47.37	7.03

Table 9 represented the problem concerning background knowledge on difficult topics while the result showed that 54.4% students admitted lack of background knowledge on difficult topics was one of the problems they got while listening. 23.97% of students did not think background knowledge affects their listening. Many of them (21.63%) puzzled about this problem.

Table 10 Listening Comprehension Problems Related to Listening Strategies

Items	Statements	Percentage				
1	I cannot always remember the inferencing strategy and cannot use it often		17.5	31.6	49.1	1.8
2	Before listening, I clarify the objective of an anticipated listening task and propose strategies for handling it	1.8	21.1	31.6	40.4	5.3
3	While listening, I write down some ideas and key words	1.8	21.1	15.8	47.4	14
Total		1.2	19.9	26.33	45.63	7.03

Table 10 showed the problem regarding listening strategies. Many of students (50.9%) agreed that they forgot applying listening strategies while listening. Only 17.5% of students could remember the inferencing strategy and could use it often. However, there were over 30% of students (31.6%) confusing about this problem.

Table 11 Listening Comprehension Problems Related to Details Memory

Items	Statements	Percentage				
		SD	D	N	A	SA
1	I find it difficult to get the details of the text	1.8	22.8	19.3	47.4	8.8
2	I find it difficult to quickly remember words or phrases I have just heard	3.5	14	35.1	38.6	8.8
3	I can hear all sentences of the text but I sometimes forget some details	7	36.8	21.1	33.3	1.8
Total		4.1	24.53	25.17	39.77	6.47

Table 11 pointed out the problem concerning details memory while listening. There were 46.24% of students agreed that they ran into difficulties when remembering details in listening text. 28.63% students did not think this was a problem and many of them (25.17%) still confused about this problem.

Table 12 Listening Comprehension Problems Related to Psychological States

Items	Statements	Percentage				
		SD	D	N	A	SA
1	I feel worried when I do not understand what I hear	5.3	12.3	17.5	38.6	26.3
2	If I do not arrive at a total comprehension of an oral text, I feel disappointed	3.5	15.8	12.3	45.6	22.8
3	Before doing listening comprehension tasks, I fear that I cannot understand what I will hear	1.8	7	17.5	56.1	17.5
Total		3.53	11.7	15.77	46.77	22.2

Table 12 presented listening comprehension problem regarding psychological states. This was a problem occupying the highest the number of approved respondents among ten tables (68.97%). Only 15.23% of respondents did not think psychological states could affect their listening. And there were 15.77% respondents remaining neutral about this problem.

Interview results

Vocabulary

Nine of ten interviewees admitted they got confused when listening to unfamiliar vocabularies. Below are some examples showing this:

Student 5: *“Yes I do get confused because when I listen to unfamiliar vocabularies, I cannot understand the content so I cannot find the answer”.*

Student 6: *“Yes I do because I have never known these words before. At these times I usually lose my attention and this leads to the failure of my listening test”.*

As Student 4 reported the effects that unfamiliar vocabulary items had on her comprehension is that she could not get the gist of the message, *“Yes, I do because if I cannot hear key words I will misunderstand all sentences”.*

On the other hand, Student 3 said her listening was influenced because she had to think about the meaning of unfamiliar words at the same time, *“Yes...I am very confused at these times because these unfamiliar words can make me not understand what I am listening. So I have to think about those words while listening because there are some words I know but I cannot recognize. Therefore, it affects the result of my comprehension”.*

Slang

Four interviewees believed that slang was not really affected their listening comprehension because they could improve it.

Student 1: *“Yes, I can recognize a few slang words that I usually hear when watching English movies on television”, “there are many slang words that I do not know but most of the time I can recognize the sound... I just do not understand the meaning”.*

Student 8: *“It's difficult to most of the people. But to me, i partly guess the meaning of it”*

Student 9: *“It affects but not too much... sometimes I can guess”.*

The other students said they could recognize slang words or not, which depended on their knowledge about slang words. If they learned it before they could recognize it easily and vice versa.

Student3: *“Sometimes, I can if these slangs I have read or listened to and then I understand them. But most of the time, I cannot”.*

Student4: *“Maybe. If I have met those slang words before”.*

Student 5: *“I mean... in some case slang words can affect my listening comprehensions because listen to slang words is quite difficult if I have not learned about those slang words before. And as I said above slang words are needed to learn to understand. If we have knowledge about slang words it will become easier to listen”.*

Idiomatic expressions

Similar to slang, two of ten students confused about idiomatic expressions because they could not definitely determine whether it was a problem or not. It depended on their knowledge about idioms.

Student 1: *“Not really. Just like the slangs, if I have read and use an idiomatic expression before, I can understand it”.*

Student 2: *“...Like slang, it depends on my knowledge about idiom”.*

The other students in interview admitted that idiomatic expressions affected their listening comprehension.

Student 3: *“Sometimes I can hear every word in idiom but I cannot understand what it means. Therefore I was extremely afraid of idioms when it appeared in my listening test. Because I usually choose the wrong answer, it is as a result of lacking of knowledge about idioms”*

Student 4: *“If I do not know the meaning of idioms I can misunderstand speakers intend”*

Student 6: *“...I have learnt many idioms and I realize idiom is very difficult. The true meaning of idiom and the word we see that is sometimes not relevant. This will make us misunderstand”.*

Only one student said idioms were not difficult to listen *“We can base on the situation to recognize their meaning and I'm trying to use it i think idioms are interesting”* (Student 7)

Unfamiliar topics

100% students answering the interview believed that unfamiliar topics exerted an influence on listening comprehension. Specifically, two of them said it was also conditional upon their interest in some case. Here are their responses:

Student 1: *“It depends. If the topic is interesting, even though I cannot understand everything they said, I still try to engage in the conversation to express what I know. But if the topic has too many strange words and I have never heard about that before, I hardly can hear what they say”.*

Student 3: *“Not good at all. Because when listening to unfamiliar topics, especially topics that is not my interest, it will make me feel bored and as a result it will be very difficult for me to focus on it for a long time. Besides, unfamiliar topics often appear many specialist vocabularies that I have never learned before. So it is very difficult for me to follow”.*

Speech speed

Four of ten interviewees believed that speech rate did not affect their comprehension because they could base on key words to catch up foreigners' speech speed.

Student 2: *“Yes, I can because I will follow the key words in the conversation and understand it”.*

Student 5: *“Yes I can understand what they say but just their ideas not every words”.*

Some students blamed rapid speech rate speaker's speech for their failure to comprehend. When the speech was delivered at a fast rate, students were more likely to have difficulty in perceiving English sound, and they could not process the input as quickly as needed.

Student 6: *“No I cannot because they speak too quickly for me to follow, even when I try to focus all my attention on the screen I just hear a few words and base on what I saw to understand”.*

Student 7: *“It depends a lot on the situations. If they speak not too fast and pronounce the words clearly; or talk about the things that I know about, I can catch up with their speech. However, if they talk too fast, or discuss about a whole new topic, I could be confused and respond slower”.*

Student 9: *“Sometimes they speak too fast or use too much vocabulary so I cannot follow”*

Ability of getting general understanding at the first time

Most of the interviewees believed that it was not very difficult to get general understanding at the first time of listening because they could base on some key words to guess the meaning. Here are some examples:

Student 1: *“I can confidently say that my listening ability at the first time I listen to someone speaks English is not bad at all. Usually, I take note key words so I can guess the general meaning in most case. However, I know that I need to study more and practice more so I can improve my listening skill”.*

Student 8: *“i think my listening is good at summarize the general issues... I select important details or guess basing on repitious words”.*

Background knowledge on difficult topics

The influence of background knowledge was perceived by most interviewees as a major factor in their listening comprehension. They reckoned that they could not listen well if they lacked background knowledge about difficult topics. Here are some excerpts illustrating it:

Student 4: *“I think it is quite bad. When I listen to difficult topics such as science or biology, I actually cannot catch up speaker's speech because it is so complicated as well as there are too many specialist vocabulary that I do not know”.*

Student 5: *“I think if my background knowledge is good I can listen to difficult topics well”.*

Student 6: *“I do not have many vocabularies about difficult topics. I think my background knowledge is not good enough to understand difficult topics”.*

Listening strategies

Four of ten students did not often employ listening strategies. Some of them used other ways to improve their listening. For examples:

Student 4: *“I did not apply listening strategies much. I just practice my listening when I go travelling or watching movie”.*

Student 5: *“I do not apply listening strategies well because I usually forgot applying strategies when listening, I just receive information naturally and try to hear all sentences the speaker says”.*

However, some of them also recognized the important of learning listening strategies. Here is the evidence:

Student 3: *“No I do not but I will apply them well in my studying process to improve my listening skill”.*

Student 4: *“Although I rarely apply listening strategies in daily life, I think I need to apply listening strategies when doing listening test in order to achieve best result”.*

Details memory

Most interviewees believed that it was not very important to remember all details when listening because they could base on *“main topics and develop the details”* (Student 2), *“remember main ideas is more important”* (Student 8). However some of them also said that remembering details was necessary in listening comprehension. For example:

Student 1: *“if i remember well I will not need to spend time taking note details so I can concentrate entirely on listening”*

Student 2: *“It could be wonderful if you have a good memory to remember all details listening text. By this way you can chose answer easily in listening text”.*

Student 9: *“the details help me understand clearly the topic”.*

Only one student thought that detail memory probably affected their listening comprehension. Here is her response:

Student 6: *“No I cannot because my memory is quite bad so it becomes a big obstacle for me when I was asked to summarize what I heard or in choosing correct answer”.*

Psychological states

90% interviewees agreed that psychological states affected greatly to their listening. This included stress, nervousness, worriment, and so on.

Student 1: *“Psychological state is absolutely an important factor that affects the listening ability. For example, I feel more confident when I listen to the things that I know clearly about, my listening ability will be better, and vice versa”.*

Student 3: *“I think psychological states can affect my listening ability because when I am not in a good mood, my listening ability cannot be as good as when I’m at normal state”.*

Student 4: *“Sure. If I have something on my mind, I cannot focus on listening. And as a result I cannot listen well”.*

Student 5: *“Yes. When I feel nervous I cannot get any correct answer because I cannot concentrate on listening text and I think we should listen when we feel relax and have comfortable mood”.*

Student 8: *“Yes. Nervosity makes your heart beat fast which reduces your concentration and analytical ability.”*

Only one student denied the statement “psychological states affect listening comprehension”. Here is her opinion:

Student 7: *“I don’t think so. I will do better when I keep focus”.*

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Discussions

The study was conducted with the rationale of investigating and clarifying the research question *“What difficulties do Can Tho University first year English major students encounter in listening comprehension based on their perceptions?”* Both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered for analysis.

The total subjects employed in this study involved 126 first year English- majored students who were taking English listening and speaking course 2015-2016 at Can Tho University, Vietnam.

Questionnaire and interview were administered as a research instruments for collecting data. Based on previous literature of the research issue, the questionnaire was designed as an opinion test and using five-point Likert scale. The process of delivering questionnaire took place in two stages. At the first stage, the first questionnaire was distributed to 69 participants to find out 10 commonest listening comprehension problems. Based on those problems, the questionnaire two was designed and delivered to 57 other participants. Data collected by the questionnaire two was processed with the assistance of SPSS program. Cronbach’s Index was .88 for 30 items of questionnaire. Therefore, the questionnaire items were considered to be valid. Interviews were also carried out with ten out of the 126 students who answered the questionnaire.

The students’ opinions about English listening comprehension problems

Based on the result of questionnaire one, a factor analysis of students’ awareness about the factors that impaired their listening comprehension yielded ten factors. Those included “Unfamiliar vocabularies”, “Idiomatic expressions”, “Slang”, “Unfamiliar topics”, “Speech speed”, “Difficult to get a general understanding from the first listening”, “Lack of background knowledge on difficult topics”, “Lack of listening strategies”, “Detail memory”, “Psychological states”.

According to the students’ responses, the number one problem that the students viewed as obstructing to their listening comprehension was psychological states (68.97%). This coincided with interview responses. Most students answering interviews believed that psychological state was absolutely an important factor affecting their listening ability. However, their answers were also different in some ways. Some students believed confidence on their knowledge would help them listen better *“I feel more confident when I listen to the*

things that I know clearly about, my listening ability will be better and vice versa". Other said refresh their mind was one of the most important steps to listen effectively *"I think it is very important because we must keep calm our brain and relax to have good listening case"*, *"When I have something in my mind I cannot focus on listening. And as a result I cannot listen well"*. In fact, listening will not be difficult if they listen to our native tongue language, it just become harder and may be stressful when they listen to foreign *"Nervosity makes your heart beat fast which reduces your concentration and analytical ability"*, *"when doing listening test or sometimes when I learn listening if I cannot understand what speaker said I feel stressful and even become disheartened"*. This is maybe the reason why some students reckoned that refreshing their mind was very necessary to listen better. These findings were congruent with Elkhafaifi (2005), who found that listening anxiety correlated with achievement. In order words, if students are provided a less stressful classroom environment, perhaps, they could improve their listening comprehension proficiency as well as their overall course performance.

Although slang was ranked as the second problem in listening comprehension (67.83%) , through interview, we could see some students found out the way to solve this problem by watching movie *"I could recognize slang words in some movies. I think it's okay with me"*, *"I can recognize a few slang words that I usually hear when watching English movies on television"* or *"I partly guess the meaning of it"*. Most of students found it difficult because they knew very little about slang words as well as it was unfamiliar with them. In other word, the use of slang words made it hard for them to comprehend *"I do not have knowledge about slang words"*, *"slang words is quite difficult if I have not learned about those slang words before"*

The third problem was unfamiliar vocabularies. There were 56.73% of students responded that unfamiliar vocabularies interfered with their listening comprehension. For instance, when encountering an unknown word, some students tended to stop listening and think about the meaning of the word. This interrupted the flow of speech and the students might miss some important information *"Yes...I am very confused at these times because these unfamiliar words can make me not understand what I am listening. So I have to think about those words while listening because there are some words I know but I cannot recognize. Therefore, it affects the result of my comprehension"*. This finding concurred with Muhammad Naeem Butt, 2010; and Hanoi, 2010 who reported that the major problem hindering listening comprehension was that the students' vocabulary was too limited to understand the message. The data also proved the theory realized by Underwood (1989) that lack of vocabulary was a big obstacle to most students in listening comprehension.

Fourthly, regarding problem related to unfamiliar topics, 55.54% students answered the questionnaire as well as most students participated in the interview considering unfamiliar topics as an obstacle made them listen harder *"when listening to unfamiliar topics, especially topics that is not my interest, it will make me feel bored and as a result it will be very difficult for me to focus on it for a long time. Besides, unfamiliar topics often appear many specialist vocabularies that I have never learned before. So it is very difficult for me to follow"*. This finding was consistent with Nuttall's declaration (1996) which showed that a more interesting requirement to understand a text was that the learner should share certain assumptions about the subject to the fact that students construct their understanding of the subject they listened

on the basis of their experience; problems arose, therefore, when there was a mismatch between the subject and the previous experience of the learner.

Fifthly, problem pertaining to background knowledge on difficult topic, 54.4% of students considered lack of background knowledge as an obstacle in the process of learning listening comprehension “*I do not have many vocabularies about difficult topics. I think my background knowledge is not good enough to understand difficult topics*”. This finding went in accordance with that reached by Samuels (1984) even if a person mastered the skill of analyzing speech accurately and automatically, lack of background knowledge can cause reduced listening comprehension. Also, when EFL listeners lacked familiarity with the cultural element in the discourse, communication could break down (Carrell, 1983).

Successively, problem regarding idiomatic expressions, idioms were shown by a number of students (52.6%) to have a major influence on second language listening comprehension. Some students found it difficult to listen to idioms because they could not understand the speaker’s intend, even when they used familiar words “*Sometimes I can hear every word in idiom but I cannot understand what it means. Therefore I was extremely afraid of idioms when it appeared in my listening test. Because I usually choose the wrong answer, it is as a result of lacking of knowledge about idioms*”

Conducting investigation by interview also revealed many learners were poorly equipped with effective listening strategies or some students were not aware of the importance of listening strategies in improving listening comprehension skill “*I do not apply listening strategies well because I usually forgot applying strategies when listening, I just receive information naturally and try to hear all sentences the speaker says*”, “*I just listen whenever I like or I want to listen and I do not have any strategies*”. Vogely (1995) suggested one way to aid learners in listening comprehension problems was through strategy training emphasizing the process rather than the outcomes of listening comprehension.

Regarding speech speed, many students (51.5%) reported that when the speaker spoke at a rapid speed, it was hard for them to comprehend what was being asked, even if the words spoken were the ones they were familiar with “*There are many words I do not know, even with familiar words sometimes I cannot recognize the sound, I just base on their body language and guess what they want to talk to me*”. This coincided with the results of the studies done by Flowerdew and Miller (1992) and Hayati (2010) who reported that their subjects unanimously rated speed of delivery as one of the greatest obstacle to understanding. The learners did not have chance to communicate more frequently might be the cause of having difficult in catching up foreigner’s speech speed. According to Buck (2001), listeners perceived that speech was too fast because of a lack of automatic processing, and once they learned to process more automatically, speech seemed to become slower. This concurred with interview responses, some students believed that if they tried to practice listening, their listening comprehension would become progressively better and they maybe did not feel native speaker spoke too fast anymore.

Subsequently, problem concerning inability in getting general understanding at the first listening, there were 49.73% of students in this study responded that they found it difficult to get a general understanding idea from the first listening. However, the number of students did not agree with this statement was quite high (29.3%) which could be explained

through interview, some students had methods to solve this problem “*Usually, I take note key words so I can guess the general meaning in most case*”.

Finally, problem pertaining to details memory. Through survey, 46.24% of students ran into difficulty when remembering details in spoken text. For example, many learners tended to quickly forget what they heard after the speaker finishes speaking. Therefore, when they had to choose the answer, they forget what was said and ended up not knowing which answer was correct.

Conclusions

Listening is vital in language learning as it supplies the learner with input. Without understanding inputs, students cannot learn anything because listening comprehension is one of the weakest skills of EFL students who encounter different kinds of listening problems. This research is conducted with the aim to investigating the perceptions of the first year English- majored students toward common problems in listening comprehension. It answers the research question about the problems which were encountered by first year English majored students and their perceptions toward those problems. The findings suggest that the most significant factor that obstructs EFL first year English major students’ listening comprehension seems to be psychological states. In general, the students’ perception on listening comprehension problems was quite high. The total mean score was 3.43. However, there were also many students (22.34%) being confused with listening comprehension problems, those who could not aware of what problems they confronted.

To sum up, like any other skills, listening comprehension is a skill which also needs to cultivate and practice frequently. Besides, recognizing problems and posing methods are also indispensable in improving this skill.

Implications

The findings of this study offer some implications that may be helpful for both EFL learners and EFL teachers. (1) For EFL learners, the research provided insight for them in their English listening comprehension’s learning. Through this investigation, it helped the students to see clearly the problems they faced in the English listening comprehension learning. From that students can learn how to avoid these problems as well as propose listening strategies for themselves. (2) The second implication concerns the teachers’ role. It cannot be denied that teachers play a vital role in developing students’ listening skill. Because the findings of this study identify students’ listening problems, teachers can deal with each problem specifically. From the investigation, the most significant factor that hinders EFL students’ listening comprehension is psychological states. The majority of students reported that psychological states hindered their listening comprehension. It is, therefore, necessary for teachers to provide students less stressful environment such as making them feel relax when preparing to listen by telling them an interesting story related to topic’s listening text. Besides, teacher can equip students with certain key words needed for listening comprehension or asking them to guess the meaning of new words before explaining the meaning to them. Activating background knowledge is also very important. Firstly, teachers can request students discuss about the topic they are going to listen and then

provide the background knowledge needed for them to understand the text. This help students be more interested in the listening text as well as students can make connections with what they already know and it therefore will be easier for them in listening comprehension. In addition, some students find it hard to listen with rapid speed hence, it is very necessary for teachers to adjust their speech rate to a level that suits their students. Moreover, it is also very essential for teachers to make students aware of the questions they will answer because students should know what they are required to listen for gist or specific details before listening. Finally, teachers should also attach special importance to teach listening strategies for students and encourage them to use it whenever they practice listening.

(3) The final implication related to further researches, further researches are needed to ascertain how students learn English listening comprehension in order to effectively develop their listening skill. Further researches should provide data that assist the students in studying English listening comprehension in a better way and also enable the teachers to apply a variety of teaching strategies as to enhance the quality of teaching and learning process.

Limitations

In any research paper, limitations are unavoidable. This study is also not an exception.

(1) The number of participants was small. There should have been more participants, especially when conducting factor analysis. (2) As listening comprehension is a hard skill, not only the first year students find it difficult in learning this skill but also the final year students do too. However the perception of freshmen and the final year students on this issue is different in some way. In this study, as a consequence of limited human power the researcher could only investigate the perception of the first year students. Specifically, most final year students have been busy with their graduate thesis, so it became a big obstacle for researcher on conducting survey. (3) Moreover, in order to gain valuable information, interview should be carried out with the participation of both students and teachers. Nevertheless, because of the restricted time it is very difficult for researchers arrange an interview with teachers. (4) Last but not least, this study will be more complete if the research about strategies in listening comprehension is conducted. It will help students not only recognize their problems but also provide them methods in order to overcome it.

Recommendation for further study

Based on the results of present study, some suggestions for further researches are established. (1) The fact that the findings of this research were relied on the data collected from 126 first year English- majored students meant that the sample size was too small to generalize an overall conclusion applying to all EFL students. Hence, it would be useful to carry out the present study with comprehensive samples in order to get a complete picture of the problem. (2) Further studies need to be researched in different English learning context in Vietnam in order to find out the difficulties that students living in different areas deal with. (3) The study focused merely on problems students encountered on listening comprehension. Therefore, the strategies of English listening comprehension teaching and learning should be extended for further studies. More importantly, the strategies have to be customized to cater the need of learners with variety problems in study.

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