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## LISTENING DIFFICULTIES FACED BY EFL STUDENTS AND INTER-RELATIONS BETWEEN LISTENING ACTIVITIES AND TESTS

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**Abstract:** This study shows an attempt to investigate the listening problems encountered by English-major students from Vinh University and then explored whether there exist inter-relations between English listening activities and English listening tests. A questionnaire is administered and sent out to 193 English-major students and the follow-up interviews are conducted to specify the findings. The results indicate that the students struggled with listening skills due to three main sources: speakers, listeners and materials. In addition, the findings also reveal that English listening activities are mostly aligned with given English listening test items. Finally, pedagogical implications are proposed to help English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students enhance their listening skills and teachers to adjust their teaching methods appropriately.

**Keywords:** EFL student's listening problems; English listening activities; English listening tests; English listening strategies; English listening topics.

### 1. Introduction

Listening skill is a fundamental skill in acquiring language, as in learning a language, listening is a means of providing learners with comprehensible input. Specifically, according to Krashen et al (1984) acquisition only happens when students absorb enough comprehensible input. Despite the importance of listening skill, it is generally believed that listening skill remains one of the most challenging skills in learning a second language. Listening (or reading) is a receptive skill, however, it seems to be the most daunting for EFL students. Indeed, listening skills have been underemphasized in the English learning process at most Vietnamese schools (Duong & Chau, 2019; Nguyen & Thai, 2018). This is probably because the official English language learning and teaching curriculum in Vietnam are primarily exam-driven. To be specific, students are prepared for examinations focusing heavily on the language knowledge including grammar, use of English, reading, and vocabulary rather than developing listening and language communicative competence (Denham, 1992; Duong, 2014) despite the fact that all four macro skills are integrated in the textbooks at high school levels. As a result, high school students are less likely to have opportunities to practice their listening as well as communication skills.

Although both teachers and learners recognize the difficulties in mastering English listening skills, few related studies were conducted in Vietnam to discuss this topic (Hien, 2020; Thao, 2013; Tuan & Duong, 2020). Most studies are concerned with the problems students encountered while learning English listening skills, the issues in taking listening tests are underdeveloped. Moreover, no study was conducted to find out the similarity between learning activities and testing items, which might be the cause of the challenges in mastering this skill.

In short, the literature review shows that English listening skill remains problematic for Vietnamese learners. However, these research problems still receive little attention from Vietnamese researchers and it lacks a deeper investigation. Moreover, no study was conducted to examine the relationship between teaching activities and listening test types. To this end, it is necessary to investigate the difficulties while learning listening skills encountered by English-major students in the tertiary context and to explore if there was a match between listening learning activities and listening tests. From the findings, the study suggested several recommendations and solutions for both teachers and learners to have better results in learning listening as well as listening test performances.

The current study sought to answer the following questions:

- 1. What difficulties are encountered by Vietnamese EFL students in learning English listening skills?*
- 2. Is there any inter-relation between listening activities and listening test types?*

## **2. Literature review**

No one can deny the importance of listening skills in foreign language learning as the key to acquiring a language is to receive language input. According to Krashen's input hypothesis, languages are acquired when people understand the message. The principles behind it were that learning first or second language follows the same procedure, listening comes before speaking. Many researchers indicated that listening is the most frequently used language skill (Morley, 1999). Rost (2002) indicated that developing proficiency in listening is instrumental in achieving proficiency in speaking. In addition, in the process of learning a language, listening skill plays a significant role in the development of other language skills. Vandergriff (1997) claims that listening internalizes not only the rules of language skills but also facilitates the emergence of other skills. To be more specific, listening helps the students to pronounce exactly and recognize the spoken form of words.

According to Bingol et al. (2014), EFL students or learners may face various difficulties and obstacles in their listening skill learning process, including accents, quality of recorded materials, unfamiliar vocabulary, cultural differences, length and speed of listening and physical conditions. In addition, it is believed that in a long comprehension exercise, a learner's grasp of the content is much better at the beginning and gets progressively worse as he/she goes on. Due to the psychological phenomenon, at the end of the lesson, the students often run out of energy and enthusiasm for studying (Yagang, 1993; Yuan and Abidin, 2013).

Numerous researchers have focused their studies on problems that EFL students faced when taking the listening tests. Chao (2013) examined listening problems that EFL students in China encountered when taking the listening test. The findings revealed problems relating to input factor and listener factor, namely, the most common listening problems: easily forgetting the content when meeting new words, long texts, and not knowing which strategy to use. Cheng (2004) examined to what extent the form and type of multiple-choice and open-ended response influence the test takers' listening performance. He noticed that the different types of responses had a significant effect on

test takers' performance. They performed the best on the test of multiple-choice format and the worst on the open-ended. Furthermore, Rost (2011) mentioned four factors as a summary, comprising medium of the input, nature of the input, nature of the assessment task, and individual listener factors. First of all, medium of the input includes video or audio-only presentation or accompaniment with graphic or text enhancement. Enhancements tend to improve test taker performance, such as video presentation, graphic cues, text subtitling or selective captioning. Next, nature of the input refers to dialect, speech rate, length, background, prepositional density, and amount of redundancy. Third, nature of the assessment task involves use of visual context, amount of context given, clarity of instructions, availability of question preview, and types of thinking process. The last factor is individual listener factor, including memory, interest, background knowledge, motivation, and readiness to take the test. Test taker with limited memory skills, limited interest in test topics or the test itself, limited background knowledge with test topics or the test itself, limited motivation to perform well, will negatively impact test performance.

Regarding the impact of tests on listening activities, Jung (2006) found that the listening tests had positive influences on EFL students' learning contents and led to students' change of learning methods. Meanwhile Kim and O (2002) studied the impact of KSAT tests and listening teaching in Korea, it was found that there was a difference between test designers' intentions and what was teaching the classroom. However, no explanation was made.

In Vietnam, Tuan and Duong (2020) examined the listening problems encountered by more than 80% of the eleventh graders at a Vietnamese high school encountered in their learning English process. Their most common problems are identified as following categories: perception problems (i.e., they could not understand English pronunciation or control the speed of the spoken material); parsing problems (common syntactic and semantic problems; for instance, some complex sentences to which they had just listened hindered their understanding) and utilization problems (cannot grasp the intended message of the listening text although they could understand the meaning of individual words). Last but not least, the problems relating to unfamiliar topics were a common cause for listening comprehension problems. At the college level, a study by Hien (2020) on listening difficulties faced by 50 first-year English-major students at Lac Hong University shows that the most common problems faced by these students include a lack of time for learning and improving listening skill, inappropriate strategies hindering students' listening comprehension; inappropriate listening materials and physical settings. Thao's (2013) study on the main difficulties in learning listening skills perceived by 150 first-year students indicate that typical difficulties encountered by those first-year students are from speakers (the speech rate and reduced forms emerged), materials (unfamiliar topics and dense information in the recording are considered as the most common hindrance in listening), psychological causes and incorrect pronunciation. No study has been conducted to investigate the relationship between the listening teaching activities and listening test types. This is the first attempts to find how the listening teaching influence EFL teachers' test designs.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Research design**

A mixed-methods survey design is believed to be pertinent to this study as it could help investigate the problem from different lenses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The quantitative data were collected from the two questionnaires with the aim to find out EFL students' perceptions of listening challenges while learning English listening skills. Then, the qualitative data from the interview were analyzed to support the findings from the previous tools.

#### **3.2. Participants**

A total of 193 seniors, 153 females and 40 males, majoring in English from Vinh University participated in the study. All the participants had an average of 12 years of formal English learning experience and they were following the same English program at Vinh University to earn a BA degree in English language teacher education and English linguistics upon graduation. They were aged between 20 and 21. The sample was randomly chosen to complete two surveys with a view of ensuring the objectivity of the data. Those participants have been learning English listening skill for three consecutive years as EFL with a diverse range of topics. Their English proficiency was around B2 level, according to the CEFR framework.

#### **3.3. Study instruments**

##### **a. Questionnaires**

Two questionnaires were used in this study. The first questionnaire aimed at examining EFL students' reflections on the listening difficulties encountered in their English learning. This tool consisted of 25 items (questions) and the 26th one was added with an aim to give EFL students more space to write their problems (if any) relating to learning listening skill. The questionnaire was designed according to the five-point Likert scale from absolutely agree (5) to absolutely disagree (1). The questions in this questionnaire were adapted from two previous studies (Chao, 2013; Tuan & Duong, 2020).

The second questionnaire was used to find out whether there is a match of frequency between learning listening activities and listening test items. This questionnaire has 54 items (questions) designed with five sub-scales: from always (5) to never (1). The 55th question was added to provide EFL students with open question to write their answers (if any).

According to Behrend, Sharek, Meade and Wiebe (2011), the questionnaires could be adopted into an online platform such as Google Form because it was convenient and flexible. That is why these two questionnaires were distributed online.

##### **b. Focus-group interview**

The semi-structured interview was used in this study to clarify some ambiguous findings from the questionnaire data. Twenty students were randomly invited to the two focus-group interviews, which had 10 interviewees each. The interviews were conducted through Zoom application. The interviewees were encouraged to answer orally, however,

they could type the answers if they wanted. There were five main questions that focused on three themes: listening difficulties; listening tests and listening strategies. Additional questions were added following the interviewers' responses. The data were recorded and then transcribed, themed and interpreted in order to answer the research questions. For the participants to express the ideas easily, the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese.

### c. Procedure

The study was conducted at the beginning of the term. Before the distribution of the two questionnaires, the participants were informed of the objectives of the study through the consent form. The questionnaires were administered online via Google Form and collected after seven days. Statistical analysis was performed to obtain specific statistics. After dividing data into groups according to research questions, the researchers based on Google Form and Excel to code data properly for further analysis. Finally, the researchers produced descriptive statistics including items, means and standard deviation (SD). After the analysis of quantitative data, 20 participants were randomly invited to the interviews through Zoom. Data from both sources were triangulated and interpreted.

## 4. Findings and discussions

### 4.1. Findings

#### a. Problems faced by EFL students while learning listening skills

To answer the first research question, data from the questionnaire were analyzed and interpreted. The results are presented in the following tables.

**Table 1:** *Listening problems related to the speakers*

Items	Mean	SD
Fast speech in the listening audio makes me miss the information	4.04	0.77
Words in the listening file are not pronounced clearly	3.79	0.79
Unfamiliar intonation patterns interfere with my English listening	3.71	0.78
There are different accents in the listening files	3.65	0.86
There are many speakers in the same conversation	3.56	0.90
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.75</b>	<b>0.82</b>

As can be seen in Table 1, the participants mostly agreed that the speed of the speakers was the most challenging factor during their listening process, item 4 had the highest mean of 4.04, equivalent to the scale "agree". Following this, the second highest mean, 3.79, was item 2, suggesting that EFL students in this study mostly agreed that words that are not pronounced clearly as their problem while listening. Similarly, in terms of intonation, the participants agreed with item 3 with a mean of 3.71, stating that unfamiliar intonation patterns interfere while listening. Next, a mean of 3.65 related to different accents in listening which was another problem encountered by these students. Finally, the lowest mean of 3.56 was item 6 "there are many speakers in the same conversation", but it had the highest standard deviation of 0.90.

**Table 2:** *Listening problems related to listeners*

<b>Items</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
I do not know which strategy to use while listening	3.49	0.92
I cannot recall their meaning immediately although some words sound familiar	3.82	0.90
I encounter too many unfamiliar words and/or expressions	3.67	0.79
I miss the next part of the text while I am thinking about the meaning of the unfamiliar words	3.84	0.82
I mistake one word for another	3.76	0.80
I cannot recognize the main points of the listening	3.50	0.95
I lack of social and background knowledge	3.59	0.90
I encounter psychological and physical factors (stress, worry, tiredness)	3.69	0.82
I find it hard to concentrate	3.68	0.93
I cannot recognize the linking words	3.46	1.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.65</b>	<b>0.88</b>

The findings for the next 10 items regarding the problems from listeners were presented in Table 2. The majority of participants in this study found that they fail to catch the ideas from the next part while thinking about the meaning of unfamiliar words (with the highest mean of 3.84). Next, item 12 got the second highest mean, 3.82, stating that “I cannot recall their meaning immediately although some words sound familiar”. Following this, the participants partly agreed that they misunderstand one word for another as found in item 15 with a mean of 3.76. The three items had approximately same means (3.67, 3.68, 3.69) were 13, 24 and 18 respectively. As for item 18, participants believed that they face psychological and physical problems such as stress, anxiety and tiredness while listening. As for item 24, they thought that it is difficult to focus on the test. As for item 13, when listening, they meet unfamiliar words and expressions. Next, item 17, participants agreed that they do not have sufficient background knowledge, had a mean of 3.59. For item 16, being unable to recognize the main points of listening content was the other obstacle with a mean score of 3.50. As for item 11, the mean score was 3.49, referring to “I do not know which strategy to use while listening”. Finally, the participants partly agreed with item 25 denoting that they cannot realize the linking devices while listening, however, it has the highest standard deviation of 1.00, which suggests that their responses were partly inconsistent.

**Table 3:** *Listening problems related to materials*

<b>Items</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
The listening text is too long	3.62	0.85
There are many background noises in listening files (rain, smiling sound)	3.52	1.00
There are complex grammatical structures in the listening files	3.53	0.95



Items	Mean	SD
Unfamiliar topics in listening tests make it difficult for me to listen	3.61	0.85
There is too much information in the recording	3.71	0.90
The questions and answers are designed too long	3.34	0.95
The answers are confusing to choose the correct one	3.75	0.87
Poor quality equipment and facility result in unclear sounds	3.41	1.00
The questions are not in order with the recording	3.47	0.95
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.55</b>	<b>0.92</b>

In addition to the problems coming from the speakers and the listeners, other potential problems also emerged from the material used for listening. As can be seen from Table 3, item 20, which had the highest mean of 3.75 and the SD of 0.87, became the most challenging issue that EFL students suffered. The multiple-choice answers are confusing and hinder listeners from choosing the correct answer. Next, item 10, with a mean of 3.71, stood as the second most common problem resulting from overwhelming information recording. Following this, two items that had nearly the same mean were 1 and 8 with means of 3.62 and 3.61 respectively and shared the lowest SD of 0.85. In terms of item 1, participants found that the listening text was too long. As for item 8, unfamiliar topics also lead them to feel difficult to do the test. Similarly, item 5 stated that there were many background noises in listening files, and item number 9 “there are complex grammatical structures” had quite the same mean of 3.52 and 3.53 respectively. Furthermore, in item 22 “the questions are not in order with the recording”, and in item 21 “poor quality equipment and facility result in unclear sounds” the mean scores were 3.47 and 3.41 respectively which can illustrate that participants’ responses are somewhat uncertain. Finally, item 19 named “The questions and answers are designed too long” got the lowest mean of 3.34 but the highest standard deviation of 1.00 suggested that the students’ answers are also not certain and partly inconsistent.

After the quantitative analysis was performed, the qualitative data were collected, analyzed and summarized in the table below.

**Table 4:** Summary of the interviewees’ responses

Factors	Types of difficulties	Frequency
Speakers	Fast speed	16
	Unclear pronunciation	18
	Number of speakers	8
Listeners	Limited vocabulary size	16
	Lack of appropriate strategies	12
	Lack of practice	16
	Incorrect pronunciation	14
Materials	Long and confusing stems	16
	Density of new words	14
	Background noise	12

As can be seen in Table 4, the responses from the interviewees were rather consistent with the quantitative findings. Remarkably, unclear pronunciation was mentioned by 18 students in the interviews. The follow-up questions and answers clarified that “unclear pronunciation” resulted not only from the speakers themselves, but also from the listeners when the words were not familiar. The vocabulary size seemed to be one of the challenges the participants faced during the listening process. Most of them indicated a lack of confidence in their pronunciation. In addition, they did not practice their listening skills frequently, which might result in the inappropriate use of listening strategies. Regarding materials, three main factors were noticed, among those the long and confusing stems and the density of new words were both emphasized by 16 and 14 students, respectively. The participants expressed that they did not have enough time to read and have an overall picture of the listening content they had. Besides, the background noise had to some extent some negative impacts on their listening mastery.

**b. Inter-relations between listening activities and listening testing task types**

To answer the second research question, descriptive statistics were employed to analyze the data which were shown in six following tables from table 5 to table 10.

**Table 5:** *Listening task types in learning listening skills*

<b>Items</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Multiple choice	4.17	0.70
True & False	4.05	0.90
Listening for dates and numbers	3.79	0.76
Completion	3.77	0.72
Matching	3.50	0.8
Short answer questions	3.40	1.00
Putting numbers in order	3.28	0.90
Picking words from a list	3.20	0.96
Map & plan labeling	3.10	0.90
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.58</b>	<b>0.85</b>

**Table 6:** *Listening task types in listening tests*

<b>Items</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>StD</b>
Multiple choice	4.20	0.63
True & False	4.00	0.94
Listening for dates and numbers	3.82	1.00
Completion	3.82	1.00
Matching	3.46	1.04
Putting numbers in order	3.33	1.02
Short answer questions	3.31	1.25
Picking words from a list	3.26	1.04
Map & plan labeling	3.04	1.10
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.59</b>	<b>1.02</b>

As can be seen in Table 5 and Table 6, both tables demonstrate clearly that the distance between means of listening task types in learning listening skills and listening tests was very minor, ranging from 0.03 to 0.07. Specifically, the two tables also indicate that most participants usually encountered multiple choice, true & false, completion, and listening for dates and numbers task types when learning listening skills and taking listening tests in English. In terms of multiple choice questions, the mean score for this task type in learning listening skills was 4.17 while the mean score in the listening tests was 4.20, therefore, the distance was 0.03. As for true & false questions, the mean for this type in English listening activities in class was 4.05, however, this score was reduced to 4.00 when taking English listening tests and thus, the distance between the two mean scores was 0.05. Regarding listening for dates and numbers task type, the mean score in English listening skill learning was 3.79, but this figure increased to 3.82 and the distance was 0.03 which was very small. In terms of completion questions, while the mean score for this type in listening skill learning was 3.77, the mean in the listening skill test was 3.82, so the distance between these mean scores was 0.05.

Moreover, the remaining task types under 3.50 in both tables comprised of matching, short answer questions, putting numbers in order, picking words from a list, and map & plan labeling appeared in both learning and testing. The mean scores in learning English listening skill activities were 3.50, 3.40, 3.28, 3.20, and 3.10, respectively, thus it might be true that most participants sometimes learn these task types in English listening activities designed by teachers. Similarly, the mean scores in listening testing tasks were 3.46, 3.33, 3.31, 3.26, and 3.04, respectively. As a result, it can be seen that the distances between them are not large, approximately ranging from 0.03 to 0.07 and thus there was a possible relation between learning listening skill activities and listening tests in terms of task types.

**Table 7: Topics in listening activities**

Items	Mean	SD
Education	4.15	0.74
Environment	4.00	0.75
Health	3.80	0.78
Society	3.78	0.72
Technology & Science	3.75	0.73
Economy & Business	3.65	0.76
Entertainment	3.60	0.90
Game & Sport	3.50	0.80
Travel	3.47	0.83
Art	2.92	0.75
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.66</b>	<b>0.76</b>

**Table 8: Topics in listening tests**

Items	Mean	Std
Education	4.10	0.77
Environment	3.95	0.70
Society	3.80	0.81

<b>Items</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std</b>
Health	3.78	0.80
Technology & Science	3.78	0.72
Economy and Business	3.70	0.87
Entertainment	3.60	0.94
Travel	3.50	0.97
Game & Sport	3.48	0.84
Art	3.00	0.87
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.68</b>	<b>0.76</b>

As observed in Table 7 and Table 8, two tables illustrate obviously that the distance between the means of topics in learning listening skills and in listening tests was very small, ranging from 0.02 to 0.08 and most participants usually encountered topics such as Education, Health, Technology & Science, Economy & Business, and Society and sometimes Entertainment, Travel, Art and Game & Sport in both English listening skill learning and testing. For education, the mean scores for English listening activities and testing were 4.15 and 4.10, respectively, and then the distance between them was 0.05 which is quite small. In terms of Environment, while the mean score in learning activities was 4.00, the score for listening testing was 3.95, and the distance is 0.05 which is minimal. Moreover, regarding the Health topic, the mean scores for both listening skill learning and testing were 3.80 and 3.78, respectively, a difference between them was 0.02. In terms of Society, while the mean score for listening skill learning was 3.78, this for listening testing was 3.80, thus the difference was merely 0.02. Regarding Technology & Science, the mean scores for both English listening skill learning and testing were 3.75 and 3.78, respectively. It can be seen that the distance stayed minimal, 0.03. In addition, for the Economy & Business topic, the means of English listening skill learning and testing were 3.65 and 3.70, respectively, with a minor difference of 0.05.

Similarly, for Economy & Business, Entertainment, Game & Sport; Travel, and Art topics, the means for listening skill learning activities were 3.65, 3.60, 3.50, 3.47, and 2.92, respectively. The mean score for listening skill tests were 3.70, 3.60, 3.50, 3.48, and 3.0, respectively. Therefore, it can be seen that the difference between them were minor.

**Table 9:** *Listening strategies when learning English listening skills*

<b>Items</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Underlining key words	4.34	0.72
Reading questions before listening	4.13	0.75
Note-taking	4.10	0.84
Looking for synonyms and antonym and similar expression	3.92	0.80
Listening for main ideas	3.90	0.80
Paying attention to linking words	3.73	0.89
Knowing different accents and speakers	3.62	1.05
Looking for labels with map and diagram task types	3.43	0.89
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.90</b>	<b>0.84</b>

**Table 10:** *Listening strategies when taking listening tests*

Items	Mean	StD
Underlining key words	4.31	0.81
Reading questions before listening	4.07	0.81
Note-taking	4.04	0.97
Looking for synonyms and antonyms and similar expressions	4.00	0.77
Listening for main ideas	3.95	0.88
Paying attention to linking words	3.78	1.00
Knowing different accents and speakers	3.68	0.87
Looking for labels with map and diagram task types	3.46	1.00
<b>Total</b>	3.92	0.88

As shown in Table 9 and Table 10, these findings in the two above tables show that the distance between means of strategies in learning listening and testing was very small, ranging from 0.03 to 0.08. It can be seen that participants were mostly provided with listening strategies by their teachers when learning listening including underlining key words, reading questions before listening, note-taking, looking for synonyms and antonyms and similar expressions; listening for main ideas, and paying attention to linking words. From the interviews, the participants also reported that they usually apply these listening strategies given by teachers to complete the listening tests. Regarding the use of technique underlining key words, the means for learning English listening activities and listening tests were 4.34 and 4.31, respectively, the distance between them was 0.03 which is assumedly minimal. As for the technique of reading questions before listening, the means for learning English listening skill activities and listening tests were 4.13 and 4.07, respectively and the difference was 0.06. In addition, regarding the note-taking strategy, the mean for learning English listening skill activities and listening tests were 4.10 and 4.04, respectively, and the minor distance was observed to be 0.06 only. Moreover, in terms of finding synonyms and antonyms in both learning and testing, the means were 3.92 and 4.00, respectively, and the distance was 0.08 which is probably very minor. In addition, as for listening for main ideas, the means for listening skill learning and testing were 3.90 and 3.95 and the distance is 0.05. In terms of the technique of paying attention to linking devices, the mean scores for both learning activities and testing tasks were 3.73 and 3.78, respectively, and the distance is 0.05. These findings suggest that most EFL students usually applied the strategies taught in class in doing listening tests. The responses from the interviews confirmed these findings to the extent that these strategies enabled students to save time in reading and have a general understanding of the listening texts.

In addition, there are two remaining listening strategies that are taught and applied occasionally. In terms of knowing different accents and speakers, the mean scores for both learning and testing were 3.62 and 3.68, respectively and the difference was 0.06. Moreover, as for looking for labels with map and diagram task types, the means for both learning activities and testing tasks stayed smallest at 3.43 and 3.46, respectively and a distance was 0.03 which was very minor.

## **5. Discussion**

As the findings of this study show, most English-majored students encountered several problems while learning English listening skills. The major obstacles were speaker factor and listener factors, including too fast speed of delivery and missing information as a result of too unfamiliar words and expressions. This result is consistent with the earlier studies (Chao, 2013; Thao, 2013; Tuan & Duong, 2020). Even though the textbooks and audio taught in listening courses are authentic, little is known about how much time is spent by students to get familiarized with the fast speed by speakers. Regarding the first issue as fast speech of speakers, it can be due to the fact that they have not made sufficient efforts to practice listening skills after lessons which in turn hinder them from mastering their listening ability. However, it is worth addressing the different nature of written language, spoken language, and the mother tongue interference. For example, in a reading comprehension test, students are allowed to read several times, while listening occurs once only in the test context. Additionally, the Vietnamese spoken language differs from English to a large extent as Nguyen (2007) finds out that Vietnamese people tend to omit the final sounds or move the final consonants and clusters towards their first language, to name just a few. The fact that these omissions and shifts occur is attributed to “monosyllabic language” (Nguyen, 2007) which interferes with Vietnamese speakers who are not familiar with diphthongs, triphthongs, consonant positions, consonant clusters, stress and intonation.

From the listeners’ perspectives, the results indicate that one of the most common problems that the EFL students faced is that there are too many unfamiliar words and expressions. This finding is consistent with the findings of previous studies (Chao, 2013; Tuan & Duong, 2020). Similarly, Tuan and Duong (2020), Juan and Abidin (2013) find out that the bulk of participants in their study reported that too many unfamiliar words and expressions in the listening resulted from the fact that the listeners had a limited lexical range for listening comprehension. The data also supports Underwood’s theory (1989) that limited vocabulary is a big obstacle to most students in listening comprehension. Moreover, as for problems relating to vocabulary, they encounter this difficulty because students lack a wide range of aural words covering diverse topics.

Regarding learning materials, in this study, the most common problem involves too long and confusing stems that EFL students did not have sufficient time to understand the content. This finding is in line with Yangawa and Green (2008); Bingol et al. (2014), which indicate that the participants who were allowed to preview answer options in a multiple choice question produced significantly fewer correct answers than the other groups.

From the research, it can be seen that there was an alignment between listening skill activities and listening skill testing tasks. Specifically, in terms of listening task types, the finding illustrates that most of participants usually learned listening skills via activities designed by teachers including multiple choice, true & false, completion, and listening for dates and numbers. The participant also reported that they usually encountered these listening task types in listening tests. One of the most common listening task types is multiple choice questions, which was found in both listening activities and listening tests. An explanation for this might be because this multiple-choice format is widely used in measuring listening ability (Hemmati & Ghaderi, 2014).

In terms of topics used in the learning and testing processes, the finding reveals that most of the EFL students are usually exposed to Education, Technology & Science, Economy & Business, and Society topics in the listening courses, and then these also belong to the most frequently encountered topics in their listening exams, which implies there exists an alignment between learning and testing listening in the program. One of the reasons is that the type of the assessment administered at Vinh University is usually achievement test to assess students' performance after finishing each semester. That is why the teachers must base on the content they teach to design equivalent items to ensure the validity of the tests.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study was conducted to examine the challenges EFL students faced while learning listening skills and to see if there was a match between listening learning activities in the classroom and listening test types. The findings indicated that these students encountered different difficulties stemmed from the speakers, materials and from themselves. From the results, many pedagogical implications were put forwards. First, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers should familiarize their students with the rules of pronunciation to help them hear the different forms of rapid natural speech. Second, EFL teachers should show their students techniques for learning vocabulary effectively and ways that they can use and recognize new words in listening texts such as using maps, noting, checking pronunciation, speaking loudly. EFL students also need to listen and read more to encounter and accumulate more new words and expressions. In addition, learners should have effective vocabulary learning strategies which enable learners to learn on their own, to strengthen their vocabulary, and to choose the way that is most beneficial and easy for them in the English learning process.

Regarding the topics covered in both listening classes and tests, it can be inferred that the students seem to be familiar with a limited range of topics. Seemingly other "unfamiliar" topics have been barely covered in both class and testing settings. Art, for example, is reported to be minimally taught and tested with a significantly lower mean compared to others. It is suggested that this finding might also resonate with the fact that the students in the study suffer from "unfamiliar words or expressions". More topics should be covered in the teaching materials.

The study findings would be more useful if other research instrument class observation was employed to gain a deeper look into the listening difficulties. For further studies, more data collection tools should be considered. In addition, any generalization should be cautious because the sample size and characteristics were limited in a university. Apart from some mentioned shortcomings, the study significantly contributes the existing body of related literature and shed light on English listening teaching and learning processes.

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## **TÓM TẮT**

### **KHÓ KHĂN TRONG VIỆC HỌC KỸ NĂNG NGHE HIỂU TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGỮ VÀ MỐI LIÊN HỆ GIỮA HOẠT ĐỘNG NGHE VÀ ĐÁNH GIÁ KỸ NĂNG NGHE TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC VINH**

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Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện nhằm tìm hiểu những vấn đề mà sinh viên chuyên Anh tại Trường Đại học Vinh thường gặp phải khi học kỹ năng nghe hiểu, đồng thời tìm hiểu xem có sự tương ứng giữa các hoạt động nghe và hoạt động kiểm tra đánh giá hay không. Có 193 người tham gia vào thực hiện bảng câu hỏi và phỏng vấn sâu được áp dụng sau đó để làm rõ vấn đề hơn. Kết quả nghiên cứu đã chỉ ra nguyên nhân tạo nên sự khó khăn cho sinh viên khi học nghe đến từ người nói, người nghe và tài liệu nghe. Hơn nữa, nghiên cứu cũng tìm thấy sự tương đồng giữa hoạt động giảng dạy và hoạt động đánh giá trong các bài kiểm tra. Từ những kết quả trên, nghiên cứu đã đưa ra một số kiến nghị nhằm giúp cho việc dạy và học kỹ năng nghe hiểu hiệu quả hơn.

**Từ khóa:** Khó khăn trong việc học nghe hiểu; hoạt động nghe hiểu; bài kiểm tra nghe hiểu.