

## ANXIETY IN LEARNING ENGLISH LISTENING SKILL EXPERIENCED AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY

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### ABSTRACT

The paper investigated the foreign language listening anxiety of 171 first-year non-English major students at School of Foreign Languages - Thai Nguyen University. To achieve the desired aims, questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were conducted. The analysis of the collected data reveals that although the respondents considered listening as an important skill in learning English process, they could not have enjoyment when being in listening class. Several suggestions of reducing listening anxiety were offered according to the findings in this study: (1) using various methods to convey the messages of the listening tapes, (2) using a wide range of strategies to improve the students' listening comprehension level, (3) encouraging students' motivation and creating a low-anxious atmosphere to study.

**Keywords:** *anxiety; listening skill; English; students; classroom.*

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## SỰ LO LẮNG KHI HỌC KỸ NĂNG NGHE TIẾNG ANH DIỄN RA TẠI ĐẠI HỌC THÁI NGUYÊN

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### TÓM TẮT

Bài báo nghiên cứu về sự lo lắng khi nghe tiếng Anh của 171 sinh viên không chuyên ngữ năm thứ nhất Khoa Ngoại ngữ thuộc Đại học Thái Nguyên. Để đạt được các mục tiêu đề ra, tác giả đã sử dụng bảng câu hỏi và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc. Việc phân tích các dữ liệu thu thập được đã chỉ ra rằng mặc dù sinh viên coi kỹ năng nghe như một kỹ năng quan trọng trong quá trình học tiếng Anh, nhưng các em không có cảm giác thích thú và hài lòng trong lớp học nghe. Từ kết quả này, tác giả đã đưa ra một số gợi ý để giảm sự lo lắng khi học nghe như sau: (1) sử dụng phương pháp đa dạng để truyền đạt thông tin của băng nghe, (2) áp dụng nhiều chiến lược để cải thiện trình độ nghe của sinh viên, (3) tạo động lực cho sinh viên và không khí thoải mái để học tập kỹ năng này.

**Từ khóa:** *sự lo lắng; kỹ năng nghe; sinh viên; tiếng Anh; lớp học.*

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## 1. Introduction

English is becoming widespread in foreign language teaching nowadays. According to [1], “the last 50 years have witnessed the rise of English from an international language... to the position of the first truly global language in the history of the world” (p. 33), and the need for English in Vietnam has also increased [2]. As the rising requirements from foreign companies, international trading, the tourist industry and the students’ demand to study overseas, English has gained higher status and become the compulsory subject in all levels of education [3].

Consequently, the students usually notice their need to improve listening skill and exactly experience listening anxiety when they face kinds of exams with listening parts. Additionally, the students may feel depressed when they think they got lost in incomprehensible input, but they are unable to specify whether they experience high listening anxiety or not.

Particularly, from the observation, teaching period and informal conversations with the students of School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University (SFL, TNU) during the teaching period here, the researcher had discovered that they mostly hesitate and feel stress when talking about listening skill. They could not exactly say the name of the phenomenon but they tended to employ some common phrases to describe their feelings; for example, “*feel like blind/ scared/ my heart and hands are terribly shaking while listening to the tape...*” If they are asked to rank the four macro language skills: speaking, reading, writing and listening in order of difficulty, listening skill will probably be one of those which are put at the top of the list. Additionally, several teachers shared the same opinion about the listening problem of the student; they would rather study reading or writing than listening.

Quite a lot of attention has been paid to the anxiety suffered by many learners when listening to the foreign or second language. Ko [4] explores listening anxiety and listening comprehension skills of 66 Korean college students. The results indicate that there are no statistical differences relating to listening anxiety levels and listening comprehension skills as well as gender of students. In an investigation of listening anxiety level of 178 students from the College of Gardening in China, Xu [5] discovers that the non-English majors experience considerably high level and most students with high anxiety level will have low learning efficiency. Likewise, the findings from Al-Sawalha [6] show that 43 out of 60 Jordanian undergraduates majoring in English language experience a high level of listening anxiety. He suggests that low proficiency and high anxious levels are seen by the students to be factors that affect the listening performance of the students.

Additionally, in Vietnam, Le [7] has an investigation into listening anxiety of 30 first year English major students by using questionnaire and interview. Through qualitative and quantitative data, the researcher finds that the students are highly anxious in listening class due to the factors: listening materials, speakers, listening environment, and listeners, she also proposes some solutions to alleviate the student anxiety and promote their English listening comprehension.

The discussion of existing literature demonstrates that while listening has been researched in various EFL situations, fewer have explored listening anxiety problem and its impacts on the student proficiency. To be more precise, listening anxiety was of little interest in the study context. The researcher believes that there is a need to investigate the variable listening anxiety, given that studies investigating listening anxiety of the university students in such context, to the best knowledge of researcher, do not exist.

Therefore, the paper aims at clarifying the levels of listening anxiety experienced by the first-year non-English-major students in SFL and giving some potential causes.

## 2. Research methodology

In an attempt to examine the listening anxiety phenomenon among the students at SFL, the researchers justified their decision to design this research as a mixed methods study which provided the most suitable approaches for this study. The mixed research method design is becoming an increasingly popular attempt to incorporate the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research in order to provide “a more complete understanding of a research problem” [8].

### 2.1. Setting

The School of Foreign Languages has 100 teachers who are assigned to teach Russian, Chinese, Korean and English separately. For all participants, subjects about Chinese language skills are always more predominant than English.

“*Life A1*” course book [9] is used as the textbook in teaching integrated skills in English. The students are non-major English learners, so their English language proficiency level can be described as pre-intermediate from the results of university entrance examination; therefore, this book is assumed to be suitable for them according to some experienced teachers. The book consists of 12 units and provides a wide range of essential knowledge from the basic grammar of tenses, popular structures in use to culture and daily life situation.

### 2.2. Participants

All of the participants (total 200) in this study were first-year students. At the time of the study, they had finished their first semester to begin the second semester of the academic year 2018 - 2019. All the students participating in the study were told that their participation was voluntary and their answers would be confidential.

All the subjects were 19-years-old females and a few numbers of students were one or two years older. However, gender was not seen as a variable in this study.

## 2.3. Data collection instruments

### 2.3.1. Questionnaire

The first tool used was the questionnaire. This was used to generalize a picture of listening anxiety phenomenon that the participants face most frequently. The questionnaire consists of two parts. In the first part, the students were asked to respond about their general information and attitudes toward listening skill. In the second part, the subjects were asked to identify their problems that increase their anxiety in listening classes by responding to questions on the basis of the five-point scale. Additionally, the researcher employed 19-item questionnaire in Part 2 as the main instrument in order to get students’ responses about the anxiety levels and sources of listening anxiety by four factors [7]. All the items are accompanied by a 5-point Likert scale ranging of which 5 refers to Always, 4 as Often, 3 as Sometimes, 2 as Seldom, and 1 as Never. Generally, the questionnaires included most of the closed questions so that respondents could answer quickly. Once the potential participants were recruited, they were asked to respond to paper-based self-reported questionnaire surveys. For the current study with Vietnamese students, all the instructions and questions in the papers had been translated into Vietnamese before handing to the participants to make sure they would not have any difficulty in understanding. In this translation, the researcher attempted to be as faithful as possible to the original English version. In terms of the documents’ accuracy, the researcher asked some experienced teachers to verify the wording through a back-translation process which ensured the validity of the data.

**2.3.2. Interview**

The second instrument, interview, was a common data collection technique in qualitative research. After conducting the survey questionnaire, the semi-structured interviews were carried out with five chosen students who were conveniently available to participate in the study to get better insights into the research questions and to discuss for further information about the items raised in the questionnaires.

All the interviews were carried out in Vietnamese in the form of an informal conversation between the researcher and the students. The data collected from the interview was recorded and then translated into English words.

**2.4. Data collection procedure**

After gaining approval from the management board, the researcher started the initial contact with the participants, all the procedure was taken in Vietnamese. Then, the researcher first carefully gave the participants an overview of the purpose and importance of the study; therefore, the students were requested to be serious and honest.

Moreover, to maximize the reliability and validity in the study, the researcher collected the data from separated time of the research process, the questionnaires were delivered to the participants in February (2019), that was when the students were at the beginning of the second semester in the academic year of 2019, to partly reflect what had been encountered during the studying time and later on (two months after) the researcher collected the information again and after comparing the data of two different periods with the same questionnaire, the researcher found the consistency between the answers.

The subject participating in the present study was 200 first-year students. However, the number of questionnaires returned was 177, of which six questionnaires failed to properly

finish the questions; thus, they were consequently eliminated from the analysis. Finally, the number of questionnaires selected for this study was 171.

After a week of calculating the results, the researcher interviewed five voluntary participants from the questionnaire in the afternoon so as not to affect the students' main morning learning lessons.

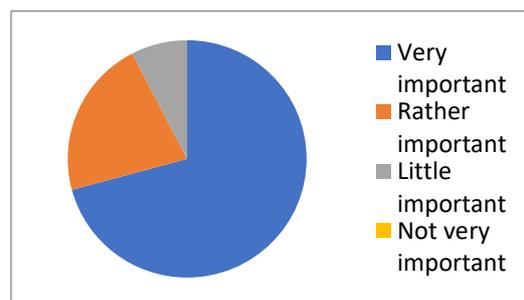
**3. Results and discussion**

**3.1. Results from the questionnaire and interview data**

**3.1.1. Students' attitudes towards listening skill**

Three questions in Part 1 of the questionnaire were used to investigate the attitudes of the students in learning English listening skill.

*Question 1: How important is listening skill?*



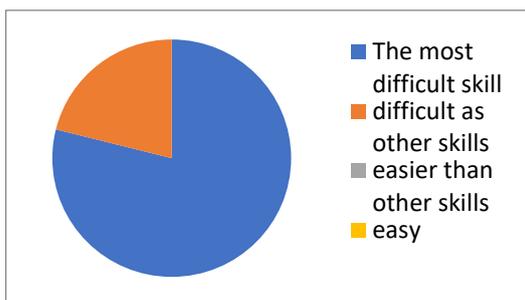
**Figure 1.** *Students' responses relating the importance of listening skills*

Figure 1 reveals that most of the students consider learning listening skill is important, no participants thought that it is not important at all to learn listening. It is evident that the majority of them were aware of the importance of listening skill, (70.8%) students agreed that the listening skill is very important and 37 out of 171 (21.6%) students thought that listening skill is rather important. 13 out of 171 students (7.6%) accepted the little importance of listening skill in English. This result shows that all students were aware of the importance of listening skills in learning a foreign language.

*Question 2: Listening is.....*

As indicated clearly in Figure 2, an overwhelming number of the students (78.9%)

viewed listening as the most difficult skill. The rest of the students (21.1 %) reported that listening skill is as difficult as other skills (reading, speaking, writing), and none of them considered listening skill to be an easy one or easier than other language skills. The main reason seems that listening skill is not familiar to them.

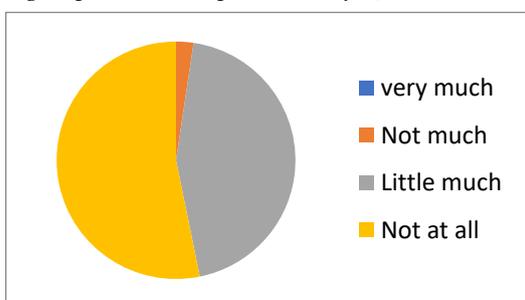


**Figure 2.** Students' responses relating to the difficulty level of listening skills in comparison with other skills

In addition, they always felt nervous and confused when they learn listening skill. In the interview, some respondents said, "because we might get on well with reading, try to learn the pieces of writing and speaking speech by rote, but there is no way to tackle the listening problems. (S3)

...I don't think my listening level is as high as other skills. I normally get lower scores and I have no confidence in doing well in listening. (S4)

Although I have learnt English for more than 10 years, I still often feel nervous when listening to English because I cannot manage to grasp what the speakers say. (S5)".



**Figure 3.** Students' responses relating to their interest in learning listening skill

*Question number 3: How interested are you in learning English listening skills?*

Figure 3 shows that only about (2.36%) of the respondents are not much interested in learning listening English, while (44.44%) of the subjects are little interested in it and more than half (53.2%) are not interested in it at all. The percentages above suggest that though the students did realize the importance of listening skill, they tended to have little or no interest in this subject. Through the interviews, most students responded that they had certain difficulties while listening to English, and these difficulties were believed to affect their enjoyment in listening to English:

*I know how important listening skill is but I just simply cannot enjoy it, which seems like a burden to me. (S5)*

From the result of the three questions in Part 1 of the survey questionnaire above, we can conclude that although most of students believe English listening skill is important, they feel that it is more difficult than other skills such as speaking, reading and writing and their difficulties in learning listening skill may decrease their enjoyment for it.

### 3.1.2 Students' listening anxiety level

Since the questionnaire was a 5-point Likert scale, the total score ranged from 19 to 95 (one point for each item equals 19 points of minimum score in total, whereas five points for each item equals 95 of maximum score, based on the Likert scale grading). Among the 171 subjects, the maximum score and the minimum score of listening anxiety were 89 and 45 respectively.

It was suggested that in order to analyze levels of anxiety through scales, multiply the total number of the items five-point Likert scale by the highest point, and then subtract from the total multiplied scores from the total items of the scale [10].

Thus, in this study, the scale total multiplied scores were 95 from which was subtracted 19; scores higher than 76 were categorized as a

high level of listening anxiety, whereas a total score ranging from 76 to 57 demonstrated a moderate level of listening anxiety, and less than 57 indicated a low level of listening anxiety.

**Table 1.** Percentages and frequencies of students' foreign language listening anxiety

	Percentages	Frequencies
Low level of listening anxiety	4.1	7
Moderate level of listening anxiety	47.4	81
High level of listening anxiety	48.5	83
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>171</b>

The results presented in Table 1 reveals that the percentages of high and moderate level are rather equal, the first-year students at TNU generally tended to experience a moderate level of listening anxiety. The descriptive results suggest that 48.5% of the participants scored higher than 76, which indicates a high level of listening anxiety, whereas 47.4% of them scored 57 – 76, which indicates a moderate level of listening anxiety. In addition, 4.1% of them scored less than 57, which indicates a low level of listening anxiety.

### 3.2. Discussion

The findings were generally encouraging in a number of areas as follows.

Firstly, the students' anxiety level and attitude toward listening skills is very clear. Most of the students had high level of anxiety in listening classes. The students are aware of the importance of listening skill in foreign language acquisition process. However, according to an overwhelming number of the students, listening skill is one of the weakest skills and one in which they have least confidence. None of them is satisfied with their current listening comprehension ability. Having been familiar with the grammar testing structure since their school years, they defined listening skill as a burden.

Secondly, the results of fairly high anxiety level among the students (48.5%) may be attributed to several reasons such as listening text factors, speaker factors, listener factors and listening environment factors. The complexity and difficulty of lexis and syntax made students nervous and embarrassed while listening to spoken text. The difficulties come from learners such as limited vocabulary, weak memory, lack of background knowledge and ineffective application of listening strategies. The findings indicate that high anxiety is detrimental to performance on difficult listening texts. If the students are attracted by the listening message, they will have incentive to make greater efforts.

Together with using textbooks, teachers should provide a wide range of materials with different contents, which are related to their major and daily life, to help students increase listening general knowledge. Moreover, try to find visual aids associated with the listening topics to help students guess or imagine actively, to remind them of the ideas and language they may know but have temporarily forgotten. Visual supports can help the students focus directly on the desired information. Including these aids in the text helps learners use limited attentional capacity only on related details. Additionally, the teachers should provide different styles of listening exercise and activity (multi-choices questions, gap-filling... or predicting what the speaker is going to say...). In doing so, they can avoid the boredom and help the students work out their own strategies instead of repeating the traditional way: turn on the tape recorder → listen for several times → still unable to understand → turn over the tape script pages.

### 4. Conclusion

The goal of the study was to explore the listening anxiety level and its sources from 171 participants at TNU. What the findings can provide is information about listening

anxiety level of participants and potential causes of listening anxiety and possible solutions to alleviate that anxiety.

Through the questionnaire and semi-structured interview, the researcher sought to illustrate the practices in listening class that evoke anxiety in the students. Based on the collected data, it is obvious that listening anxiety has a detrimental effect on language learners, in other words, it impedes the students in learning language successfully. Therefore, the researcher discusses several pedagogical implications that might help the teachers address listening anxiety in their classroom. The limited pedagogical suggestions offered here can be modified to fit the level and dynamics of most foreign language classes. With the suitable strategies, the students will be motivated to learn and have positive attitudes toward the target language and its speakers.

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