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Vu Thai Linh

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Hanoi, Vietnam**LISTENING DIFFICULTIES AND LEARNERS' EXPECTATIONS OF EFFECTIVE LISTENING INSTRUCTION:
EVIDENCE FROM VIETNAMESE EFL FRESHMEN****Abstract**

A study of 164 first-year English majors at Hanoi University of Mining and Geology identified fast speech, limited vocabulary, unfamiliar accents, and connected speech as primary listening difficulties. Students preferred explicit strategy instruction and increased authentic material exposure, highlighting the need to blend strategy-based teaching with self-directed learning to improve listening proficiency.

Keywords:

EFL listening; listening difficulties; learner perceptions; thematic analysis;
Vietnamese university students; listening pedagogy

1. Introduction

Listening is a complex, less visible process essential for language learning, often challenging first-year students who struggle with real-time speech, reductions, and accents despite heavy exposure to English media (Field, 2008; Mendelsohn, 1998; Buck, 2001). This study examines the perceived difficulties, independent practices, and instructional expectations of 164 first-year English majors at a Vietnamese university to better align pedagogy with learner needs.

2. Literature Review**2.1. Listening comprehension as a multilevel process**

Listening comprehension involves an interaction between bottom-up acoustic decoding and top-down contextual processing (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Nation & Newton, 2009). Goh (2000) categorizes listening failures into three cognitive stages: perception, parsing, and utilization. Consequently, common complaints like excessive speech rate often reflect internal processing limitations—such as slow lexical access, unfamiliar connected speech, or limited automaticity—rather than just the literal speed of the audio. Effective pedagogy must therefore move beyond broad problem identification to target these specific underlying processing demands and help students build phonological flexibility.

2.2. Learner practices and the role of digital exposure

Digital media expand out-of-class listening opportunities through films, podcasts, and social media, supporting vocabulary growth and motivation, though its value depends heavily on how learners engage with the material. Passive exposure, such as watching with first-language subtitles, often prioritizes plot over linguistic form, whereas structured practice utilizing explicit goals, prediction, selective attention, and reflection yields greater improvement (Graham & Macaro, 2008; Vandergrift, 2003). Additionally, incorporating micro-listening activities helps students focus on short speech stretches, diagnose comprehension errors, and notice connected-speech processes (Field, 2008). Ultimately, digital resources are most effective when integrated into a deliberate cycle of listening, diagnosis, and adjustment rather than treated as exposure alone.

2.3. Learner perceptions and effective listening instruction

Learner perceptions directly influence motivation, strategy choice, and persistence, as students often attribute listening failure to uncontrollable factors like speaker speed or low innate ability, which reduces self-efficacy (Graham, 2006). Teachers can counter this by making the listening process visible through