

THE STUDY OF ENGLISH LISTENING PROBLEMS OF THAI EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

English listening difficulty is one of the barriers to English communication which causes misunderstanding and misinterpretation between the speakers and the listeners. It is beneficial for teaching and learning English communication to study students' problems and their need for improvement. This study aimed to explore difficulties in English listening of Thai EFL university students. Samples were 30 second-year undergraduate students, majoring in English for Business Management at a public university in Thailand. The questionnaire was employed to explore students' English listening problems, the causes of listening problems, and students' need for English listening skill improvement. The results revealed that Thai EFL university students reported a medium level of English listening problems in four types regarding the problems related to the messages, the contexts, the speakers, and the listeners. In terms of the individual items, they rated a high level of listening problems with the speed of the speaker, the pronunciation of the speaker, and the ability of the listener to understand at the first time of listening. For the causes of English listening problems, students rated four causes at a high level of agreement including lack of listening skill practice, lack of exposure to different kinds of listening materials, lack of knowledge in vocabulary, and lack of knowledge in grammar. With regard to students' need for English listening skill improvement, the findings showed a high level of improvement need. The highest level of agreement was the need to improve English vocabulary and knowledge by reading English from books or online materials. Further results drawn from students' suggestions and comments indicated their need for English listening skill improvement in six main areas: practicing speaking English in class, practicing speaking English with native speakers, practicing listening English in class, learning new vocabulary and technical terms, learning pronunciation with different accents, and learning listening comprehension strategies. It can be concluded that Thai EFL university students mostly had English listening difficulties especially problems related to speaking speed and pronunciation of speakers. Moreover, most students reported that they need to improve their English listening skills. Based on the findings, it is suggested that EFL teachers should consider students' problems and implement more activities in class which can help students improve their skills in English listening.

Keywords: *English listening problems, English listening skill improvement, EFL English listening.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Listening is very crucial for communication, especially for EFL students. Grant (1987) stated that there are two reasons why listening is important. First, it is important for communication as communication can not be completely processed with listening. The communication will be more successful if the listener understands the message. Second, it is important for learning as it enables students to understand the lesson. Skilled listeners can understand the lesson and language more easily. However, listening comprehension requires many skills. As, it is an active process, the learners need to construct the meaning by inferring clues from the text and from the prior knowledge (O'Malley et al, 1989). In addition, Anderson (1995, p. 37) mentioned that in listening, the listener needs to recognize segmenting phonemes from the continuous speech stream.

Thus, many students encountered listening difficulties. Underwood (1989) stated seven major listening problems: the inability to control the speed of the speaker, the inability repeat the listening, limited vocabulary, cannot notice the signals, having problem in interpretation, failure to concentrate,

building learning behaviors. Moreover, previous studies revealed English listening problems of employees (Phoonkum, 2021) and EFL high school students (Thangpradit, 2020; Tran & Duong, 2020).

1.2. Objectives

The purposes of this study were to explore English listening problems of Thai EFL university students. In addition, this research aimed to study the causes of listening problems and the need of the students for English listening skill improvement.

2. Methods

2.1. Research design and participants

This research study employed a quantitative research method design. The questionnaires were utilized to collect data from participants. The participants of this study were selected by a purposive sampling method. The participants in this study were the students who enrolled the English for Business Communication course. This course was selected because English listening skill is important for business communication. There were 30 second-year undergraduate students, majoring in English for Business Management at a public university in Thailand.

2.2. Data collection

A five-points Likert scale questionnaire was adapted from Phoonkum (2021) and Tamtani et al (2019), to explore students' English listening difficulties. The questionnaire comprised three main parts: 1) Self-assessment of English listening problems, 2) Causes of English listening problems, and 3) The need of listening skill improvement. There was an open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire to collect the students' additional suggestions for listening skill improvement. The questionnaire was translated into Thai to applicable with the students' native language.

The English for Business Communication course consisted of 15 weeks. The students were administered the questionnaire in week 1 to study their English listening problems before starting the course. The students were assigned to answer the questionnaire in the classroom for 30 minutes.

2.3. Data analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using statistical methods. Descriptive statistics were employed to describe the mean scores and standard deviations. Then, the means were interpreted into three levels based on Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995)'s concept: high (mean of 3.5 or higher), medium (mean of 2.5-3.4), and low (2.4 or lower). Furthermore, the data drawn from the open-ended questions were analyzed and categorized through the content analysis.

3. Results

3.1. English listening problems of Thai EFL university students

Table 1 shows the results obtained from part 1 of the questionnaire regarding the students' English listening problems.

Table 1. Self-assessment of English listening problems.

Problems	Mean	S.D.	Level
A. English Listening Problems Related to the Message			
1. I find it difficult to understand technical terms or unfamiliar words.	3.38	0.75	Medium
2. I find it difficult to understand slang words, idioms, phrasal verbs.	3.22	0.83	Medium
3. I find it difficult to understand complex grammatical structures.	3.31	0.82	Medium
4. I find it difficult to understand long connected speech.	3.00	1.05	Medium
5. I find it difficult to understand unorganized messages.	3.31	1.00	Medium
Overall	3.24	0.90	Medium
B. English Listening Problems Related to the Context			
6. I find it difficult to understand conversations when I lack background knowledge.	3.41	1.13	Medium
7. I find it difficult to understand unfamiliar topics.	3.22	1.04	Medium
8. I find it difficult to understand conversations when I don't understand the cultural context.	3.00	0.84	Medium

Overall	3.21	1.01	Medium
C. English Listening Problems Related to Speakers			
9. I find it difficult to understand when speakers speak stammering with occasional pauses.	3.03	0.93	Medium
10. I find it difficult to understand when speakers speak too fast.	3.88	0.98	High
11. I find it difficult to understand when speakers speak unclear pronunciation of words.	3.78	0.94	High
12. I have problems with intonation and stress.	2.81	1.03	Medium
13. I have problems with different accents of different speakers.	3.19	1.15	Medium
14. I have problems with speakers' non-verbal language.	2.03	1.00	Low
15. I have problems with pronunciation of final sounds.	2.50	0.95	Medium
16. I have problems with communication/conversation characteristics determined by culture.	2.91	0.93	Medium
Overall	3.02	1.13	Medium
D. English Listening Problems Related to Listeners			
17. I find it difficult to understand the message when I listen to it just one.	3.56	1.01	High
18. I sometime lose my concentration while listening.	3.19	0.97	Medium
19. I can't grasp the key words or main ideas of the message.	3.44	0.80	Medium
20. I feel uncomfortable when communicating with foreigners.	3.28	1.17	Medium
Overall	3.37	1.00	Medium
Overall of English Listening Problems	3.21	1.01	Medium

As seen from table 1, Thai EFL university students rated their English listening problems at a medium level for the overall mean score of students' problems (M=3.21, S.D.=1.01), and for the four types of problems (the messages: M=3.24, S.D.=0.90; the contexts: M=3.21, S.D.=1.01; the speakers: M=3.02, S.D.=1.13; the listeners: M=3.37, S.D.=1.00). With regard to the individual items, the mean scores were ranged from the low to the high level of problems. The highest mean score fell into Item 10: I find it difficult to understand when speakers speak too fast. (M=3.88, S.D.=0.98), and the lowest mean score went into Item 14: I have problems with speakers' non-verbal language. (M=2.03, S.D.=1.00).

3.2. Causes of English listening problems

Table 2 presents the results obtained from part 2 of the questionnaire regarding the causes of English listening problems.

Table 2. Causes of English Listening Problems.

Causes	Mean	S.D.	Level
21. Lack of listening skill practice.	3.50	1.05	High
22. Lack of exposure to different kinds of listening materials.	3.50	1.22	High
23. Lack of knowledge in vocabulary.	3.81	0.93	High
24. Lack of knowledge in grammar.	3.50	1.14	High
25. Lack of understanding of correct pronunciations.	3.47	1.02	Medium
26. Lack of cross-cultural knowledge.	3.31	0.93	Medium
27. Problems related to physical conditions (e.g. Noisy setting).	3.25	0.95	Medium
28. Feeling uncomfortable, excited, and nervous.	3.06	1.11	Medium
29. Feeling embarrassed.	2.88	1.16	Medium
Overall	3.36	1.08	Medium

As shown in Table 2, the overall mean score of listening problem causes was reported at a medium level of agreement (M=3.36, S.D.=1.08). In terms of individual items, the students reported their agreements with all 9 items ranged from a low to a high level. The highest mean score was Item 23: Lack of knowledge in vocabulary. (M=3.81, S.D.=0.93), and the lowest mean score was Item 29: Feeling embarrassed. (M=2.88, S.D.=1.16).

3.3. The need of the students for English listening skills improvement

Table 3 illustrates the results obtained from part 3 of the questionnaire regarding the need of the students for English listening skills improvement.

Table 3. The need of Listening Skills Improvement.

Listening Skills Improvement	Mean	S.D.	Level
30. I need to learn about pronunciation.	4.00	1.05	High
31. I need to understand English accents.	3.94	0.95	High
32. I need to practice my listening skills by talking with my English teachers.	4.28	0.85	High
33. I need to practice my listening skills by talking with foreigners or native speakers.	4.50	0.88	High
34. I need to increase my grammar knowledge.	4.31	0.82	High
35. I need to increase my English vocabulary and knowledge by reading English from books or online materials.	4.56	0.67	High
36. I need to improve my English listening proficiency by attending English training courses.	3.94	1.08	High
37. I need to improve my knowledge and skills related to cross-cultural communication.	4.16	0.85	High
Overall	4.21	0.92	High

As presented in Table 3, the overall mean score of the students' need for English listening skills improvement was rated at a high level ($M=4.21$, $S.D.=0.92$). For individual items, all of 8 items were reported at a high level of the students' improvement need. It can be seen that the highest mean score went into Item 35: I need to increase my English vocabulary and knowledge by reading English from books or online materials. ($M=4.56$, $S.D.=0.67$), the lowest mean score was Item 31: I need to understand English accents ($M=3.94$, $S.D.=0.95$) and Item 36: I need to improve my English listening proficiency by attending English training courses. ($M=3.94$, $S.D.=1.08$).

Furthermore, the results obtained from the open-ended questions revealed that they need English listening skill improvement. The students' need can be categorized into six main aspects: 1) to practice speaking English in class, 2) to practice speaking English with native speakers, 3) to practice listening English in class, 4) learn new vocabulary and technical terms, 5) to learn pronunciation with different accents, and 6) to learn listening comprehension strategies.

4. Discussion

4.1. English listening problems of Thai EFL university students

The overall results of this research study showed that the students encountered various problems in English listening. They faced difficulties at the same medium level in all four types of problems including problems related to messages, contexts, speakers, and listeners. In terms of the individual items, the students agreed that they had listening problems at the medium level with almost 20 problems. It is noticeable that they reported a high level of listening problems with the speed of the speaker, the pronunciation of the speaker, and the ability of the listener to understand at the first time of listening. This means the students strongly agreed that these three problems were the most-frequently faced problems.

4.2. Causes of English listening problems

Overall, the students agreed that all nine causes had the impact on their English listening at the medium level. Four causes were reported at a high level: lack of listening skill practice, lack of exposure to different kinds of listening materials, lack of knowledge in vocabulary, and lack of knowledge in grammar. This means the students strongly agreed that these four causes had the greatest factors affecting their English listening.

4.3. The need of students for English listening skills improvement

The results from the questionnaire showed a high level of the students' need for English listening improvement regarding the overall and all eight skills. The top-three needs were: the need to practice their listening skills by talking with foreigners or native speakers, the need to increase their grammar knowledge, and the need to increase their English vocabulary and knowledge by reading English from books or online materials. It can be seen that the top-three needs of English listening improvement were in line with the four-highest level causes of problems. This means they need to improve their listening in all eight skills, especially the top-three needs.

5. Conclusions

This study explored English listening problems of Thai EFL university students, causes of problems, and the need of English listening skill improvement. It can be concluded that Thai EFL university students faced various problems under the categories of messages, contexts, speakers, and listeners. They mostly encountered English listening difficulties with speaking speed of speakers, the pronunciation of speakers, and the listeners' ability to understand at the first time of listening. Moreover, the students reported a high level of their need to improve their English listening skills, especially the need to practice listening, the need to increase grammar knowledge, and the need to enhance vocabulary and knowledge. Based on the results of this study, it is suggested that EFL teachers should consider students' problems and implement more activities in class which can help students improve their skills in English listening. In addition, the needs of the student should be considered as the important points to create the activities in classroom.

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