

# Boosting Listening Skills in Non-English Major Freshmen: Challenges and Solutions at Dong Nai Technology University

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## Article Information

Received: April 17, 2024

Revised: May 27, 2024

Accepted: June 01, 2024

Online: June 08, 2024

## Keywords

Listening Skills,  
Non-English Major Students,  
Problem,  
Solutions

## ABSTRACT

*This research investigates the difficulties non-major students face in English listening comprehension, focusing on those who have undergone a TOEIC-oriented English module. Listening is a critical skill for effective communication, yet many learners find it challenging. The study identifies specific listening obstacles and evaluates students' performance across different listening tasks. A descriptive statistical approach was employed, with data collected via a listening test based on the TOEIC format, administered to 190 first-year students at Dong Nai Technology University. Results indicate that students perform better in tasks involving discrete statements and responses but struggle significantly with conversations and monologues, which require more complex listening skills. The analysis reveals that while students can manage straightforward, detailed information, their inferencing abilities and handling of long, complex sentences are inadequate. These findings suggest a need for targeted instructional strategies to enhance listening comprehension, particularly in making inferences and processing detailed auditory information. Improving these skills is essential for students' overall listening proficiency and success in TOEIC and real-world communication.*

## INTRODUCTION

English In life, language is very essential. We cannot downplay the significance of English in the modern process of internationalization and globalization for social progress. Both those who speak English as their primary language and those who use it as a second or foreign language utilize it as an international language for information communication (Guo, 2021; Sofyan, 2021). A strong command of the English language is helpful for many people who are looking to further their education, study, and career (H. D. Nguyen & Dinh, 2023; Pham & Nguyen, 2021).

The ability to listen is one of the four essential communication skills as it enables students to take in information about their surroundings (Suyitno et al., 2021). Speaking makes up 25–30% of everyday communication activities, listening makes up 40–50%, reading makes up 11–16%, and writing makes up just 9% (Newton & Nation, 2009; Tunagür et al., 2021). It is so challenging for students to communicate successfully when they are listening without comprehending (Tran & Duong, 2020).

Listening is a complex process that requires both verbal and non-verbal language comprehension (Ekayati, 2020; Sah & Shah, 2020). It involves the receiving and processing of auditory information.

Numerous researches have demonstrated that listening comprehension is a challenge for English language learners ([Ahmadi Safa & Motaghi, 2024](#); [Hardiyanto et al., 2021](#); [Namaziandost et al., 2019](#)). Listening comprehension is regarded as one of the most challenging language skills for non-majors in universities and colleges nowadays. Because schools frequently place a greater emphasis on teaching grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary, students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) often struggle with listening comprehension ([Guo, 2021](#); [Newton & Nation, 2009](#)). The majority of instructional materials do not place much emphasis on listening skills, and educators do not prioritize teaching students these abilities in the classroom ([Guo, 2021](#); [Sah & Shah, 2020](#)). Also it might be challenging for students to comprehend what others are saying. When listening, learners encounter several challenges. In order to identify acceptable listening methods or workarounds for common obstacles, teachers must ascertain what challenges students have in order to assist them in improving their listening abilities ([Nushi & Orouji, 2020](#); [Purwanto et al., 2021](#)).

There are several explanations for why students struggle with listening. Listening comprehension is a common challenge for English language learners. These challenges include: (1) difficulty recognizing sounds made by English speakers; (2) habit of needing to understand every word in a sentence in order to understand the article's content; (3) difficulty understanding native speakers speaking English quickly and naturally; (4) needing to listen several times in order to understand; (5) difficulty understanding all of the information and being unable to predict what the speaker is going to say; and (6) fatigue and lack of concentration if learners are required to listen for extended periods of time ([Fenyi et al., 2021](#); [Tilwani et al., 2022](#); [Tran & Duong, 2020](#)).

Five essential criteria are identified when talking about listening comprehension. They are: (1) speaking speed, pauses, stress, rhyme, differences between first and second language, etc.; (2) interlocutor characteristics; (3) exercise characteristics; (4) listener characteristics; (5) information processing during listening, such as using listening strategies; and (6) listener characteristics, such as language proficiency, memory, concentration, age, gender, ability to use first language, and background knowledge ([Newton & Nation, 2009](#); [Tai & Chen, 2024](#)).

There are four aspects to be considered when determining the difficulty or ease of a listening lesson: (1) the listening content; (2) the person speaking; (3) the person who listens; and (4) the listening situation ([Namaziandost et al., 2019](#); [Newton & Nation, 2009](#)). It is generally more difficult for the listener to comprehend and retain a message that contains lengthy information and unaccustomed information. Listening learners may also encounter difficulties when the speaker speaks at a natural pace and with a native accent ([Nadhira & Warni, 2021](#)). The listener himself is the third explanation. At that point, poor listening comprehension is unavoidable if the listener's concentration is low. They will also lack vocabulary and prior knowledge, receive sounds poorly, want to listen repeatedly, and lack note-taking, memorization, judgment, and reasoning skills. An unavoidable factor contributing to the difficulty of listening comprehension is a loud listening setting with lots of background noise ([Guo, 2021](#); [Newton & Nation, 2009](#)). The learner element is subjective, while the other three factors – message, speaker, and listening context – are objective. In actual conversation, teachers must first attend to internal elements, the listener, while exterior factors are more challenging to modify. To help learners find practical solutions to improve listening skills, this research mainly aims to understand the subjective aspects of listeners, precisely the sub - skills of listening that students have not applied well.

## **METHODS**

Descriptive statistical research was conducted to find out the English listening difficulties of non – major students ([Cooksey, 2020](#)). The data collection tool is a test of students' listening skills after they are about to complete the TOEIC – oriented English module 1. The exam is prepared with a TOEIC orientation and is based on the Starter TOEIC book (3rd Ed) by authors Anne Taylor and Casey Malarcher. It is similar to the sort of listening exercises students learn in class and has an analogous difficulty level. The exam lasts 560 seconds (almost 10 minutes) and consists of 20 multiple – choice questions (part 2 only has 3 options, whereas the rest sections all have 4), separated into 4 sections, each with 5 sentences, as indicated in the table below.

**Table 1. Test Description**

Part	Number of Questions	Content	Aim
Part 1 (Picture description – P)	5	Listen to single sentences and choose the correct picture	To test students' ability to distinguish types of vocabulary (places, objects, positions, actions).
Part 2 (Questions – Responses – R)	5	Listen to the question and choose the correct answer	To test students' ability to distinguish similar sounds, and different types of question (yes – no questions, Wh – questions).
Part 3 (Short conversations – C)	5	Listen to the dialogues and answer the questions (2 dialogues)	To test students' capacity to listen for specifics, make conclusions, and discern between words with similar pronunciations.
Part 4 (Short talks – T)	5	Listen to the monologue and answer the questions (2 monologues)	To test students' listening ability combined with reasoning, listening to detailed ideas together with memorizing or taking notes (The content emerges in long statements with several concepts; no words represent the same notion appear in the text).

The listening test was carried out with the researchers' attempts to limit the particular effects of environmental circumstances. Especially the listening exam structure is comparable to what students were exposed to throughout the session. The material is based on typical TOEIC test themes and has a similar duration. The speaker's voice does not sound too weird or unusual. The listening setting is noise-free.

Research participants included 190 non – English major freshmen at Dong Nai Technology University. Students have studied 50 lessons in the TOEIC 1 Orientation English program with Anne Taylor and Garrett Byrne's book *Very Easy TOEIC* (2nd Ed.) was published by Ho Chi Minh General Publishing House in 2006. Thus, these learners are familiar with TOEIC exam questions, although at a basic level, the number of questions for each listening part is lower than the number of questions students must answer while taking the standard international TOEIC test.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The listening test has a total of 20 questions, each correct sentence is counted as one point, each incorrect sentence is zero point. The test results were processed using SPSS software, with Cronbach alpha reliability of .642, proving that the scale is qualified for survey use. One sample t-test is performed to check whether the overall average score and each section is different from the sample average of 0.5.

### Students' Ability to Listen to the TOEIC-Oriented Test

**Table 2. The Results from the Listening Test**

Part	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation	Mean Difference (MD)	Significant Difference (p)
1 (P)	0.72	0.24	0.23	.00
2 (R)	0.75	0.19	0.26	.00
3 (C)	0.42	0.22	-0.11	.00
4 (T)	0.40	0.27	-0.13	.00
<b>Total (tt)</b>	<b>0.57</b>	<b>0.23</b>	<b>0.06</b>	<b>.00</b>

The combined results of the students' listening test are shown in Table 2. The average scores for part 1 and part 2 are 0.72 and 0.75, above the sample average of 0.5 with significance levels  $p_P$  and  $p_R$  both = .00 ( $MD_P = 0.23$ ,  $MD_R = 0.26$ ). The average scores for parts 3 and 4 are 0.42 and 0.40, below the sample average of 0.5 with significance levels  $p_C$  and  $p_T$  both = .00 ( $MD_C = -0.11$ ,  $MD_T = -0.13$ ). The results showed that the average score of the entire listening test on 190 students reached 0.57, not high, only 0.5 higher than the sample average with  $MD_{tt} = 0.06$ . The aforementioned scores indicate the learners' listening proficiency after completing the TOEIC 1 - oriented English course is only slightly higher than the sample average, with no significant difference ( $p = .00$ ) regardless of the test despite the educational material regarding its format and level of challenge. In particular, students' capacity to listen to separate statements is more effective than listening to discussions or monologs, especially when listening to monologs (one person speaking continuously) because the score of part 4 is the lowest ( $M_T = 0.40$ ).

The average scores for parts 1 and 2 are above the sample average of 0.5, indicating that students perform better in listening to separate statements (part 1) and responses (part 2). Conversely, the average scores for parts 3 and 4 are below the sample average of 0.5, indicating that students experience more difficulty in listening to conversations (part 3) and monologues (part 4). Overall, the average listening test score reaches 0.57, only slightly higher than the sample average. Although there is an improvement compared to the sample average, these results indicate that students' listening skills after completing the TOEIC-oriented English course are still not significant. Specifically, students' ability to listen to separate statements is more effective than listening to conversations or monologues, with the lowest score in part 4 reflecting difficulty in understanding monologues.

These results suggest that students perform better in listening to single statements and brief responses. This might be due to the more straightforward and easier-to-understand format of statements in a listening context. Conversely, the conversation and monologue sections require a more complex understanding of context and the ability to follow longer speech flows, which seem to be challenging for students ([H. Nguyen & Gu, 2020](#); [Pham & Nguyen, 2021](#)). The difficulties faced in listening to conversations and monologues suggest that students may need more extensive practice and strategies to develop more effective listening skills for longer and more complex text formats ([Hardiyanto et al., 2021](#); [Lertcharoenwanich, 2022](#)). The low scores in the monologue section also reflect that the ability to understand and interpret information from a single speaker speaking continuously still needs improvement ([Lertcharoenwanich, 2022](#)). Thus, although there is a slight improvement in overall listening ability, these results emphasize the need to strengthen listening teaching and learning strategies that focus more on complex text types, such as conversations and monologues, to improve students' overall listening skills.

**Sub-Skills that Students have Difficulty with When Listening According to TOEIC Orientation****Table 3. Specific Results of Part 1**

Question	Percentage of Correct Answers	Details
P1	59.1	Identify places
P2	56.3	Identify objects
P3	88.7	Identify prepositions of places
P4	70.2	Identify action verbs
P5	85.6	Identify action verbs
Average	72	

The analysis of students' sub-skills in listening according to the TOEIC orientation, as shown in Table 3, provides valuable insights into specific areas where learners face difficulties. Part 1 of the listening test, which involves picture descriptions, requires students to listen to four simple statements and choose the one that correctly describes the given picture. The results indicate that the overall accuracy rate for this section is above 50%, with an average of 72%. However, a closer examination reveals significant variations in performance across different types of questions.

The highest accuracy rates were observed in questions 3, 4, and 5, which involved identifying prepositions of places and action verbs. Specifically, 88.7% of students correctly identified prepositions of places in question 3, while 70.2% and 85.6% of students correctly identified action verbs in questions 4 and 5, respectively. In contrast, the accuracy rates for questions 1 and 2, which required identifying places and objects, were significantly lower, at 59.1% and 56.3%, respectively.

These discrepancies suggest that students find it easier to recognize and understand action verbs and prepositions of places compared to identifying specific areas and objects. One possible explanation for this difference is that learners may have a more active vocabulary and more vital recognition skills for verbs and prepositions, which are often more contextually reinforced in language learning environments (Purwanto et al., 2021; Richard, 2021). Conversely, the lower performance in identifying places and objects points to potential gaps in students' vocabulary knowledge or their ability to activate and utilize this knowledge during listening tasks (Hong & Phan, 2020; Tai & Chen, 2024).

The variation in performance also highlights a potential issue with auditory processing and the ability to connect spoken words with their written forms and meanings. Students may recognize these words when reading but struggle to do so when listening, indicating that their listening skills and vocabulary activation are not sufficiently integrated. This could be due to inadequate exposure to auditory forms of vocabulary or insufficient practice in listening activities that reinforce the connection between sounds and their corresponding meanings (Masrul & Rasyidah, 2023; Namaziandost et al., 2019).

To address these challenges, educators might consider incorporating more targeted listening exercises that focus on identifying and differentiating between various places and objects. Additionally, increasing the frequency and variety of listening activities that emphasize vocabulary in auditory contexts can help students improve their ability to recognize and process spoken words more effectively (Almusharraf & Bailey, 2023; Lertcharoenwanich, 2022; H. Nguyen & Gu, 2020). By strengthening these specific sub-skills, students can develop a more balanced and comprehensive proficiency in listening, which is crucial for success in TOEIC and other real-world listening scenarios.

**Table 4. Specific Results of Part 2**

Question	Percentage of Correct Answers	Details
R1	45	Identify similar sounds "at" - "It's"



Question	Percentage of Correct Answers	Details
R2	82.7	Identify two sentences that have similar sounds: "How old are you?" – "How are you?"
R3	96.5	Identify the answer to Yes – No questions
R4	75.3	Identify the answer to the question with "Where."
R5	83.8	Identify the answer to the question with "Why."
Average	76.7	

The analysis of students' sub-skills in listening, based on the results from Part 2 of the TOEIC-oriented test, reveals significant insights into the specific areas where learners encounter difficulties. In Part 2, students listen to a question and select the correct answer from three options. The data from Table 4 indicate varied performance across different types of questions, highlighting particular strengths and weaknesses in students' listening abilities.

The lowest accuracy rate was observed in question R1, with only 45% of students correctly identifying similar sounds between "at" and "It's." It suggests that students struggle significantly with differentiating similar-sounding words. The likely reasons for this difficulty include a lack of concentration, insufficient listening techniques, or a careless approach to judging and selecting answers. The subtle differences in pronunciation between "at" and "It's" can easily be missed without keen auditory discrimination skills, which many learners seem to lack.

Conversely, question R2, which required students to distinguish between the similar-sounding sentences "How old are you?" and "How are you?" had a much higher accuracy rate of 82.7%. This better performance can be attributed to the more distinct difference in rhyming and sentence length between the two phrases, making it easier for students to notice and differentiate. The contrasting success rates between questions R1 and R2 underscore the importance of context and sentence structure in aiding students' listening comprehension.

Questions R3, R4, and R5, which involved identifying the answers to yes-no questions and questions starting with "where" and "why," showed high accuracy rates of 96.5%, 75.3%, and 83.8%, respectively. The exceptionally high score for R3 indicates that students find it relatively easy to respond to yes-no questions, likely due to the brief and straightforward nature of such responses. This suggests that students are more adept at processing and responding to direct and simple questions compared to those requiring more complex auditory discrimination ([Hong & Phan, 2020](#); [Richard, 2021](#)).

The strong performance in identifying answers to "where" and "why" questions further suggests that students have a good grasp of context-specific vocabulary and can understand questions that are clearly distinct in their phrasing. However, the slightly lower accuracy for "where" questions (75.3%) compared to "why" questions (83.8%) might indicate that spatial-related questions pose a bit more of a challenge, possibly due to the need for a more precise understanding of prepositional phrases and spatial terms.

Overall, the average accuracy rate for Part 2 is 76.7%, indicating a reasonably good performance but with noticeable room for improvement in specific areas, particularly in differentiating similar sounds. To enhance students' listening skills, especially in distinguishing subtle phonetic differences, educators should consider integrating more focused auditory discrimination exercises and training in their curriculum ([H. D. Nguyen & Dinh, 2023](#); [Richard, 2021](#)). This could include drills that emphasize the nuances of similar-sounding words and sentences, as well as strategies to improve concentration and attentive listening. By addressing these specific weaknesses and reinforcing effective listening techniques, students can develop a more robust ability to comprehend and respond to a wide range of auditory stimuli, thereby improving their overall performance in TOEIC-oriented listening tasks and real-world communication scenarios.

**Table 5. Specific Results of Part 3**

Question	Percentage of correct answer	Details
C1	49.4	Listen to details
C2	11.7	Listen and infer
C3	24.4	Listen and infer
C4	74.5	Listen to details; the listening information is similar to the answer, but related words repeat it
C5	40.4	Listen to details, two confusing sounds
Average	40.1	

Analyzing students' sub-skills in listening according to the TOEIC orientation, particularly in Part 3 (Short Conversations), reveals critical insights into their listening abilities and areas of difficulty. Table 5 presents specific results, showing that the overall capacity of learners to comprehend short conversations is relatively poor, with an average accuracy rate of only 40.1%.

The data indicate that students struggle significantly with listening to detailed information and making inferences. For instance, only 49.4% of students correctly answered question C1, which required listening to details. This percentage drops even further to 40.4% for question C5, which also involves listening to more information but with the added complexity of confusing sounds. These results suggest that while students can somewhat manage to catch detailed information, the presence of similar-sounding words or complex auditory input significantly hampers their ability to do so ([Almusharraf & Bailey, 2023](#); [Dalman & Plonsky, 2022](#)).

One notable finding is that students performed relatively well on question C4, with a 74.5% accuracy rate. This question involved listening to details where the information in the listening passage was closely matched with the answer but expressed using related words. The higher performance on this question implies that students are better at recognizing and understanding detailed information when it is presented in a straightforward manner or when there is a high degree of lexical overlap between the question and the passage.

However, the most striking observation is the shallow scores for questions that required students to listen and infer information. Only 11.7% of students correctly answered question C2 and 24.4% answered question C3 correctly. These results highlight a significant weakness in the ability of students to make inferences based on the information they hear. This deficiency could be attributed to a lack of reasoning skills or an inadequate application of listening sub-skills necessary for inferencing ([Masrul & Rasyidah, 2023](#)). It indicates that students may not be effectively employing strategies to piece together implicit information from conversations, which is a crucial aspect of higher-level listening comprehension.

The poor performance in listening to short conversations suggests that while students can handle some aspects of detail-oriented listening, they face substantial challenges when the task requires more complex cognitive processing, such as making inferences. The discrepancy between their ability to handle straightforward, detailed information and their difficulty with inferencing suggests a need for targeted instructional strategies ([Nadhira & Warni, 2021](#); [Richard, 2021](#)).

To improve these listening sub-skills, educators should focus on developing students' inferencing abilities and reasoning skills within listening exercises ([Min & Wenjun, 2022](#)). It could involve practice identifying implicit information, understanding context, and connecting disparate pieces of information ([Thu et al., 2023](#)). Additionally, exercises that mimic real-life conversations with varying levels of complexity and vocabulary can help students become more adept at navigating the nuances of spoken language ([Masrul & Rasyidah, 2023](#); [Suyitno et al., 2021](#)). By addressing these specific weaknesses through targeted training and practice, students can enhance their overall listening comprehension

skills, particularly in understanding short conversations. This improvement is crucial for success in TOEIC and similar listening assessments and effective communication in real-world situations.

**Table 6. Specific Results of Part 4**

Question	Percentage of Correct Answer	Details
T1	29.5	Listen and infer
T2	31	Listen and infer
T3	32.2	Listen to details; the answer is in long and complicated sentences
T4	60.1	Listen to details; the answer is in short and single sentences
T5	37.3	Listen to details; the answer is at the end of the listening; the information is short; no similar expressions in the listening
Average	38	

The analysis of students' listening sub-skills according to the TOEIC orientation in Part 4 (Short Talks) reveals significant challenges that learners face in comprehending and processing auditory information presented in monologues. Table 6 shows that the overall performance in this section is relatively low, with an average accuracy rate of only 38%.

The data indicate that students have considerable difficulty with questions requiring them to listen and infer information. Specifically, only 29.5% of students correctly answered question T1 and 31% answered question T2 correctly. These low scores suggest that students struggle significantly with making inferences from what they hear, which requires not only understanding the explicit information but also drawing conclusions based on implied content. This difficulty is consistent with the challenges observed in Part 3 and highlights a fundamental weakness in inferencing skills.

Question T4, with a 60.1% correct response rate, stands out as the only question where students performed at an average level. This relatively higher performance can be attributed to the nature of the question, which required listening to short and simple sentences. The straightforward and concise nature of the sentences likely made it easier for students to comprehend and recall the information, resulting in better performance.

In contrast, questions T3 and T5 had lower accuracy rates, with 32.2% and 37.3% correct responses, respectively. These questions involved listening to detailed information embedded in long, complicated sentences or presented at the end of the listening passage. The complexity and length of these sentences pose a challenge for students, requiring sustained concentration and the ability to process and retain extensive information. Additionally, the placement of crucial details at the end of the listening passage can be particularly problematic, as students' attention and focus may wane, leading to missed details.

The consistently low performance in questions requiring detailed listening and inferencing suggests that students may not effectively employ strategies for managing and processing complex auditory information. This includes the ability to identify critical points, maintain concentration over extended periods, and make connections between different parts of the monologue. To address these challenges, educators should focus on developing students' inferencing skills and strategies for handling detailed and complex auditory information ([Thu et al., 2023](#)). It could involve exercises emphasising identifying key points and practicing listening for specific details within longer passages ([Nushi & Orouji, 2020](#); [Sah & Shah, 2020](#)). Additionally, teaching students to take notes and summarize information can help improve their ability to retain and recall important details ([Hardiyanto et al., 2021](#); [Hong & Phan, 2020](#)).



Furthermore, incorporating varied listening activities that mimic real-life scenarios with different levels of complexity can help students build resilience and adaptability in their listening skills. By enhancing these sub-skills, students can improve their overall listening comprehension, which is crucial for success in TOEIC-oriented tasks and real-world communication (Hong & Phan, 2020; Masrul & Rasyidah, 2023). In conclusion, the findings highlight a significant need for targeted instructional strategies to address the specific listening challenges faced by students, particularly in making inferences and processing detailed information within complex auditory contexts. Through focused practice and skill development, students can enhance their listening proficiency and achieve better outcomes in TOEIC and similar assessments.

## CONCLUSION

The study's findings reveal that the research participants' listening capacity is merely average, even though the listening lesson is not strict and the listening content is comparable to the lesson material. The data presented above also helps to highlight some of the challenges learners face when listening, as well as the reasons for these issues. (1) Learners discern words expressing activities more accurately than nouns denoting locations and items, probably due to a lack of vocabulary competence. (2) Some words are difficult to discern, and comparable sounds are difficult to separate, maybe owing to a lack of vocabulary proficiency, judgmental skill, or inadequate listening style. (3) Students prefer to listen to separate sentences rather than paragraphs or simple sentences with little information rather than long sentences with many ideas, indicating that their sound recognition speed remains slow, as does their ability to concentrate, take notes, and remember. (4) Listening to material that is repeated is preferable than information that is mentioned just once, implying that the ability to concentrate, take notes, and recall is restricted; maybe pupils anticipate to hear it several times. (5) hearing to specific concepts outperforms hearing paired with inference, indicating that pupils have not used their inference abilities effectively when listening. This result is similar to what expert Ur (1996) stated in his language teaching book.

Thus, the above findings indicate that language learners frequently struggle with listening, which could be due to (1) a shortage of vocabulary competence, (2) limited capacity for sound recognition and differentiation, (3) a limited ability to use listening strategies such as making judgments, taking notes, and memorization, and (4) a lack of focus. Teachers should focus on the following concerns to assist students develop their listening skills: students should replenish their vocabulary knowledge on a regular basis. Listening, writing, and spelling practice, as well as learning to detect homophones, are all considered vital activities. Learners should practice thinking, reasoning, interpreting, and judging before to, during, and after listening. Listening and taking notes are also valuable skills for improving attention and information retention.

## *Funding and Conflicts of Interest*

The authors declare no funding and conflicts of interest for this research.

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