

Case Study

The Factors Having Influence on Learning Listening Skill in TOEIC- A View from Readability in A Case Study

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Abstract: This paper discusses the factors having influences on learning listening skill in a case study non-English majored student at Saigon Techology University (STU), Vietnam. Five main factors, including 18 elements, were identified: texts, listeners, speakers, tasks, and environment. The data were collected through questionnaire, including multiple choice questions and open questions, from 319 students. The results show that the texts and the listeners are 2 factors having close relation and influence each other with different rankings of different features; interesting, “physical and psychological states” is not the important element in this case. Based on statistical results, from a view of readability, the paper deeply analyzes these features to find the solutions in designing course syllabus, selecting materials, proposing teaching methods and improving the listening learning environment to meet the learning outcome; especially, achieving the outcome standard “B1”, shown the scale by the international TOEIC test, being trained at the school.

Keywords: learning listening skill, STU, TOEIC, readability, solutions.

INTRODUCTION

Saigon University of Technology (STU) chooses English as the first foreign language to teach in the training program for non-English majored students. Foreign language output standards built on the main language is English and TOEIC program has been taught at STU since 2009 to meet B1 (CEFR) for the output standard of school.

The TOEIC tests offer a complete, accurate picture of English-language proficiency in all four communication skills - listening, reading, speaking, and writing - and a range of skill levels, including beginner, intermediate and advanced levels [1]. Pourhosein, G. A., & Ahmadi, M. R. (2011) expresses that listening has an important role in the communication process and the four main areas of communication skills called listening, speaking, reading, and writing, listening is the most important of all. Therefore, it is very necessary to survey and analyze the factors affecting learning of listening skills of students at STU to find and give the applicable solutions to meet the English output standards for the development orientation of school.

Factors that influence English listening learning have been done in many research woks with different views, connecting with other skills or other fields with different terms.

¹ <https://www.ets.org/toEIC/organizations/about.html>

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Listening skill is very important in acquiring understandable input, and learning listening does not occur if there will not be any input as Hamouda (2013) states. Chastain (1971) expresses that the goal of listening is to comprehend the language at normal speed in an automatic condition. And in listening tasks, listeners try to construct a meaning when they get the information from the listening source as Roh. M (1990) presents.

The lists of general factors influence listening skill have been identified. Rubin. J (1994) stated 5 major factors affecting listening skill: (1) text characteristics (variation in a listening passage/text or associated visual support); (2) interlocutor characteristics (variation in the speaker's personal characteristics); (3) task characteristics (variation in the purpose for listening and associated responses); (4) listener characteristics (variation in the listener's personal characteristics); and (5) process characteristics (variation in the listener's cognitive activities and in the nature of the interaction between speaker and listener). Having the same factors but in different view, Boyle, J. (1984) examined in listening literature: (1) listener factors; (2) speaker factors, and (3) factors in material and medium. In addition, C. Goh (1999) also presented 5 general factors in her research: (1) environment; (2) tasks; (3) texts, (4) speakers, and (5) listeners.

Some factors or elements with their own characteristics have been investigated deeply and separately. Carver & Ronald P. (1973) examined “the rate of speech” in listening comprehension with the view psychology. Cervantes, R. & G. Gainer (1992) investigated the syntactic simplification and repetition on listening tasks to improve this skill teaching and learning. Brown, A. L. & A. S. Palinscar (1982) surveyed and analyzed the characteristics of texts to find the role of topics in texts in learning listening. Connecting listening comprehension with other fields by qualitative method, Bacon, Susan M. (1992) did the research about the relationship between Gender, Comprehension, Processing Strategies, Cognitive and Affective Response in Foreign Language Listening.

It can be seen that research about English listening skill has been done with the main tendencies: listening learning, listening teaching, listening comprehension, or listening comprehension with other interdisciplinary fields. Many studies show that the researchers have investigated, examined and analyzed the general factors, or some of them, or individual with specific characters quantitatively, qualitatively or both to identify the findings in their research.

Thus, studying the factors affecting listening skill of learners, there will be many aspects to exploit and analyze. Within the aim and paper’s scope, the factors having influence on learning listening will be investigated for students studying TOEIC program at STU, as a case study, from a view of readability.

Readability and Comprehension are closely related, but they are intrinsically different. Two concepts are not considered as synonyms because there is a remarkable distinction between them in many readability studies. Wray and Dahlia (2013) distinguish that readability is as a characteristic of the text itself and comprehension is understandability as an indication of human ability to make meaning of the text. The readability features, making a text easy, are content, style, design, and organization; but the human features, making a text easy, are prior knowledge, reading skill, interest, and motivation as Dubay (2007) [2] presents. Having the same view, Chiang *et al.*, (2008) and Jones (1997) state that the readability level of a text is an indicator of the textual difficulty level of the text, it is fixed for a given text and is not varied by human characteristics. Comprehension is an ability to understand the meaning or importance of something or the knowledge acquired as a result. Comprehension refers to whether listeners can understand the message communicated by a speaker. Comprehension is affected by human characteristics, such as the human background, prior knowledge, interest, and general ability.

Investigating readability, Dale and Chall (1949) gave a common definition as follows: “the sum total (including the interactions) of all those elements within a given piece of printed material that affect the success of a group of readers have with it. The success is the extent to which they understand it at an optimal speed and find it interesting.” Fukun Xing, Dongyuan Cheng, & Jianzhong Pu (2008) presented: “readability is how easily written materials can be read and understood. Readability depends on many factors, including (a) the average length of sentence in a passage, (b) the number of new words a passage contains, (c) the grammatical complexity of the language used.”

This paper is conducted by the following research questions: (1) Which is the level of STU students when they learning listening in TOEIC program?; (2) What are the factors having influence on learning listening skill in TOEIC for learners at STU, from a view of readability?; and (3) What are the practical solutions to improve listening learning for STU students?

The paper is done with the hope to determine the factors having influences on listening learning largely in quantitative direction, from a readability view. Therefore, the paper surveys, analyses and examines 5 main factors: texts, listeners, speakers, tasks, and environment to identify the influence of these factors in learning listening skill of STU students with the tendency: these factors make students’ learning easier or more difficult in listening TOEIC program.

The paper does not investigate the factors on the view depending on subjective factors of human, comprehension. Based on the findings, the paper gives the applicable solutions and suggestions for future works.

METHODS AND DATA

To study the factors having influence on learning listening skill in TOEIC - a view from readability in a case study, the paper uses the statistical methods to make statistics of the data collected from the placement test of the students, 8590 tests, including 7 majors, from the school year 2017 to 2021 (5 years recently), and the questionnaire collected from 319 second-year students randomly.

The placement test is designed in format of TOEIC test, including 2 skills: Reading (495 points) and Listening (495 points). The total questions are 100: 50 questions for reading and 50 questions for listening; and because of the purpose of the paper, only the results of listening test are investigated.

The STU students, first, will take 4 English course in their school program, then they can learn extra English class for their B1 level to meet the outcome standard of school, so the second- year students, who have already learned TOEIC- English1, TOEIC- English 2, and are learning TOEIC- English 3, are chosen as the subject to investigate the questionnaire in this paper. It can be seen that they are enough time and experience to give assessment for the questionnaire about the factors having influences on listening skill in their English courses as well as the open comment effectively for the survey.

The questionnaire includes 2 main parts: (1) Personal information and (2) Investigating the factors that influence listening skill. In the first part, full name, class, major, age, gender, mail and hand phone are written. In the second part, 5 main factors: texts, speakers, listeners, tasks, and environment are conducted. In this part, each of the factors is described by subordinated elements, and the items are chosen by the ranking: 1: Completely unimportant; 2: Not important; 3: Maybe; 4: Important; 5: Very important. The students first rank the number, then they can write their own ideas about the factors or elements in the part “other ideas”. It can be seen in detail in the following table:

Table 1: Factors having influence on learning listening skill in TOEIC at STU

Factors having influence on learning listening skill in TOEIC at STU				
Texts	Speakers	Listeners	Tasks	Environment
1. Phonological features	1. Accent	1. Interest and purpose	1. Sufficient time available for processing	1. Physical conditions
2. Vocabulary	2. Competence in speaking	2. Prior knowledge and experience	2. Other ideas	2. Other ideas
3. Speech rate	3. Other ideas	3. Physical and psychological states		
4. Type of input		4. Knowledge and content		
5. Sentences length and complexity		5. Accuracy of pronunciation		
6. Visual support		6. Knowledge of grammar		
7. Other ideas		7. Memory		
		8. Attention and concentration		
		9. Other ideas		

Although the questionnaires could be done online to save time and labor, we decided to conduct them at class directly because of the main reasons: (1) students can be explained clearly about the questions of the questionnaire by the teachers; (2) this survey is considered as an exercise for them to get plus marks so they can do the survey effectively; (3) the teachers can help students answer the open questions or explanations the reasons for their ranking.

This questionnaire survey was done by this way with the hope that the paper can find the related problems and the students’ needs when they learn listening skills in TOEIC program at STU in order to get the valid results that are used SPSS 22.

Besides, the descriptive and analytical methods are also applied to analyze the results with statistical data to find out the factors affecting learning listening skill in TOEIC program at STU. Based on the findings, the paper can carry out as well as suggest the practical solutions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

From a view of readability, we only investigate and analysis 5 main factors: texts, speakers, listeners, tasks and environment that include the objective elements with quantitative view and give applicable suggestions for the findings. This paper doesn't investigate the elements with subjective features of learners.

The Results of Placement test in TOEIC Listening

As mentioned above, the placement test includes 2 parts: Listening and Reading, but this paper is done to find the solutions to help students learn listening in TOEIC program; therefore, only the result of listening part is shown in the following table:

Table 2: The results of placement test – listening part in TOEIC at STU

	Placement Test- Listening Skill					
School Years	2017	2018	2019	2000	2021	Overall
Number of students	1632	1675	1429	1671	2183	8590
No Attendance	101	47	95	66	2183	2492
TOEIC Scale						
000-050	335	199	328	265		1127
055-100	418	438	368	432		1656
105-150	500	615	457	585		2157
Total	1354	1299	1248	1328	0	7432
Percentage	82.97%	77.55%	87.33%	80.67%	00,00	82.13%
155-200	175	224	129	217		745
205-250	64	95	30	69		258
255-300	24	33	16	22		96
Total	263	352	175	308	0	1098
Percentage	16.12%	21.01%	12.25%	18.43%	00.00	16.95%
305-350	9	16	5	10		40
355-400	3	6	0	3		12
405-450	2	2	1	2		7
455-495	1	0	0	0		1
Total	15	24	6	15	0	60
Percentage	00.92%	01.43%	00.42%	00.90%	00.00	00,92%

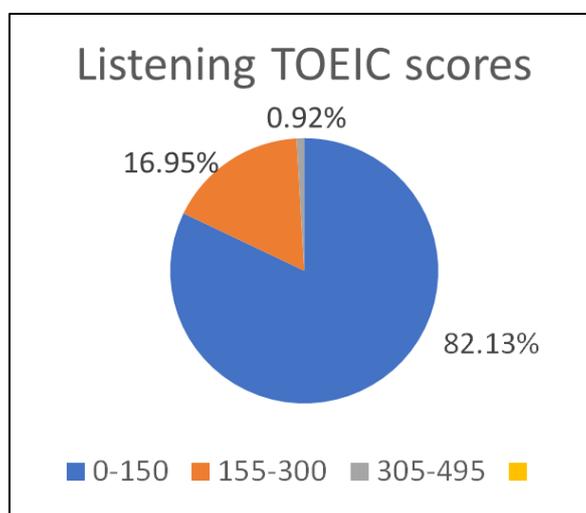


Chart 1: The result of TOEIC listening placement test at STU

The placement test was done at school by freshman for 5 years: 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, but in 2021 due to Covid 19, this test was done online, so only the reading part was done and the students could not do listening part in this test. Therefore, the table 2 is not shown the data for the listening result of the placement test in 2021.

It can be seen that 8590 students took the tests and 7432 of them got from 0 to 150/495, it occupied 82.13%. Only 0.92% got 355-495 and in this number, most of them (40/60 students) got 305-350. It is similar for 1098 students got 155- 300/495 (16, 95%) which the larger number of them (745/1098) got 155-200/495.

The most important thing from the results shows that most of fresher’s (over 82%) are at the starter level for listening skill. Therefore, from a readability view, finding the factors having influences on learning listening skill in TOEIC program in order to improve teaching and learning this skill for students at STU is very necessary.

The Results of Survey “The Factors having Influence on Learning Listening Skill in TOEIC

In this part, SPSS 22 is used to analyze the descriptive statistics to count percentage (%) of Frequency and the Mean of the survey designed by Likert’s Scale. The results are shown with 3 levels as follows:

- 1.00-2.60= Completely important/Not important
- 2.61-3.40= Maybe
- 3.41-5.0= Important/ Very important

Text Factor

The data shows that most of students (82.5%) believed that this factor is important (54.9%) or very important (27.6%). Investigating in each of elements with different features, the data shows that the levels of importance are ranked in order from highest to lowest as follows: (1) Vocabulary; (2) Speech rate; (3) Sentences length and Complexity; (4) Phonological Features; (5) Type of input; and (6) Visual support. We can see more details in the following table:

Table 3: The elements having influence on texts

No	The elements having influence on texts	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Phonological Features	319	4.08	.732
2	Vocabulary	319	4.44	.679
3	Speech rate	319	4.21	.730
4	Type of input	319	3.89	.786
5	Sentences length and complexity	319	4.11	.783
6	Visual support	319	3.88	.828
	Valid N (listwise)	319		

The students state that all of the elements in Text factor are important or very important in their learning listening skill. It is explained in their other ideas as follows: the students are poor at vocabulary (M=4.44); the presence unfamiliar words make them confused about the content words; this includes English basic words, idioms, jargon, and academic terms. The perceived speed or slowness at which words are produced is very important for them because they cannot pronounce words correctly or even could not know the popular words (M=4.21). They are also poor at grammar (M=4.11), so they could not catch the content of the long or complex sentences with embedded clauses. With phonological Features (M=4.08) that might make it difficult to divide modifications streams of speech, such as linking, stress, students state that they do not know how to use these pronunciation rules correctly. In addition, the students write that the type of input (M= 3.89) that effects of features related to specific text types; such as lectures, TV/radio news broadcast, stories, face-to-face conversations, is also important, and they need to learn popular topics, from the easy to difficult levels, with the teachers’ helps as well as visual support (M=3.88), such as pictures, handouts, captions, subtitles that support the spoken text.

Thus, the statistics and the students’ answers show that designing the course syllabuses and selecting students’ books form the starter level (English 0) to the higher levels (English 4 = A2 of CEFR) with the basic vocabulary and grammar, basic rules for pronunciation, and popular topics in life are very important.

Speaker Factor

With 2 elements in speaker factor, “Accent” and “Competence in speaking”, the students’ ranking for speaker factors with different ideas and their choices are explained by the interesting reasons written in the other ideas as follows:

Table 4: Ranking of speaker factors

Valid	Elements			
	Accent		Competence in speaking	
	Frequency	Valid Percent	Frequency	Valid Percent
Completely Unimportant	2	.6	2	.6
Not Important	6	1.9	4	1.3
Maybe	88	27.6	112	35.1
Important	136	42.6	146	45.8
Very Important	87	27.3	55	17.2
Total	319	100.0	319	100.0

The data shows 69.9% thinks speaker factor is important (42.6%) and very important (27.3%) because the students think that the competence in speaking; such as the speaker’s command of English, overall fluency, will interest listeners or facilitate their comprehension.

It is interesting that 88 students (27.6%) rank “maybe” because they think that speakers only need to pronounce correctly and they think that it is useful for them to listen different accents. While 6 of students (1.9%) think that this factor is not important since they seldom listen to English so they couldn’t decide for their choice.

This investigation also shows 69.9% agrees that accent is important, and they think that besides American accent in TOEIC test, it should be supplied another supplemental texts in different accents with popular topics, such as Canadian English, New Zealand English, South African English, Australian English to meet practical purposes in work of learners.

Listener Factor

The statistic shows that 7 out of 8 elements: (1) Interest and purpose; (2) Prior knowledge and experience; (3) Knowledge of context; (4) Accuracy of pronunciation; (5) Knowledge of grammar; (6) Memory; and (7) Attention and concentration are ranked by important and very important because M is from 3.92 to 4.54. It can be seen in detail in the following table:

Table 5: Listeners’ factor having influence on learning listening in TOEIC

No	Elements	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Interest and purpose	319	3.92	.742
2	Prior knowledge and experience	319	4.25	.731
3	Physical and psychological states	319	2.37	1.236
4	Knowledge of context	319	3.96	.764
5	Accuracy of pronunciation	319	4.54	.662
6	Knowledge of grammar	319	4.33	.758
7	Memory	319	4.22	.740
8	Attention and concentration	319	4.28	.700
	Valid N (listwise)	319		

The results show that the elements in this factor have close relation with the elements of the text factor. This relation can be seen clearly when it is analyzed in the following details:

The students think 2 elements: “interest and purpose” (M=3.92) and “knowledge and context” (M=3.96) are important. They believe that the listening tasks related to their interests and meet their purpose are crucial for them to continue listening, but they also show that they need to learn different kinds of topic to meet daily activities. The element “knowledge of context” that is a general sense of what the spoken input is about is important because they think that when learners have well prepared for this step it is useful for them to do listening exercises. In addition, they also give the idea that “prior knowledge and experience”, including specific knowledge about the topic being talked about is important (M=4.25) and the texts should be included this knowledge.

It is clear that these elements have a close relation with the element “type of input” in the text factor; therefore, students should be taught about the lexicon and structures in the specific type, popular topics, presentation forms and the methods so that the students can grasp the contents in a listening lesson. It means that choosing textbooks suitable for the students’ needs and level should be considered carefully.

The students also answer that the element “memory” - the ability to retain what is heard or processed - is very important (M=4.22), and they want teachers help them process listening tasks effectively by different methods as well as “visual support” at the starter level. Based on this basic ground, the students can improve their “attention and concentration” (M=4.28) when they can improve their attention ability to the task at hand, and they will not be distracted or discouraged when understanding is not immediately forthcoming.

All of the students agree that “knowledge of grammar” (M=4.33) and “accuracy of pronunciation” (M= 4.54) are 2 elements playing very important role in learning listening in TOEIC. It is the same ideas when they decided: Phonological Features, Vocabulary, Speech Rate, and Sentences Length and Complexity are crucial as their answers in the part “text factor”. The students believe that listeners who do not pronounce certain words accurately may have problems recognizing these words when speakers speak them correctly and it is difficult to understand or parse a long complex sentence. Most of the students write that they are poor at grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, so they want teachers help them to grasp and apply phonological feature, pronounce vocabulary correctly, and use grammatical points

effectively in contexts. Therefore, besides applying the suitable methodology in teaching and learning listening in TOEIC program, choosing textbooks including these elements to meet students’ need is very necessary and practical.

The most interesting point in this statistic is that the students answer that the element “physical and psychological states” (M= 2.37) is not the important element in this case. To investigate deeply this element, the answers are written in the other ideas show that fatigue, nervousness, anxiety, impatience, feeling relaxed and calm will have bad influence on listening English; it is clear that poor health will inevitably lead to a negative impact on learning listening, and listeners cannot do listening tasks effectively when they have health problems. However, in this case, learning listening in TOEIC is at STU, so when students have health problems, they can not attend the school. Therefore, this element is not important in this case study; importantly, as mentioned above, the paper is conducted from the view of readability so this element is presented as an example to distinguish between “readability” and “comprehension”.

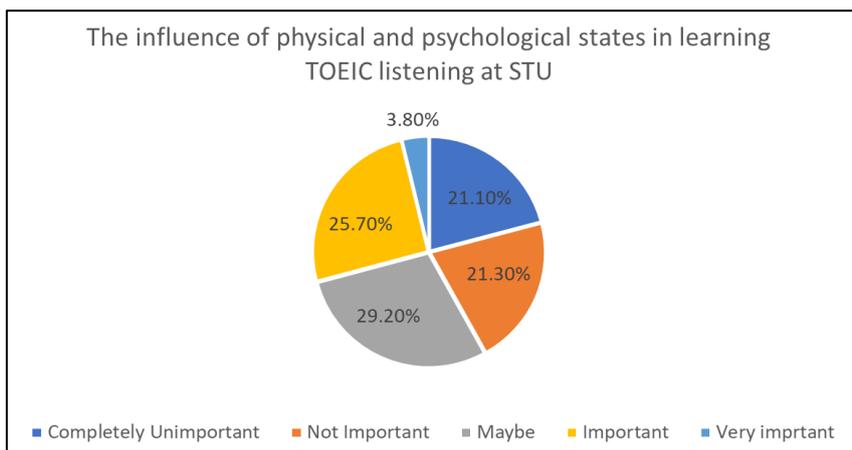


Chart 2: The influence of physical and psychological states in learning TOEIC listening at STU

Task Factor

The statistic shows the task factor is important (M=4.09). To explain the reason for this choice, the students comment that they need enough time between processing one part and the next or before responding at the starter level. It means that the textbooks should be designed many activities for pre- listening, and the listening tasks should be at slow speed rate. The result is presented as follows:

Table 6: Sufficient time available for processing in TOEIC listening

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Sufficient time available for processing	319	4.09	.710
	Valid N (listwise)	319		

Environment Factor

Table 7: Environment Factor

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Physical conditions	319	4.30	.702
	Valid N (listwise)	319		

The result show that “physical condition” is ranked as an important element in learning listening in TOEIC at STU (M=4.30, 284 students, 89%). To clarify the reasons for this ranking, the students comment that the presence of noise, the acoustics in a room, or the loudness of input make them difficult to do listening tasks. Therefore, the sound, including speakers and mic, needs to be clear and fully equipped for TOEIC test practice; classrooms also need to be quite to practice listening tests effectively.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper investigates 18 elements, from a readability view, divided into 5 main factors: Texts, Speakers, Listeners, Tasks, and Environment. The results show that most of the students agree 17 elements play important role in their learning listening in TOEIC program at STU except for the element “Physical and psychological states” because this element related to the listeners’ comprehension with subjective features. This element should be studied with other

interdisciplinary fields deeply and separately, such as psychology and health care from a different view that human is the research subject.

Based on the result of TOEIC listening placement tests, the paper is conducted the factors having influence on learning listening skill in TOEIC- a view from readability- at STU as a case study. The findings show that most of the students are at the starter level and give their comments related to 5 main factors: texts, speakers, learners, and environment in the other ideas. The most important finding of the paper shows that selecting texts to meet the learners' needs about vocabulary, grammar, topics, pronunciation for the basic level is necessary in this case study. Therefore, from the view of readability, we have written the new course syllabuses for STU students. The TOEIC curriculum consists of 4 main levels: English 1, English 2; English 3, and English 4. Based on the most basic foundation: A1-A2 of CEFR, including the books: "My First TOEIC Class – Starter for beginner level" for English 1 and English 2; "My First TOEIC Class – Starter Plus for elementary" for English 3 and English 4 as the textbooks, and supplementary materials of teachers in charge, STU students can start learning listening in specific, and speaking, reading, and writing in general effectively. Besides, the curriculum of English 0 (Pre English 1) and TOEIC Exam Preparation have already designed to meet learners' needs at STU. Besides, 2 labs for learning and teaching English are being equipped and can be used in 2023.

In addition, a seminar about teaching and learning TOEIC program at STU was held with 3 presentations: (1) How TOEIC textbooks can help improve learners' pronunciation - some personal experience; (2) The orientation for teaching TOEIC and some suggestions to teach TOEIC effectively"; and (3) Some models of extracurricular activities support students to improve their English communication skills during the teaching process. With the aims to exchange experience to improve teaching and learning in TOEIC, the seminar gave the practical solutions not only to help learners learn listening skill effectively but also to update the effective methods for the lectures in teaching TOEIC at STU as a case study.

Selecting new textbooks, holding seminar, building labs have been implemented and applied for teaching and learning TOEIC at STU based on this paper's findings. The paper's result is also the foundation step for our team to do more research on integrating listening skills with speaking and reading skills, design supplemental materials to meet the aims and requirements for English program of STU in the future.

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