

Teaching Listening Skills for English Non-Majored Students at Ba Ria - Vung Tau University: Difficulties and Solutions

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Abstract: This research was conducted to investigate the teaching of listening skills at Ba Ria – Vung Tau University. Its focus was on the reality of teaching listening skills for English non-major students, the difficulties faced by EFL teachers in teaching this skill and their recommendations.

The findings of the study uncovered a dull reality of the listening teaching at Ba Ria – Vung Tau University, especially low interests of both teachers and students in the listening teaching and learning, the lack of modern listening facilities, students' low proficiency in English listening, teachers' limited listening competence, inappropriate listening teaching methods, the difference between teachers' favors and students' interests towards listening activities, and so on. Besides, the study revealed that EFL lecturers at Ba Ria – Vung Tau University had been facing a lot of challenges in teaching listening skills. The prominent obstacles included students' low motivation and limited vocabulary, large class-size and mixed ability, too difficult listening tasks. Therefore, the suggestions and implications of the research were worked out to increase the effectiveness of teaching listening for English non-major students at BVU. Providing students with key words before listening to the passage, adapting listening tasks to suit students' levels, helping them with listening strategies and using more interesting materials were offered by many BVU lecturers.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. RATIONALE

In recent years, English teaching plays an important role in the period of modernization and industrialization. In order to develop students' communicative competence, the emphasis of the English teaching has been placed on the mastery of communicative language skills in which the four language skills including listening, speaking, reading, writing have been given balanced weight in the national syllabus of English teaching for non-major students.

Of these four language skills, listening has long been considered the most challenging and difficult one by both foreign language teachers and students. The qualities and effectiveness of teaching and learning this skill are not really as good and high as expected. From the fact that most EFL teachers at BVU have faced a lot of problems in teaching listening. Hopefully, the study will benefit teachers who want to be successful in the English listening teaching.

1.2. AIMS OF THE STUDY

The aims of the study are as follows:

- To find out the real situation of teaching listening skills for English non-major students in BVU.
- To investigate EFL teachers' problems in teaching listening skills
- To suggest some solutions and implications for improving teaching listening skill.

1.3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

For the above aims, the following three research questions are posed:

1. *What is the reality of teaching listening skill for English non-major students?*
2. *What difficulties do lecturers encounter in teaching listening skill?*
3. *What are the solutions to the difficulties EFL teachers encounter in teaching listening skill?*
4. *What are the implications for improving the quality of teaching listening skill”?*

1.4. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This research is conducted with non-major students such as students from Economy Faculty, Chemistry Faculty or Tourism Faculty and EFL teachers who have been teaching English at BVU. The study mainly has a look at existing problems in teaching English listening and points out teachers' solutions to these problems.

Besides, the research has just given some suggestions and implications so as to partly improve the quality of teaching English listening skills.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. OVERVIEW

It can be said that listening is one of the most challenging skills for both EFL teachers and learners. Therefore, more and more studies of the issues of teaching and learning this skill have been particularly concerned by a lot of researchers and educators.

Yagang (1993) pointed out four major factors that made listening difficult to learners such as the message, the speaker, the listener and the physical setting. He also suggested some solutions to these problems so that EFL teachers could provide their students with suitable listening materials, background and linguistic knowledge, comfortable classroom conditions, enabling skills and useful drills to encourage them to obtain effective listening strategies.

Olaofe (1994) studied teaching listening comprehension in large classes. He believed that students could get a lot even under these conditions. In his viewpoint, it was possible to create an interactive learning environment in large listening classes. In this case, the only solution is to work in groups in which all the learners should attempt to do the task individually before getting involved in group-discussion. During group reports and presentations, practice in note-taking was emphasized and the whole class participation enhanced. As a result, the usual rowdiness accompanying group presentation is considerably reduced.

Jian (2005) paid much attention to teaching listening in a communicative classroom. She showed the disadvantages of traditional listening teaching and discovered some communicative ways to teach listening from her experience. In contrast, in the communicative classes, students are given a real communicative environment with a variety of listening tasks, materials and listening strategies so that they can become more active and skillful in listening.

Djiwandono (2006) indicated a technique for teaching listening comprehension that is a combination of cooperative and strategic learning. Students are required to work in pairs or in small groups and then cooperate in comprehending the message of a recorded speech by using listening strategies. This technique helps teachers create a positive classroom atmosphere as well as promotes interaction among students.

In Vietnam, this issue has also been received much attention via various studies by teachers and educators. It proves that teaching listening skills for Vietnamese learners has become an integral part in the trend of globalization. So far, there have been many researches related to this field. Le Thi Xuan Anh (2001) revealed that "Listening Strategies" were unconsciously used by Vietnamese students at tertiary level. She realized a relationship between the learners' listening abilities and their strategy choice. The better listeners seem to employ listening strategies more often than the worse ones.

Pham Thanh Vinh (2002) investigated the difficulties in listening faced by first-year students of English at Da Nang College of Education.

Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan (2011) kept on studying the difficulties in teaching listening comprehension in the course book "Head for Business" to the second-year students at Economics Department, Hanoi Open University. She pointed out the challenges that listening teachers often face when teaching the listening comprehension part of the course book such as the lack of academic training for teachers, students' mixed abilities and passive learning habits, poor facility of teaching and learning, time allocation for listening comprehension as well as characteristics of the listening comprehension. The research also suggested some solutions to improve the efficiency of the listening comprehension.

2.2. Teaching English Listening Skills

2.2.1. What is the Listening Skill?

Listening is theoretically considered as a process in which individuals concentrate on selected area of aural input, construct meaning from passages, and relate what they hear to existing knowledge (O'Malley, Chamot and Kupper (1989)).

Rost (1994) states that listening is a complex process which enables us to comprehend spoken message.

Anderson and Lynch (1988) define listening as "*the means to immediate oral production, the imitation of spoken forms*". Listeners hear the input as well as actively process the message to comprehend. The objective of listening comprehension is that the learners are able to talk and write about what they have heard after listening. The authors emphasize that the "mental model" which is built as a representation of a spoken message is the result of our combining the new information in what we just heard with our previous knowledge and experience.

Buck (2001, p.31) points out that listening is an active process of constructing meaning by utilizing knowledge to the incoming sound in which both linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge are involved. He

indicates that “comprehension is affected by a wide range of variables, and that potentially any characteristic of the speaker, the situation or the listener can affect the comprehension of the message”.

2.2.2. The Importance of Listening Skills

In daily life, people spend much time listening: students listen to their teachers, children listen to their parents, and adults listen to the news on TV and radio. Therefore, listening is said to be the most common communicative activity in daily life: “we can expect to listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read, and five times more than we write” (Morley, 1991: 82).

In language use, the listening skill plays an integral part. It consists of various types of listener’s knowledge: knowledge of phonology, vocabulary, and semantics of the language in use, culture of its people, his life experience in the topic, his ability to predict and respond. It decides his understanding, content and attitudes towards the speaker’s saying or utterance as well. Harmer (2000) argues that apart from their teacher’s accents and varieties, the learners should be prepared to hear different ones for the real world listening such as telephone conversations, speeches, broadcast news, announcement, advertisement, etc.

2.2.3. Teacher’s Role in Teaching Listening

Gardner and Lambert (1972) propose that the way teacher presents the contents must be dynamic and interesting to get students involved. In addition, teachers should find out activities and employ different techniques. Brown (1994) also agrees that before the class, teacher should help students think about a schema for what they will hear. According to Rost, M (1994), language teachers had better provide their learners with various types of support to help them develop listening skill. This includes talking to learners in the target language, raising their awareness of their listening styles and strategies and supplying a range of materials, speaking styles and listening situations.

Underwood (1989: 22) states that teachers need to give out systematic opportunities for their students to learn how to determine what an utterance or conversation is about, establish who is talking and to whom and recondite the mood and attitude of the speakers.

2.2.4. The Challenge of Teaching Listening Skills

Teaching listening skills is one of the most difficult tasks for any ESL teacher. This is because successful listening skills are acquired over time and with much practice. It is frustrating for students because there are no rules as in grammar teaching. Speaking and writing also have very specific exercises that can lead to improved skills. This is not to say that there are not ways of improving listening skill; however, they are difficult to quantify.

It can be seen that listening equipments such as listening tapes, cassette players play an important role in teaching English listening skill. Thus, good and modern listening equipments are vital for teaching listening. Many teachers state that the new textbooks cover a large amount of knowledge which hinders students’ listening learning whereas many students are too weak to catch the listening text. That is because they lack vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and background knowledge. Therefore, it is very difficult for teachers to organize the listening lessons and use all of activities they designed in their class.

Moreover, many students do not really pay attention to the listening skill. They only focus on learning grammar, vocabulary and ignore this skill. They do not like learning listening because they find it very difficult and finally they spend little time practicing it. Hence, this negatively affects the process of teaching listening skills of teachers.

2.2.5. Common Methods of Teaching Listening

Underwood (1989, p90-109) indicates four common methods of teaching second or foreign language listening which are grammar- translation method, grammar method, audio-lingual method and task-based method.

2.2.6. Principles of Teaching English Listening Skills

In order to teach any language skill, it is very important for teachers to follow the principles for teaching that skill successfully and methodically. Forseth et al (1996: 72) suggests seven principles for teaching listening skills.

First, teachers should use authentic texts and present them naturally and realistically with background noise or interruptions and different voice types and accents.

Second, teachers had better include various types of texts such as conversations/ dialogues, jokes, lectures, news broadcasts, songs or narratives to make students get used to listening to different pieces of speech and avoid boredom.

Third, teachers need to use primarily meaning based tasks for students to do. For students at the lower levels, some tasks may not be meaning-based but the longer-term goal is to use language for communication. Fourth, teachers should state a specific purpose for listening task. The task should be designed to practice on or more sub-skills (skimming total comprehension...).

Another principle is that teachers had better introduce a listening task before asking the students to listen in order to help them to focus their attention.

Next, generally it is best for teachers to pre-teach only vocabulary that is necessary for understanding the main idea of the text.

Lastly, teachers can let students listen to the text more than once. Often the listeners will not catch the full meaning the first time.

2.2.7. Stages of Teaching Listening Skills

Teaching listening text can be divided into three main stages: pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening. Each stage has its own aims and activities.

a) Pre-listening

Pre-listening stage aims at preparing students with everything necessary for listening and understanding the listening text. This stage is of great importance since it leads students to the listening passage that they are going to listen, arouses their interests and provides students with the purposes of listening.

b) While-listening

The aim of this stage is to facilitate students' listening and check their comprehension. While the students are listening to the text for the first time, they can check their guess and give the correct answer to the guiding questions. Then the teacher gives the students some tasks to do while they are listening for the second time. They can do some of the activities such as: gap-filling, true or false statements, answering comprehension questions, matching, multiple choice, reordering, etc. The students may need to listen to the text more than once so that they can finish their while-listening activities. After checking the students' answers, the teacher should emphasize the key points of the text and explain the difficulties in vocabulary or structures that the students encounter while listening. Teachers must make sure that students are not allowed to look at the tapescript of the listening text.

The topic of the listening text and the students' interests also decides the success of the while-listening tasks. Students may feel bored if the same activities are repeated over and over again. Thus a variety of activities should be done on different occasions. It is advisable that while-listening activities should suit students' different levels and needs so that they are encouraged to listen better.

c) Post-listening

At this stage, students can have opportunities to practice using what they have got from the listening text. Post-listening activities are performed after the listening is finished. According to Underwood (1989), the first purpose of those activities is to check how well the students understood and whether they have finished the listening task. The second one is to reflect on why some students have failed to understand or miss parts of the passage. Moreover, post-listening activities aims at expanding the topic or the language of the listening text. Students are also given an opportunity to consider the attitude of the speaker in the listening text because they can realize the purpose of the speaker based on his/her attitude.

First, data collected from the survey and observations will be analyzed in detail and the results will be categorized to synthesize. At the same time, interviews with teachers who have just participated in the survey will help the author clarify and illustrate their opinions.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. OVERVIEW

This chapter focuses on the analysis of data collected mainly from the questionnaires to both teachers and students, the informal interviews conducted with teachers and the class observations. The findings are presented systematically along with the researcher's explanations and evaluation aiming at studying the current situation of teaching listening skill for non-major students, exploring teachers' problems in teaching listening, finding out the solutions to these problems and then presenting the pilot teaching.

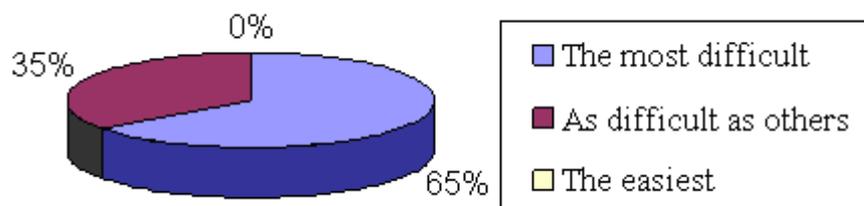
3.2. FINDINGS

3.2.1. The Reality of Teaching Listening at BVU

3.2.1.1. Teachers' and Students' Attitudes towards Listening Teaching and Learning

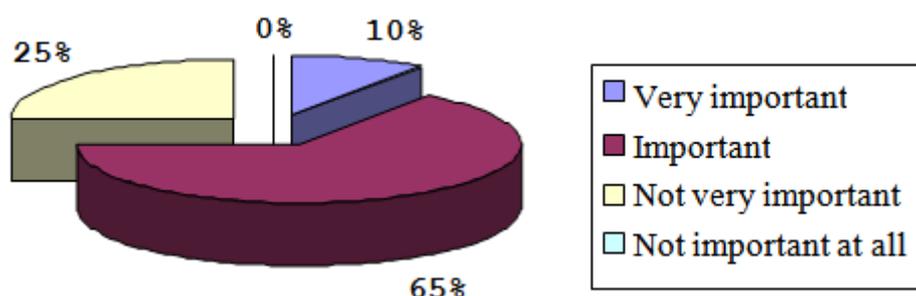
a. Evaluation of the Listening Skill

☞ *Question for students:* How do you feel about the listening skill in comparison with other skills?



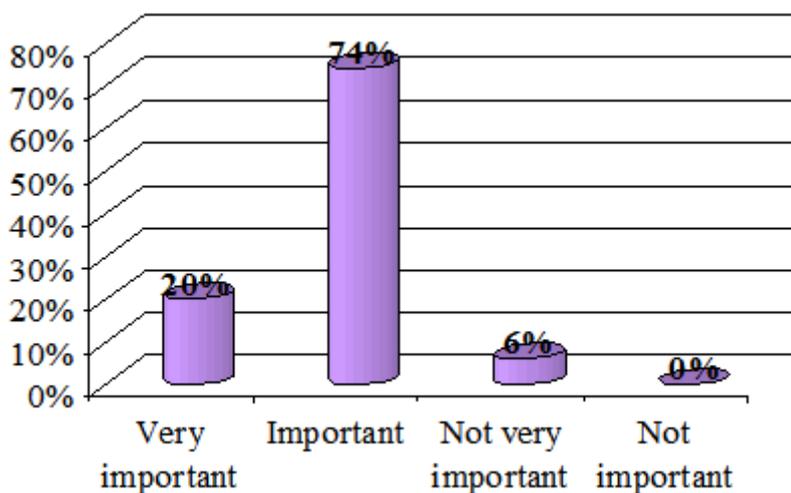
b. The Importance of Listening Skills

☞ *Question for students:* Do you find it important to learn listening skills?



c. The Importance of Listening Teaching Skill

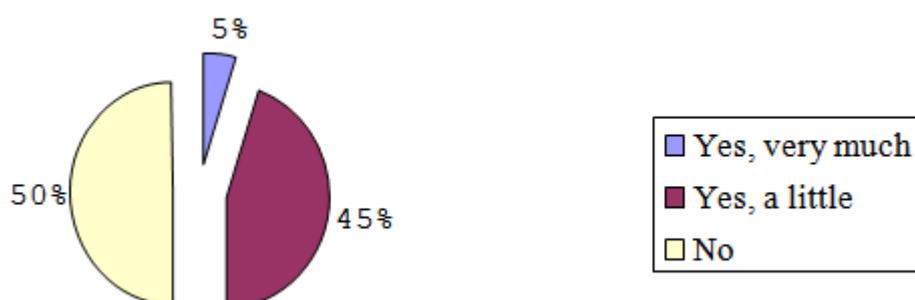
☞ *Question for teachers:* How important is listening teaching skill?



d. Interests in Listening Lessons

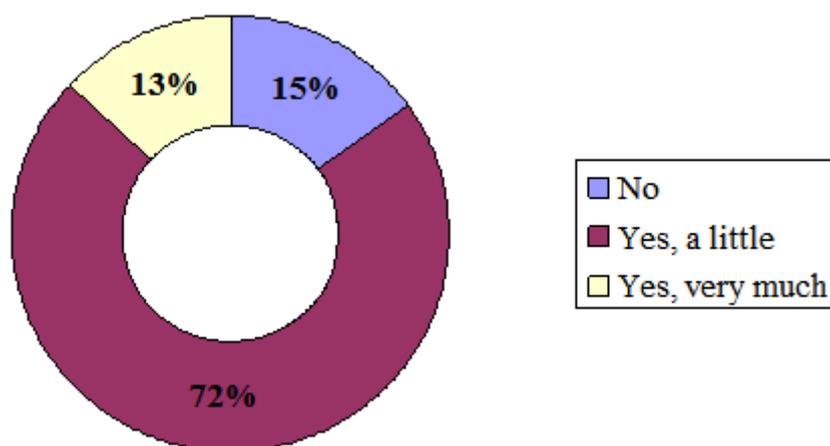
▪ Teachers' Interests in Teaching Listening Skills

☞ *Question for teachers:* Do you like teaching listening skills?



▪ **Students' Interests in Listening Lessons**

Question for students: Do you enjoy listening lessons?



3.2.2 Teachers' Methodology and Strategies of Listening Teaching in the Classroom

Question for teachers: What listening strategies do you use to teach your students?

Listening Strategies	Teachers (No = 10)	Percentage (%)
Activating their previous knowledge to understand what is being spoken	5	50%
Using title, subtitles, pictures, diagrams accompanying the listening task	7	70%
Reading through the requirement of the tasks to get general ideas	7	70%
Guessing the answer using linguistic clues and context	8	80%
Predicting about what they are going to listen to	5	50%
Taking note the main ideas	6	60%
Others	1	10%

3.2.3. Activities in Listening Lessons

a. Frequency of Organizing Pre-listening Activities

Question for teachers: How often do you organize Pre-listening activities?

Pre-listening Activities	Teachers (N=10) – Percentage (%)									
	Always		Often		Sometimes		Seldom		Never	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Prediction	4	40%	8	80%	6	60%	1	10%		
Pre-teaching vocabulary and structures	8	80%	3	30%						
Discussion	4	40%	5	50%	6	60%				
Warm-up games	7	70%	4	40%						
Providing background knowledge			5	50%						

b. Techniques Used at While-listening Stage

Question for teachers: Which techniques should be used at while-listening stage?

1- strongly agree 2- agree 3- disagree 4- strongly disagree 5- don't know

Techniques	1		2		3		4		5	
Playing the tape as many times as possible for students to do the listening tasks.	1	10%	4	40%	5	50%				
Playing the tape with necessary pauses for students to do the listening tasks once.	1	10%	9	90%						
Playing twice or three times for students to do the tasks first, then transcript sentence by sentence.			8	80%	2	20%				
Playing the tape and complete doing listening comprehension only.					10	100%				
Asking students to take note before or after doing tasks.	3	30%	7	70%						

c. Activities Teachers usually Conduct to Motivate Students' Participation at Post-listening Stage

Question for teachers: At post-listening stage, which activities do you usually conduct to motivate your students' participation?

Activities	Teachers (N= 10)	Percentage (%)
Discussion	5	50%
Interview	3	30%
Role-play based on the listening content	8	80%
Communication games	4	40%
Retelling story	2	20%
Writing about similar topics	1	10%

3.2.4 Listening Difficulties Perceived by Teachers

Question for teachers: Which difficulties do you often encounter when teaching a listening lesson?

Difficulties	Teachers (No = 10)	Percentage (%)
Students' low motivation or passive attitude	10	100%
Students' limited vocabulary	10	100%
Large classes and mixed ability	9	90%
Lack of teaching facilities and teaching aids	7	70%
Time limitation for curriculum	8	80%
Lack of experience in teaching listening	1	10%
Others	1	10%

3.3. Informants' Suggestions for Better Listening Lessons

3.3.1. Student Informants' Suggestions

Suggestions		Students (No= 100)	Percentage (%)
<i>Facilities</i>	Using more modern technology or facilities: computers, CDs, cassettes, etc.	61	61%
	Using more supplementary references to improve listening skill	40	40%
<i>Teachers</i>	Designing more interesting listening tasks	54	54%
	Create more suitable listening tasks to students' levels	74	74%
	Guiding and instructing students how to listen and do the task, emphasize the purposes or key words (equipping you with necessary strategies in listening)	98	98%
	Providing background information and vocabulary for listening activities	100	100%

3.3.2. Teacher Informants' Suggestions

Suggestions	Teachers (N= 10)	Percentage (%)
Using interesting games to motivate students	8	80%
Providing key words with their pronunciation before listening	10	100%
Having students work in groups and do different tasks	6	60%
Bringing the teaching facilities from home (if you have)	1	10%
Adapting listening tasks to suit students' ability	10	100%
Cutting off unnecessary activities and focus on the main tasks	7	70%
Using more interesting materials beside the textbook (e.g. English songs, video)	9	90%
Providing regular workshops or programs to exchange experiences and train teachers' methodology	5	50%

IV. CONCLUSION

4.1. CONCLUSION

The findings aim at addressing the issues of teaching listening skill for non-major students at BVU. The research investigates the reality of teaching listening skills and teachers' difficulties in teaching listening as well as their suggested solutions to the problems detected.

First, one of the most important points is the teachers' and students' awareness of the importance of listening skills. Both the teachers and the students found it important to teach and learn this language skill for successful communication with other people from different countries. They also considered the listening skill as the most difficult one among the four language skills. Both of them did not like listening lessons for some several reasons. As for the students, uninteresting topics, too difficult and boring listening tasks, inappropriate teaching methods and too much vocabulary were the main causes for their low interests in listening lessons. Meanwhile, the teachers' low interests in teaching listening mainly resulted from subjective reasons such as their limited listening competence, listening's boredom, students' low interests in learning listening and lack of importance. As a result, many students exposed to be indifferent and de-motivated when the listening skill was too difficult to learn.

The research also uncovered a variety of listening activities which were often conducted by the lecturers. At pre-listening stage, *pre-teaching vocabulary and structures*, *guiding questions* and *warm-up games* were used very often in the listening classes. Meanwhile, *discussion*, *providing background knowledge* and *ordering* were employed by few teachers, depending on the textbook design. Besides, at post-listening stage, the teachers often chose the activities that created a comfortable atmosphere for the students to participate in such as *free talk*, *discussion*, *role-play* or *interview*. *Retelling the story*, *communication games*, *writing about the similar topics* were given less attention by the informants.

Moreover, the findings denoted that the teachers often encountered a lot of difficulties in teaching listening skills. The prominent problems were listed such as students' limited vocabulary, big-sized classes and mixed ability, uninteresting and unsuitable listening tasks, students' low motivation and passive attitude, time limitation as well as lack of teaching facilities and teaching aids. Some of them lacked listening teaching experience.

Last but not least, the research revealed students' expectations for better listening lessons and then drew some solutions to the obstacles suggested by the teachers at BVU. Concerning students' expectations for effective listening lessons, two aspects were taken into consideration to make some changes for the current problems: *facilities*, *teachers' methodology*. In terms of *teachers' methodology*, background information and vocabulary, essential listening strategies and more suitable listening tasks to their levels of proficiency were offered by most of them. Many students hoped that more interesting listening tasks should be designed by their teachers.

Listening to students' desires makes the teachers give out effective solutions to improve their listening teaching. Providing the students with key words with their pronunciation before listening to the passage, adapting listening tasks to suit students' ability, helping students with listening strategies and using more interesting materials beside the textbook were offered by most of the respondents. Next, as for many of them, using interesting games to motivate the learners, having students work in groups and do different listening tasks as well as providing teachers with regular workshops or programs to exchange experiences and train teachers' methodology were the good solutions. Meanwhile, cutting off unnecessary activities and focusing on the main tasks and bringing teaching facilities from home were approved by few teachers.

4.2. IMPLICATIONS

First of all, observing the listening classes of the other teachers is very helpful for teachers to get more experience in teaching listening. After class observations, they can share opinions on the contents of the lessons as well as teaching methods.

Second, EFL teachers necessarily have to spend much more time studying and updating the methodology knowledge by reading methodology materials as well as magazines and journals from the Internet, participating in workshops and so on.

Third, teachers should make students aware of the importance of listening skills and motivate their interests towards this skill. Students need to know that the listening skill is one of the four basic language skills which helps them communicate effectively and learn other skills better.

Fourth, it is essential that teachers know students' learning preferences, language competence and need to adapt the tasks so that they are appropriate with their students' interests and abilities. Moreover, teachers should utilize or exploit various communicative activities such as *role-play, pair work, group work and communication games* in order to attract students' full interaction and enthusiastic participation. Giving high challenging activities may have negative influence on students' motivation and lead to time problem. Hence, some necessary adjustment and adaptation should be performed to meet students' needs.

Additionally, teaching methods should be adapted creatively and flexibly. For weaker students, teachers need to facilitate and simplify the fixed tasks in the textbook. For students at higher levels, teachers can divide the long listening text into smaller parts and ask students to listen to different parts in groups. Then they discuss together and exchange the information to complete the task.

Furthermore, teachers can give students the listening tasks which are arranged from easy to more difficult level. First, they should ask students to do a simple task so that after finishing the tasks successfully, they feel more confident to risk doing a more complex one.

Next, teachers should regulate the teaching time properly. Three listening stages are all equally important. However, pre-listening stage is normally used for eliciting or leading in the lessons. Therefore, teachers should not spend too much time on this stage. With good time management, teachers can have enough time to spend for the other stages. Then, students have more chances to effectively perform at while-listening stage and develop productive skills at post-listening stage. This can avoid omitting activities at post-listening stage due to limited time.

Moreover, in the listening teaching process, teachers should use a variety of teaching aids with full of attraction to appeal to students towards the lesson. Visual aids and drawing pictures should be well-prepared to create students' imagination. Sometimes teachers have to employ other authentic materials such as English films, favorite songs, funny short stories, interesting news and conversations, some exciting programmes on radio, TV or the internet in order to reduce students' boredom and indifference during listening periods. By this way, students not only are motivated but also approach the real world listening to develop their listening skills.

Besides, it is important that teachers need to design listening activities which easily activate students' background knowledge. Furthermore, teachers' adapted activities need clear instructions, simplicity, clear demonstration and integration of motivating contents like games, songs and so on. Hence, teachers' in-class job will not be time-consuming but smooth.

As mentioned in the findings, students benefit much more from group work, pair work, full-class interaction. Therefore, teachers ought to give students more chances to co-operate with their partners and share listening strategies as well as the information to finish the listening tasks.

Finally, in the classrooms, teachers may create short tests after 3 or 4 units to measure students' listening abilities and make them pay much more attention to this skill.

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