

IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES FOR BEGINNER STUDENTS AT IELTS ARENA ENGLISH CENTER

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Abstract: *This study investigates the challenges faced by beginner-level learners in developing English listening skills at IELTS Arena English Center. Employing a mixed-methods approach with 60 participants, the research examined attitudes, practice habits, learning challenges, and strategic behaviors related to listening skill development. The findings reveal a significant motivational paradox: the majority of students recognized the importance of listening, yet reported high difficulty and low preference for the skill. Practice patterns were found to be inadequate and irregular. Five major challenges were identified: poor sound quality, unfamiliarity with native accents, cognitive overload from word-by-word processing, fast speech, and limited vocabulary. This study also identified notable strategic competence gaps, with many learners unsure how to improve and rarely seeking teacher guidance. These findings significantly advance understanding of the multidimensional nature of listening skill development and provide an empirical foundation for designing more effective pedagogical interventions.*

Keywords: *English listening skills, beginner students, learning challenges, motivational paradox, pedagogical strategies*

I. Introduction

Listening comprehension is a fundamental component of second language acquisition (SLA) and a cornerstone of effective communicative competence (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Within the Vietnamese educational context, listening skills pose considerable challenges for beginner-level English learners, primarily due to the receptive nature of listening, the temporal constraints of spoken discourse, and the intersection of cultural and phonological factors that impede comprehension (Nguyen, 2019).

The present study examines the listening comprehension difficulties encountered by beginner-level learners at IELTS Arena English Center in Vietnam. These learners consistently demonstrate difficulty in processing authentic spoken English, particularly when confronted with variations in accent, speech rate, and lexical complexity within formal instructional settings. Such challenges reflect broader pedagogical concerns in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, where limited exposure to target-language input significantly impacts listening development (Field, 2008).

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This research aims to: (1) identify and analyze the primary obstacles to listening comprehension among beginner-level Vietnamese learners, (2) propose evidence-based pedagogical strategies to enhance listening skill development within this demographic, and (3) contribute to the broader discourse on effective listening instruction methodologies for EFL contexts in Southeast Asia. The findings of this study are anticipated to provide actionable insights for educators working with similar learner populations both within Vietnam and in comparable EFL environments internationally. Despite the growing body of research on EFL listening instruction, significant gaps remain regarding the specific challenges facing beginner learners in private language training centers in Vietnam. Previous studies (e.g., Nguyen, 2019; Azmi et al., 2014) have documented listening difficulties in formal school settings, but relatively few have examined the affective, strategic, and technical dimensions of listening development in intensive IELTS preparation contexts. The present study addresses this gap by providing context-specific empirical evidence that can inform targeted instructional design for this underrepresented learner population.

II. Theoretical background

2.1 Definitions and theoretical perspectives on listening comprehension

Before reviewing the relevant literature, it is necessary to clarify the conceptual distinction between “listening skills” and “listening comprehension.” While listening comprehension refers specifically to the cognitive process of

understanding spoken language, listening skills constitute a broader construct encompassing comprehension alongside strategic, affective, and interactive dimensions (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). This study primarily investigates listening comprehension as the core component of overall listening skill development in beginner EFL learners. The conceptualization of listening comprehension has evolved considerably in the field of second language acquisition, with scholarly definitions reflecting the multifaceted nature of this cognitive process. Early definitions, such as those proposed by Howatt and Dakin (1974), characterized listening as the fundamental ability to decode and comprehend spoken linguistic input. This perspective, while foundational, has been subsequently refined to encompass the complex interplay of cognitive and metacognitive processes involved in auditory language processing.

Brown (2001) advanced a more comprehensive framework, conceptualizing listening as a psychomotor process that integrates both perceptual and cognitive mechanisms. This definition acknowledges the dual nature of listening comprehension, wherein bottom-up processing (phoneme recognition, lexical access) interacts with top-down processing (schema activation, contextual inference) to facilitate meaning construction (Buck, 2001). Contemporary research further emphasizes that listening transcends passive reception of auditory stimuli and constitutes an active, constructive process that demands sustained attention, predictive processing, phonological decoding, and engagement of working memory (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

The theoretical evolution from passive to active models of listening comprehension has significant pedagogical implications. Anderson's (1995) cognitive processing model identifies three distinct phases: perceptual processing (acoustic signal recognition), parsing (syntactic and semantic analysis), and utilization (integration with existing knowledge structures). This framework underscores the strategic nature of listening comprehension, in which learners must simultaneously coordinate multiple cognitive resources to achieve successful comprehension (Goh, 2000).

In the EFL context, listening comprehension becomes more complex due to the interplay between linguistic competence and cultural schema. Cross-cultural pragmatic knowledge significantly influences comprehension outcomes, as listeners must navigate not only linguistic features but also culturally embedded meanings and discourse conventions (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). This multidimensional perspective on listening comprehension provides the theoretical foundation for understanding the challenges faced by Vietnamese beginner learners and informs the development of targeted pedagogical interventions. Furthermore, learner motivation plays a critical role in listening development. Eccles et al. (1993) proposed expectancy-value theory, which posits that learners' motivation is shaped by their expectation of success on a task and the subjective value they assign to it. In the context of EFL listening, learners who perceive listening as both highly important and highly difficult may experience motivational conflicts that undermine sustained engagement and practice (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). This theoretical framework is directly applicable to the

motivational paradox observed among beginner learners in the present study.

2.2. Types of listening

Researchers classify listening into various types, including:

- Discriminative Listening: Differentiating sounds without understanding meaning.
- Comprehensive Listening: Understanding meaning through linguistic and contextual cues.
- Informational and Critical Listening: Absorbing facts or evaluating content critically.
- Active, Inactive, Selective, and Reflective Listening: Defined by engagement level.

For language learners, comprehensive and active listening are particularly important for acquiring vocabulary, grammar, and fluency.

2.3. The listening process

According to Vandergrift (1999), the listening process comprises five stages:

- Receiving: Perceiving sound accurately.
- Understanding: Decoding meaning.
- Evaluating: Interpreting speaker intent.
- Remembering: Retaining key points.
- Responding: Reacting through speech or nonverbal cues.

Interruptions at any stage can hinder comprehension, especially for learners unfamiliar with the language or context.

2.4. Common problems in listening comprehension

Azmi et al. (2014) and Buck (2001) identify several challenges:

- Poor audio quality.

- Fast speech or unfamiliar accents.
- Cultural gaps and unknown vocabulary.
- Lack of control over playback.
- Difficulty concentrating or identifying stressed words.

These issues resonate strongly with beginner learners at IELTS Arena.

III. Research methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews. This design offers both statistical representation and depth of insight into learners' challenges and strategies.

3.2. Participants and setting

The research was conducted at IELTS Arena English Center in Hanoi, with 60 beginner-level students (ages 18-22). Most participants had prior exposure to English through high school but lacked structured listening practice. The center employs experienced teachers and modern methods, making it a suitable site for study.

3.3. Data collection instruments

- Questionnaires: 12 questions examining students' attitudes, difficulties, strategies, and preferences regarding listening. Likert scales and multiple-choice formats ensured clarity.

- Interviews: Conducted with 10 students, purposively selected to ensure variation in practice frequency (regular vs. irregular practitioners), self-reported difficulty levels (high vs. moderate), and

gender, in order to gather rich qualitative insights into personal experiences and learning habits.

3.4. Data analysis

Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Interview transcripts were coded thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodology. Quantitative and qualitative data were triangulated to reinforce validity.

IV. Findings and discussion

4.1. Data analysis and findings

4.1.1. Students' attitudes toward English listening skills

The analysis of students' attitudes toward English listening skills reveals several important patterns regarding skill preferences, perceived difficulty, and importance recognition.

The data reveal a significant paradox in students' attitudes toward listening skills. While speaking emerges as the most preferred skill (50%), listening ranks second with 25% preference. However, the perceived difficulty data shows that 68.3% of students find listening either "difficult" (50%) or "very difficult" (18.3%), with only 5% considering it "easy."

Despite this perceived difficulty, an overwhelming majority (85%) considers listening "very important," with an additional 10% rating it "important." This creates a motivational paradox: students acknowledge the critical value of listening skills while simultaneously finding them challenging and showing a relatively lower preference for them compared to speaking.

4.1.2. Students' practice patterns and listening habits

Table 1. Students' practicing level in listening to English

Frequency	Number of students	Percentage
Never	4	7%
Sometimes	38	63%
Usually	18	30%
Always	0	0%

Source: Survey data from IELTS Arena English Center (N=60)

The practice frequency data indicate concerning patterns in students’ listening habits. The majority of students (63.3%) practice listening only “sometimes,” while 30% practice “usually,” and 6.7% never practice outside of formal instruction. Notably, no students reported practicing “always,” suggesting a lack of consistent daily engagement with listening activities.

Among students who do practice listening, time investment remains limited. The largest group (39%) dedicates only 30 minutes daily, while 26% practice for just 15 minutes. Only 21% invest one hour daily in listening practice. Significantly, 14% reported “unstable” practice patterns dependent on mood, indicating that

emotional factors significantly influence practice consistency.

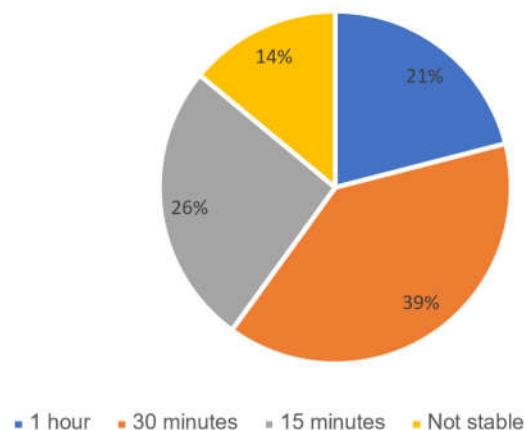


Figure 1. The time students spend on practicing listening to English a day

Source: Survey data from IELTS Arena English Center (N=60)

4.1.3. Primary challenges in listening comprehension

Table 2. Difficulties of students when listening in class

Difficulties	Number	Percentage
I do not familiar to listen to the native voice	18	30%
I am fed up with listening lessons	6	10%
The lessons are difficult for me	6	10%
The sound quality from radio is not good so I cannot concentrate	20	33%
Other difficulties	10	17%

Source: Survey data from IELTS Arena English Center (N=60)

The analysis reveals five primary challenges affecting listening comprehension. Technical issues represent the most significant barrier, with 33.3% of students citing poor sound quality from radio and audio equipment as a major hindrance to concentration and comprehension.

Accent familiarity emerges as the second most significant challenge (30%), with students reporting difficulty understanding native-speaker

pronunciation patterns that differ from their teachers’ or peers’ speech. This finding highlights the limited exposure to authentic English varieties in students’ prior learning experiences.

Complex listening behaviors were also identified through additional survey questions, revealing that 45% of students attempt to “catch every word” rather than focusing on overall meaning, leading to cognitive overload and comprehension breakdown.

4.1.4. Students' expectations and desires for improving their listening skills

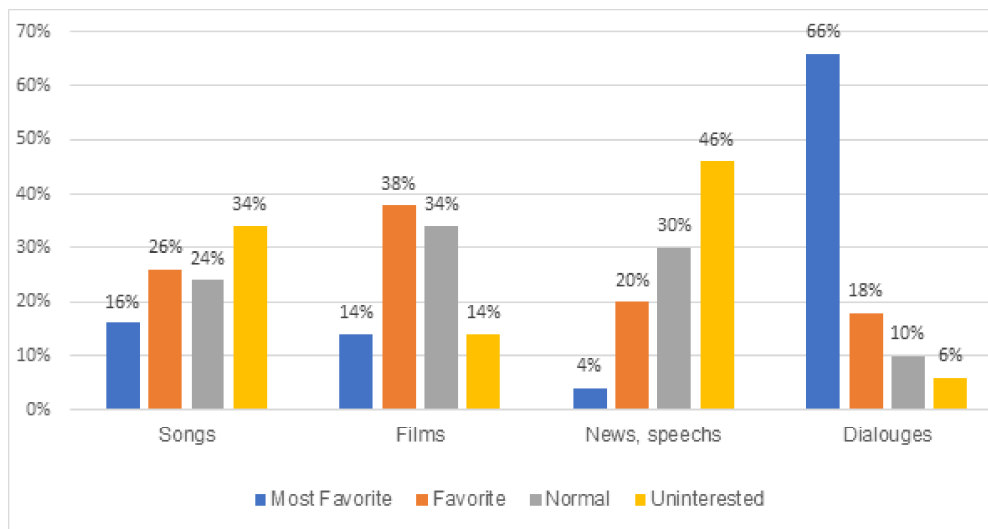


Figure 2. Students' interest in extra listening activities

As shown in the bar figure above, the majority of the pupils enjoyed listening to the dialogues. Listening to dialogues is the favorite activity of 66% of pupils.

Only 6% of them are uninterested in this kind. In contrast to discussions, the majority of students (46%) were bored while listening to news, speeches, or lectures. As a result, 4% of them are interested in this type of monologue. Furthermore, listening to music looks engaging. However, it is surprising that just 16% of learners enjoy them. Furthermore, one-third (34%) are dissatisfied with the tunes. Watching movies or listening to stories is acceptable because 38% consider these their favorite hobbies, and 14% say they are their favorite. Furthermore, 34% of them consider these actions usual. In conclusion, most students enjoy listening to dialogues, chats, and conversations.

The data illustrate that the majority of students (70%) in listening classes are taught new vocabulary related to the listening texts, and they frequently guess the contents of the listening text based on the exercises provided by the teacher.

Source: Survey data from IELTS Arena English Center

However, 13% of them just acquire new words, while the remaining 12% predict the substance before beginning to listen. Only 5% of pupils do not accomplish anything. Finally, students should prepare things related to the book before listening.

According to the table, the majority of learners (60%) understand how to take notes while listening. It is a constructive practice that greatly helps students develop their listening skills in both English class and real-life settings. 20% of them frequently attempt to answer questions while they are listening. The remaining 16% of them are merely listening. These findings represent the approach of teaching and learning the listening skill.

According to the data, most students agree to note both mistakes and words they cannot hear (60%). There is still a small percentage (10%) of students who do nothing after listening and just leave the room, which cannot bring any efficient knowledge at all. The rest just choose to do one of the things that they think they need (10% for words and 20% for mistakes), without realizing they need both things for this to become effective learning or testing sessions.

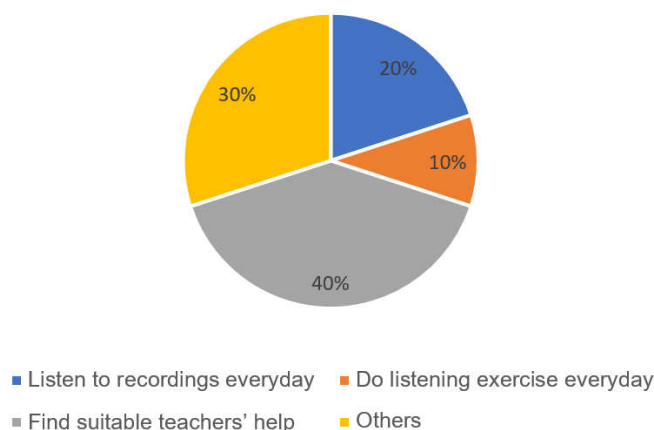


Figure 3. What students think they should do to improve their listening

As the figure shows, most students are unsure what they need to do to improve their listening. If they just make one of the first 3 choices, they cannot improve quickly. More specifically, only 40% try to get a teacher's help, 20% just try to listen to recordings every day, and 10% believe that doing exercises alone will help them get better. 40% of those who chose the last option may even feel confused and not know exactly what to do.

4.2. Discussion of findings

4.2.1. The motivational paradox in listening attitudes

The research reveals a compelling paradox where high importance recognition (85%) coexists with relatively low skill preference (25%) and high perceived difficulty (68.3%). This finding has significant pedagogical implications, suggesting that while students intellectually understand listening's value, affective factors and perceived challenges may limit their engagement.

This paradox can be interpreted through the lens of expectancy-value theory, in which students' motivation depends on both their expectations of success and the value they place on

Source: Survey data from IELTS Arena English Center

the task. The high importance ratings indicate strong task value, but the difficulty perceptions may negatively impact success expectations, creating motivational conflicts.

4.2.2. Practice inadequacy and strategic gaps

The finding that only 30% of students practice regularly, with 39% investing minimal time (≤ 30 minutes), reveals a significant gap between the recognition of importance and behavioral commitment. The mood-dependent practice patterns (14%) suggest that listening engagement is largely affective rather than systematic, potentially limiting the effectiveness of skill development.

The strategic analysis reveals particular concerns regarding metacognitive awareness. While students demonstrate reasonable strategy use during structured activities (70% employ pre-listening strategies, 60% take notes), the finding that only 40% seek teacher guidance and 30% remain uncertain about improvement approaches indicates inadequate strategic planning capabilities.

4.2.3. *Processing challenges and cognitive overload*

The high incidence of word-by-word processing attempts (45%) supports theoretical frameworks suggesting that beginner listeners struggle with top-down processing strategies. This bottom-up orientation, combined with technical barriers (33.3% cite sound quality issues) and accent unfamiliarity (30%), creates multiple obstacles to effective comprehension.

The preference for dialogues over monologues (66.7% vs. 3.3%) suggests that interactive content provides contextual support that helps overcome processing limitations, indicating the importance of content selection in beginner listening instruction.

4.2.4. *Implications for listening to pedagogy*

These findings carry several important pedagogical implications:

Strategic Instruction Needs: The high rate of cognitive overload and uncertainty about improvement strategies indicates a need for explicit metacognitive strategy instruction.

Technical Infrastructure: Sound-quality issues affecting one-third of students constitute a fundamental barrier requiring institutional attention.

Systematic Practice Development: The irregular practice patterns suggest a need for structured practice schedules and self-regulation training.

Motivation Maintenance: Given the importance-difficulty paradox, instructional approaches should leverage students' recognition of listening value while providing scaffolded support to maintain motivation despite challenges.

Content Differentiation: The clear preference patterns suggest that listening curricula should progress from interactive dialogues toward more challenging monologue formats as students develop confidence and skills.

4.3. *Synthesis*

The comprehensive analysis of 60 beginner English learners at IELTS Arena English Center reveals a complex landscape of attitudes, challenges, and behaviors regarding listening skill development. Key findings include:

- A motivational paradox where high importance recognition (85%) contrasts with moderate preference (25%) and high difficulty perception (68.3%);
- Inadequate practice patterns, with only 30% practicing regularly and 39% investing minimal daily time;
- Significant technical and cognitive barriers, including sound quality issues (33.3%) and word-level processing difficulties (45%);
- Strategic gaps evidenced by limited guidance-seeking (40%) and high uncertainty about improvement approaches (30%);
- Clear content preferences favoring interactive materials over monologue formats.

These findings contribute to understanding the multifaceted nature of listening skill development among beginner learners and provide empirical support for the development of more targeted pedagogical interventions addressing both cognitive and affective dimensions of listening comprehension.

V. **Conclusion**

This research contributes to the growing understanding of listening comprehension challenges among

beginner English learners by documenting the complex interplay between motivational, cognitive, and strategic factors that influence skill development. The identification of a motivational paradox in which high importance recognition coexists with low preference and high difficulty perception provides new insights into the affective dimensions of listening instruction.

The findings demonstrate that effective listening pedagogy requires attention to multiple dimensions: technical infrastructure, strategic instruction, maintenance of motivation, and systematic practice development. The prevalence of cognitive overload and limited strategic awareness among participants underscores the need for explicit metacognitive instruction alongside traditional comprehension activities.

Perhaps most significantly, this study reveals that students' intellectual recognition of the importance of listening does not automatically translate into effective learning behaviors or sustained engagement. These findings challenge traditional assumptions about the relationship between importance recognition and learning motivation, suggesting that pedagogical approaches must address both cognitive and affective barriers to listening development.

The research provides empirical support for integrated approaches to listening instruction that combine technical improvements, strategic skill development, and motivational support. By addressing the multifaceted nature of listening challenges documented in this study, educators can develop more effective and responsive pedagogical practices that support beginner learners in overcoming the significant

obstacles they face in developing this critical language skill.

Future research should extend this work by including objective listening proficiency measures alongside self-reported data, examining teacher perspectives to complement learner-reported challenges, and conducting longitudinal studies to assess the effectiveness of the pedagogical interventions implied by these findings. Comparative studies across different EFL learning contexts in Vietnam and the broader Southeast Asian region would also contribute to the generalizability of the current findings.

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CHIẾN LƯỢC CẢI THIỆN KỸ NĂNG CHO HỌC VIÊN MỚI BẮT ĐẦU TẠI TRUNG TÂM ANH NGỮ IELTS ARENA

Nguyễn Trung Hiếu^{1,2}

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này khảo sát những thách thức mà học viên trình độ sơ cấp gặp phải trong việc phát triển kỹ năng nghe tiếng Anh tại Trung tâm Anh ngữ IELTS Arena. Với việc sử dụng phương pháp nghiên cứu hỗn hợp với 60 học viên, nghiên cứu tập trung phân tích thái độ, thói quen luyện tập, thách thức học tập và hành vi chiến lược liên quan đến phát triển kỹ năng nghe. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy một nghịch lý đó là: phần lớn sinh viên nhận thức được tầm quan trọng của kỹ năng nghe, nhưng đồng thời lại gặp khó khăn và có mức độ yêu thích thấp đối với kỹ năng này. Các hình thức luyện tập chưa đầy đủ và thiếu tính thường xuyên. Năm thách thức chính được xác định bao gồm: chất lượng âm thanh kém, sự không quen thuộc với giọng bản ngữ, tình trạng quá tải nhận thức do cố gắng xử lý từng từ một, tốc độ nói nhanh và vốn từ vựng hạn chế. Bài viết cũng chỉ ra những khoảng trống về năng lực chiến lược, khi người học không nắm được cách cải thiện kỹ năng của mình và hiếm khi tìm kiếm sự hướng dẫn từ giáo viên. Những phát hiện làm sáng tỏ bản chất đa chiều của quá trình phát triển kỹ năng nghe, đồng thời cung cấp cơ sở thực nghiệm cho việc thiết kế các chương trình đào tạo và ứng dụng phương pháp giảng dạy hiệu quả hơn.

Từ khóa: kỹ năng nghe tiếng Anh, học viên sơ cấp, thách thức học tập, nghịch lý động lực, chiến lược sư phạm

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