

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE LEARNER AUTONOMY IN ENGLISH LISTENING SKILLS FOR FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH MAJORS AT HANOI OPEN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: *Learner autonomy in learning English listening skills has been increasingly developed and explored in the world. This study aims at investigating first-year English majored students' perceptions of learner autonomy and their practices in learning English listening skills at Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University. A questionnaire survey was employed to gather the data for the study. The structured questionnaire was administered to 85 participants from class K28X,Y,Z,V. The results of the survey revealed that almost students were aware of the importance of learner autonomy and the difficulties in learning and self-studying English listening skills. In addition, the results also indicate that the students really want to improve their autonomous learning. Therefore, teachers should make learners independent in their learning process. Besides, teachers should create favorable learning environment and effective strategies to facilitate learner autonomy in learning English listening skills and motivate them to be smartly autonomous learners.*

Keywords: *learner autonomy, autonomous learners, listening learning strategies, favorable learning environment.*

I. Introduction

Learner autonomy has been highly appreciated so far and has gained interest in the modern world. It is believed that learner autonomy has effectively changed the teaching and learning method. In Covid-19 pandemic, learner autonomy has been increasingly used as an effective tool in learning English as a second language. Learner autonomy is an issue of much concern for many writers in the

world. Little [9] shows that it will be more efficient and effective if learners are reflectively engaged with their learning because it is more personal and focused. The effectiveness of autonomous learners means that the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom can be applied to situations that arise outside the classroom. Therefore, learner autonomy has great impact on learning in general and foreign language learning, including listening

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skills, in particular. This paper aims at reporting the results of a research study on the first-year English majored students' perceptions of learner autonomy and their practices in learning English listening skills. More specifically, it attempts to find out the difficulties in learning and self-studying listening skills and the effective strategies to improve learner autonomy in learning listening skills.

II. Literature Review

2.1. Autonomous language learners

Nowadays, lifelong learning and autonomous learning play an important role in our life. Becoming more knowledgeable or skilled in learning a new language can increase our self-confidence in both our personal and professional life. Increasingly, many researchers have paid much attention to this area. According to Dr. Richard [27]: "Learner autonomy refers to the principle that learners should take an increasing amount of responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it. Autonomous learning is said to make learning more personal and focused and, consequently, is said to achieve better learning outcomes, since learning is based on learners' needs and preferences. It contrasts with the traditional teacher-led approach in which most decisions are made by the teacher." Orawiwatnakul and Wichadee [11] also point out that learner autonomy concept plays a significant role. An emphasis is put on the new form of learning which enables learners to direct their own learning in language learning. Another researcher, Dam [3] shows that a main element of language learning that is considered significant is learner autonomy and it has been given a

great deal of consideration from second language researchers and practitioners over the years. Gardner [6] suggests that autonomous language learners have the ability to plan and do their own learning to meet the goals they set for themselves. As a result, autonomous language learners can show their progress, and interpret individual learning performance. (Benson [1]). The researcher completely agrees with the point of view from Gardner [6] and Benson [1] because the autonomous language learners can identify the targets in their learning and they are able to make progress in the individual learning process.

2.2. An overview of English listening skills

2.2.1 Definition

Listening skill is a key to all effective communication. Without listening effectively, messages are easily misunderstood. As a result, communication breaks down and the sender of the message can easily become frustrated or irritated.

According to Brown [2], listening is a spoken or written response from the student that indicates correct (or incorrect) auditory processing. In order to become better listeners, the learners must think actively when they are listening. Listening is involved in many language-learning activities, both inside and outside the language classroom. The improvement in listening will provide a basis for the development of other language skills.

Herbert J. Walberg [7] points out that listening skills are essential for learning since they enable students to acquire insights and information, and to achieve success in communicating with others.

Based on the definitions above, it can be concluded that listening skills involve in many language-learning activities, both inside and outside the language classroom.

2.2.2. Listening sub-skills

The students should set the goals for developing one's own listening skills (on the whole) and set the goals for developing particular sub-skills (components of listening skills). Listening is one of the four language macro-skills (the others are reading, writing and speaking). In fact, there are several different kinds of listening, which we call sub-skills (micro-skills). Willis [22] lists a series of sub-skills of listening. They are: (1) Predicting what people are going to talk about; (2) Guessing at unknown words or phrases; (3) Using one's own knowledge of the subject to help one understand; (4) Identifying relevant points, rejecting irrelevant information; (5) Retaining relevant points (listening for main ideas, listening for details, note-taking, summarizing); (6) Recognizing discourse markers; (7) Recognizing cohesive devices (Ex: such as and which, including link words, pronouns, references, etc.); (8) Understanding different intonation patterns and uses of stress; (9) Understanding inferred information, such as speakers' attitude or intentions. These sub-skills are very necessary for the researcher to identify the strategies to strengthen the learner autonomy in English listening skills.

2.2.3 Listening processes

While practicing listening, setting the objectives for each particular listening activity without teacher intervention is considered as a vital activity. The three listening processes including pre-listening, while-listening, post-listening

are considered as a very important role in learning listening skills. The pre-listening phase is a kind of preparatory work which: "ought to make the context explicit, clarify purposes and establish roles, procedures and goals for listening" (Rost [14]). While-listening activities can be shortly defined as all tasks that students are asked to do during the time of listening to the text. The nature of these activities is to help learners to listen for meaning, that is to elicit a message from spoken language. The post-listening stage comprises all the exercises which are done after listening to the text. Some of these activities may be the extensions of those carried out at pre- and while-listening work. Post-listening activities allow the learners to 'reflect' on the language from the passage; on sound, grammar and vocabulary as they last longer than while-listening activities so the students have time to think, discuss or write (Rixon [13] and Underwood [18]). Besides, they also monitor and evaluate the listening skills development, make records on one's own progress, assess and plan the further cycle for the improvement of listening skills. These listening processes will help the students develop their listening skills effectively.

2.2.4 Difficulties in listening English skills

In Underwood's point of view [19], there are seven potential difficulties in listening comprehension: (1) lack of control over the speed; (2) inability to get things repeated; (3) the listener's limited vocabulary; (4) failure to recognize the signals; (5) problems of interpretation; (6) inability to concentrate; (7) established learning habits. Many language learners believe that the greatest difficulty with

listening is that the listener cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks.

Based on this point of view, the researcher will design the questions in the survey and find out the difficulties the students often get in their learning English listening skills.

2.3. *Autonomous learning strategies for English listening skills*

According to (Oxford et al. [12]; Vandergrift, [20]), three types of learning strategies have been applied in listening instruction: cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies and socio-affective strategies. Cognitive strategies consist of inferencing, resourcing and note taking which are unconscious interactions with the material to be learned. Metacognitive strategies refer conscious management and regulation over learning process namely planning, concentrating and monitoring. Socio-affective strategies involve interacting with peers or management of affection to facilitate learning.

In addition, most of the listening strategy studies have been investigating patterns and strategies used by successful versus less successful learners. Gradually the line of research shifted to focus on effective strategies-based and process-oriented approaches to teaching listening skill in order to guide the students “learn to listen” so that they can better “listen to learn” (Vandergrift, [21]). Therefore, listening instructors have the responsibility of teaching students to take advantage of strategies rather than merely providing students with oral passages. (Mendelsohn, [10]). The research also follows the view of Vandergrift [21] and Mendelsohn [10]. The teachers should provide the students autonomous learning strategies and the

students should control and be self-centered in their learning process.

2.4. *Previous study on learner autonomy*

There has been a remarkable growth of interest in the theory and practice of autonomy in language teaching and learning in recent years. There are many researchers mentioned this issue. (Rungwaraphong, [15]) examined readiness for autonomy in students at a university in Thailand. He investigated three areas which were learner autonomy; learner’s perception of teacher’s roles and their roles and strategies they used in learning. Previous studies such as (Fathali and Okada, [5]), (Lai et al., [8]) provided proof that out-of-class study played a major role in language learning process and it helped learners become proficient in many ways. Recently, Ngo Phuong Anh, Dao Hong Thuy [25] have reminded some researchers in Viet Nam in their study. The most recent paper on learner autonomy was a research by Dinh Thi Hong Thu [24] Nguyen Thanh Van [26] completed a study investigating the perceptions of responsibilities and abilities related to autonomous learning of the language and the students’ autonomous learning activities in and outside of class. Dang Tan Tin [23] also carried out a study of learner autonomy perception and performance on Vietnamese students in online and offline learning environments with the objectives of fostering learner autonomy in the higher education sector in Vietnam. Meanwhile, no findings of the previous studies under review was found in Faculty of English, HOU and especially, in the context of Covid-19 pandemic, learner autonomy in English listening skills is very important. This leads to the study being conducted to improve the learner autonomy.

III. Methods of the study

3.1. The participants of the study

The participants of the research were eighty-five first-year students in classes K28X,Y,Z,V at Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University. They have never been given any training in learner autonomy in learning listening skills. By the time the researchers gathered the data for this study, they had finished the first term of the school year 2021-2022.

3.2. Methods and instruments of the study

A quantitative research has been employed in this study. The survey was used for collecting data for the students' perceptions of learner autonomy and their practices in learning listening skills. Based on the theory and best practices of questionnaire design from David [4] and to clarify the perceptions of students toward autonomous learning and the difficulties in learning listening skills as well as the autonomous strategies, twelve multiple choice questions in google form were given to the first- year students in 4 classes, K28X,Y,Z,V. The researcher used electronic survey (Internet-based survey) "because of their speed and accessibility" Saris and Gallhofer [16]). These questions were designed in closed- ended ones, where respondents are restricted to choose among any of the given multiple choice

answers. The closed format questions make it easier for the researchers to calculate the statistical data and percentages.

This questionnaire focuses on three main points related to students' perceptions on learner autonomy, the difficulties in learning listening skills and the autonomous strategies for the first- year English majors at the English Faculty under research. A group of questions 1,2,3 was designed to answer the first research question "What are the perceptions of students toward autonomous learning". The items 4,5,6,7 were given to find the difficulties in learning listening skills and the questions 8,9,10,11,12 related to the strategies to improve the autonomous learning.

The data were collected from the questionnaire survey being sent by google form link to eighty-five first-year students in classes K28X,Y,Z,V to identify the difficulties in learning and self- studying listening skills and the effective strategies to improve learner autonomy in learning listening skills.

IV. Results and Discussions

4.1. The perceptions of the importance of learner autonomy

As can be seen from figure 4.1, the percentage of students understood the importance of learner autonomy up to 90.6 %. Eight students (9.4%) also thought that it was rather important.

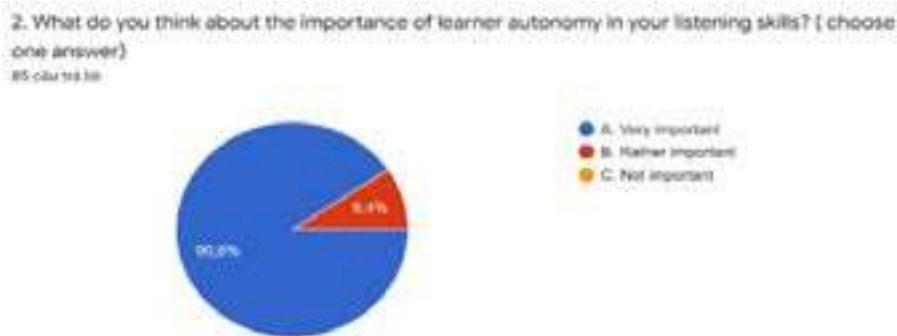


Figure 4.1 The perceptions of the importance of learner autonomy

This graph gives an overview of the students' perception in their responsibility of autonomous learning because almost students think that listening is a difficult skill. When being asked the frequency of self-studying listening at home, many students (53.6 %) revealed that they sometimes studied, meanwhile 34.5% students often self-studied.

4.2. The difficulties in learning English listening skills

In order to identify the difficulties in learning listening skills, the researchers investigated what the most difficult activity in the process of practicing listening skills at home was: pre- listening,

while- listening or post- listening. Many students thought that while-listening was the most difficult. While-listening activities (thinking processes) helped students form ideas and capture specific information to come up with the answers based on what they hear. Therefore, up to 69 students (81.2 %) agreed that it was difficult to be active while listening. Only 5 children (5.9 %) agreed with the view that activities after listening are also important. This is an activity that provides an opportunity for teachers to assess and test students' ability to understand and answer questions, expand understanding, provide explanations and critiques.

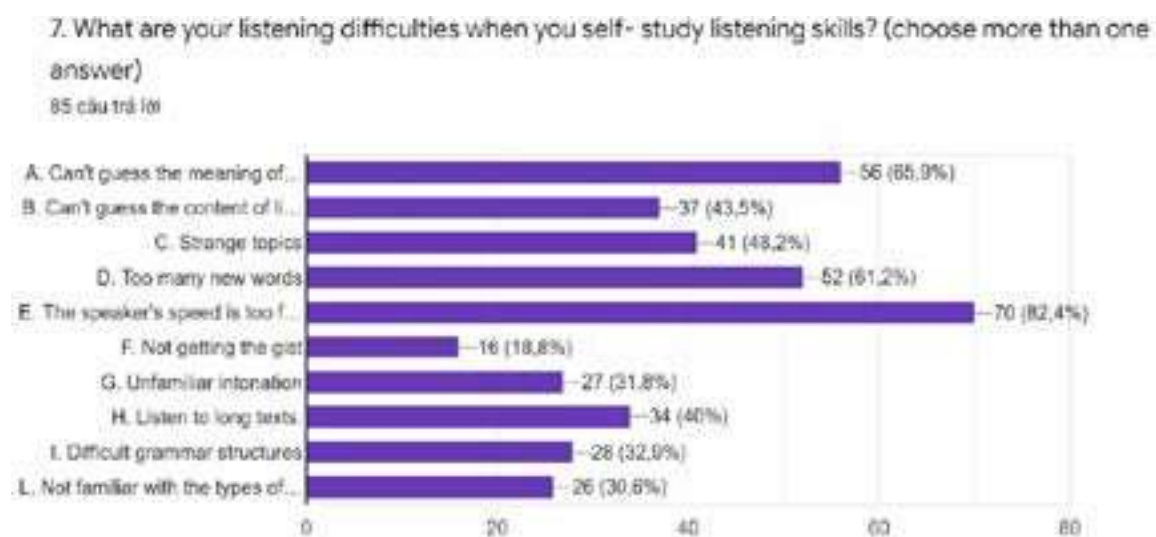


Figure 4.2 The difficulties in learning listening skills

Besides the objective factors affecting the listening comprehension process, the data in Figure 4.2 show subjective difficulties for learners. 70 students (82.4%) agreed that they met many difficulties when the speakers spoke too fast. Additionally, the students can't guess the meaning of the words (65.9%) or strange topics (48.2%) are also the obstacles. If the students do not have enough vocabulary or good background

knowledge, this is really a barrier to apply skills when practicing listening exercises. Meanwhile, difficult grammatical structures (32.9%) or unfamiliar types of exercises (30.6%) and not recognizing the main idea (18.8%) while listening were also very noticeable to the students. Nearly a half of the students (49.4%) sometimes used the listening sub-skills in their listening process.

4.3 Strategies to improve autonomous learning for English listening skills

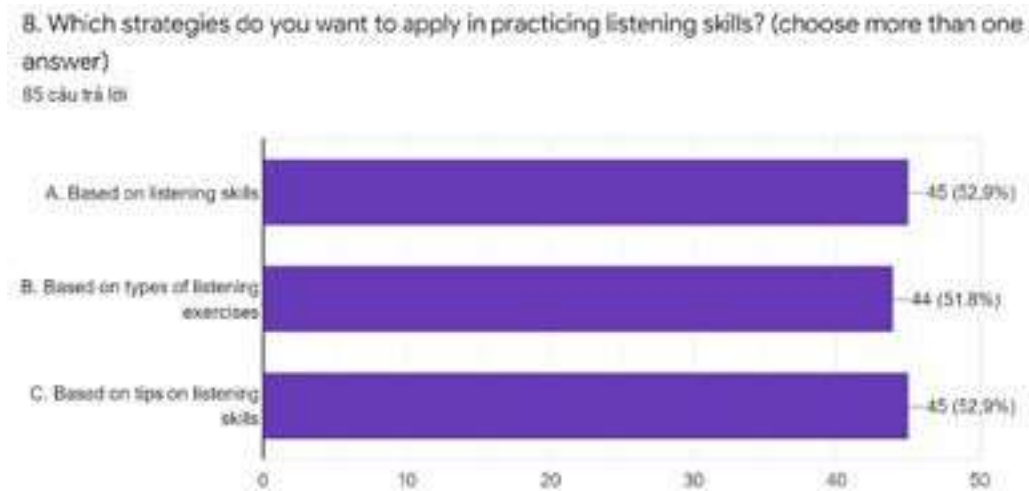


Figure 4.3 Strategies to improve autonomous learning for listening skills

This bar chart mentions the strategies the students want to apply in practicing listening skills. It can be seen from the chart that the rates are nearly equal for 3 strategies: based on listening skills, types of listening exercises, tips on listening skills with 52.9, 51.8 %, 52.9 respectively. When receiving, processing and memorizing information, the students should develop the effective listening strategies based on listening sub-skills as well as listening techniques. Obviously, the students also need to improve their psychological problems to confidently apply their listening strategies. Furthermore, being familiar with the types of exercises helps the students employ the listening sub-skills and listening techniques easily and effectively.

In the survey, in terms of textbooks, supplemental materials, Internet sources, 75% of the students wanted to exploit and take full advantages of all three. Thus, the students preferred a variety of different sources. Currently, technology and the Internet have become a very useful open source to help learners exploit

useful materials in their learning process, especially in autonomous learning.

V. Conclusion

Based on the theoretical background mentioned above and the findings on the results and discussion, the study is concluded with several strategies to improve learner autonomy in English listening skills for first year English majors at Hanoi Open University.

5.1. Based on the stages of listening process

Pre-listening is the very first stage of listening activities. In this stage, the students should focus on brainstorming ideas around the listening text and setting gist questions for predictions. They can use this stage as a way to get motivated.

While- listening is very important stage of listening process. The nature of these activities is to help learners to listen for meaning, that is to elicit a message from spoken language. Shelagh [17] points out that, at the while-listening stage students should not worry about interpreting long questions or giving full answers, but they

should concentrate on comprehension, whether they have understood important information from the passage.

Post-listening activities allow the learners to 'reflect' on the language from the passage; on sound, grammar and vocabulary as they last longer than while-listening activities so the students have time to think, discuss or write (Shelagh [17] and Underwood [18]). The students can assess and reflect themselves in this stage.

5.2. Based on the listening sub-skills

Skimming This sub-skill helps students find the main ideas quickly.

Scanning The listeners need to look for specific information and details

Summarizing The listeners try to reduce the main points into few words.

Predicting The efficient listeners predict what he is going to hear and the process of understanding the text is the process of the text matching up to these predictions.

Listening and note-taking Note-taking is one way to enhance listening skills. It can add immeasurably to the listener's understanding and remembering the details effectively.

5.3. Based on technology and Internet-based learning

Widespread use of the Web and other Internet technologies in education has exploded in recent years. According to the results, it was found that the students had a good view to use the Internet sources for practicing listening skills. It can be a good assistance for the students to improve their language learning ability. There are variety of open sources on Internet. They can classify the types of bottom- up exercises to top-down exercises. Video-based learning also help

the students exploit the listening sub-skills effectively.

To sum up, this study explores the first-year English majored students' perceptions of learner autonomy and their practices in learning listening skills. In addition, it attempts to find out the difficulties in learning and self- studying listening skills and based on the findings of the study, the effective strategies are proposed to improve learner autonomy in learning listening skills. The most significant findings are found related to learner autonomy perception. The data from the questionnaire survey reveal the difficulties in self-studying listening skills. Remarkably, the recommendations will motivate the students to improve their learner autonomy in learning listening skills.

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