EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTION AND INSTRUCTION IN LISTENING CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

By investigating EFL teachers from local colleges of the Mekong Delta area, South Vietnam via a questionnaire, this paper provides insights into how the teachers perceive of EFL listening skill, and what they usually run listening classes in terms of pre-, while- and post-listening stage. It also makes suggestions to diversify class activities and improve classroom management.

Keywords: Listening, EFL teacher, activity, pre-, while-, post-.

INTRODUCTION

Few would deny that at the first stages of learning, EFL learners have to spend the most time on practicing listening skill in daily communication activities in and outside class. They have to listen to others speaking, listen to themselves while talking, and even implicitly while reading and writing. However, it is generally hard to improve EFL learner's listening ability, and virtually no student feels quite confident when taking a listening exam though they are good at other skills, "Assisting learners in the development of listening comprehension is a challenge. It is a challenge that demands both the teacher's and the learner's attention because of the critical role that listening plays, not only in communication, but also in the acquisition of language" (Duzer, 1997). Listening is difficult because it well requires attention, thought, interpretation, and imagination (Austin, 1970). And most of what is known about the listening process stems from research on native language development; however, as the importance of teaching listening comprehension has increased, so has the inquiry into second language listening comprehension (Rubin, 1994). On this line, the purpose of the present study is: to investigate EFL teachers' perception and instruction in listening classes, and accordingly offer relevant suggestions.

LITERATURE REVIEW
The Role of Listening in a Foreign Language

Apparently, listening interacts with speaking in the aural-oral communication feedback system. Ordinarily, it is not an isolated skill. In normal, daily communication, listening usually occurs in conjunction with speaking. One person speaks, and the other, through attending by means of listening process, responds. Only in certain circumstances - for example, in a lecture situation, at the theater or when listening to the radio or watching television – does listening seem to become an isolated skill, unsupported by and not interacting with other language skills. Yet, even in those special circumstances, listening comprehension is not totally isolated because listeners apply what they know from the sociolinguistic rules of speaking to predict what they are likely to hear spoken texts, and they interpret what they hear based on what they know of the culture, the grammar and the vocabulary of the language. Therefore, listening operates with the aid of numerous language-related sub-skills, and the act of listening is not passive. What actually happens when we listen with understanding is that we actively work out what the discourse means as we go along predicting what is to come by reference to what has predicted or been heard. Listening

in this sense is a kind of accomplishment whereby a discourse is created in the mind by means of the process of reasoning (Widdowson, 1978: 59-63). Listening interacts not only with speaking, but also with a very powerful nonverbal communication system, which sometimes contradicts the messages provided through the verbal listening channel. An ESL student might hear a message of interest and welcome from a native speaker of English; for instance, "Let's get together for lunch sometime", but the nonverbal cues (indifferent facial expression, moving away, and onto the next activity, lack of follow-up) give a very different message that must also be interpreted and weighed before action is taken (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992:139). As a result, learners must train to understand how to listen effectively by attending to both verbal/linguistic and nonverbal/non-linguistic cues. Listening is a critical element in the competent language performance of adult foreign language learners, whether they are communicating at school, at work, or in the community. Through the normal course of a day, listening is used nearly twice as much as speaking and four to five times as much as reading and writing (Rivers, 1981). And as language teaching has moved toward comprehension-based approaches, listening to learn has become an important element in the adult English as a second/foreign language (Lund, 1990). Scarcella and Oxford (1992:138-139) also point out that listening is a significant and essential area of development in the native language and in a foreign language. It is more than just perception of sounds, although perception is the foundation. Listening also requires comprehension of meaning. Effective listening sharpens thinking and creates understanding.

Basic Processes at Work in Listening

Richards (1987:162) comes to the following processes involved in listening comprehension:
- The listener takes in raw speech and holds an image of it in short-term memory.
- An attempt is made to organize what was heard into constituents, identifying their content and function.
- As constituents are identified, they are used to construct propositions, grouping the propositions together to form a coherent message.
- Once the listener has identified and reconstructed the propositional meanings, these are held in long-term memory, and the form in which the message was originally received is deleted.

In more details, Duzer (1997) claims that there are several basic processes at work in listening. These do not necessarily occur sequentially; they may occur simultaneously, in rapid succession, or backward and forward as needed. The listener is not usually conscious of performing these steps, nor of switching back and forth between them. The listener:
- Determines a reason for listening;
- Takes the raw speech and deposits an image of it in short-term memory;
- Attempts to organize the information by identifying the type of speech event (conversation, Lecture, radio ad) and the function of the message (persuade, inform, request);
- Predicts information expected to be included in the message;
- Recalls background information (schemata) to help interpret the message;
- Assigns a meaning to the message;
- Checks that the message has been understood;
- Determines the information to be held in long-term memory;
- Deletes the original form of the message that had been received into short-term memory.
  Each of these processes or steps influences the techniques and activities a teacher might choose to incorporate into instruction in order to assist learners in learning to listen as well as listening to learn.

Shape of an EFL Listening Lesson

The classroom lesson is indeed a very complex event, with several dimensions to it. From a pedagogic perspective, any given lesson is viewed as (1) the completion of one small part of a course with reference to earlier and later lessons in the overall sequence, and (2) the implementation of an approach or method of teaching (Prabhu, 1992). Subsequently, the communicative approach with its theories and principles should lie behind a communicative listening lesson-plan through the stages and activities to be undertaken. A communicative-based listening lesson should demonstrate three stages (Elttp, 1999: 85; Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011): Pre-, While- and Post-:

- **Pre-listening:** prepare students to listen, establish the purpose of the listening activity and activate the schemata by encouraging the learners to think about and discuss what they already know about the content of the listening text. It can also provide the background needed for them to understand the text and focus attention on what to listen for. Pre-listening techniques include true/false statement prediction; open prediction; ordering; pre-questions. The completion of the pre-listening task happens after the first listening and is used for fluency listening – getting the main ideas.
- **While- listening:** The task should involve the listener in getting detailed information by doing such immediate activities as gap-filling, selecting items; deliberate mistakes; grids; listen and draw; and comprehension /multiple choice questions. The completion of this stage usually happens after the second or third listening. It is used for accuracy listening.
- **Post-listening:** an extension activity, usually integrated skills with tasks of information transfer; personalization/recall; writing it up, discussion; role-play; and further practice.

Previous Research in EFL listening

Current research and theory point to the benefit of providing a silent or pre-speaking period for the beginning-level learner (Dunkel, 1991). Delaying production gives learners the opportunity to store information in their memories. It also spares them the trauma of task overload and speaking before they are ready. The silent period may be long or short. It could comprise several class periods of listening activities that foster vocabulary and build comprehension such as in the Total Physical Response (TPR) approach. In this approach, the teacher gives a series of commands while demonstrating each one. Learners then show their comprehension by acting out the commands as repeated by the teacher. Learners themselves begin to give the commands as they feel comfortable speaking. Or, the silent period may consist of learners listening to a tape-recorded conversation two or three times before answering questions about the content. In one listening study, Nunan (1997) reported that the use of a concept mapping technique also proved effective. Students were put into one of three groups, and asked to listen to an interview with a television journalist. The first group was required simply to listen to the tape, make notes, and complete a comprehension test. The second group listened, checked off key words/phrases, and completed the test. As the third group listened, they were required to complete a concept map which showed not only key words and phrases, but the relationship between these. The study showed that the additional depth of processing required by the third group resulted in superior comprehension. In a series of experiments Anderson and Lynch (1988) found that the difficulty of listening tasks may particularly be influenced by the following:

- The organization of information (texts in which the order in which the information was presented matched its chronological sequence in real life were easier than texts in which the information was presented out of sequence).
- The familiarity of the topic.

- The explicitness and sufficiency of the information.
- The type of referring expressions used (for example, use of pronouns rather than complete noun phrase referents made texts more difficult).
- Whether the text described 'static' relationships (for example, geometric figures) or dynamic relationship (for example, a road accident).

Teachers should, therefore, take into thorough consideration the major factors of the speaker, the listener, the support, and the content in particular when selecting listening texts for instruction in order to minimize the text difficulty at the right level of the learners. Otherwise, it is inaccessible to learners, and learning would not take place. Other studies done by Vandergrift (2004), Goh (2008), Chen (2009), Liu (2010), Siegel (2012), Guan (2015), etc. have examined different aspects of teaching and learning ESL/EFL listening skills and gained a great number of conclusions related. However, issues in question are by no means exhaustive. As a result, the present study is conducted in the local area of the Mekong Delta, South of Vietnam, where little research has been done in the EFL listening instruction from the teacher's point of view.

METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire is used with 16 questions/statements, involving ticking items (or graded listing). The questions ask about EFL teachers' perception and applications of teaching listening skill; how they utilize and develop the new methodology in class; what they think of the effectiveness, etc. (details can be found in the section below). Copies of the questionnaire have been randomly delivered to 100 EFL teachers (but with 56 copies returned a few weeks later) from a couple of local colleges in the Mekong Delta, South of Vietnam. They are all Vietnamese-speaking teachers of EFL, with average 5 years of instructional experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1: Role of Listening

Question 1	Listening is a crucial skill		
	(a) Absolutely agree	*(b) Agree*	*(c) Disagree*
%	*33.9*	*57.1*	*8.9*

Responding to the first question on the role of listening, 91 percent of the teachers participating in the survey acknowledge that listening is a crucial skill for students of English, whereas only 5 out of 56 teachers (accounting for 8.9%) disagree. It can, therefore, be said that EFL teachers are expectedly attending to the importance of listening skill in their process of teaching/learning the English language because this skill enormously contributes to language acquisition as researchers have claimed: 'Listening is an important element in the adult English as a second language' (Lund, 1990), 'crucial for communication' (Wolvin & Coakley, 1991), 'becoming a significant, essential area of development' (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992), and 'assuming greater and greater importance in foreign language classroom' (Rost, 1994).

Table 2: Liking for the Skill

Question 2	How much do you like teaching listening?				
	(a) Not at all	*(b) Not very much*	*(c)A little*	*(d) Very much*	*(e) completely*
%	*0*	*26.7*	*14.2*	*55.3*	*3.5*

It is encouraging to notice that none of the teachers dislike the skill and more than half of them like it either very much (55.3%) or completely (3.5%). This is understandable. Teachers have perceived the vital role of listening and now probably, fairly well equipped with available textbooks, methodology, techniques and facilities for their implementation and exploration of the communicative instruction.

Table 3: Difficulty in Teaching the Skill

Question 3	It is hard, time-consuming to design and instruct a communicative listening lesson.		
%	*(a)* *3.5*	*(b)* *64.2*	*(c)* *32.1*

Listening comprehension in a foreign language is a complex process, which requires not only the linguistic competence, but the knowledge of the target-language culture as well. It requires attention, thought, interpretation, and imagination (Austin, 1970). Consequently, although they like listening, 64.2 % teachers might have difficulty in designing and instructing communicative listening lessons.

Table 4: Confidence in Teaching the Skill

Question 4	How confident do you feel using the communicative approach?				
%	*(a)* *5.3*	*(b)* *19.6*	*(c)* *17.8*	*(d)* *44.6*	*(e)* *12.5*
Question 5	How effective is your application of the communicative approach in listening class?				
%	*(a)* *10.7*	*(b)* *25.0*	*(c)* *23.2*	*(d)* *32.1*	*(e)* *8.9*

From the table, in spite of the fact that a large proportion of the teachers claim to feel confident using the communicative approach (44.6% very much and 12.5% completely), the positive responses to question 5 are much lower: only 32.1% for 'very much' and 8.9 % for 'completely'. Those who do not feel their application of the new methodology works at all make up 10.7%. It could be assumed that they came to this feeling partly because they had problems (as mentioned above) with designing appropriate techniques for diverse activities and conducting these activities in the classroom. Consequently, if they as practitioners did not demonstrate complete confidence or efficient instruction, students could hardly acquire much in class.

Table 5: Teachers with Textbooks and Lesson Plans

Question 6	When designing a listening lesson, you.....			
%	*(a) 8.9 stick to the textbook.* *(b) 76.7 adapt the textbook.* *(c) 14.2 design your own lesson plan.*			
Question 7	A complete listening lesson should cover 3 stages, pre-, while-, and post-listening.			
%	*(a) 55.3*	*(b) 44.6*	*(c) 14.2*	
Question 8	Which stage do you think is the most important?			
%	*(a) pre-* *0*	*(b) while* *28.5*	*(c) post* *0*	*(d) all equally important* *71.4*

Those who stick to the textbook (they might be asked to do so by authorities or they might have difficulty in designing lesson plans) constitute 8.9%, while 76.7% reveal that they adapt the textbook to suit their students. Although there is no information about to what extent they adapted the textbook and how effective their adaptation is, it deductively indicates teachers are now to some extent aware of what they should do to make learning take place with reference to the learner's needs and characteristics. This undoubtedly provokes the learner's strengths and pushes up language acquisition. Not only do teachers now feel an urgent need to modify the textbook or plan their own curriculum which they think can come up to the learner's expectations, but they also understand correctly that a complete listening lesson, responding to the natural listening process, should cover three stages. All the teachers agreed with the idea (55.3% completely agreed and 44.6% agreed). Each stage plays its own indispensable role in the learner's language learning process. The pre-listening prepares students for listening by introducing input, familiarizing them with the topic of listening, creating expectations, arousing interests in the subject matter (Harmer, 1991) in order to clarify the things in their minds and get them to disregard redundancy, hesitation and ungrammaticality. The while-stage focuses on practicing the skill or listening strategies with a variety of tasks for learners to carry out during the course of listening, while the last stage proceeds to the learner's language production-output.

Table 6: The Frequency of Pre-Teaching New Vocabulary

Question 9	How often do you pre-teach new vocabulary at the pre-stage?				
	(a)Never	*(b) Rarely*	*(c)Sometimes*	*(d)Usually*	*(e)Always*
%	*0*	*5.3*	*8.9*	*44.6*	*41.0*

The figures from table 6 remarkably show that most teachers do assist students with their listening (either usually or always) by presenting new vocabulary before letting them listen. This obviously does not take long (approximately 10 minutes in a 45-minute lesson), but it works much in several ways as Mackey (1978) points out, 'Presentation means communicating something to somebody. It is an essential part of the method; the most carefully graded selection of a language is useless unless it gets into the minds of the learners'. It provides students with comprehensible input to build a rich language store because they find that they are getting the language right and internalize it correctly so that it gradually becomes part of their acquired store (Harmer, 1991:39). It also lessens the possible trauma, and motivatingly leads students into the listening as the concentration on particular items of language in various practice contexts can help the internalization process while at the same time giving many students a strong feeling of security (Harmer, 1991:39).

Table 7: Techniques for Presenting New Vocabulary

Question 10	When presenting new vocabulary, which one(s) do you often use?					
%	*(a)*	*(b)*	*(c)*	*(d)*	*(e)*	*(f)*
	80.3	*62.5*	*57.1*	*89.2*	*66.4*	*80.3*

The first thing to notice is that all the presenting techniques mentioned are comparatively often employed by the teachers. The figures could be divided into two groups: (A) more than 80% including the techniques of (a) visual/pictures 80.3%, (d) explanation/examples 89.2%, and (f) translation 80.3%, (B) less than 80% for (c) real objects, (b) mine and (e) synonym/antonym often used by 57.1, 62.5 and 66.4%, respectively. It is encouraging to see that the technique topping the scale is (d) explanation/examples (89.2%). An inference could be made that English is frequently the medium through which teachers instruct lexis, give definitions, explanations and examples to students.

Table 8: Practicing New Vocabulary

Question 11	How often do you use games in practicing new vocabulary?				
	(a)	*(b)*	*(c)*	*(d)*	*(e)*
%	*0*	*7.1*	*46.4*	*35.7*	*10.7*

The benefits of games for vocabulary practice have been greatly explored by language teachers. They all use games for practicing new words in class. Around (d) 35% teachers usually and more than 10% (e) always use them to help students internalize linguistic items in listening lessons. Well-organized games create fun, motivation, class-dynamics, and collaborative work. Through games, learners acquire language unconsciously with their whole attention engaged by the activity in much the same way as they acquired their mother tongue (Cross, 1992:153). Thus, there is no reason to turn our back on games and those who have not made maximal use of games should exploit them more often for the sake of the learner's language development as Ur (1984: 27) points out that a well-constructed task can be fun as well as learning effective, for an element of puzzle-solving or game-playing is easily built in.

Table 9: Pre-Listening Techniques

Question 12	Which pre-listening technique(s) do you often use?
%	*(a) True/False statement prediction.* *(b) Open prediction.* *(c) Ordering.* *(d) Pre-questions.* *(e) Others.*

Prediction based on previous knowledge contributes enormously to listening comprehension. Being aware of it, teachers tend to deliberately engage students in prediction–oriented exercises at the pre-listening stage. Consequently, true/false statement prediction and open prediction are most often adopted by teachers, 83.9 and 87.5% respectively. Compared with other activities like ordering, they are easier to conduct for teachers and learners, and also they appear to tangibly serve the purpose of the first listening stage: getting the main ideas of the listening. An added benefit is that in these prediction exercises, teachers give way to students' pair/group talking involvement.

Table 10: While-Listening Techniques

Question 13	Which while-listening technique(s) do you often use?
%	*(a) Gap-filling.* *(b) Selecting items.* *(c) Deliberate mistakes.* *(d) Grids/Tables/Charts.* *(e) Listen and draw.* *(f) Comprehension/multiple choice questions.* *(g) True/false statements.*

Traditional modes of while-listening tasks are still common: comprehension/multiple choice questions (91.0%) and true/false statements (87.5%) often taken up by teachers. The fact that most textbooks provide particularly these two sorts of comprehension exercises offers a plausible explanation. However, although comprehension/multiple choice questions and true/false statements are available in textbooks, familiar to learners, and appropriate to checking detailed information, continually working with them may get students bored and

boredom is not only an unpleasant feeling in itself, it also leads to learner inattention, low motivation, and ultimately less learning (Ur, 1991: 23). It is a good idea to alternate them with other modes of tasks such as deliberate mistakes and listen and draw, to maintain the learner's motivation.

Table 11: Post-Listening Techniques

Question 14	Which post-listening technique(s) do you often use?
%	*(a) Recall the story.* *(b) Write it up.* *(c) Role-play.* *(d) Discussion.*

In terms of post-listening activities, 'write it up' was frequently used by 80.3 percent of the teachers. It can be assumed that this activity has several advantages: to be integrated with writing skill, used for language consolidation, and done as homework in case time is up. However, it lacks the sense of personalization and meaningfulness, which should not be neglected in the light of the communicative approach because to train learners to become effective communicators, listening and speaking must be seen as interdependent (Anderson & Lynch, 1988). As a result, discussion and role-play should be taken into consideration and implemented more often. These activities are supposed to promote more oral-production, active participation and great fun. They help make classroom a lively and rich language environment for learners of all abilities (Nunan, 1999:84). Thus, it is worth spending time designing diversified post-listening activities for students' better engagement, communication and meaning-negotiation.

Table 12: Pair/Group Work Practice

Question 15	How often do you get students to work in pairs or groups?				
%	*(a)* *0*	*(b)* *0*	*(c)* *14.2*	*(d)* *71.4*	*(e)* *14.2*
Question 16	How often do you purposely form new pairs and groups for different activities during one listening lesson?				
%	*(a)* *3.5*	*(b)* *8.9*	*(c)* *57.1*	*(d)* *14.2*	*(e)* *16.0*

Now that teachers generally understand the value of pair/group work in class, they all appear to engage students in it. All the responses to the question 16 are positive (d) 'very much' gets 71.4 percent of the responses, (c) 'sometimes' and (e) 'completely' take up 14.2% each. In spite of this, teachers do not tend to maximize this type of classroom interaction. Only 14.2% (d) usually and 16 (e) always purposely made a change in class atmosphere by forming students into new pairs and groups for different listening activities. This should be done more often as it obviously promotes dynamics, flexibility in working with a variety of partners/group members for more learning from more people and subsequently, teachers who do not use a variety of student groupings (pairs and groups, etc.) may be missing valuable opportunities to create a cooperative atmosphere in the class and to maximize student practice (Harmer, 1991:235).

CONCLUSION

Firstly, most teachers participating in the survey believe that listening is a crucial skill, significantly influencing target language intake and development. They also exhibit their seemingly increasing liking for teaching the skill. They, however, do not feel entirely

confident working on it. Few teachers get on well without facing certain difficulties in designing and instructing appropriate listening lessons. Secondly, the teachers tend to be quite aware of the need for tailoring textbooks to suit students and make sure that a listening lesson expectedly covered the three stages with equal emphasis. Accordingly, a listening lesson usually begins with presenting and practicing a few key unknown words, followed by pre-listening techniques, most often, of prediction questions quickening the top-down strategy. Comprehension/multiple-choice questions obtained a high frequency at the while-stage and 'write it up' at the post-listening. Thirdly, as far as classroom management is concerned, pair/group work has been widely exploited by teachers so as to achieve the goal of the communicative instruction. Yet, the teachers seem to take for granted the necessity to maintain classroom dynamics by forming new partners and groups for different listening tasks during every single lesson. Accordingly, it is strictly recommended that a variety of communicative grading techniques should be realized at the three listening stages, particularly the while listening to prevent boredom, and on the other hand to maximize engagement, communication, negotiation in frequent groupings. The recommendation goes on with the usual use of songs/music and rhymes as well as the constant pre-teaching key vocabulary. These are supposed to gently lead students into enjoyable and learnable listening, which used to sound impossible.

Although the investigation has offered the insights into the current instruction of EFL listening skills in local colleges of the Mekong area, South Vietnam, it is by no means free from any shortcomings. Nor does it claim to cover everything about this receptive language skill. It, therefore, is still open to further questions and more comprehensive investigations on the subject matter in this area and elsewhere. Answers to such questions as "What types of listening materials appear to work best with Vietnamese college students?", "What is the role of skill integration in listening classes?", "Should songs/rhymes be topic- or linguistic-oriented?", and "How can one best assess and measure success in listening ability?" from different research methods appear to be significantly relevant and necessary for the teaching of English listening skill to Vietnamese learners and college students particularly.

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