

Listening Comprehension Difficulties in English among Thai EFL Students and Considerations for Assessment and Instruction

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Abstract

Listening comprehension is widely recognized as one of the most challenging language skills for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Thai university students often encounter various difficulties that hinder their ability to understand spoken English effectively. This study aimed to investigate the specific challenges experienced by Thai university students in English listening comprehension. The research was conducted at a university in Bangkok, Thailand, with 87 students participating through a questionnaire survey. The quantitative data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. The findings revealed that students experienced difficulties across three key processes of listening comprehension: perception, parsing, and utilization. The major challenges identified included difficulties in recognizing syntactic structures, limitations in processing auditory information, and problems related to meaning construction and comprehension. These findings are discussed within the context of Thai EFL education, with pedagogical implications proposed for improving listening instruction and learner support. The results provide valuable insights for syllabus designers and English language teachers seeking to develop more effective assessment practices and instructional strategies to address listening comprehension difficulties among EFL learners.

Keywords: Thai EFL Students, Comprehension, Difficulties, Instruction

INTRODUCTION

Despite its critical role in language acquisition, listening comprehension is considered to be one of the most challenging skills for language learners. Those struggling with listening may face difficulties in communication, which can negatively impact their overall communicative competence. Developing strong listening skills is vital for EFL/ESL learners as it provides essential language input, as emphasized by studies conducted by Rost (2002), Underwood (1989), Anderson and Lynch (2003), Nguyen and Tran (2015), and Ur (1996). Furthermore, in spite of efforts by schools and universities to improve English

education in Thailand, several studies have demonstrated unsatisfactory results in the English language proficiency of Thai learners. According to a study conducted by Chonprakay (2009), listening was a pervasive and significant challenge for Thai undergraduate students. Despite English being an international means of communication, multiple factors obstruct the success of English language learning. Emphasis is mainly given to reading, writing, and grammar over listening and speaking skills; ensuing in minimal practice opportunities for spoken English, which resulted in poor listening and speaking skills. Moreover, Cubalit (2016) stated that although English language teaching in Thailand offers the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), listening is relatively neglected. Most of the students are having difficulties in developing their listening skills.

Hence, this study attempted to investigate the EFL listening comprehension problems that EFL university students encounter during their learning process. The research questions were formulated as follows:

1. What difficulties do Thai EFL university students face in perception, parsing and utilization during listening?
2. What are the possible causes of the perceived problems of the students while listening to English?

Definition of Listening Comprehension

The term “listening comprehension” has been defined in various ways. According to Rost (2002) and Hamouda (2013), it is an interactive process that involves the active construction of meaning through discriminating sounds, prior knowledge, grammatical structures, stress, intonation patterns, and other cues, linguistic or non-linguistic in nature (Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Meanwhile, Nadig (2013) defines listening comprehension as a group of processes that aid in the comprehension and interpretation of spoken language. These processes include recognizing speech sounds, understanding individual word meanings, and sentence structure (Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Brown and Yule (1983) and Hamouda (2013) offer a similar definition, stating that listening comprehension refers to an individual's understanding of what they have heard. Nonetheless, the mere repetition of sounds without genuine comprehension does not imply successful listening comprehension.

Listening Comprehension Problems

According to Anderson (1995) and Goh (2000), difficulties in listening comprehension can be attributed to three phases: perception, parsing, and utilization. Perception problems arise when listeners are unable to recognize intonation, stress, and accents in a speech stream. This phase includes phonological and lexical challenges, and unfamiliar vocabulary and high speech rates can also affect the listener's comprehension. Parsing problems occur during the processing phase and involve difficulties with syntactic and semantic matters, such as failure to form a mental representation from the words heard. Utilization is the phase where listeners face discourse-related issues, like difficulties in recognizing the overall structure of ideas in a text. Unfamiliar listening topics can also

hamper comprehension. The present study is based on Anderson and Goh's three-phase model due to its sufficiency and clarity.

Previous Studies

Numerous studies have shed light on the various difficulties that EFL students and teachers face in English listening comprehension, such as speech delivery, listener factors, text characteristics, accents, cultural differences, and challenges related to teaching. Hamouda (2013) conducted research focused on Saudi students, using a mixed-methods approach involving questionnaires and interviews. The findings revealed that students struggled with speech delivery, including speed, recording quality, and accents, as well as listener factors such as a lack of concentration, anxiety, and a limited vocabulary.

Duong and Chau (2018) conducted a study in Vietnam that highlighted the main challenges of listening comprehension for English majors. The participants identified unfamiliar words, slang, idioms, colloquial language, and complex sentence structures, as well as fast speech, unclear pronunciation, different accents, anxiety, the inability to observe facial expressions, and background noise, as factors affecting their comprehension. Khamprated (2012) investigated English listening and speaking problems among students at private vocational schools in Thailand and identified potential causes. The participants commonly reported difficulties related to local accents, speaker speed, cultural differences, and limited resources for English grammar and vocabulary. Alrawashdeh and Al-zayed (2017) focused on the challenges that English teachers face in teaching listening comprehension.

The study revealed that the learning environment, availability of resources and teaching aids, and teachers' own proficiency levels hindered effective English listening comprehension instruction.

METHODS

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in Bangkok, Thailand. The participants of the study included first year university students taking the advanced class "English for Communication." The sample was composed of 87 students who were attending the first week of the summer class. Out of the 87 participants, 42 were male (48%), 42 were female (48%), and 3 (3%) signified the other gender. In general, all participants had received English education during their elementary and high school years.

Instrument

The study employed a structured, closed-ended questionnaire as the primary research instrument. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section 1 collected participants' demographic information, whereas Section 2 comprised 15 items designed to investigate students' listening comprehension difficulties based on Anderson's (1995) perception–parsing-utilization framework. Specifically, the questionnaire included five items measuring perception problems, five items measuring parsing problems, and five items measuring utilization problems.

The questionnaire items were adapted from Goh's (2000) framework of listening comprehension problems and modified to suit the context of Thai EFL university students. To establish content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by three experts in English language teaching and applied linguistics. Based on their recommendations, minor revisions were made to improve the clarity, wording, and relevance of the items. The Index of Item–Objective Congruence (IOC) values was 0.70 which indicates satisfactory content validity.

To ensure that the participants clearly understood the questionnaire, it was written in simple English and translated into Thai. The Thai version was reviewed by bilingual experts to ensure that the translated items accurately reflected the meaning of the original English version. Prior to the main data collection, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with 30 university students who were not included in the final sample. Feedback from the pilot study was used to revise unclear wording and improve the overall clarity of the instrument.

Participants responded to each item in Section 2 using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The internal consistency of the questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a reliability coefficient of .75, which indicates acceptable reliability for research purposes.

Scope and Delimitation

This study aims to explore and gain valuable insights into the listening comprehension problems experienced by Thai students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at Southeast Asia University in Bangkok, Thailand. Specifically, the study is guided by Anderson and Goh's Three-Phase Information Processing Model, which examines listening comprehension difficulties in terms of perception, parsing, and utilization. The participants consisted of 87 first-year university students enrolled in the Advanced English Communication course during the summer term. Data were collected during the first week of the summer classes using a closed-ended questionnaire designed to assess the students' listening comprehension problems across the three stages of the information processing model.

The study has several delimitations and limitations. First, the research is limited to students enrolled in the Advanced English Communication course and does not include learners from other academic subjects. Second, the participants were restricted to first-year students attending the advanced summer class, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other year levels or regular academic terms. Third, the investigation focuses exclusively on listening comprehension problems and does not examine other English language skills, such as speaking, reading, or writing. Finally, data collection was conducted only during the first week of the summer term due to time constraints. Despite these limitations, the findings are expected to provide useful insights that may serve as a basis for improving instructional approaches and assessment practices in teaching English listening comprehension to Thai EFL learners.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the demographic and contextual characteristics of the participants and instructional setting included in this study. It provides information on the composition of the student participants, including their gender distribution, age range, and enrollment status, as well as the profile of the English language instructors in terms of nationality, teaching experience, and educational qualifications. The table also describes the instructional setting and the primary teaching material used during the implementation of the study.

Table 1 – Demographics

University Students	42 (m), 42 (f), 3 others Incoming 1 st year age 16-25, 87 full-time students
English Language instructors	2 Filipinos 1 Japanese 4 Thais
Experience and degree	10 – 20 years 5 Master of Arts graduates 2 Postgraduate degree / MAgDev graduates
Setting	Traditional classroom setting
Teaching materials	Oxford Smart Choice 2 A

The study was conducted at a university involving 87 full-time incoming first-year students enrolled in English language courses. The participants ranged in age from 16 to 25 years and included 42 male students, 42 female students, and three students who identified with other gender categories. English instruction was provided by a multicultural teaching team consisting of two Filipino instructors, one Japanese instructor, and four Thai instructors. The instructors had between 10 and 20 years of teaching experience, which reflect a high level of professional expertise. Regarding academic qualifications, five lecturers have Master of Arts degrees in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), while two faculty members have postgraduate degrees in Language and Literacy Education and Master of Agriculture and Development (MAgDev) major in Language Teaching degrees, respectively. The study was conducted in a traditional face-to-face classroom environment, where instruction followed the prescribed curriculum using *Oxford Smart Choice 2A* as the primary textbook. This instructional setting provided a consistent learning environment for developing students' English language proficiency.

Perception Problems

The data analysis for the first six items in the questionnaire relating to the university students' perception problems is summarized in Table 2.

Operational terms:

N=never; R=rarely; O=occasionally; U=usually; A=always

Table 2. *Questionnaire Results of the university students' Perception Problems*

Items	N	R	O	U	A
1. I hear the English sounds, but I am not sure if it is right or I do not know many English sounds.	1	25	43	25	6
2. I mistake one English word to another one because of speed, intonation, stress, and accents.	5	18	57	15	5
3. I meet and listen to too many unfamiliar English words or English words that I do not know.	2	24	26	23	15
4. I miss listening to the next part of the English text when I am still thinking hard about the first part.	2	25	34	25	13
5. It is hard to concentrate when listening to English text.	7	25	39	18	10

As shown in Table 2, a large proportion of the participants reported experiencing perception-related listening difficulties. Approximately 67% indicated that they often confused one English word with another because of the speed of speech, intonation, stress, and different accents (Item 2). Similarly, 63% reported difficulty recognizing English sounds (Item 1), while another 63% indicated that unfamiliar vocabulary frequently hindered their comprehension (Item 3). In addition, 63% stated that they often missed the beginning of a listening text, and 59% reported difficulty maintaining concentration while listening.

Overall, the findings indicate that many university students experienced substantial perception problems during English listening. These difficulties were primarily associated with accurately identifying spoken words, recognizing English sounds, coping with unfamiliar vocabulary, and maintaining attention throughout the listening process. Missing the beginning of the listening text or subsequent information while attempting to process previously heard content further reduced their ability to understand the overall message.

Parsing Problems

The results for the five questionnaire items measuring parsing problems are presented in Table 3. The majority of participants (74%) reported difficulty processing long English sentences and dividing them into meaningful units. Similarly, 73% indicated that they quickly forgot long phrases or sentences they had just heard, while 70% found it difficult to process new information within the limited time available during listening. Furthermore, 66% reported difficulty understanding the meanings of some words within English sentences.

These findings suggest that many university students experienced considerable challenges during the parsing stage of listening comprehension. The major difficulties involved processing lengthy spoken input, retaining information in working memory, interpreting words within sentence contexts, and integrating incoming information rapidly enough to support comprehension.

Table 3. *Questionnaire Results of the university students' Parsing Problems*

Items	N	R	O	U	A
1. I forget phrases or sentences just heard when it is very long.	2	14	37	30	17
2. I cannot understand the meaning of some words in English sentences.	1	23	32	31	13
3. It is very hard to listen to long English sentences and divide it to several parts.	0	15	40	28	17
4. It is very hard to understand if I listen to so many new English information in a very short time.	1	18	31	30	20

In table 3, it can be seen that the participants encountered parsing problems (i.e. the length of the text, the meaning of words, the length of some sentences, and the limited time) that inhibited their listening comprehension ability.

Utilization Problems

The findings for the five utilization items are presented in Table 4. The highest percentage of participants (72%) reported that they found it difficult to understand the speaker's intended message even when they recognized the individual English words. In addition, 68% experienced difficulty organizing ideas within a listening text, while 67% found it difficult to identify the main idea. Furthermore, 63% reported difficulty following unfamiliar topics. Nearly half of the participants (48%) indicated that they had difficulty establishing logical relationships among ideas in the listening text.

Overall, the findings suggest that many university students encountered substantial utilization difficulties during listening comprehension. These challenges involved interpreting the speaker's intended meaning, organizing information into a coherent mental representation, identifying the main idea and supporting details, and understanding unfamiliar topics. Collectively, these findings indicate that higher-level meaning construction remains challenging for many Thai EFL university students.

Table 4. *Questionnaire Results of the university students' Utilization Problems*

Items	N	R	O	U	A
1. I have difficulties in understanding and following English topics that I do not know.	2	25	36	23	14
2. It is hard to understand the message even if I know the English words.	7	22	43	18	10
3. It is very hard to arrange ideas of an English text - like subject, object, and many more.	3	18	43	25	10
4. I get confused about what is the main idea of the English text.	5	18	44	24	9
5. I can't get details or supporting ideas - like why, what, when or how.	15	30	39	14	2

Table 4 results indicate that many university students encountered significant difficulties during the utilization stage of listening comprehension. Specifically, they experienced problems when listening to unfamiliar topics, interpreting the speaker's intended message despite understanding individual words, organizing ideas to establish meaningful connections, and identifying the main idea and supporting details of the listening text. These findings suggest that higher-order comprehension and meaning construction remain challenging for many Thai EFL learners.

DISCUSSION

Perception Problems: Pronunciation-and-lexis-related issues

The findings indicate that perception-related difficulties were among the most commonly reported listening problems. Many participants identified speech rate, intonation, stress, accents, pronunciation, and unfamiliar vocabulary as major obstacles during listening. These findings are consistent with Duong and Chau (2019), who reported that rapid speech and pronunciation differences were common sources of listening difficulty among English-major students. Similarly, Juan and Abidin (2013) found that limited vocabulary knowledge hindered English listening comprehension among Chinese undergraduate students.

Within Anderson's (1995) perception–parsing–utilization framework, perception involves recognizing spoken sounds and lexical items before higher-level processing can occur. When learners fail to recognize words because of pronunciation variations, rapid speech, or unfamiliar vocabulary, subsequent stages of comprehension become more difficult. This interpretation is also consistent with Goh (2000) and Darti and Asmawati (2017), who noted that learners often pause to mentally translate unfamiliar words, causing them to miss subsequent information in the listening text. The present findings therefore suggest that pronunciation-related factors and vocabulary limitations are closely associated with students' reported perception difficulties.

These results imply that English listening instruction should include systematic exposure to authentic speech delivered at varying speeds and with different accents. Explicit instruction in pronunciation features, connected speech, and high-frequency vocabulary may also help learners improve word recognition during real-time listening.

Parsing Problems: Language Proficiency

The findings further indicate that parsing represented a significant source of difficulty for many participants. Students commonly reported forgetting information they had just heard, struggling to process long or complex sentences, and finding it difficult to integrate new information within the limited time available during real-time listening. These difficulties are consistent with Goh (2000), who described parsing as the stage at which listeners organize linguistic input into meaningful mental representations.

The results also align with previous studies by Duong and Chau (2019) and Phung (2008), both of which found that limited language proficiency was associated with greater difficulty processing spoken English. However, because the present study employed a

descriptive survey design, these findings indicate an association rather than a causal relationship between proficiency-related difficulties and parsing problems.

Through the perception-parsing-utilization framework, unsuccessful parsing may occur when learners devote excessive attention to decoding individual words rather than integrating them into larger, meaningful units. This word-by-word processing style may overload working memory, which leaves learners with insufficient cognitive capacity to retain and subsequently interpret incoming information. These results suggest that listening instruction should incorporate activities that build chunking skills, sentence-level processing, and working-memory support. Teachers may also provide repeated listening opportunities, scaffolding listening tasks, and explicit strategy instruction that encourages learners to understand the meaning rather than isolated words.

Utilization Problems: Socio-cultural and Metacognitive Factors

The findings indicate that utilization represented a particularly challenging stage for many participants. Although most students reported being able to recognize individual words, they experienced difficulty interpreting the speaker's intended message, identifying the main idea, organizing information, and comprehending unfamiliar topics. Within Anderson's framework, utilization involves integrating linguistic information with background knowledge to construct coherent, higher-level meaning, a process that goes well beyond decoding individual words.

These are aligned with Brown (2000), who emphasized that language use is closely tied to sociocultural context. Limited familiarity with cultural references or discourse conventions may have constrained learners' ability to interpret meanings that extend beyond the literal content of individual words. In addition, students' tendency to focus on decoding each word individually, rather than attending to the overall message, may have further limited effective meaning construction during listening.

The results suggest that listening instruction should place greater emphasis on classroom activities that activate relevant background knowledge, introduce cultural or contextual information prior to listening tasks.

CONCLUSION

The listening comprehension difficulties experienced by Thai EFL university students were examined through the lens of Anderson's perception-parsing-utilization framework. The findings revealed that students encountered difficulties at all three stages of the listening process: perception-level challenges related to recognizing spoken words, discriminating English sounds, and coping with unfamiliar accents, speech rates, and vocabulary; parsing-level challenges involving working memory limitations and the rapid processing required to construct sentence-level meaning; and utilization-level challenges concerning inferring speaker intent, organizing ideas, identifying main points, and comprehending unfamiliar topics.

These results confirm that listening comprehension is not a single, unified skill but a multi-stage cognitive process, and that each stage presents distinct challenges for EFL learners. Accordingly, the findings exhibited that effective listening instruction must address perception, parsing, and utilization as interconnected components rather than treating them

in isolation. Instructional practices that integrate pronunciation and vocabulary development, structured listening practice to build chunking and working-memory skills, explicit strategy instruction in inference-making, and activation of background and sociocultural knowledge are likely to more effectively support the listening development of Thai EFL learners. In addition, listening assessments should be designed to evaluate not only word-level recognition but also learners' higher-order abilities to interpret meaning, organize information, and comprehend extended spoken discourse.

Since this study relied on students' self-reported listening difficulties, the findings do not establish a direct causal link between sociocultural knowledge, listening habits, and utilization problems. Rather, these factors offer plausible theoretical explanations that are consistent with the broader listening comprehension literature. The data derived primarily from students' self-reported perceptions of their listening difficulties may not fully capture the underlying cognitive processes involved in real-time listening comprehension is one of this study's limitations. Additionally, it was conducted within a specific institutional context, which may limit the similarity of the findings to other EFL settings.

****DECLARATION OF THE USE OF GENERATIVE AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING**

During the preparation of this article, the authors used Artificial Intelligence (AI) writing tool to improve language clarity and overall readability. The use of generative AI was limited to linguistic refinement and did not contribute to the study design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, or the development of the research content.

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