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Research Article

Exploring English Listening Difficulties Among Vocational Freshmen: A Case Study at LILAMA 2 College

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Abstract

This study investigates the difficulties faced by first-year vocational students at LILAMA 2 International Technology College in acquiring English listening skills. Using a questionnaire distributed to 163 freshmen from various technical majors, the study examines four main areas of challenge: linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, and environmental/technical factors. Descriptive statistics and Cronbach's Alpha analysis were used to identify key problem areas. Results indicate that fast speech, limited vocabulary, and background noise were the most frequently reported issues. Psychological factors such as anxiety and lack of confidence also significantly hindered listening comprehension. In contrast, students were generally satisfied with teaching methods and materials. Based on these findings, the paper suggests practical strategies such as using authentic listening resources, offering emotional support in class, and improving classroom audio quality. The study provides insights for English teachers and administrators in vocational settings, aiming to improve students' listening proficiency through more targeted instructional support.

Keywords

Vocational students, English listening skills, linguistic barriers, psychological factors, SPSS analysis, teaching improvement

1. Introduction

English listening skills are important for students in vocational education, especially when they prepare to work in technical fields where English is often used. However, many vocational students in Vietnam, including those at LILAMA 2 International Technology College, still find listening to English very difficult. Most of them have studied English before, but they often struggle to understand when people speak fast, use different accents or use words they don't know.

First-year students at LILAMA 2 come from different majors such as mechanical, electrical, or electronic engineering. English is a compulsory subject for them, but many feel unconfident and stressed during listening tasks. In addition, problems like low-quality audio, noise in the classroom, and a lack of useful strategies make it harder for them to improve.

While previous research has addressed listening difficulties

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among general learners, limited attention has been paid to the experiences of vocational students in Vietnam, especially those in their first year of study. These learners often lack prior exposure to authentic listening materials and are unfamiliar with strategies to cope with fast speech,

unfamiliar accents, or specialized vocabulary.

This study aims to explore the major difficulties that vocational freshmen at LILAMA 2 face in developing English listening comprehension. By examining both internal and external barriers, the study seeks to offer insights that can support the improvement of English teaching practices in vocational colleges.

To achieve this goal, the study addresses the following research questions:

1) What are the main challenges that vocational freshmen at LILAMA 2 International Technology College encounter in acquiring English listening skills?

2) What are the primary reasons contributing to these challenges (e.g., linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, environmental or technical)?

3) What suggestions can help vocational freshmen in enhancing their English listening proficiency?

2. Literature Review

English listening comprehension has long been recognized as a demanding skill for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), as it requires both rapid decoding of speech and higher-level interpretation (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Buck, 2001; Field, 2008). Contemporary perspectives emphasize that bottom-up processes such as word recognition and grammar parsing operate interactively with top-down knowledge and strategies (Vandergrift, 2007; Rost, 2011). Metacognitive models further highlight that successful listeners monitor and regulate their listening, a dimension often underdeveloped among less experienced learners (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). For vocational students, who have limited prior exposure to authentic listening tasks, these challenges may be amplified in real-world contexts like safety briefings or workplace instructions (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005).

Research consistently points to four broad categories of listening difficulties. The first is linguistic barriers. Learners often struggle with fast speech, reduced forms, varied accents, complex syntax, and insufficient vocabulary (Underwood, 1989; Hasan, 2000; Goh, 2000; Field, 2008). Rate of delivery is particularly problematic: when speech is rapid, students lose the ability to segment and decode words, which impedes comprehension (Buck, 2001). Vocabulary coverage is another key predictor; Nation (2001) and Vandergrift (2007) showed that limited lexicon prevents learners from grasping main ideas, a finding echoed across EFL contexts.

The second category is psychological factors. Listening anxiety, low confidence, and declining motivation are frequently linked to weaker comprehension (Graham, 2006; Hamouda, 2013; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Anxiety can narrow attentional focus and increase cognitive load, making it harder to process input in real time (Graham, 2006). For vocational freshmen who are new to academic listening in English, these affective challenges may be especially acute.

The third category concerns pedagogical factors. Studies note that task design, relevance of materials, and the quality of teacher feedback strongly influence outcomes (Richards, 2008; Field, 2008; Graham & Santos, 2015). Traditional comprehension exercises may test knowledge but do not necessarily build skills. More recent approaches advocate explicit training in decoding, strategy instruction, and authentic tasks to foster sustained improvement (Rost, 2011; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). In vocational settings, tailoring materials to domain-specific contexts is particularly important for relevance and transferability (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005).

Finally, environmental and technical factors have also been highlighted. Poor audio quality, background noise, and malfunctioning equipment raise the perceptual burden and distract learners (Goh, 2000; Hamouda, 2013). In vocational classrooms that may be adjacent to workshops, such issues can be especially disruptive unless addressed systematically.

While many studies have documented these challenges among general EFL learners, relatively few have focused specifically on Vietnamese vocational students. Prior work in Vietnam suggests that fast speech, vocabulary gaps, and affective barriers are common (Nguyễn, 2011; Hoàng, 2023; Nguyễn & Phan, 2024). However, little research has disaggregated their difficulties according to the four-factor scheme above. The present study, therefore, adopts this framework: linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, and environmental/technical as the theoretical basis for examining the listening comprehension problems faced by vocational freshmen at LILAMA 2 International Technology College.

The following conceptual framework (Figure 1) illustrates the hypothesized relationships between these factors and the listening performance of vocational freshmen at LILAMA 2 College.

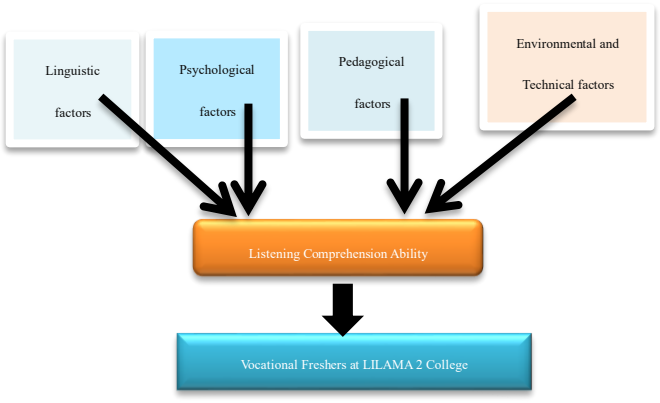

Figure 1. *Conceptual framework of the study*

This figure illustrates the conceptual framework used to explore English listening difficulties among vocational freshmen at LILAMA 2 College. The framework identifies four major categories of factors that may influence students' listening comprehension ability: linguistic factors, psychological factors, pedagogical factors, and environmental and technical factors. Linguistic factors relate to students' vocabulary knowledge, pronunciation, and grammatical understanding, which directly affect message decoding. Psychological factors include motivation, anxiety, attention, and confidence, all of which shape learners' cognitive engagement during listening. Pedagogical factors refer to teaching methods, materials, and classroom activities that either facilitate or hinder listening development. Environmental and technical factors involve external conditions such as classroom acoustics, equipment quality, and exposure to authentic listening contexts. Together, these dimensions interact to influence the overall listening comprehension ability of vocational freshmen at LILAMA 2 College.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design to explore the listening comprehension difficulties faced by vocational freshmen at LILAMA 2 International Technology College. The purpose was to identify key barriers affecting their English listening skills and to provide pedagogical suggestions based on students' perspectives.

3.1. Data Analysis

A total of 163 first-year vocational students participated in the study. They were selected using convenience sampling, as they were readily accessible and had just completed their first semester of English instruction at the college.

Table 1. *Demographic Summary of Participants*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	149	91.4%
	Female	14	8.6%
Age	19 years old	112	68.7%
	Over 19 years old	51	31.3%
Years of learning English	6 - 10 years	155	95.1%
	Over 10 years	8	4.9%

The primary research instrument was a structured questionnaire consisting of 16 items categorized into four groups of factors: linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, and environmental/technical. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

The questionnaire was distributed and collected manually during class sessions. The data collection took place in the second semester of the 2024–2025 academic year. The responses were entered into SPSS (Version 28.0) for descriptive statistical analysis and reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha to ensure the internal consistency of the items.

3.2. Validity and reliability of the study

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data collection procedure, multiple strategies were employed throughout the research process, including explanations of the questionnaire to the participants and collecting them carefully and objectively for the data analysis.. The main research instruments are the questionnaire and the software SPSS. A pilot study was conducted with a small group of students to refine the instruments and confirm their comprehensibility. Reliability was examined using Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the questionnaire, which yielded a satisfactory value above 0.60, indicating high internal consistency. These steps collectively enhanced the accuracy, dependability, and trustworthiness of the collected data.

3.3. Ethical Considerations

This study strictly adhered to ethical standards for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all vocational freshmen before data collection, and participants were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality throughout the study. All responses were used solely for academic purposes and stored securely to prevent unauthorized access. By employing quantitative method, the study aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting students' English listening comprehension. The quantitative design enabled a deeper exploration of learners' difficulties, perceptions, and experiences, thereby providing meaningful insights for improving English listening instruction at LILAMA 2 College. Before starting the research, the study received permission from the English Department at LILAMA 2. Students were informed clearly about what the research was about, what they would be asked to do, and how their information would be used. Only those who agreed to take part signed a consent form. The researcher explained that joining the study was voluntary and would not affect their grades or classes. This approach aligns with ethical research principles that emphasize transparency, voluntary participation, and informed consent in educational contexts (BERA, 2018; Israel & Hay, 2006).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Linguistic Factors

As shown in Table 1, fast speech (M = 4.55, SD = .610) and limited vocabulary (M = 4.53, SD = .580) were rated as the most serious linguistic difficulties, indicating that students often struggle to process rapid spoken input and lack the lexical resources needed for effective comprehension. In comparison, complex grammar (M = 4.36, SD = .646) and different accents (M = 4.35, SD = .634) were reported as slightly less problematic, though still considered significant barriers. These findings are consistent with Hasan (2000) and Goh (2000), who identified fast speech and vocabulary limitations as critical challenges for EFL learners. The consistently high means further suggest that vocational freshmen are particularly vulnerable to linguistic obstacles due to their limited exposure to authentic spoken English prior to entering college. This highlights the need for teaching practices that prioritize vocabulary expansion and provide training with authentic, fast-paced listening materials to better prepare students for real-life communication.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics for Linguistic Factors (N = 163)*

Item (Linguistic Difficulties)	Mean	SD	Rank
Fast speech	4.55	.610	1
Limited vocabulary	4.53	.580	2
Complex grammar	4.36	.646	3
Different accents	4.35	.634	4

4.2. Psychological Factors

As presented in Table 3, psychological barriers also posed significant difficulties for vocational freshmen, with all mean scores exceeding 4.1 on a five-point scale. The most critical issue was psychological stress and inability to stay focused (M = 4.60, SD = .529), followed by anxiety during listening (M = 4.37, SD = .686) and low self-confidence (M = 4.33, SD = .656). Lack of motivation (M = 4.15, SD = .681) was rated slightly lower, though it still represents a considerable challenge. These results align with Graham (2006) and Hamouda (2013), who emphasized that anxiety and low confidence are among the most common affective barriers to listening comprehension. The findings suggest that vocational students' listening performance is strongly influenced by their emotional state, with stress and anxiety often preventing them from applying effective listening strategies. Given the consistently high means, teachers should pay particular attention to creating a supportive learning environment that reduces stress, builds learners' confidence, and fosters sustained motivation in listening practice.

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics for Psychological Factors (N = 163)*

Item (Psychological Difficulties)	Mean	SD	Rank
Psychological stress / lack of focus	4.60	.529	1
Anxiety while listening	4.37	.686	2
Low self-confidence	4.33	.656	3
Lack of motivation	4.15	.681	4

4.3. Pedagogical Factors

Table 4 indicates that, compared with linguistic and psychological challenges, pedagogical factors were rated relatively low, with mean scores ranging from 1.40 to 2.22. Among these, students most frequently mentioned the lack of teacher feedback (M = 2.22, SD = .599) as a limitation, while issues such as unsuitable listening materials (M = 1.83, SD = .580) and ineffective teaching methods (M = 1.40, SD = .624) were considered less problematic. This suggests that, overall, students were fairly satisfied with the way listening was taught and the materials provided, but they still desired more individualized feedback to help them improve.

These findings are somewhat different from those reported by Richards (2008), who highlighted that poorly designed listening tasks and limited materials often pose significant barriers. In the case of vocational students at LILAMA 2, teaching methods and resources appear to be less of an obstacle, possibly because instructors already adapt lessons to suit students' needs. Instead, the emphasis falls on the quality and frequency of feedback, which students believe could better support their listening development. This underlines the importance of formative assessment and continuous teacher support in helping learners refine their strategies and overcome difficulties in listening comprehension.

Table 4. *Descriptive Statistics for Pedagogical Factors (N = 163)*

Item (Pedagogical Difficulties)	Mean	SD	Rank
Lack of teacher feedback	2.22	.599	1
Ineffective classroom activities	1.85	.631	2
Unsuitable listening materials	1.83	.580	3

Ineffective teaching methods	1.40	.624	4

4.4. Environmental and Technical Factors

As shown in Table 5, environmental and technical conditions were also rated highly as barriers to listening comprehension, with mean scores ranging from 4.10 to 4.53. The most critical issues were technical problems such as unclear recordings or malfunctioning devices (M = 4.53, SD = .601) and the poor quality of audio equipment (M = 4.48, SD = .559). Meanwhile, difficulties caused by the classroom environment (M = 4.17, SD = .669) and background noise (M = 4.10, SD = .562) were also reported but to a slightly lesser extent.

These results confirm earlier observations by Hamouda (2013), who noted that poor sound quality and technical constraints can significantly reduce learners' ability to follow spoken input. In the context of vocational education, such challenges may be particularly disruptive, as students often learn in noisy workshops or practice rooms where background sounds are unavoidable. The findings emphasize the importance of ensuring reliable audio equipment and minimizing classroom noise in order to create more supportive listening conditions. In addition, improving access to high-quality recordings and updated technology would allow students to practice in environments that are closer to real-life communication contexts.

Table 5. *Descriptive Statistics for Environmental/Technical Factors (N = 163)*

Item (Environmental/Technical Difficulties)	**Mean**	**SD**	**Rank**
Technical issues (unclear recordings, malfunctioning devices)	4.53	.601	1
Poor quality of audio equipment	4.48	.559	2
Classroom environment not conducive	4.17	.669	3
Background noise in the classroom	4.10	.562	4

Overall, the findings indicate that linguistic and psychological factors posed the greatest barriers for vocational freshmen, while pedagogical and environmental issues were less critical but still influential. Together, these findings highlight the multifaceted nature of listening comprehension difficulties and provide a basis for drawing practical implications, which are summarized in the conclusion.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the major difficulties that vocational freshmen at LILAMA 2 International Technology College encounter in English listening comprehension. The findings revealed that linguistic and psychological factors represented the greatest challenges. In particular, fast speech and limited vocabulary emerged as the most critical linguistic obstacles, while psychological stress, anxiety, and lack of self-confidence strongly hindered students' ability to focus and process listening input. In contrast, pedagogical factors were rated less severe, with students generally satisfied with teaching methods and materials, though they highlighted the need for more individualized feedback. Environmental and technical issues, especially poor audio quality and malfunctioning equipment, also proved disruptive to listening performance.

The results carry important implications for teaching practice in vocational education. Teachers should place greater emphasis on vocabulary development and provide more exposure to authentic, fast-paced listening materials to prepare students for real-world communication. At the same time, classroom strategies should aim to reduce listening-related anxiety and build learners' confidence. Addressing technical limitations, such as ensuring high-quality audio equipment and reducing classroom noise, will further enhance the learning environment. Finally, more consistent teacher feedback should be integrated to support students' progress in listening skills.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The research was based on a single vocational institution, and the findings may not fully represent other contexts. Moreover, the study relied solely on self-reported questionnaire data, which might not capture the full range of learners' listening difficulties.

Future research could expand by including multiple vocational colleges across Vietnam to enhance generalizability. It may also combine surveys with classroom observations or listening tests for more comprehensive insights. Longitudinal studies or intervention-based research would be valuable to evaluate the effectiveness of specific pedagogical strategies in overcoming the challenges identified.

Appendix

Appendix A: Questionnaire

Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female

Age: ☐ 18 ☐ 19 ☐ Over 19

PART I. PERSONAL INFORMATION

Your major at Lilama 2 College: (Please specify your

major) .....

How long have you been learning English?

☐ 3 - 5 years

☐ 6 - 10 years

☐ Over 10 years

Have you ever attended any English listening course outside school?

☐ Yes ☐ No

PART II. FACTORS AFFECTING ENGLISH LISTENING SKILLS

Please indicate how much you agree with the following questions:

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Hoàn toàn không đồng ý	Không đồng ý	Trung lập / Không ý kiến	Đồng ý	Hoàn toàn đồng ý

Please rate the following statements based on your experience with learning English listening skills.

Theme 1: Linguistic Factors

No.	Questions	1	2	3	4	5
Q1	Complex grammar in listening materials makes it hard for me to understand spoken English. *(Ngữ pháp phức tạp trong tài liệu nghe khiến tôi khó hiểu tiếng Anh nói)*					
Q2	Fast speech in English conversations or recordings is a major obstacle to my listening comprehension. *(Tốc độ nói nhanh trong các đoạn hội thoại hoặc bản ghi tiếng Anh là một trở ngại lớn đối với khả năng nghe hiểu của tôi.)*					
Q3	Different accents (e.g., British, American, Australian) make it difficult for me to understand English listening content. *(Các giọng khác nhau (ví dụ: Anh – Anh, Anh – Mỹ, Anh – Úc) khiến tôi gặp khó khăn trong việc hiểu nội dung nghe tiếng Anh.)*					
Q4	My limited vocabulary prevents me from understanding English listening materials effectively. (Vốn từ vựng hạn chế khiến tôi gặp khó khăn trong việc hiểu tài liệu nghe tiếng Anh)					

Other (If possible) - *Ý kiến khác (Nếu có)*.....

.....

Theme 2: Psychological Factors

No.	Questions	1	2	3	4	5
Q5	I feel low self-confidence when listening to English, which affects my comprehension. *(Sự thiếu tự tin khi nghe tiếng Anh ảnh hưởng đến khả năng hiểu của tôi)*					
Q6	Anxiety while listening to English makes it difficult for me to focus and understand. *(Cảm giác lo lắng khi nghe tiếng Anh khiến tôi khó tập trung và hiểu nội dung)*					
Q7	Lack of motivation reduces my effort to improve my English listening skills. *(Việc thiếu động lực làm giảm nỗ lực của tôi trong việc cải thiện kỹ năng nghe tiếng Anh)*					
Q8	I find it hard to stay focused during English listening tasks due to psychological stress. *(Căng thẳng tâm lý khiến tôi khó duy trì sự*					

	tập trung trong các bài nghe tiếng Anh.)					

Other (If possible) - *Ý kiến khác (Nếu có)*.....
.....

Theme 3: Pedagogical Factors

No.	Questions	1	2	3	4	5
Q9	The teaching methods used in class do not effectively improve my English listening skills. *(Tôi thấy phương pháp giảng dạy trên lớp chưa thực sự hiệu quả trong việc cải thiện kỹ năng nghe tiếng Anh của tôi)*					
Q10	The listening materials provided are not suitable for my current English proficiency level. *(Tôi cảm thấy tài liệu nghe chưa phù hợp với trình độ tiếng Anh hiện tại của mình)*					
Q11	Classroom activities for listening practice are not engaging or effective for me. *(Các hoạt động luyện nghe trên lớp không hấp dẫn hoặc không hiệu quả đối với tôi.)*					
Q12	Teachers do not provide enough feedback to help me improve my listening skills. *(Giáo viên không cung cấp đủ phản hồi để giúp tôi cải thiện kỹ năng nghe)*					

Other (If possible) - *Ý kiến khác (Nếu có)*.....
.....

Theme 4: Environmental/Technical Factors

No.	Questions	1	2	3	4	5
Q13	Background noise in the classroom disrupts my ability to focus on English listening tasks. *(Tiếng ồn trong lớp học ảnh hưởng đến khả năng tập trung của tôi khi nghe tiếng Anh.)*					
Q14	Poor quality of audio equipment (e.g., speakers, headphones) affects my listening comprehension. *(Chất lượng kém của thiết bị âm thanh (ví dụ: loa, tai nghe) ảnh hưởng đến khả năng nghe hiểu của tôi.)*					
Q15	The learning environment (e.g., classroom setting) is not conducive to practicing English listening. *(Môi trường học tập (ví dụ: không gian lớp học) không thuận lợi cho việc luyện kỹ năng nghe tiếng Anh.)*					
Q16	Technical issues (e.g., unclear recordings, malfunctioning devices) hinder my ability to practice listening. (Các sự cố kỹ thuật (ví dụ: bản ghi âm không rõ, thiết bị trục trặc) cản trở khả năng luyện nghe của tôi.)					

Other (If possible) - *Ý kiến khác (Nếu có)*.....
.....
.....

Appendix B: Informed consent form

Project Title: **An Investigation into the Difficulties of Learning English Listening Skills among Vocational Freshers at LILAMA 2 International Technology College**

Researcher: LE THI HANG NGA
Institution: LILAMA 2 International Technology College
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Purpose of the Study:

This research aims to explore the challenges that first-year vocational students face in English listening comprehension and to suggest practical strategies to improve their listening skills.

Participation:

You are invited to take part in this study voluntarily. Your responses will help contribute to better English teaching practices for vocational learners.

Confidentiality:

All information you provide will be kept strictly confidential. No names or identifying details will be recorded. Data will be used solely for academic purposes.

Right to Withdraw:

You may withdraw from the study at any time, without explanation or penalty.

Declaration:

By signing below, you confirm that:

You have read and understood the information above. You voluntarily agree to take part in this research.

Participant's Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

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