



**ANXIETY FACTORS AFFECTING EFL STUDENTS' LISTENING  
COMPREHENSION**

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**Abstract:**

The mixed-method study sheds light on the factors influencing 84 non-English major sophomores' listening anxieties in a public university in Vietnam. The questionnaire adapted from Kim (2000) and semi-structured interviews were employed to discover students' anxiety levels related to teacher factors, student factors, and materials during their listening process. The findings show a high frequency of anxiety experienced by many students when they were distracted during the listening process. Secondly, the concern emerges from unfamiliar English pronunciation and accents, which led to students' difficulty understanding English audio recordings. As a third obstacle, the speaker may experience discomfort if they speak at a fast speed, which pertains to the second concern of being overworked. Lastly, students' nervousness during listening sessions was worsened by instructor-related worries. Though there was still restraint, several pedagogical implications were additionally presented in the field to help increase students' anxiety in EFL listening classes.



## CÁC YẾU TỐ LO LẮNG ẢNH HƯỞNG ĐẾN KHẢ NĂNG NGHE HIỂU CỦA SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN TIẾNG ANH

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| Thông tin bài viết  | Tóm tắt   |
|---|---|
| Ngày nhận bài: 07/08/2022   | Nghiên cứu theo phương pháp hỗn hợp làm sáng tỏ các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến nỗi lo lắng của 84 sinh viên không chuyên năm thứ 2 tại một trường đại học công lập ở Việt Nam trong giờ học nghe. Nghiên cứu thu thập dữ liệu qua Bảng câu hỏi khảo sát phỏng theo Kim (2000) và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc, nhằm tìm hiểu nỗi lo lắng của sinh viên liên quan đến yếu tố về giảng viên, sinh viên và tài liệu sử dụng trong giờ học nghe. Kết quả cho thấy sinh viên lo sợ nhất là mất khả năng tập trung trong quá trình nghe, cách phát âm và giọng điệu lạ, tốc độ của bài nghe và các biểu hiện của giảng viên dạy nghe. Nghiên cứu cũng chỉ ra một số hạn chế đồng thời cung cấp một số đề xuất sự phạm nhằm giảm tải nỗi lo lắng của sinh viên trong giờ học nghe tiếng Anh. |
| Ngày sửa bài: 10/09/2022  |   |
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| <b>Từ khóa:</b><br><br><i>Các yếu tố lo lắng, nỗi lo lắng khi học nghe, khả năng nghe hiểu, Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS).</i> |   |

### 1. Introduction

Most listeners of English as a foreign language (EFL) cannot comprehend what the speaker is saying (Vogely, 1998). While listening involves hypothesizing, predicting, generalizing, modifying, and verifying, anxiety interferes with the ability to comprehend speech (Vandergrift, 1997). Multiple research (Kim, 2000; Kimura, 2008; Vogely, 1998) concur that anxiety impacts EFL acquisition. The anxiety associated with speaking, listening, or learning a second language is known as language anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Listening is viewed as a challenging skill, and meaning is generated via the dynamic process of listening comprehension. Listeners may utilize pertinent information and existing knowledge to complete the assignment (Tran et al., 2019). Detailed listening comprehension frustrates and frightens EFL

students; consequently, anxiety hinders the ability to learn (Kim, 2000). Anxiety over a second language may also harm motivation and language learning (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). In particular, anxiety impairs an individual's capacity to listen and understand. Moreover, anxiety diminishes the sensitivity and responsiveness of the auditory organs, resulting in poor information comprehension.

According to Fang (2011), anxiety has many influences on listening comprehension; hence. Listening anxiety must be examined for successful second-language instruction. This research examined students' moods, anxiety, and performance during listening comprehension exercises. Without negative marking, this study will assist EFL teachers in course design and students in achieving academic success. The research is advantageous since it teaches EFL

teachers about anxiety levels, causes, and methods for lowering anxiety and enhancing performance. A Vietnamese university focuses minimal emphasis on the understanding of spoken language. While it is included in the curriculum, it is seldom taught. Listening anxiety in students is brought on by a lack of practice, which inhibits language learning and decreases performance. Hence, the research question *“What variables affect the EFL sophomores’ listening comprehension?”* was employed to determine students’ anxiety when they listen comprehensively.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Listening anxiety**

Wheeles (1975, as cited in Dalman, 2012, p. 28) described it as the fear of not comprehending what others are saying or misunderstanding what they have heard. Hence, students suffer anxiety, which has a connection to the nervous system (Serraj, 2015). It indicates that student anxiety is linked to their brain makeup. They were anxious before going to class; they feared their listening lesson. As a consequence, the success and failure of second-language learners are affected by their listening anxiety.

Anxiety about listening has two impacts. In the first place, these are the incapacitating, inhibiting, and stimulating varieties (Vogely, 1998). Anxiety reduction may increase student performance. Facilitating anxiety could be undetected since it does not generate tension. Secondly, anxiety hinders the learning of a foreign language. That is debilitating detrimental, and unhelpful to foreign language acquisition. Consequently, this results in decreased motivation, unfavorable attitudes and beliefs, and difficulties in language competence. According to Kim (2000) and Gonen (2009), anxiety around listening comprehension is often neglected despite its significance. In addition, while many academics understand the significance of study on learning anxiety, studies on the relevant topic are limited.

### **2.2. Factors influencing listening anxiety:**

Vogely (1998) describes many forms of listening anxiety. The instructor, students, listening materials, and methods are all contributors.

First and foremost, teachers plan and direct the educational process. It is undeniable that traditional classrooms strongly emphasize authority and the teacher. Planning is critical for both teaching and learning. Besides, the instructor’s personality impacts the students’ listening anxiety. Overly serious professors may exert class pressure. Thus, outgoing and laid-back professors are amused in class, which helps students relax. The teacher’s attitude toward the students’ listening faults will not worry them.

Students are the second variable. The ability of students to listen has an impact on the outcome. The priority is listening comprehension. Anxiety rises when a student’s listening comprehension is poor, and vice versa. Moreover, linguistic understanding (lexicon, syntax, and grammar) and listening competence compose listening capacity (the ability to catch essential words, predict the following information, etc.). Moreover, the audience’s sense of self-efficacy must be correspondingly considered. Both urgency and anxiety are influenced by self-efficacy. Students confident in their listening abilities are more observant and proficient at picking up on indirect information. Listeners with poor self-efficacy doubt their talents when faced with challenging tasks. They give up because stress and anxiety impair listening comprehension. In terms of habits, many language students do not practice listening outside class and are unmotivated in class, resulting in poor listening skills and frequent absences. This habit is worrisome because it encourages students to reject critical facts. Their wants influence learners’ listening anxiety to succeed. Create positive expectations and demanding learning objectives to calm learners. Achievement motivation is the inherent determination to perform things well that motivates people to achieve their goals.

Among the things to look into are listening materials. Regarding difficulties and listening anxiety, the more complex the language is, the more intricate the issue becomes, which leads to the quicker the tempo, the fewer the pauses. The audience may experience terror as a result of these occurrences. Listening is influenced by the content, duration, pace, and language of listening materials. Complications may arise if the listening text is irrelevant in the case of a new subject, which makes it harder for EFL listeners to learn and recall. The second factor is anxiousness. Listening cannot be repeated; hence, others who cannot understand are concerned. Furthermore, inadequate processing time causes concern. Listeners feel pushed and nervous when asked to answer a question promptly.

### **2.3. Relevant studies**

Tran et al. (2013) investigated the familiarity of EFL students and teachers with foreign language anxiety. The author delivered the survey to 419 Vietnamese non-English majors and 8 EFL teachers. It triangulated data using surveys, interviews, and student memoirs. More than two-thirds of students indicated anxiety while learning a foreign language. Despite this, there remained a lack of classroom focus. Most learners dislike learning a foreign language; thus, teachers should design courses appropriately.

Zhai (2015) used quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate students’ anxieties about

English listening comprehension. Participants were eighty-two first-year English majors from a typical college. Participants' anxiety levels were assessed using a modified version of a foreign language listening questionnaire, and the underlying reasons were determined via in-depth interviews. The paper's analyses advocate firstly, freshmen English majors do experience slightly more listening anxiety; secondly, there is a significant negative correlation between anxiety and listening comprehension; and finally, the primary causes are a lack of confidence and listening strategies, characteristics of listening comprehension and materials, and fear of negative evaluation. Using this discovery as a launching point, numerous practical suggestions were made to assist students in enhancing their listening abilities and the current condition of listening classrooms.

Serraj (2015) shed insight into the factors that influence listening concerns. Individual features, input variables, and environmental factors contribute to listening anxiety. Anxiety, negative emotions, poor decision-making, and a lack of readiness are individual challenges that may impact students. However, contextual influences, such as those in the classroom, impact students' listening anxiety. Instructors, students, and the overall classroom atmosphere all have an effect. Time constraints, the absence of visual cues, the spoken language's distinctiveness, and the difficulty level are examples of auditory input elements. It was discovered that these traits affected students' listening anxiety levels. Lastly, when children are worried about their hearing, they do poorly in listening activities.

Tran (2019) examines anxiety among EFL students at Hanoi National University of Education. Exams, oral exercises, teachers' speaking speeds, and students' self-evaluations of their abilities relative to their peers are common sources of anxiety in foreign language studies. In foreign language classes, great emphasis is placed on calming students' thoughts. First, semester-long examinations must contain questions assessing students' communication and listening abilities. Teachers must also teach interactional skills so students can talk in the target language and their native tongue. Teachers may lessen classroom anxiety by fostering cooperative learning and allowing students sufficient time to prepare for assignments. Students are permitted to sit in circles, work in pairs or small groups, and move around as necessary for games and activities.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research design and settings

A mixed method study design is the process of collecting, evaluating, and synthesizing data from both quantitative and qualitative sources. One study adopted this method better to comprehend research concerns

(Creswell, 2012). The results from the student survey were evaluated quantitatively. In contrast, a qualitative technique was used to transcribe the students' replies to the questionnaire into narratives or words, followed by interviews with an English instructor and three students. Participants in the study were 84 second-year students from a public college in Vietnam who were not English majors. The sophomores were chosen because, based on first observations, they were adequately prepared for the end-of-semester English exam.

#### 3.2. Data collection instruments and data analysis

Using a questionnaire, the researchers first evaluated the factors influencing students' listening discomfort. This survey is based, with slight modifications, on Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) adapted by Kim (2000). The 20-item survey explored variables impacting students' listening anxiety. They were required to read each sentence attentively and indicate whether they strongly disagreed, disagreed, not decided, agreed, or strongly agreed. Participants were given a permission form to complete to indicate their desire to serve as data sources, and their anonymity was guaranteed. The survey was disseminated via Google forms.

After analyzing and classifying the quantitative survey results, in-depth interviews were conducted with six students with the highest listening anxiety and eagerness to be recruited.

Using BMI SPSS version 25.0, the FLLAS survey data were tabulated and analyzed for insights into the research issue. Meanwhile, the interview was transcribed verbatim and examined using theme analysis to understand what causes students to experience listening anxiety.

| Reliability Statistics |            |
|------------------------|------------|
| Cronbach's Alpha       | N of Items |
| .874                   | 20         |

**Figure 1. Reliability and validity analysis of FLLAS questionnaire** Figure 1 depicts Cronbach's alpha at .874, showing that FLLAS has an excellent internal coefficient. Consequently, the FLLAS is a viable instrument for further statistical analysis.

### 4. Findings and discussion

From the data obtained from the questionnaire and the interview, the results were categorized into three factors (listening material, teacher-related factors, and student-related factors) that lead to their anxiety in listening.

#### 4.1. Teacher-related factors

The teacher-related factor is related to how the lecturer guides and teaches the class. The way the lecturer leads the class is going to affect the level of anxiety of the students in the class.

**Table 1. Teacher-related factors affecting students' listening anxiety**

|   | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|------|----------------|
| The teacher's behavior and manner make me nervous                         | 4.66 | .840           |
| The teacher open show frustration when I don't know the answer            | 4.50 | .836           |
| I feel worried and anxious when I am evaluated                            | 4.72 | .723           |
| When the teacher speaks in English, I am anxious that I cannot understand | 4.58 | .989           |
| I am worried if I do not know what the teacher is correcting              | 4.75 | .535           |
| I am worried if the teacher is ready to correct every mistake             | 4.81 | .588           |
| I feel uncomfortable around teachers speaking English                     | 4.03 | .975           |

Table 1 indicates that the students got primarily anxious when the teacher was ready to correct every mistake they made (M=4.81). The following issue made students worried when they did not know they were being corrected or evaluated (M=4.75, M=4.72). It could be explained when the teacher was too severe with the lesson. It might make the students feel anxious and worried that they would not be acceptable in the class; otherwise, if the teacher was humorous and calm, it made the students feel comfortable and less anxious. It also happened in the situation when the teacher gave the students a question, and they did not answer it correctly. The teacher could be either disappointed, and it was going to raise the level of anxiety of the students, or the lecturer could be merely calm and explain clearly what the mistake made by the students, resulting in less anxiety among students. The interview also supported this finding that one student reported, “... I think I will be frustrated when the teacher shows the behavior like that when I am called to answer the questions or do the exercise. It feels like the teacher is letting me down. It is all right for me when the teacher behaves like that face-to-face. However, I don't want to be treated like that in front of the class, particularly my friends because it will make me embarrassed like I am the foolish person in the class...”.

A possible explanation is that the respondent felt much anxiety toward that kind of teacher's behavior. He thought it would make him sad, embarrassed, and scared in listening class. He thought the lecturer was not supposed to do that to the students. If the teacher did it, it had to be face-to-face with the student itself, but if the lecturer did it in front of many people or friends, it would make him embarrassed, and he thought that the lecturer did not support him.

Qualitative data from the interview indicates that the language teacher's role is a critical factor influencing the degree to which students fear listening to new content. Every respondent believes their instructor is the most significant individual for minimizing their listening anxiety and making them feel more comfortable during listening exercises. Several students commented that lecturers significantly cause anxiety in their listening lessons. They struggle to comprehend complicated listening tasks and meet their professors' expectations. According to Vogely (1998), learners experience anxiety over listening comprehension when instructors have high expectations and are critical of students who provide incorrect responses. Tran et al. (2013) suggest that instructors of foreign languages should avoid depending only on listening production systems that demand students to produce the correct replies since doing so may distract students and increase their anxiety. Rather than being the exclusive emphasis of the course, foreign language instructors should encourage their students to make errors and see them as part of the learning process. This may help students overcome the common worry of “losing face” in language lessons (Tran et al., 2013). Moreover, if FL teachers can make their students feel comfortable and encouraged, they may assist their students in gaining self-confidence (Zhai, 2015).

**4.2. Student-related factors**

In terms of student factors, it is strongly related to the students themselves. It is interconnected with how the students manage themselves in listening class, such as their ability, self-esteem, motivation, and, most importantly, the student's interest in listening. Table 2 demonstrates student-related factors impacting their listening anxiousness.

**Table 2. Student-related factors affecting their listening anxiety**

|  | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--|------|----------------|
| I am stuck on one or two unknown words           | 4.13 | 1.291          |
| I often guess the missing part                   | 4.00 | 1.039          |
| I mind drifting                                  | 4.73 | .718           |
| I differentiate the words                        | 4.69 | .889           |
| I have little time to think                      | 4.16 | .996           |
| I often translate words while listening          | 4.00 | .959           |
| I do not understand what the speakers are saying | 4.19 | 1.153          |

The more the students have no interest in listening, they are going to have an empty brain when they come toward the class because they have no idea what to do during the listening lesson runs, and when they have the task, they might have worried that they do not know what to do with that and it results with the lack of ability in listening comprehension. Table 2 shows that students selected their lack of concentration most frequently to increase their anxiety (M=4.73). They were afraid that they could not catch the critical information or idea. The student feels anxious about losing an important idea from the English recording. They feel difficult to focus when listening to an English recording and feel anxious if he only does not know what is being said by the speaker in the English recording. So, the students had to stay focused when listening to the audio. Besides, the students only master a little about English vocabulary, so they cannot understand what the speaker is talking about. This result is that the students do misinterpret the meaning and loss information relating to the contents of the English recording. The result was also proved by the qualitative data from the interview “... If I even think the other things while listening, I will lose the important information of listening even a second. I will do not know what to fill in the paper. Even if I focus, I still lose the point of listening itself. So, I should keep concentration and focus not to lose that. That’s only way...” Another student also stated that he sometimes felt worried because he could not get the core of the speaker’s utterance. He did not focus to the recording because he thought of something

else. It could be concluded that the students often lost important information while listening. They lost that because they sometimes thought about things other than listening or daydreaming of something, then the students lost the points of the listening itself. According to the respondent, he thought he had to stay focused while listening to get the vital information from listening audio.

The findings align with those of Kim (2000), Serraj (2015), and Tran et al. (2013). The unfamiliarity created significant challenges with the subject matter and required students to pay close attention while listening to the recording. As a result, students are unable to concentrate during classroom lectures. A primary indicator of more significant anxiety while listening is a lack of focus. During lectures, it was usual for students to stress and daydream, resulting in poor listening abilities. Due to the intricacy of the listening process, students must pay great attention to the phrase they hear to form a mental image of it.

**4.3. Listening materials**

*Listening material* is the material used in the listening skill, especially audio used in the listening class. However, listening material is one of the factors that cause the increasing level of listening anxiety in advanced listening classes. It occurs due to the nature of speech in listening and unfamiliar topic listened to by the students, and the unfamiliar topic of the listening material.

**Table 3. Listening materials affecting students’ listening anxiety**

|  | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--|------|----------------|
| The recording pronounces word differently from the way I pronounce it                        | 4.36 | .824           |
| The speed of the recording is so fast  | 4.52 | .891           |
| I am anxious because I cannot see the facial expressions of people in the recording          | 4.17 | .883           |
| I often listen to the recording without written texts  | 4.17 | .883           |
| I am anxious when I am not at my pace while listening  | 4.11 | .779           |
| I am anxious when I listen to the native speakers on the phone or imagine that things happen | 4.27 | .877           |

Most students thought that fast-speed listening exercises (M=4.52), then their incapacity to recognize the pronunciation (M=4.36) helped increase their anxiety. It was said that if the people in the audio spoke too fast, they might not understand what they were saying. They thought it made them feel incompetent in their listening material which tended to make them misunderstand what the people were saying in the audio. As a result, the students could not catch any idea of the audio. This finding was backed up by the interviewee, who reported, "... it is hard to understand people speaking too fast, especially with unfamiliar pronunciation...". The respondent felt anxious when she hardly recognized people's different pronunciations other than hers. She had anxiety because she thought it was challenging to understand the people who had different pronunciations from her. After all, it could make her feel confused and not know what to say to people.

This finding supports Serraj's (2015) claim that the intrinsic ambiguity of language exacerbates students' anxiety. Kim (2000) and Vogely (1998) highlight speech rate and unfamiliar pronunciation as contributing factors to students' anxiety in listening lessons. Vogely (1998) revealed that one-third of the participants reported feeling worried due to the quick speech pace and strange accents. This finding is congruent with Zhai (2015), who discovered that students had difficulties comprehending the recording's content, but if it had been played slower, they would have gotten its gist. This is reinforced by the findings of Tran (2019), who argues that the inability to regulate the speaking pace significantly contributes to the perception that listening is a challenging skill.

Participant interviews revealed that when students perceive listening material to be difficult, they feel anxiety. The usage of specialist terminology influenced participants' evaluations of the difficulty of hearing input, the complexity of the grammatical structures used, and the novelty of the topics presented in the texts being read. In many instances, it seems that students are unable to manage the difficulties that listening comprehension presents and are unable to tolerate ambiguity throughout the listening for the meaning process. As a result, people become less concentrated, worsening their anxiety. This is consistent with Vogely's (1998) assertion that the structural aspect of the information adds to the difficulty of hearing comprehension. Some listeners may erroneously believe they can only comprehend the portions of the speech whose vocabulary and grammar they are unfamiliar with. This implies that substantial lexical and grammatical knowledge is required. Instead of inferring the meaning from the context, these viewers must labor to decode the text's complex structures.

They often gloss over critical phrases in the content, which hinders understanding. Consequently, anxiety and tension would increase throughout any tasks demanding listening comprehension.

### 5. Conclusions, limitations, and implications.

The study shed light on the elements that impact listening concerns. The detected listening anxiety variables may be classified into teacher-related factors, student-related factors, and listening materials. Anxiety is a common emotion, but it is not necessarily bad. The findings point to several factors contributing to students' nervousness while listening to English. Students are first concerned about their minds drifting, which might lead to misunderstanding. Students struggle to understand English audio recordings due to unfamiliar English pronunciation and accents. The next barrier is the fast speed rate, which makes them uncomfortable. Finally, worries about the lecturer heightened students' uneasiness throughout listening lessons.

Certain limits remain as a consequence of the constrained nature of the circumstances. The sample size of 84 students who are not English majors is inadequate to be representative, and there is an overemphasis on self-reported data. The following principles for assuaging students' anxieties during class listening have been produced based on prior research. First, it is recommended that students learn to recognize the signs of listening anxiety in themselves. Students should participate in as much listening practice as possible before class begins to overcome their aversion to hearing. Secondly, it is advised that teachers work to alleviate students' concerns about listening during class. The first thing a teacher can do to alleviate students' concerns and encourage them to learn more about listening is to establish a pleasant classroom environment. In order to boost the students' concentration, the teacher should adopt a funny tone. Thirdly, future research should look at strategies for soothing students' anxiety during listening exercises and the most effective ways for instructors to interact with their students during the session. It is recommended that more studies be undertaken on the reasons and amount of listening anxiety experienced by these students since they are enrolled in an advanced listening course does not mean that their concern is insignificant.

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