AN INVESTIGATION INTO APPLYING COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES IN LISTENING CLASSES FOR GRADE 10 STUDENTS AT SOME HIGH SCHOOLS IN HUE

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ABSTRACT

This research paper is an investigation into the teaching listening skills to grade 10 students at some high schools in Hue City (Vietnam). It particularly aims to: (1) enhance the awareness of both teachers and students about the necessity of communicative activities for listening class, (2) find out what common activities are used in listening periods, (3) discover the problems encountered by teachers and students when teaching and learning listening using communicative activities as well as identify some solutions to make the situation better.

The data for this project is collected from class observations, questionnaires and interviews. Questionnaires are distributed to 120 students and 12 teachers while in-depth interviews are conducted with 5 teachers and 10 students.

The findings show that communicative listening activities have been applying to some extent. Both teachers and students are aware of the importance of those activities since they gain many benefits from them. However, there remain some subjective problems and objective ones during the implementation of communicative activities.

Basing on the difficulties faced by both teachers and students, the researcher makes some suggestions to better communicative activities in the teaching and learning listening skills.

Key words: *English, communicative activities, listening skills, listening class*

1. INTRODUCTION

In order to master the English language, it is really important for any learners to be good at four skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening is considered a difficult skill among fours skills. According to Mark Twain, the great American author of all times, once states "If we talk more than we listen, we should have two tongues and one ear". This statement implies that listening appears much more difficult and important than speaking and other skills of communication.

As can be seen, listening skill has great importance in learning language. However, in the past, listening used to be called a passive process that means concentrating at a low-level and absorbing just enough the speaker's words to stay involved in a conversation or speech (Camp, 2002, p. 43). Thus, passive listeners actually understand and remember little of what is said. This misunderstanding has led both teachers and students in a boring atmosphere during the listening period. For language learners generally, "frequent diet of successful listening classes makes

students are able to cope with listening to English" (Harmer, 1991, p.186), thereby teaching listening should be paid much attention. However, we can see clearly that situation of teaching and learning the subject of listening at some high school in Hue is not encouraging enough.

As a teacher of English, so I think with this research, I can understand more about the reality of teaching listening skills at high schools in Hue, the difficulties faced by teachers and students. From that I suggest some solutions to make the situation better.
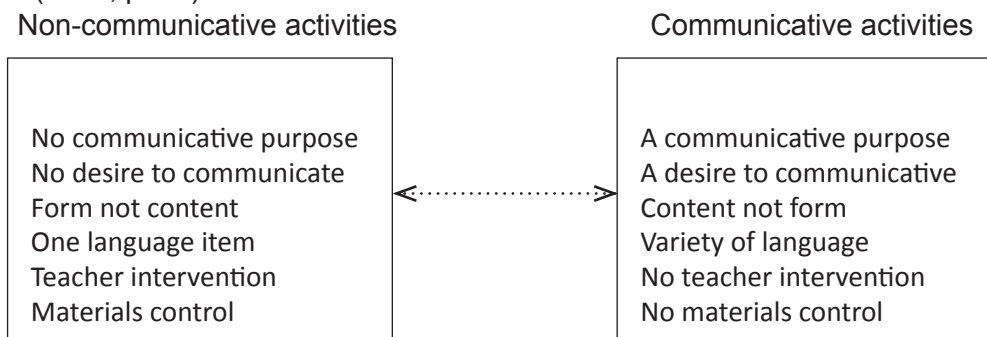
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The importance of listening skills in English learning and teaching

Among four basic skills in teaching a foreign language, listening is the most difficult one. Howatt and Dakin (1974, p. 29) stated that listening is the ability to identify and understand what other people are saying, this involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, his grammar and vocabulary and grasping his meaning. This means that, at the mean time, listeners have to use many skills to obtain the spoken message. That also explains the reason why listening is a difficult subject in learning and teaching a second language.

It cannot be denied that communication cannot successfully take place unless what is spoken is also understood. Adrian (1988, p.198) emphasized that we cannot develop speaking skill if we do not develop listening skill, to have a successful conversation, learners must understand what is said to them". Sharing the same idea, Rivers & Ternperley (1978) showed that "45 percent of the time adults spend in communication activities is on listening, 30 percent on speaking, 16 percent on reading and 9 percent on writing". Therefore, listening is essential for the development of the ability to understand the spoken English daily contact, and spoken English on radio.

2.2 Using communicative activities in English listening classes

According to Richards and Rodgers (1986, p.72), "learning activities are selected according to how well they engage the learner in meaningful and authentic language use (rather than merely mechanical practice of language patterns)". Thus, range of exercise types and activities compatible with a communicative approach is chosen by teachers before setting up the class. In Moss and Ross-Feldman's point of view, "communicative activities include any activities that encourage and require a learner to speak with and listen to other learners, as well as with people in program and community (2003). A distinction is drawn between 'communicative' and 'non-communicative' activities by Harmer (1991, p. 50) as follow:

Non-communicative activities	Communicative activities
No communicative purpose No desire to communicate Form not content One language item Teacher intervention Materials control	A communicative purpose A desire to communicative Content not form Variety of language No teacher intervention No materials control

We can infer from the figure above that students must have a desire to communicate, and there must be some communicative purpose to their communication. This implies, of course, that the students' attention will be focused on the content of what they are saying, rather than the form. They will use a wide variety of language, and the teacher will not intervene. Therefore, not only teacher intervention but also materials' limitation would reduce communicative purpose of the activity.

For non-communicative activities, there will be no desire to communicate, nor will students have a communicative purpose. Where students are involved in repetition or substitution drills, for example, they will be motivated not by a desire to achieve a communicative objective, but by the need to attain accuracy. The emphasis will be on the form of the language, not the content, the teacher will intervene to ensure accuracy, and the materials used will often be designed to concentrate on a particular item of language.

2.3 Types of communicative activities teachers use in listening classes

Students are often asked to listen to tapes or to their teacher talking, but it can be just as useful to encourage them to listen to each other in a more active way.

Learning to listen to each other more carefully can build their ability and confidence in real-life situations, in which they will need to focus on both listening and speaking. The following activities are a fun way of getting students to concentrate more and to remember information.

2.3.1 Communicative Games

There are many ways to define the notion of games. Hadfield said that a game is an activity with rules, a goal and element of fun (1998, p. 4). Harmer also states that games are a vital part of a teacher's equipment, not only for language practice they provide, but also for the therapeutic effect they have. They can be used at any stage of a class to provide an amusing and challenging respite from other classroom activity and are especially useful at the end of a long day to send students away feeling cheerful about their English class (1991, p. 101).

Game are truly communicative, according to Morrow (in Johnson & Morrow, 1981), have three features of communication: information gap, choice, and feedback. These three features have mentioned in the previous part.

For example: Each student works with a partner. One student in each pair receives a copy of handout A, the other a copy of handout B. They must not let their partner see their handouts. By describing their pictures to each other and asking questions, the students have to determine which picture out of their set corresponds with one on their partner's handout. (Friederike Klippel, 1984, p.42).

2.3.2 Role-play

In Larsen-Freeman's viewpoint, role-plays are very important in the Communicative Approach because they give students an opportunity to practice communicating in different social contexts and in different social roles. He also said that role-plays are communicative activities because they give the learners more of a choice. Moreover,

role-plays also provide information gaps since learners cannot be sure what other person or people will say. Learners also receive feedback on whether or not they have effectively communicated.

For example: Imagine both of you want to meet later. Sit back to back and role-plays a phone call. Use these questions and your own ideas.

Where are you? What are you doing?

Who are you with? Where should we meet?

2.3.3 Information gap

"Communication takes place between two (or more) people, one of whom knows something that is unknown to the other(s)" (Morrow & Johnson, 1981, p. 62). A lot of communication involves bridging an information gap: You know things I do not know, and I know things you do not know. Often this is hard for students to do naturally in class, either because they might not know enough facts or because everyone knows the same facts. We can simulate the information gap by giving two participants different information, which they have to share.

In the next example, two students role-play a phone call between friends in different cities. Some questions are suggested to start them off.

2.3.4 Story-telling

Later, Dwyer, A. (2003, p. 27) affirms that both telling stories and reading them have a positive effect on students' listening and concentration. Story-telling activity helps students easily focus on listening information because a spoken story has interesting characteristics that make attractive to young listeners, such as characters, action, a resolution at the end, setting in time and place. Moreover, a story can be brought alive by dialogue, changes in tense, descriptive details, exaggeration suspense, and details of character's feelings. All of those elements help learners concentrate and develop good listening skills.

Followings are the activities of using story-telling that Prouse (2000, p. 11) suggests:

• Ask students to imagine that they are in the story as an extra character. What happen?

• From events happening in the passage, tell a story.

• Make up a sequel to the story using some of the same characters or imagine what was happened to them 5 years later.

• The first is an old favorite: making up a new ending for the story. The second is giving the story a new title or chapter headings or new names for the characters.

• Students create a time chart with days and times down one side and events from the story written in the appropriate sequence.

• Students match characters and descriptions, or put events in the right order.

• Artistically talented students can draw the story or make a collage telling the story, while others can use copies of the picture from the book to tell the story.

This activity of story-telling is often organized before or after listening.

<u>For example:</u>

Each student receives a small slip of paper with one noun/ verb/ adj. The teacher starts the story by giving the first sentence. Students continue the story basing on the word on their paper.

2.3.5 English songs

Sacoriban and Metin (2000) have found that songs can develop the four areas of reading, writing, listening and speaking.

As noted by Larry M. Lynch (2000), songs contain authentic language, are easily obtainable, provide vocabulary, grammar and cultural aspects and are fun for the students; they can provide valuable speaking, listening and language practice in and out classroom.

Songs as supplementary activities can be used at the beginning as warm-up to lead in the listening lesson and even in while-stage.

<u>For example</u>: In pre-listening, students will listen to the song "Green Field-The Brother Four". Then in while listening stage, students will imagine and draw a picture that comes to their mind about green fields kissed by the sun, blue skies with white clouds high above, etc.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out mainly using quantitative approach. In this study, relevant questionnaires were designed and distributed to students with the aim of having generally reliable results. I also used qualitative approach in order to get varied perspectives of target audience. Qualitative data sources in my thesis result from observation and interview.

3.1 Subjects of the study

Data for this research will be mainly collected from questionnaires, interviews, class observations from Hai Ba Trung, Cao Thang, and Huong Thuy high schools.

There are two groups of subjects for the study:

- Group 1: 12 teachers from Hai Ba Trung, Cao Thang , Huong Thuy High Schools
- Group 2: 120 students from the schools mentioned above.

1.2 Data collection

Data for this study is collected through questionnaires, observations, and interviews.

- Questionnaires including questions delivered to high schools teachers and students.

+Questionnaire for students consisting of 8 questions was delivered to 120 10th grade students in Hai Ba Trung, Cao Thang, Huong Thuy high schools.

+Questionnaire for teachers consisting of 12 questions was also delivered to 12 teachers in Hai Ba Trung, Cao Thang, and Huong Thuy high schools.

- Interviews with teachers and students were carried out to collect more data for this study. In the investigation, 5 teachers and 10 students from above mentioned high schools were interviewed.

- Four class observations were carried out in eight English periods.

3.3 Data analysis

Data analysis was mainly based on quantitative approach including the questionnaires, interviews and class observations. The results are presented in numbers and tables.

3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The previous chapter presented the research methodology of the study. In this chapter, the results of the study will be reported and the discussion of current issues will be performed.

Four research questions are:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of teaching listening skills at high schools in Hue?
2. How is the reality of using communicative activities in listening classes?
3. What are the difficulties in teaching and learning listening skills?
4. What are the solutions to better the situation?

4.1 Teachers' perceptions of teaching listening skills at high schools in Hue

4.1.1 Teachers' attitudes toward the importance of listening skills

Responses	N=12	Percentage (%)
Yes	12	100
No	0	0

Table 1. Teachers' attitudes toward the importance of listening skills

It can be seen from Table 1 that the maximum number of the teachers (accounting for 100%) found it necessary to teach listening in English classes at high schools. It proves that a number of the teachers were conscious of the necessary as well as crucial role of listening in teaching English.

4.1.2 Teachers' attitudes toward the importance of communicative activities in listening classes

Figure 1. Teachers' attitudes toward the importance of communicative activities in listening classes
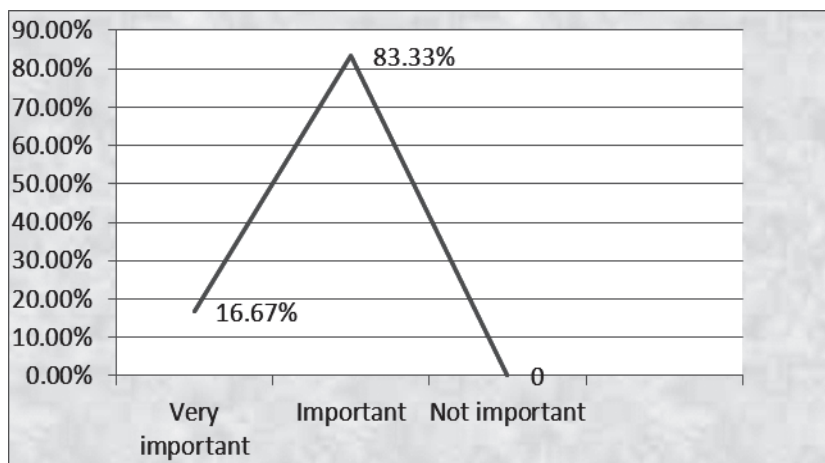
Figure 1 which summarizes the data of all answers to question 2 (from teachers' questionnaire) indicates the ideas of respondents from three high schools in Hue were nearly the same. Actually, 10 out of 12 teachers affirmed that communicative listening activities were important in learning listening skills (accounting for 83.33%). Besides, two teachers (16.67%) found these activities very important. None of them found it unimportant to use these activities in listening class. The reality of the teachers' interview showed the similar results, most of them definitely agreed with the necessity of using communicative activities to teach listening skills.

4.1.3 Teachers' attitudes toward the benefits of communicative listening activities

Figure 2: Teachers' attitudes toward the benefits of communicative listening activities
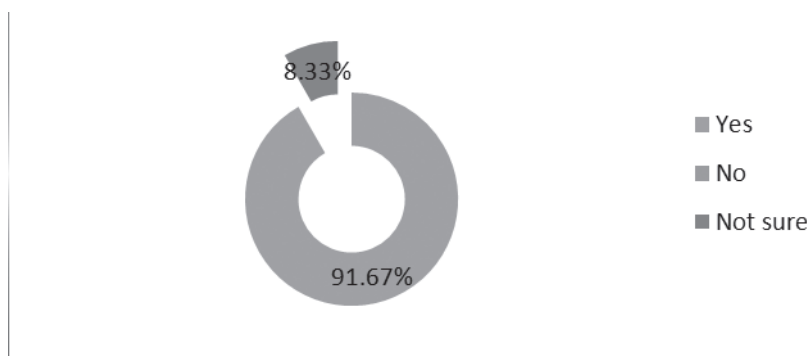
From the result denoted in figure 4, it can be seen that a great proportion of teachers (91.67%) are aware of the benefits offered by using communicative activities, just an unremarkable number of teacher (accounting for 8.33%) divulged that she was not sure about the benefits of using those activities. The fact that she rarely used communicative activities in listening classes made her unable to recognize the benefits clearly, she said. In the table 2 below are some benefits of communicative activities.

Benefits	N=12	
	Frequency	Percentage(%)
Motivate students to be more cooperative in discussion	3	25
Motivate students to take part in doing Listening tasks	3	25
Motivate students to be more active and talkative	9	75
Motivate students to become self-confident	10	83.33
Other(s)		

Table 2: Benefits of communicative listening activities for students' learning process

The statistics presented in the figure 4 and table 2 unveil the fact that a substantial majority of teachers admit that communicative activities are really useful for students in learning listening skills. The largest portion of teachers, 83.33% claims

that communicative activities help students gain confidence in their ability in listening skills. Most of students interviewed share the same idea. Results from observation sheet revealed that unless teachers give communicative activities like games, role-play or story-telling, must students will not be involved in listening class. Additionally, 9 out of 12 teachers agreed that students seem to be more active and talkative when they use communicative activities.

The same percentage from the table 2 showed that, not only do communicative activities motivate students take part in doing listening tasks, but it also makes them cooperative in class discussion. This is confirmed by an equivalent proportion of the former, 25% and of the later, 25%. To demonstrate, a teacher stated, "When I use communicative activities in listening class, my students feel extremely self-motivated. They exchange ideas, seek agreement, solution through discussion, and help each other with tasks". The data gathered reveal that teachers share a lot of common ideas about positive effects of using communicative activities in listening class. The next part will examine some common communicative activities applied by teachers in listening classes.

4.2 The reality of using communicative activities in listening classes

4.2.1 Teachers' frequency of using communicative activities

Figure 3: Teachers' frequency of conducting communicative listening activities
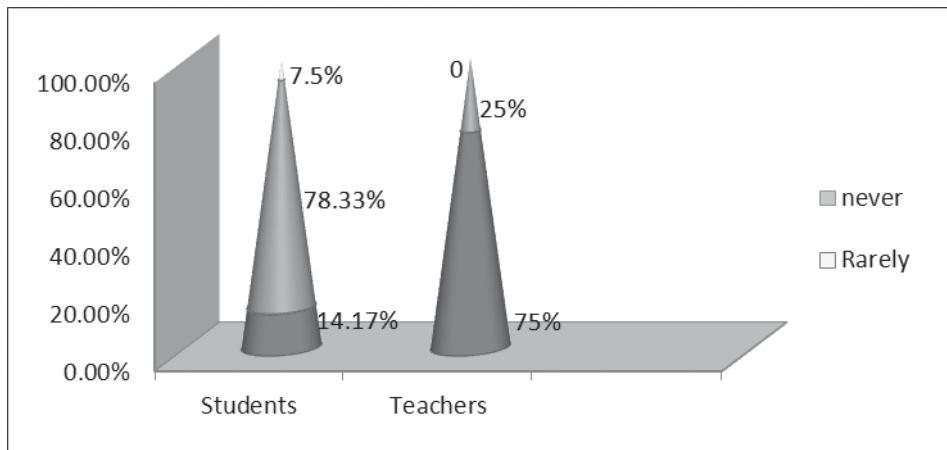
The findings show a high proportion of the teachers (75%) who often conducted communicative activities in listening periods. Besides, 25% of teachers answered that they sometimes carried out those activities. This result shows that all the teachers have a right view of communicative activities and their effects on the teaching and learning English.

More evidence from students' interviews showed that most of the students (accounting for 78.33%) admitted that their teachers sometimes required them to do listening exercises. Additionally, 14.17% (17 out of 120 students) said that their teachers often asked them to do tasks, and only 9 out of 120 respondents showed that their teachers rarely required them to do listening exercises (accounting for 7.5%). These figures implied that communicative activities were used quite often in listening classes in Hue high schools.

4.2.2 Types of commonly used communicative activities in listening classes

Activities	N=12(Teachers)		N=120(Students)	
	Frequency	Percentage(%)	Frequency	Percentage(%)
Listening to music	10	83.33	73	60.83
Communicative games	7	58.33	26	21.67
Information gap	7	58.33	21	17.5
Role-play	6	50	26	21.67
Story-telling	4	33.33	11	9.17
Discussion	2	16.67	15	12.5
Question-answer	1	8.33	11	9.17
Other(s)	6	5		

Table 3: Types of commonly used communicative activities in listening classes.

During the process of teaching and learning, the teachers intend to carry out a combination of various kinds of communicative activities such as role play (50%), story-telling(33.33%), listening to music (83.33%), discussion(16.67%), question-answer (8.33%), information gap and communicative game(58.33%). From the data in table 3, it is easily seen that listening to music, games, and information gap are more suitable to practice than other activities.

Occasionally other types of activities were conducted as well to help students get familiar with various types of communicative activities and stimulate listening ability in English classes.

As can be seen, up to 83.33% of teachers chose listening to music to teach listening. Standing behind listening to music, communicative games are the teachers' second choice (accounting for 58.33%). It seems that students are interested in something lively and cheerful, so using games is an effective way to stimulate students' participation in the lesson.

Students' questionnaires also showed that 60.83% of them agreed that their teachers often let them listen to music as communicative activity in listening class. Similarly, 58.33% of teachers answered that they often used information gap to teach listening. Different from teachers' choice, information gap ranked fourth in students' opinions, standing behind role-play. The reason is that these activities were conducted in different classes with different teaching methods.

4.3 Problems teachers and students often encounter in listening classes

4.3.1 Problems teachers often encounter when using communicative activities in listening classes

	N=12	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Poor facilities	7	58.33
Limitation of time	2	16.67
Students' lack of vocabulary & culture knowledge	11	91.67

Students' listening habit	4	33.33
Large size of class	5	41.67
Other(s)		

Table 6: Problems teachers often encounter when using communicative activities in listening classes

A vast majority of teachers (accounting for 91.67%) replied that the most difficulty was students' lack of vocabulary & culture knowledge. This option is considered a barrier, which prevents students from getting involved in listening activities. The reality of classroom observation also revealed the similar results. As what I observed, poor vocabulary and culture knowledge caused trouble for students to catch up with information as well as exchange ideas. Additionally, some stated that poor facilities made it hard for them to teach listening skills (58.33%).

In addition, "large size of class" has high impact on students' learning process. As clearly denoted in the table, up to 41.67% of teachers complained that they find unpleasant to teach in such big classes, they cannot control the whole class with more than fifty students and get feedback from all students. When being asked about perspective on the number of students in a class, a teacher informed, "large size of class reduces the interaction between teachers and students; we cannot take all students into consideration, some students will be ignored during listening period."

Students' negative listening habit is also a factor that has bad influence on teaching process (33.33%).

Occupying the smallest percentage in table 5 is limitation of time.

4.3.2 Problem students often encounter in communicative listening activities

	N=120	
	Frequency	Percentage
Teachers don't give clear instructions	11	7.33
You don't feel confident	52	41.33
Activities are too difficult to do	17	18
Lack of vocabulary & culture knowledge	46	30.67
Large classes	18	15
Other(s)		

Table 7: Problems students often encounter in communicative listening activities

The statistics presented in table 7 unveil the fact that a substantial majority of students (41.33%) admitted that they are not confident to participate in communicative activities in listening period.

Another common difficulty in listening period is the lack of vocabulary as well as culture knowledge. There are 46 out of 120 students (30.67%) agreed with this difficulty. It is easy to understand that the more number of unknown vocabulary and background knowledge increases, the more challenging is it for students to listen the task.

Moreover, "activities are too difficult to do" is also a considerable obstacle to

students. As can be seen, 17 out of 120 students (accounting for 18%) found difficult to participate in the activity. The fact indicated that there were still a number of students who has low motivation, so they find it difficult to follow listening activities. More evidence from observation is that while some students were extremely enthusiastic, others kept quiet and learned passively.

Large classes also affect the teaching and learning process. 15% of students agreed with this. In a big class, some students claimed that they did not have chance to participate in listening activities.

I really want to join in communicative listening activities. However, there are many other students so the teachers do not pay any notice to me.

(Students' interview)

Another difficulty which was agreed by 7.33% is teachers do not give clear instructions.

4.4 Solutions to resolve the problems in teaching and learning listening skills

4.4.1 Teachers' solutions

	N=12	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Encourage student to listen to listening English songs	9	75
Use authentic materials in listening tasks	7	58.33
Use communicative games or jokes	7	58.33
Redesign the tasks in textbook	6	50
Let students discuss topic before listening	4	33.33
Teach students some listening strategies	3	25
Give clear instructions	2	16.67
Other(s)		

Table 8: What teachers do to improve the effectiveness of listening classes

A significant number of teachers (75%) suggested learning listening through English songs**.** The results from interview supported the findings from questionnaires. Most of teachers answering in the interview maintain a consistent idea that English songs help much in correcting students' pronunciation.

Providing their students with authentic materials which are suitable to student level (Saricoban, 1999) is also used by many teachers (accounting for 58.33%).

What is more, interesting atmosphere is very important to an effective class. Therefore, 7 out of 12 teachers (58.33%) proposed using communicative games in listening class to awaken students' interest. One student interviewed said that he was very excited and eager to participate in communicative games. Generally, students appear to be interested in something cheerful and exciting, so using game is the effective way to improve students' listening ability.

Besides the survey also showed that half of the teachers (50%) chose "redesign the tasks in textbooks" as a way to help student overcome difficulties. In fact, some

listening exercises in the textbooks are not relevant to students' level. Some of listening texts are too long, that makes students bored. Moreover, unfamiliar topics which include many unknown words, make students confused and uncomfortable. Hence, adapting the textbooks is a necessary way to increase students' interest.

Further, students may have limited general knowledge about a topic. Therefore, let students discuss topic before listening is quite necessary. 33.33% agreed with this. Students can work in groups and discuss what is the topic about and become more familiar with the topic. In this way, students will be provided with background information, vocabulary and a reason for them to listen (Yagang, 1993).

Teaching students strategies is also considered the remarkable solution. 3 out of 12 teachers (accounting 25%) agreed with this method. As defined by Oxford (1990, p. 1), learning strategies are steps taken by students to enhance their own learning and they are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement.

Also, the other important point that determines how successfully students will learn is the way instructions are formulated. Although this method is not directly related to the teaching, clear instruction will create a good status which helps students to listen effectively. It goes without saying that the best activity in the world will turn into a disappointing failure if students don't understand the instructions. Therefore, some of teachers (16.67%) suggested that they should give clear instructions for students to follow easily. It is obvious that clear instructions are necessary for students to know what to do and focus on.

4.4.2 Students' solutions

	N=120	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Watch films in English	93	62
Learn more vocabulary items	36	24
Listening to English songs	26	17.33
Listening to English tape as much as possible at home	17	11.33
Listen to the English news on radio	6	5
Other(s)		

Table 9: Students' solution to improve listening skills

As displayed in table 8, Watching films in English is one of the most effective way. The table shows that more than half of students (accounting for 62%) express their interest in watching films in English. Another common way to improve listening skills is learning more vocabulary items (accounting 24%). Limited vocabulary prevents students from listening well.

It can be recognized that students are strongly motivated in listening to English songs. Therefore, English songs should be paid more attention in teaching listening skills.

In addition, we can see clearly that a few number of students (11.33%) agreed that they would listen to English tapes as much as possible at home. Moussa (1996) also

asserted that learners need to be encouraged to developed listening skill and be given homework so that they can use their knowledge of language to listen to news, music, special programs, video tapes, etc.

Last but not least, 5% of students thought that listening to the English news on radio would help them solve their problem.

4 CONCLUSION

Based on the research questions, the findings of the study were grouped into four sections. First of all, the findings disclose teachers' perception of teaching listening skills at high schools in Hue. The result shows that teaching listening plays a crucial role in learning English. Besides, teachers are fully aware of the importance of teaching listening as well as the necessity of using communicative listening activities in English classes. As a result, teaching listening skills will be more effective if communicative activities are used with high frequency.

Secondly, the research also indicated some types of communicative activities commonly used in listening classes. During the process of teaching and learning listening, teachers tend to conduct a combination of various kinds of communicative activities such as listening to music, communicative games, information gap, role-play, story-telling, discussion and question-answer.

Thirdly, reference to difficulties in teaching and learning listening skills, most of teachers agreed that students' lack of vocabulary & culture knowledge is the most difficult one which is considered a barrier preventing students from getting involve in listening activities. Moreover, up to 58.33% of teachers said that poor facilities was also the obstacle that they often encountered. However, nearly half of teachers said that large classes made them cannot take all students in care and it was difficult to control the class. Similarly, students' listening habit, and limitation of time are among the factors affecting teachers' teaching listening skills. Furthermore, a significant number of students agreed that beside lack of vocabulary & culture knowledge as teachers said, more than half of them do not feel confident when participating in communicative listening activities. In addition, many students admitted that large size of classes as well as difficult activities prevent them from listening well. They also claimed that their teachers do not give clear instructions.

Finally, the study attempts to figure out some feasible solutions of teachers and learners to resolve the problems. The findings point out some ways to enhance students' listening ability. Among many ways, encouraging students to listen to English songs is the most effective way. What is more, most of students agreed that watching English films was also a good way to help them practicing English at home. Students not only learn more new words by watching films but also feel relaxed from that.

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