English Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Listening Comprehension Difficulties

Theerapong Palakaprasith
Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand

Rattanawadee Chotikapanich
Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand

Surattana Adipat
Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand
 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2433-1547

Abstract

This study examines the perceptions of listening comprehension difficulties among English preservice teachers at a university in Thailand. Survey-based research was conducted using a questionnaire designed by Ahkam Hasan Assaf. The questionnaire consisted of 45 close-ended questions on a five-point Likert scale. Out of 98 English preservice teachers selected through simple random sampling, 63 respondents completed an online questionnaire. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The results indicated that the greatest difficulties were associated with the physical setting (M=3.84) as the most challenging, followed by content of spoken text (M=3.77), the speaker (M=3.72), failure to concentrate (M=3.51), difficulties related to the listener (M=3.49), and linguistic features (M=3.45). Rated as moderate, the importance of listening skill (M=3.05) was rated the least. The study reveals how individual learner differences impact listening comprehension and trigger the need for effective educational approaches, such as diagnostic assessments to identify specific listening challenges faced by students, allowing for customized listening exercises. Additionally, curriculum designers can incorporate diverse and comprehensive listening components to directly target these difficulties. This also emphasizes the need for enhanced teacher training programs that focus on pedagogical strategies, including adaptive teaching methods and effective use of technology, to improve the engagement and effectiveness of listening lessons.

Keywords: Listening Comprehension, Listening Difficulties, English Preservice Teachers

Introduction

Listening is a key component of communication, essential for learners to understand the spoken forms of the target language. It is considered a challenging skill due to the complex process that involves decoding auditory input and constructing meaning (Field, 2009). The listening process comprises four overlapping types of processing: neurological (involving consciousness, hearing, and attention), linguistic (engaging with linguistic input signals), semantic (integrating memory and prior experience to understand events), and pragmatic (building contextual meaning) (Rost, 2011). Effective listening is not innate, and English listening competence requires conscious development. Moreover, listening comprehension levels significantly influence improvements in other language skills such as speaking, reading, and writing. Therefore, all stakeholders in students' English listening comprehension should provide ample opportunities for students to practice and actively engage in learning (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011).

Past studies have revealed various difficulties students face with English listening comprehension. For example, advanced English learners in Iran struggled with maintaining focus, memorizing long texts, encountering unfamiliar words, and grasping the main ideas (Namaziandost et al., 2019). Turkish secondary students

often missed key messages due to their inability to chunk speech streams or keep pace with the input (Ozcelik et al., 2019). In Indonesia, undergraduates found it difficult to retain information, define words, and follow fast speech (Rakhman et al., 2019). In Thailand, both first-year undergraduates and high school students reported challenges such as dealing with unfamiliar words, fast speech, and noisy environments (Laeha & Laohawiriyanon, 2020; Thepvongsa & Klinchan, 2020).

A study conducted with 44 Thai undergraduate EFL students at a university in Thailand, where English served as a medium of instruction, utilized questionnaires to identify factors affecting their English listening comprehension. The survey identified five key factors: vocabulary knowledge, grammar, content of the spoken text, accents, and speaking speed. Results indicated that vocabulary knowledge and speaking speed were major influences on comprehension, while the other factors were deemed less significant (Bamroongkit & Aowsakorn, 2021). Furakul's (2022) study also employed questionnaires to examine English listening difficulties among 90 Thai second-year EFL air cadet students at an Air Force Academy in Thailand. The difficulties were categorized into four domains: spoken text, speaker, listener, and physical setting. The findings revealed that challenges, such as unfamiliar vocabulary, complex grammar, lengthy texts, and sequence mix-ups in spoken texts posed significant difficulties. In addition, issues with the speaker, such as fast speech, unfamiliar stress and intonation, varying accents, and lack of non-verbal cues, were problematic. Listener challenges included difficulties in understanding upon first hearing and insufficient listening training. External noise and poor audio-visual quality were also noted as significant barriers.

Theories and existing studies on listening skills and comprehension difficulties primarily emphasize two aspects: decoding and meaning building. Decoding involves the recognition of sounds, syllables, words, and grammatical patterns. It relates to a listener's ability to match the auditory signal to words, activating an acoustic signal and translating it into the sounds of the target language, and further into words and phrases within his vocabulary and background context. On the other hand, meaning building involves interpreting text, context, pragmatics, and global understanding. This process includes interpreting what has been heard through external information, background knowledge, or recall of previously heard content, and then making decisions regarding the importance and relevance of the sentences heard (Field, 2009). A skilled listener is more adept at resolving these difficulties than an unskilled listener; however, factors such as the academic level of English, years of study at university, gender, type of school, and years of studying English do not significantly affect the differences in the difficulties that students perceive in listening comprehension (Assaf, 2015).

Based on the studies of students' perceptions of difficulties in English listening comprehension both in Thailand and abroad, this research examines the perceptions of difficulties in listening comprehension among English preservice teachers at a university in Thailand. The findings can benefit lecturers, course designers, educators, and students by raising awareness of potential difficulties in listening comprehension and identifying appropriate solutions.

Research Question

What are the listening comprehension difficulties perceived by English pre-service teachers in the Faculty of Education at a university in Thailand when listening to spoken English texts?

Methodology

In this study, survey-based research was employed to examine the perceptions of difficulties in listening comprehension among English preservice teachers at a university in Thailand.

Participants

The sample consisted of 98 English preservice teachers from the first to the fourth year of their program at the Faculty of Education. These participants were enrolled during the summer semester of the 2023 academic year, spanning from 18 April 2024 to 17 May 2024. They were selected using simple random sampling, a technique facilitated by the Yamane formula - a method commonly used to determine sample sizes in research (Mauthong et

al., 2017). Most participants were engaged with their lessons outside the classroom.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire, designed by Ahkam Hasan Assaf for his study titled 'The Difficulties Encountered by EFL Learners in Listening Comprehension as Perceived by ELC Students at the Arab American University-Jenin' (Assaf, 2015), was employed. Assaf's questionnaire was suitable for the study because it specifically addressed listening comprehension difficulties among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students, making it directly relevant to academic settings in Thailand, where English is not the mother tongue of students and is not used in their daily lives. Therefore, the general nature of the questions made the questionnaire adaptable to other EFL contexts, including Thailand, and minor modifications could be made to suit the educational background of Thai students. In addition, the questionnaire was designed to cover a broad range of issues related to listening comprehension, including psychological, linguistic, and pedagogical factors, providing a holistic understanding of the challenges faced by learners.

The questionnaire consisted of close-ended questions on a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree). The questionnaire was divided into two parts: the first part gathered personal information (gender, academic year, and number of years studying English), and the second part assessed perceptions of listening comprehension difficulties across 51 questions in seven domains: importance of listening skill (6 items), content of spoken text (12 items), linguistic features (6 items), failure to concentrate (5 items), listener (10 items), speaker (8 items), and physical setting (4 items). The following intervals were used in the study: strongly disagree (1.00–1.80), disagree (1.81–2.60), neither agree nor disagree (2.61–3.40), agree (3.41–4.20), and strongly agree (4.21–5.00) (Kan, 2009).

The validity of the questionnaire was verified by three experts who determined its Indicators of Compromise (IOC), with all items scoring 1.00, which means valid. The questionnaire was administered to 30 students in a pilot study to assess its reliability. After revising six items with unacceptable discriminant indices, the recalculated Cronbach's Alpha improved to 0.954, and all discriminant indices exceeded 0.20. After the revision, the second part of the questionnaire was reduced to 45 items.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher administered an online questionnaire to 98 English preservice teachers using Google Forms over an eight-day period, from 9 to 16 May 2024. Of these, 63 participants responded, resulting in a response rate of 64.29%. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentages, means, and standard deviations, to examine the participants' perceptions of difficulties in listening comprehension.

Results

The results of the study show participants' perceptions of difficulties in listening comprehension as illustrated in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Table 1 Participants' Perceptions of Difficulties in Listening Comprehension (n = 63)

Difficulties in Listening Comprehension	M	SD	Level
Domain 1: Importance of Listening Skill			
1. I find that listening comprehension is difficult	3.70	0.84	High
2. I find that listening comprehension is boring	2.51	0.98	Medium
3. I never heard of listening strategies	2.94	1.06	Medium
Average	3.05	0.65	Medium
Domain 2: Listening Difficulties Related to the Content of Spoken Text			
4. I find it difficult to understand spoken text in which there are too many unfamiliar words	4.11	0.72	High
5. I find listening comprehension difficult when the spoken text contains jargon	4.05	0.68	High
6. I find listening comprehension difficult when the spoken text contains idioms	4.08	0.68	High

7. I find listening comprehension difficult when the utterances contain slang expressions	3.97	0.88	High
8. I find listening comprehension difficult when the spoken text contains complex grammatical structures	3.75	0.92	High
9. I find listening comprehension difficult when I listen to long spoken texts	3.49	0.93	High
10. I feel tired when I listen to a long-spoken text	3.49	1.06	High
11. I feel distracted when I listen to a long-spoken text	3.51	1.01	High
12. I find it difficult to understand the spoken text when the topic is unfamiliar	3.79	0.83	High
13. I find it difficult to understand every single word of the incoming speech	3.86	0.91	High
14. I find it difficult to understand the whole spoken text	3.41	0.93	High
Average	3.77	0.53	High
Domain 3: Listening Difficulties Related to the Linguistic Features			
15. I find pronunciation familiar but cannot recognize the words	3.27	0.92	Medium
16. I cannot recognize words I know while listening	3.19	0.93	Medium
17. I find it difficult to recognize the signals, which indicate that the speaker is moving from one point to another	3.32	0.95	Medium
18. I stop listening and start thinking about the meaning of the word when encountering an unknown word	3.60	0.85	High
19. I find it difficult to infer the meaning of an unknown word while listening	3.56	0.82	High
20. I find it difficult to follow the sequence of the spoken text when the sentences are too long and complex	3.78	0.81	High
Average	3.45	0.68	High
Domain 4: Listening Difficulties caused by the Failures to Concentrate			
21. I lose focus of the talk when I have an expected answer in my mind	3.38	1.13	Medium
22. I am unable to concentrate because I look for the answers and listen to the dialogue at the same time	3.46	0.96	High
23. I lose my concentration when the spoken text is too long	3.25	1.08	Medium
24. I lose my concentration if the recording is of poor quality	3.86	0.93	High
25. I lose the flow of speech because I concentrate very hard on understanding every word or phrase I hear	3.60	0.98	High
Average	3.51	0.76	High
Domain 5: Listening Difficulties Related to The Listener			
26. I find it difficult to get a general understanding of the spoken text from the first listen	3.43	0.86	High
27. I find it difficult to predict what would come next at the time of listening	3.30	0.85	Medium
28. I stop listening when I have problems understanding the spoken text	3.52	0.97	High
29. I find it difficult to recognize the words I know because of the way they are pronounced	3.57	0.76	High
30. I find it difficult to tell where a word finishes, and another begins. There are words that I would normally understand in writing, but it is difficult when I hear them in a stream of speech	3.62	0.97	High
31. I feel anxious when I listen to spoken texts	3.59	0.93	High
32. I find listening comprehension difficult when I am not interested	3.38	1.17	Medium
33. I find listening comprehension difficult when I feel tired	3.30	1.27	Medium
34. I fear that I cannot understand what I will hear before doing listening comprehension tasks	3.59	0.96	High

| 35. I find it difficult to answer questions which require other than a short answer (e.g. why or how questions)	3.59	1.03	High
Average	3.49	0.64	High
Domain 6: Listening Difficulties Related to The Speaker			
36. I find it difficult to understand natural speech which is full of hesitation and pauses.	3.56	0.98	High
37. I find it difficult to understand the meaning of words which are not pronounced clearly.	3.98	0.87	High
38. I find it difficult to understand the meaning of the spoken text without seeing the speaker's body language.	3.56	1.04	High
39. I have difficulty understanding speakers with unfamiliar accents.	3.84	0.97	High
40. I find it difficult to understand the recorded material if it is not repeated.	3.71	0.81	High
41. I find it difficult to understand the spoken text when the speaker does not pause long enough.	3.46	0.99	High
42. I find it difficult to understand the spoken text that has unfamiliar stress and intonation patterns.	3.90	0.91	High
Average	3.72	0.64	High
Domain 7: Listening Difficulties Related to the Physical Setting			
43. I find it difficult to concentrate with noises around.	3.73	1.00	High
44. I find it difficult to concentrate when the room is not conditioned.	3.65	1.11	High
45. I find it difficult to understand English when there are unclear sounds resulting from poor acoustic conditions of the classroom.	4.14	0.80	High
Average	3.84	0.76	High
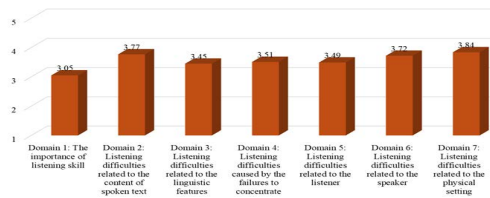
Figure 1 A Comparison of Difficulties in Seven Domains

The data presented in Table 1 and Figure 1 show that participants perceived a high overall level of difficulty in listening comprehension. They ranked difficulties associated with the physical setting, content of spoken text, the speaker, and failure to concentrate as the most challenging, in descending order from the highest to the fourth highest, with means of M=3.84, M=3.77, M=3.72, and M=3.51, respectively. Meanwhile, difficulties related to the listener (M=3.49) and linguistic features (M=3.45) were also perceived at a high level. The importance of listening skill (M=3.05) was the only domain rated as moderate.
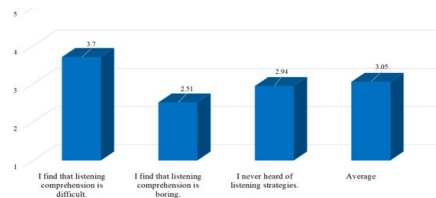

Figure 2 Domain 1: The Importance of Listening Skill

Figure 2 presents participants' perceptions regarding the importance of listening skills. The data show that listening comprehension was considered challenging, with the highest mean (M=3.7). Additionally, awareness of listening strategies appears to be moderately low (M=2.94), followed by the perception of listening comprehension as boring, with the lowest mean (M=2.51).
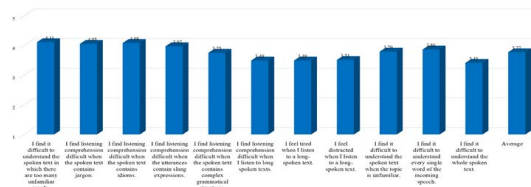

Figure 3 Domain 2: Listening Difficulties related to the Content of Spoken Text

Figure 3 presents the various difficulties participants encountered with the content of spoken texts. The data show that too many unfamiliar words were perceived as the most challenging aspect, with a mean score of 4.11. This was closely followed by idioms, jargon, and slang, which were also highly rated for difficulty at 4.08, 4.05, and 3.97, respectively. Additionally, participants faced challenges understanding every single word of the speech (M=3.86), when the topic was unfamiliar (M=3.79), or when the spoken texts contained complex grammatical structures (M=3.75). Other difficulties included distraction (M=3.51), listening fatigue (M=3.49), and listening comprehension difficulty (M=3.49), especially during lengthy spoken texts. There was also difficulty in understanding the whole spoken text (M=3.41).
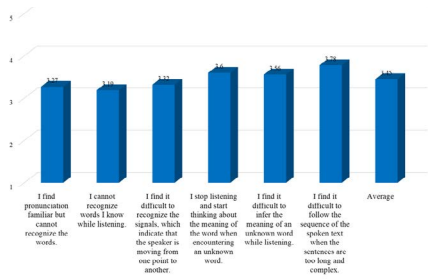

Figure 4 Domain 3: Listening Difficulties Related to the Linguistic Features

Figure 4 presents difficulties related to the linguistic features of spoken text. Complex and lengthy sentences, which made it difficult for participants to follow the sequence of spoken text, received the highest mean (M=3.78). Unknown words also hindered their understanding, as it took time for them to think about the meanings (M=3.6) and to infer meanings (M=3.56). Recognizing signals that guided the transition speakers made from one point to another was also challenging (M=3.32), as was their inability to recognize words, even though the pronunciation was familiar (M=3.27). Difficulties in recognizing words during listening received the lowest mean (M=3.19).
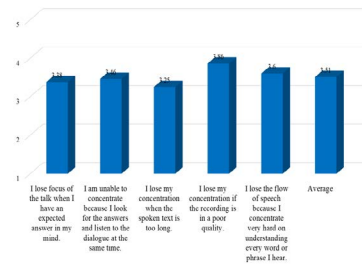

Figure 5 Domain 4: Listening Difficulties Caused by the Failures to Concentrate

Figure 5 presents the greatest difficulties caused by an inability to concentrate when the recording was of poor quality (M=3.86), followed by the excessive effort required to understand every single word or phrase (M=3.6). Difficulties also arose from searching for answers while listening (M=3.46), having expected answers in mind (M=3.38), and listening to very lengthy texts (M=3.25).
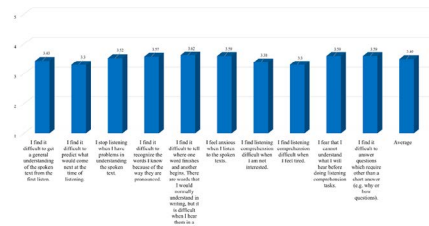

Figure 6 Domain 5: Listening Difficulties Related to the Listener

As illustrated in Figure 6, the greatest difficulty related to the listener was identifying where one word ended and another began, a task normally managed easily in writing (M=3.62). Anxiety associated with listening to spoken texts, the challenge of answering complex questions, and the fear of misunderstanding what would be heard before starting listening comprehension tasks all shared the same mean of 3.59. Other challenges included issues with recognizing words due to pronunciation (M=3.57), stopping listening when encountering problems understanding the spoken text (M=3.52), and a general lack of understanding from the first listen (M=3.43). Participants also found it challenging to comprehend spoken texts when not interested (M=3.38), and reported feeling fatigued during listening tasks, which, along with difficulty in predicting incoming text, received the same mean of 3.30.
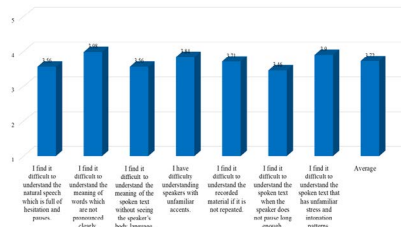
Figure 7 Domain 6: Listening Difficulties Related to the Speaker

As illustrated in Figure 7, the greatest difficulty related to the speaker was understanding the meaning of words that were unclearly pronounced (M=3.98), followed by unfamiliar stress and intonation (M=3.9). Participants also had difficulty with unfamiliar accents (M=3.84) and recorded materials that were not repeated (M=3.71). Additionally, they had a hard time understanding speech that included hesitations and pauses and was delivered without the speaker's gestures, both receiving the same mean (M=3.56). The least difficulty was encountered with insufficient pauses (M=3.46).

Figure 8 presents difficulties related to the physical setting and shows that poor acoustics in the classroom (M=4.14), surrounding noise (M=3.73), and an unconditioned room (M=3.65) led to a loss of concentration, significantly impacting participants' ability to listen effectively.
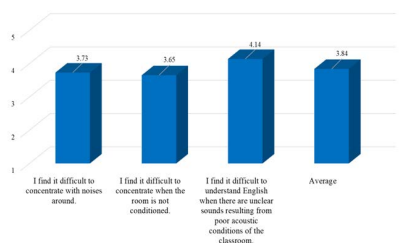

Figure 8 Domain 7: Listening Difficulties Related to the Physical Setting

Discussions and Conclusions
Physical Setting
The difficulties related to the physical setting were ranked highest. These difficulties arose from unclear sounds due to poor acoustic conditions in the classroom, surrounding noises, and loss of concentration caused by poor room conditions. Previous studies support these findings, indicating that listening difficulties occur in noisy environments

(Assaf, 2015; Furakul, 2022; Hamouda, 2013) and due to poor classroom acoustics (Assaf, 2015).

Content of Spoken Text
Difficulties related to the content of spoken text were ranked second highest. Factors such as unfamiliar words, idioms, jargon, slang expressions, the effort to understand every word, unfamiliar topics, complex grammatical structures, and distraction during lengthy spoken texts contributed to these difficulties. Earlier research corroborates these issues, noting that unfamiliar words (Hasan, 2000), complex grammatical structures, and long texts exacerbate listening comprehension challenges (Assaf, 2015; Furakul, 2022; Hamouda, 2013; Thepvongsa & Klinchan, 2020).

Speaker-Related Issues
Difficulties related to the speaker were ranked third highest. These were caused by unclear pronunciation, unfamiliar stress and intonation patterns, various accents, unrepeated recorded material, natural speech full of hesitation and pauses, and the inability to see the speaker's body language. Supporting studies indicate that unclear pronunciation and diverse accents significantly impact comprehension (Assaf, 2015; Bamroongkit & Aowsakorn, 2021; Furakul, 2022; Hamouda, 2013; Hasan, 2000; Thepvongsa & Klinchan, 2020).

Failures to Concentrate
Ranked fourth highest, failures to concentrate were linked to poor quality recordings and the challenge of understanding every word or phrase. Previous studies have shown that long texts and poor recording quality are primary factors causing concentration difficulties (Assaf, 2015; Hamouda, 2013).

Recommendations for Future Research
Data collection methods can be enhanced by implementing face-to-face interactions with participants to improve manageability. Structured or semi-structured interviews can be conducted alongside questionnaires to obtain more detailed explanations from participants. Additionally, future research should focus on developing differentiated

instruction and investigating its efficacy and impact on comprehension accuracy. This could be followed by longitudinal studies to assess the durability of these interventions over time. Experimental designs can be employed to compare traditional listening exercises with innovative pedagogical tools, such as AI-integrated language learning applications that adapt to individual learning paces and difficulties. Finally, a broader scope of research should involve studying students across Thailand to gain a comprehensive overview of the listening comprehension difficulties encountered by Thai EFL students.

References

Assaf, A. H. (2015). *The Difficulties Encountered by EFL Learners in Listening Comprehension as Perceived by ELC Students at the Arab American University-Jenin*. An-Najah National University.

Bamroongkit, S., & Aowsakorn, P. (2022). Factors affecting English listening comprehension perceived by Thai university students of English medium instruction programs. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Mahasarakham University*, *41*(4), 121-128.

Field, J. (2009). *Listening in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge University Press.

Furakul, K. (2022). English listening problems and the English listening ability of second year air cadets at Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy. *CRMA Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, *9*(1), 69–81.

Gilakjani, A. P., & Ahmadi, M. R. (2011). A study of factors affecting EFL learners' English listening comprehension and the strategies for improvement. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, *2*(5), 977-988.

Hamouda, A. (2013). An investigation of listening comprehension problems encountered by Saudi students in the EL listening classroom. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, *2*(2), 113-155.

Hasan, A. S. (2000). Learners' perceptions of listening comprehension problems. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, *13*(2), 137-153.

Kan, A. (2009). Statistical procedures on measurement results. In H. Atilgan (Ed.), *Assessment and Evaluation in Education* (pp. 397-456). Ani Publications.

Laeha, M., & Laohawiriyanon, C. (2020). English listening comprehension difficulties of high and low proficiency learners. *Journal of Education, Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus*, *33*(1), 45-64.

Mauthong, P., Thongkhotr, W., & Ungpansattawong, S. (2017). *Determining the Sample Size by the Yamane's Formula*. Khon Kaen University.

Namaziandost, E., Neisi, L., Mahdavirad, F., & Nasri, M. (2019). The relationship between listening comprehension problems and strategy usage among advanced EFL learners. *Cogent Psychology*, *6*(1), 1-19.

Ozcelik, H. N., Branden, K. V. D., & Steendam, E. V. (2019). Listening comprehension problems of FL learners in a peer interactive, self-regulated listening task. *International Journal of Listening*, *37*(2), 142-155.

Rakhman, F. A., Tarjana, S. S., & Marmanto, S. (2019). Explicating listening difficulties and listening strategies of Indonesian EFL learners. *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies*, *6*(2), 51-63.

Rost, M. (2011). *Teaching and Researching Listening*. Pearson Education Limited.

Thepvongsa, C., & Klinchan, N. (2020). A study of problems in English listening comprehension of Mattayomsuksa students. *Journal of MCU Humanities Review*, *6*(1), 189-198.

Author Details
Theerapong Palakaprasith, *Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand*

Rattanawadee Chotikapanich, *Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand*

Surattana Adipat, *Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand,* ***Email ID****: ajsurattana@gmail.com*