

The Application Of Pre-Listening Activities To Activate Students' Listening Comprehension: An Action Research At High Schools In Viet Nam

Nguyen Thi Dieu Ha, Ph.D.

School of Foreign Languages – Thai Nguyen University, Vietnam

Hoang Thi Van An, M.A.

School of Foreign Languages – Thai Nguyen University, Vietnam

Abstract

Listening skill is one of the four core language competences fostered for students in high school's English curriculum, especially in Thai Nguyen city, Vietnam. Although listening skills are being applied in English lessons, students' proficiency is still low. During the teaching time, the researchers realized that the main reason for this problem is students are not interested in listening skills and are not well-prepared from the pre-listening stage. Therefore, it is extremely necessary to conduct a study with the aim of raising students' interest in listening comprehension by reinforcing pre-listening activities. In the study, questionnaires and observation were employed to collect the data from students and teachers at 4 high schools in Thai Nguyen. The findings suggest that students' listening interest was much better after being exposed to many kinds of pre-listening activities.

Key words: *listening skills, listening comprehension, pre-listening activities, learning interest*

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I. Introduction

Listening is an essential skill in acquiring a language and it can be defined as the process of understanding speech in a second language or foreign language. As mentioned in Richards (2008), listening is the most frequently used in communication. It is stated that people spend 50 percent on listening, 25 percent on speaking, 15 percent on reading, and 10 percent on writing. Moreover, according to Morley (1984), listening is a key to all effective communication without the ability to listen effectively, messages are easily misunderstood. In listening comprehension, it is commonly recognized that pre-listening is very important because it can make students interested in the listening tasks and they can listen to the tasks better. Pre-listening is a preparation of the listening class. In this stage, teachers tend to arouse learners' expectation and interest of the language text they are going to listen. They can also motivate learners by providing background knowledge of the text; organizing learners to discuss a picture or a related topic which involves in the text; asking some related questions to the text. In general, pre-listening plays a role in warming-up and the main aim of this stage is to make learners focus their attention on the following while-listening stage and decrease the difficulties of the text.

It can be said that the pre-listening is a kind of introductory work which used make the content explicit, clarify the purposes and establish roles, procedures and aims for listening. In real life it is unusual for people to listen to something without having some idea of what they are going to hear. Underwood (1989) described pre-listening as follows: before listening, students should be "tuned in" so that they know what to expect, both in general and for a particular task. This kind of introductory work is generally described as pre-listening work or just pre-listening.

To catch up with the purpose in language teaching, Vietnam is trying to launch reforms in education step by step. Teachers, for example, are investing time and effort to help students improve their English, especially communication skill. It is the fact that, communicative approach is used to teach English according to the policy of the Ministry of Education. According to the 2020 Project of Vietnam's Government, listening and speaking are more and more important in learning English. Moreover, at high school, each lesson contains 4 skills which focus on students' communication skill; therefore, there are effective methodologies for teachers to apply in teaching listening skill. However, the students' listening skill is still low due to some reasons. Firstly, the English background of students in rural areas such as Tran Phu, Vo Nhai and Hoang Quoc Viet high schools are low because most of them come from remote areas, and they did not have chances to exposure to English like the ones in the big cities. Another reason is the lack of teaching and learning. This directly affects students' listening attitudes and listening comprehension. Besides, the number of the students in class is from 40 to 50 whereas the

ideal class for studying language is from 20 to 25 members. This could be another reason why students listening skills cannot be improved. Thus, the students are not interested in listening skills; therefore the teachers have less motivation to teach listening. Therefore, the study aims at examining the use of pre-listening activities in the pre-listening stage to improve students' listening comprehension.

With the above mentioned aims, the study attempts finding answers to the following research questions:

- How do pre-listening activities activate learners' listening comprehension?
- What are the benefits of pre-listening activities in enhancing listening comprehension?

In order to answer the research questions, two kinds of data collection instruments including questionnaire and observations were used to collect information about student's listening comprehension.

The questionnaire was delivered to 120 students in order to check students' listening perception before and after using pre-listening activities. The questions are in Vietnamese and comprises of two parts. The first part is about students' attitude about listening skills, the importance of listening skills and their encountered difficulties in learning English listening. The second part seeks for students' motivation and attitudes towards English listening skills. The questionnaire for teachers includes both closed and open-ended questions. There are ten questions in the questionnaire aimed at finding out the teachers' attitudes towards pre-listening activities and their purposes of using pre-listening activities, the current situation of using pre-listening activities and their opinions of the most effective pre-listening activities to the students, problems the teachers encounter when using pre-listening activities, and their comments and suggestions to improve the pre-listening activities in the textbook. Besides, the observation sheet was used to check whether teachers used the pre-listening in the class or not, and whether students were motivated by these activities or not.

The participants who participated in this research are 120 grade 11th students in four different classes, and 14 English teachers from three high schools in Thai Nguyen city, Vietnam. Three of them are from Tran Phu high school, eight of them are teaching at Hoang Quoc Viet and Vo Nhai high school, and three of them are working at Tran Quoc Tuan high school. After being introduced about the way to do the observation, they were invited to observe the class during the time when the researcher implements the action plan.

Being one of the most challenging language skills, listening comprehension has caught attention of a number of pedagogy specialists. Berne, J. (1995) has shown the impact of listening habits on listening comprehension. The researchers suggested teachers to provide students with numerous listening opportunities, thus help them become actively engaged in listening. As defined by those researchers, listening process has three inevitable phases including pre-listening, during listening and after listening, among which the purpose of the first phase is to prepare students for cultural and lexical background knowledge, review necessary listening skills and stimulate students' interest in the listening task. As concluded by the group of researchers, good habits of listening make effective listeners, and according to them, listening to movies is much better than to tapes due to the fact that movies are more attractive to listeners. They explained that when watching movies, students have opportunities to both listen and observe the speakers' manner. Although the suggestions of this researcher group appear compelling and can be beneficial to their teaching environment, the application of them in Vietnamese teaching context may be a big challenge due to a shortage of necessary facilities.

In an M.A thesis, Thuy (2005) made an experimental research to investigate whether pre-listening activities motivate students before the listening and therefore improve their listening comprehension. The experiment group was provided with numerous pre-listening activities while only new vocabulary and structures were given to the control group students in the first phase of listening. While and post-listening activities were the same for both groups. The effectiveness of pre-listening activities was evaluated by comparing the difference between the results of a pre-test and post-test. The result showed that the application of various pre-listening activities has positive influence on the test results of the experiment group.

Another research which is also related to pre-listening stage is a study on pre-listening techniques to motivate Non-English major students to develop their listening skills at the Faculty of Electro-Mechatronics at Phuong Dong University in Hanoi by Le (2006). The findings of the study revealed several techniques used at the first stage of listening lessons with the textbook "Lifelines" by Tom Hutchinson. The students' preferences for these techniques were also highlighted. Then, basing on the teachers' and the students' comments, some suggestions to improve the situation of teaching and learning at Phuong Dong University were made.

Moreover, Farrokhi and Modarres (2012) carried out a study on the effects of two pre-task activities: glossary of unknown vocabulary items and content related support on improvement of Arian EFL learners' listening comprehension. The study showed that offered pre-task activities for listening tasks improved learners' listening performance. It is concluded that pre-task activities had different supportive roles on low and high proficient learners' performance.

II. Findings and Discussions

Data collected from questionnaire for students

Data collected from questionnaire for students part 1

The results from Table 1 showed that the mean score of most questions are higher than 3.00. This revealed that the students found the listening lesson enjoyable, useful satisfying and appealing. They were attracted by the ways teacher use pre-listening activities in pre-stage because they could easily understand the listening lessons and comprehend the lesson better. However, question 2 illustrated that the number of students felt that pre-listening activities are dull are very low.

Data collected from questionnaire for students part 2

The table illustrates that after the experiment, all the questions had mean scores higher than 3.0 in which question 5 was the highest score. It means that the majority of students liked the pre-listening activities in the listening lesson and they thought that these activities were effective to complete the task better. There were 85% of students felt that the pre-listening activities that the teacher used interesting and 65% of them thought that these activities can expand their vocabulary and structure. The number of students thought that these lead-in activities also expand their knowledge in many fields got the same number with the above number. Moreover, 64% of students said that these activities are suitable for their knowledge. Finally, the number of students thought that teacher should use more pre-listening activities in the future are 83%. From these evidences, it is convinced that pre-listening stage that teacher applied could help students with positive attitude towards listening lessons.

Data analysis on the teachers' questionnaire

Question 1: What do you often do to start the listening lesson?

According to the result of the survey, 14 teachers organized pre-listening activities before leading the students to the main listening. None of them went straight to the listening without any pre activities as they know the importance of pre-listening activities.

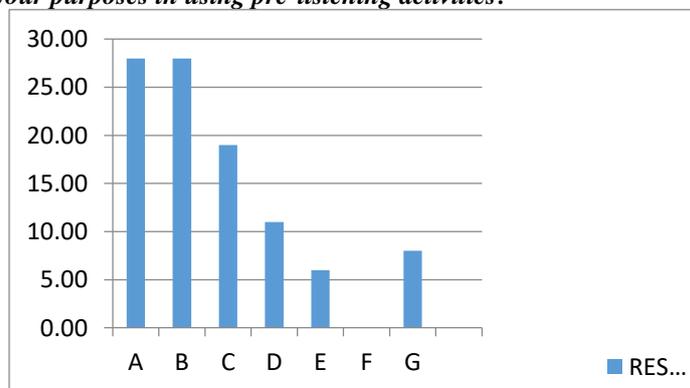
Question 2: How do you find the importance of pre-listening activities to students' listening performance?

It is clear from the survey that the number of the teacher found pre-listening very important are 65% and 35% of which claimed that it is important while none of them thought pre-listening stage is useless. Being aware of this, the teachers in high schools in Vo Nhai district often take consideration in choosing pre-listening activities in listening lessons.

Question 3: How often do you use pre-listening activities?

The result shows that 80% of the teachers always used pre activities, and the rest 20% of them often applied these activities in listening lesson. It means that applying pre-listening activities are very popular for the teachers due to the good effect they bring to the students. In addition, different pre-listening activity has a different purpose that is the reason why the next question is available in the observation checklist.

Question 4: What are your purposes in using pre-listening activities?



The chart illustrates the purposes of using pre-listening activities are various. Ten out of fourteen teachers (accounting for 28% of the total teacher) were for the purpose of providing background knowledge about the topic of the listening passage, which made up the most percentage of the purposes of using pre-listening activities. The same percentage belonged to the purpose of motivating students to participate in the lesson, followed by the purpose of teaching new vocabulary and structures which appear in the listening passage with nineteen percent. The third rank was to help students predict the content of the listening passage, which accounts for 11% of the

total number of teachers; followed by helping students more confident in listening lessons. The least number of responses was to provide opportunities for students to communicate (only 6 out of 14 responses). None of the teachers thought that the purpose of using pre-listening activities is to revise vocabulary and structures, and no one provided other purposes. As a result, most of the teachers aimed at providing background knowledge about the topic of the text and motivating students to participate in the lesson when using pre-listening activities. Besides, teaching new vocabulary and structures appearing in the listening passage and helping students predict the content of the listening passage are also much paid attention to.

Question 5: How often do you use the following pre-listening activities?

Table 1: The table of teacher's frequency of using pre-listening activities

Pre-listening Activities	Teachers' frequency of using pre-listening activities				
	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
A. Prediction of the content of the listening passage	40%	30%	30%	0%	0%
B. Pre-teaching new vocabulary or grammatical structures	30%	40%	30%	0%	0%
C. Using audio-visual aids to introduce the topic of the passage	0%	30%	70%	0%	0%
D. Discussion	10%	30%	60%	0%	0%
E. Previewing the listening tasks	90%	10%	0%	0%	0%
F. Brainstorming	30%	40%	30%	20%	0%
G. Questioning	20%	50%	10%	10%	0%
H. Using games to introduce the topic of the listening passage	10%	20%	60%	10%	0%

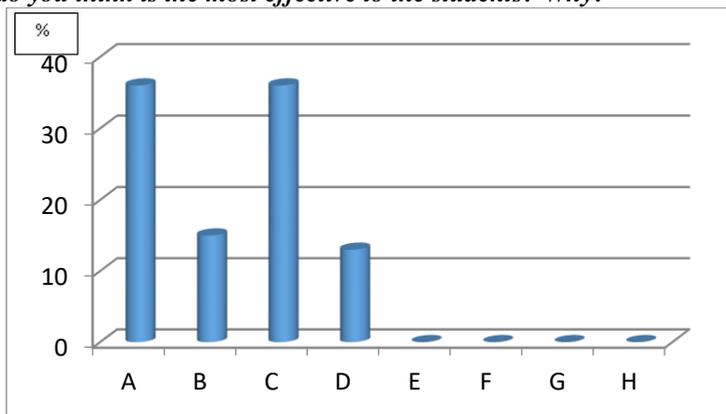
From table we can see that teacher's choices of pre-listening activities in class were different. It is clear that each activity had its own benefit so that the teachers had different options for each class. Noticeably, 90 % of the teachers previewed the listening task before going to the main listening task, this have been mentioned in Underwood (1989: 39), "it is very useful indeed for the students to see the questions before they begin listening to the text. Not only do they know what they have to seek from the text, but they also benefit from the reading itself". It is extremely important to preview the content of the listening because it helps to predict the answers for the listening.

Secondly, the most frequently used pre-listening activities used by the teachers are pre-teaching vocabulary or grammar structures, prediction of the content of the listening passage and using pre-listening questions, and brain storm which were the same accounted for 70 % *always* and *often* categories. They are considered the traditional pre-listening activities and most of them are the activities in the text book so the teacher can use them to make use of time. Next, the percentage of the teacher used questions and discussion is 20 and 10 % respectively. Finally, 60% of the teacher sometimes used games to introduce the topic of the listening passage, 20% of them often used this activity and 10% of them applied games because they claimed that it is time consuming and hard to prepare. They only introduced games to pre-listening task to change the learning atmosphere for students.

It is the fact that teachers in Tran Phu, Hoang Quoc Viet, Vo Nhai high school often used various pre-listening activities such as predicting the content of the listening vocabulary and grammar pre-teaching, using audio to introduce the topic of the lesson, discussion, brainstorming and using games to motivate students in the listening lesson. However, most of the teachers used previewing the listening; the reason is these activities are available in the textbook so they would like to make use of them. Moreover, pre-teach vocabulary and grammar, predicted the content of the listening are teacher's favorite activities before listening task. However, the activity is used least is using audio visual aids to introduce the topic of the lesson because it may take time to finish.

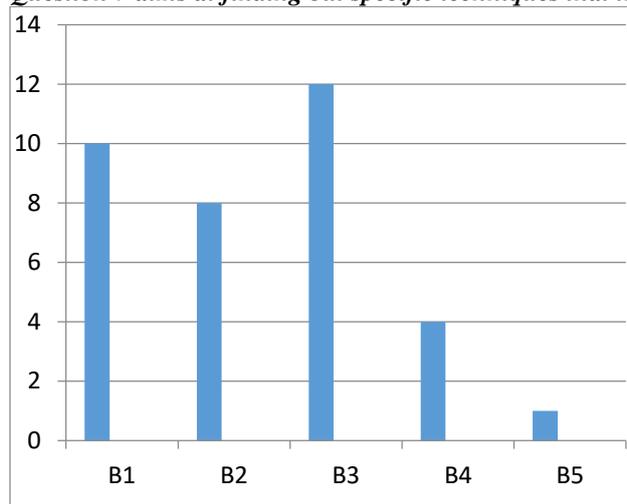
Question 6: Which pre-listening activity do you think is the most effective to the students? Why?

- A: Prediction of the content of the listening passage
- B: Pre-teaching new vocabulary or grammatical structures
- C: Using audio-visual aids to introduce the topic of the listening passage
- D: Discussion
- E: Previewing the listening tasks
- F: Brainstorming
- G: Questioning
- H: Using games to introduce the topic of the listening passage



It can be seen from the bar chart that the purposes of pre-listening was different. Five out of fourteen students (36%) thought that the most affective pre-listening activity is predicting the content of the listening. The same number applied for using audio-visual aids to introduce the topic of the listening passage. The teachers also provided the answers that these pre-listening activities help the students do the tasks better, and get students into the listening lesson. As mentioned earlier by some researchers such as Underwood (1989), Ur (1984), Anderson and Lynch (1988), pre-listening activities help facilitate comprehension, generate students' interest and activate students' background knowledge. Prediction can facilitate comprehension of the listening passage. Audio-visual aids may draw students' attention and generate their interest. From the chart it is also clear that the percentage of teacher's choice is 15 and 13 respectively for Pre-teaching new vocabulary or grammatical structures and discussion. Noticeably none of the teachers thought previewing the listening tasks, brainstorming, and using games before listening are the most effective to the students. Although it was thought that reading and studying the task are not the most effective ways, in current teaching most of the teachers require their students to do it before listening.

Question 7 aims at finding out specific techniques that the teachers often use in each pre-listening activity.



- B1.** Using pictures, real objects, gestures
- B2.** Using synonyms and antonyms
- B3.** Giving explanation and definition in English
- B4.** using translation

Firstly, from the survey, it is clear that 73% of the teachers confirmed that they often ask students to predict the content of the listening through visuals and title. Teachers in survey preferred using pictures to guess what the listening passage is about because it is a good way to present various things.

Moreover, pre-teaching vocabulary and grammar structure are also necessary for students before the main listening task. There are variety ways to teach vocabulary and structures, the below charts presents some common pre-listening activities.

It is obvious that most students were lack of vocabularies and structures related to the field of the listening tasks so they found listening skills challenging. Others thought that they do not have enough background knowledge for the specific listening task. Being aware of this, teachers in Tran Phu high school as well as some

other teachers in Vo Nhai district frequently applied pre-listening activities in the listening lessons. Both teachers and students have recognized the importance of pre-listening activities which provide students with background knowledge about the listening topic, motivate students in to concentrate in listening, give them vocabulary and structures about the listening thus they are more confident in listening skills.

The chart shows that twelve out of fourteen teachers often gave explanation and definition in English to pre-teach vocabulary and grammatical structures. Next, using pictures, real objects or gestures was also used frequently by ten teachers. Besides, using synonyms and antonyms was preferred by most teachers (8 out of 10 teachers). There were fewer teachers who use translation to teach new vocabulary, only 4 of them. Pre-teaching new vocabulary by word web or tree was rarely used by the teachers in some high school; in Vo Nhai district only one teacher admits using it.

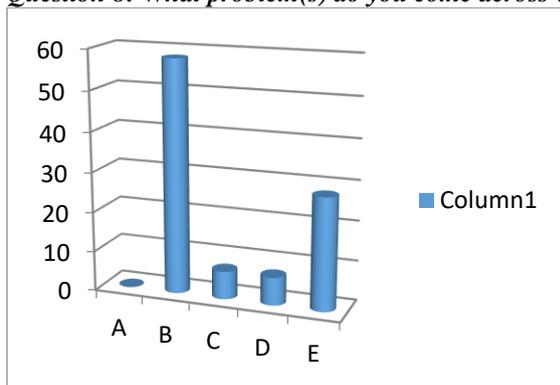
Thirdly, using audio-visual aids to introduce the topic of the listening passage was preferred by many teachers in the survey. Pictures were mostly used to introduce the topic of the lesson by nine out ten teachers. Only one teacher often used short videos to introduce the topic of the listening lessons. The reasons for this can be easily understood in the way that it is not easy to search short videos which is suitable for the lesson.

The next part is to discuss the activities are complemented by the teachers. From the survey, pair work activities were more favorable than group work activities with the results are ten and seven respectively. However, discussion among the whole class was the least with only one response.

When answering part E of question 7 about previewing listening tasks, nine teachers assumed that they often ask students to read and study all the tasks in *While you listen*, and only three teachers often asked their students to preview the first task. Brainstorming is an activity that the teachers in the survey use frequently. Usually, the teachers asked students to brainstorm ideas in the listening passage with eight out of fourteen responses. Next, brainstorming vocabulary is less frequently used than ideas with three out of eleven responses. Brainstorming of grammatical structures are least asked by the teachers. When being asked about the types of questions that the teachers often raise in pre-listening stage, most of the teachers choose WH-questions (seven out of fifteen responses). Multiple choice questions and Yes- No questions were less frequently used. Finally, using games to introduce the topic of the lesson is a very motivated activity and there is a variety of games that can be applied.

Each teacher has different ways to conduct pre-listening activities. Thus, the researchers want to go examine the teachers' techniques in using pre-listening activities. Som teachers thought that they often require students to guess the content of the listening passage through pictures rather than titles. In addition, the current techniques of pre-teaching new vocabulary and structures used by the teachers in listening lessons are using pictures, real objects, synonyms and antonyms, giving explanation and definition in English, translation and using word web or tree. Among those techniques, giving explanation and definition in English was used frequently by most of the teachers, followed by using pictures, real objects, synonyms and antonyms. Translating words into Vietnamese was not used often in teaching new words in Tran Phu high school. Moreover, using audio-visual aids to introduce the topic of the listening passage was favorable by many teachers at Tran Phu high school, Hoang Quoc Viet high school and Vo Nhai high school. Pictures were mostly used to introduce the topic of the lessons by the teachers but short videos and music were not likely used to because it takes much time to find and adapt short videos for the lesson. Besides, to use video and music, teachers need some equipment such as cassette, computer, projector, etc. Therefore, despite of many benefits of video and music, teachers rarely used them. For discussion, group work and pair work in pre-listening stage were used more frequently than work done with the whole class. Group work and pair work allowed students involved in the lesson better and make them more confident than working individually. For brainstorming, the teachers in the survey usually asked students to brainstorm ideas. Next, brainstorming vocabulary is less frequently. They think that ideas related to the listening passage are much important because they can help students understand the content of the lesson. When being asked about the types of questions that the teachers often raised in pre-listening stage, most of the teachers choose WH-questions. Multiple choice questions and Yes- No questions are less frequently used.

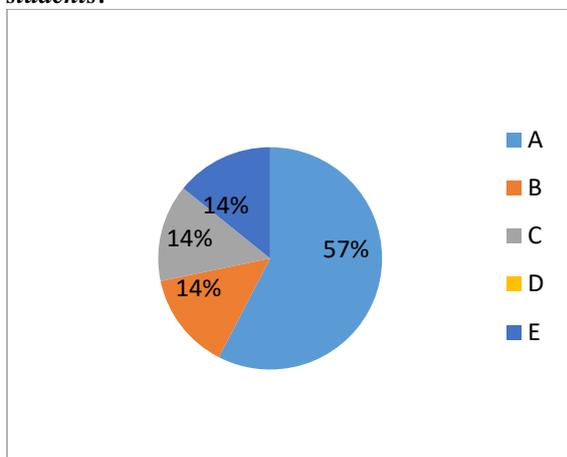
Question 8: What problem(s) do you come across when using pre-listening activities?



- A. It is difficult to design them
- B. Designing them is time-consuming
- C. Doing pre-listening activities in a listening lesson is time consuming
- D. Handling them is sometimes out of control
- E. Sometimes the activities used are not of the students' interests

From the chart, it is clear that 58% of the teachers claimed that designing pre-listening activities is time consuming. 28% belonged to the answer sometimes the activities used are not of the students' interest. Only 7% of them thought that pre-listening activities is time consuming and sometimes out of control. Besides, no one thinks that designing these activities is difficult. It can be said that most of the teachers did not have any problem about pre-listening activities except for time consuming in designing.

Question 9: What do you think of the pre-listening activities in the text book "English 11" for non- major students?



- A: Suitable for students' background and levels
- B: Sufficiently varied
- C: Meet student's interest
- D: Boring
- E: Others

It can be said that the textbook was suitable for both teachers and students, however it is hard to meet all learners' expectation. In question number 9, teachers were asked to give some comments on grade 11th text book, most of the teachers (57%) agreed that the pre-listening activities were suitable for students while 14% of them said that the activities meet students' interest, another 14% of them agreed that the activities were sufficient varied and 14% of the teachers had other ideas. However, no one believed that the activities are boring.

Question 10: In your opinion, what should be done to improve pre- listening tasks in the textbook?

Although the majority of the teachers think that pre-listening activities in the text book were suitable with students' background and levels, many of them still thought that there should be more activities for students and the tasks should be illustrated in visual to motivate learners in listening skills. To be specific, 75% of the teachers suggest that more kinds of pre-listening activities should be added. In addition, 25% of the teachers would like to have each listening lesson illustrated with beautiful pictures. In that case, the teachers do not have to spend much time designing pre-listening activities to meet students' needs and beautiful pictures may draw student's attention, and lead them to the content of the listening passage. Moreover, students will have more opportunities to join in variety of activities.

III. Conclusion

The study focuses on the importance of listening skill in English language classes and the role of pre-listening activities. The results showed that students had higher levels of participant in the pre-listening activities prepared by the teachers. The students also showed great interest in pre-listening activities. They are now willing to share their knowledge and opinions as well as discuss about the listening topic before listening to the tasks or doing the comprehension tasks. Consequently, the students' listening comprehension of the listening tasks was higher.

Besides, teachers and students in Tran Phu high school face with difficulty in teaching and learning listening skills. One of the most common problems is that students are not well-prepared for the listening lessons. This leads to students' low level in listening comprehension. Being teachers for more than ten years, the researchers are aware of the importance of pre-listening activities at the first stage of the listening lesson. This stage may have good influence on high school students' listening comprehension. Therefore, the researchers decided to conduct an experiment on three classes at the four high schools.

The data analysis helps the researchers find out the significance, limitations as well as implications for teaching-learning and further research. The research focuses on the importance of pre-listening task and its practical findings. The pre-listening activities could provide students with some background knowledge to help them interact with others and teacher in the class. Moreover, pre-listening activities can raise students' interest, motivation, concentration and level of enjoyment in listening lessons.

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