

Developing Bottom-up Listening Skills in a Google Classroom-based EFL module

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Abstract

The influence of a mini EFL listening module of bottom-up activities on learners' listening ability and students' views on using Google Classroom is used as a tool for language learning and teaching. The students were 100 first-year EFL students at Hanoi. The teaching practice of EFL listening has not well addressed bottom-up listening skills (Seigel & Seigel, 2015). Moreover, autonomous listening is not very well focused in current pedagogy (Field, 2008). This study was conducted to investigate Pedagogical University 2. The module was developed on the Google Classroom platform, which incorporates listening activities on different bottom-up skills. The students completed the assigned bottom-up listening activities on the platform every week over a period of 10 weeks. The data were collected from an online survey (n=100) and a dictation pre-test, and a dictation post-test (n=100). This conference paper reported the results drawn from the survey data with 100 students. The results showed that the module improved students' bottom-up listening skills and positively affected their autonomy. The study suggests that EFL teachers should be more aware of the importance of bottom-up activities and allocate adequate time for them in listening courses, especially for low-level learners. Furthermore, the study indicates that Google Classroom, as a sample tool of technologies, can be employed with sound pedagogy to benefit students.

Keywords: EFL bottom-up listening, the use of technology, learner autonomy, Google Classroom, Vietnam.

1. Introduction

Listening has a crucial role in foreign language learning and communication (Vandergrift, 2015). It is the most frequently used language skill by language learners (Brinton, Snow, & Celce-Murcia, 2014) and consequently has an essential role in providing linguistic input and interaction opportunities for learners to acquire the language (Field, 2008). Thus, the development of L2 listening skills has a strong impact on the development of other skills (Rost, 2015). However, listening has been "the least well taught" (White, 2006, p. 111). Listening has been the most neglected skill in the language classroom, and learners are not often taught how to listen effectively (e.g., Berne, 2004; Mendelsohn, 2006). Listening is often considered by language learners as the most difficult skill to learn, especially for those in the contexts where English is a foreign language (e.g., Graham, 2003; Hasan, 2000). In Vietnam, EFL learners often consider listening as one of the most difficult skills, and they often ask for guidance in learning this subject (Vu & Shan, 2016).

Among different listening skills, bottom-up listening skills play a key role in helping students understand the listening input at the sound, syllable, word, chunk, syntax, and intonation levels. However, activities to enhance students' bottom-up listening skills have not received adequate attention in EFL listening instruction, especially for low-level students (Seigel & Seigel, 2015). Textbooks often have not reflected a systematic approach to develop listening skills (Hill & Tomlinson, 2013). They usually include limited types of texts and tasks and seem to include outdated materials. The reasons mentioned so far suggest that more attention needs to be given to the teaching of listening skills, specifically bottom-up listening skills. This study was conducted to investigate the influence of a mini EFL listening module of bottom-up activities on learners' listening ability and learner autonomy. The students

were 100 first-year EFL students at a public university in Vietnam. The module was developed on the Google Classroom platform, which incorporates listening activities on different bottom-up skills. The students completed the assigned bottom-up listening activities on the platform every week over a period of 10 weeks. The data were collected from an online survey (n=100) and a dictation pre-test, and a dictation post-test (n=100).

2. Literature review

2.1. English listening skills

2.1.1. Top-down and Bottom-up processing in EFL listening

Top-down and bottom-up listening are two important approaches that L2 learners need to employ to understand listening input comprehensively. In a top-down listening approach, learners use background knowledge about the topic of listening to understand its meaning. Bottom-up skills or decoding skills are the skills that students need to use to decode the listening input at the smallest units of information, such as detecting, identifying, and distinguishing the sound, syllable, word, chunk, syntax, and intonation levels from which the meaning of the listening input is understood (Field, 2008). The bottom-up listening skills are important for beginning learners because of their limited language repertoire, which does not automatically process what they are listening to and understand the input message (Field, 2008; Siegel & Siegel, 2015). Therefore, learners need to rely on language elements such as sounds, grammar, vocabulary ... and then process those information units into a meaningful message. Depending on the purpose of listening (listening for the gist or listening for details) or the learner's ability (intermediate, advanced, or beginner), the learner can choose one or combine two approaches to the listening process. The combination of the two listening approaches will help them improve their English listening skills effectively.

2.1.2. The teaching of EFL listening skills

In recent years, the literature on listening instruction indicates a greater focus on the process approach (Ellis, 2003; Field, 2003, 2008, 2012; J.C. Richards, 2006, 2008; Rost, 2015). This approach compensates for the limitation of the comprehension approach, which has paid little attention to difficulties that learners may experience while they are listening to certain segments of listening texts (Field, 2008). It focuses on the subskills listeners need to acquire to understand listening texts.

There have been some attempts to provide comprehensive taxonomies of such subskills, such as those of J.C. Richards (1983) and Field (2008). The recent one by Field (2008) classified subskills according to decoding processes and meaning-building processes, which listeners draw upon to arrive at a full understanding of texts. According to Field, in order to improve language learners' ability to decode linguistic input, teachers can introduce subskills tasks focusing on single different aspects of listening such as lexical segmentation, the recognition of recurrent chunks, intonation patterns, turn-taking signals, linkers, and patterns of logical argument. This approach to listening instruction is supported by the fact that language listeners' major reason for breakdowns of understanding is lexical segmentation (Field, 2003; J.C. Richards, 1983, Rost, 2015) and their ability to cope with linguistic decoding plays an important role in the listening performance (Lynch, 2009). Examples of subskills related to decoding processes at the word level can be recognizing variant forms of words, using awareness of word frequency, and distinguishing known and unknown words (Field, 2008, p. 336). It is also emphasized in this approach that learners should be equipped with subskills for meaning-building processes. These skills help listeners draw on their outside knowledge and the message from the text to make sense of the meaning of what is said (Field, 2008; Richards, 1983). Examples of subskills related to meaning-building processes at the word level can be narrowing word sense to fit the context, dealing with word ambiguity, and inferring the meaning of unknown words (Field, 2008, p. 338).

In response to the call for more attention to the instruction on bottom-up listening skills, some researchers have conducted study to investigate the effects of bottom-up listening activities on students' listening abilities (Al-Jasser, 2008; Field, 2008; Goh, 2000; Siegel & Siegel, 2015; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Data from Goh's study suggested that lower-level students became more confident at phoneme, word recognition, and segmentation problems. Field (2008) found that students having bottom-up listening skills instruction could decode listening input more accurately and automatically. In another study, Vandergrift and Goh (2012) pointed out that listening activities focusing on bottom-up skills raised students' awareness of the spoken language's pronunciation. Siegel and Siegel (2015) showed that explicit instruction of bottom-up skills positively affected most of the students when they had higher scores on the dictation and listening proficiency tests. Despite the importance of bottom-up skills instruction, there remains a lack of evidence on the practical classroom context. This indicates a need for further investigation of how direct instruction on bottom-up listening skills can help students' listening competence in L2 classrooms.

2.3. The use of technology for language teaching and learning

Technology has been considered an essential tool in language teaching and learning. A growing body of research has shown that teachers and students have a positive view of the use of technologies in language teaching and learning (e.g., Chapelle, 2001; Levy, 1997). Many studies have provided evidence showing positive effects of technology use in language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The effects include increasing levels of learner autonomy, motivation and self-confidence, development of communicative competence, and improvement of linguistic proficiency (Dina & Ciornei, 2013; Kim, 2013; Yunus, Nordin, Salehi, Embi & Salehi, 2013).

Google Classroom has been around since 2014 and has become one of the most well-known learning management systems (Albashtawi & Bataineh, 2020). This free and user-friendly application integrates with other Google services such as Google Drive, Google Docs, Google Sheets, Google Slides. It has many functions that help educational institutions simplify teaching and learning. Students can join a class when provided with a login code or automatically added by the class's teachers. Teachers can assign homework, share materials, track learning progress, grade students' work, or provide comments (Sukmawati & Nensia, 2019).

To date, some studies have investigated the effectiveness of the use of Google Classroom for learning and learning (e.g., Albashtawi & Al Bataineh, 2020; Duong, Hoang, & Mai, 2019; Markham & Peter, 2003; Islam, 2008; Sukmawati & Nensia, 2019). Advantages of Google Classroom include helping students develop and organize their work to learn English effectively; increasing students' motivation of online learning; providing instant notifications of assignments and deadlines; easily uploading and downloading materials; being available on different electronic devices; improving EFL students' reading and writing performance and facilitating learner autonomy.

Taken together, the evidence reviewed here suggests a crucial role for the instruction on bottom-up listening skills and for the integration of technology into language teaching and learning, i.e., Google Classroom in this case. The next section presents the methodology used for this study.

3. Methods

The study aims to examine Vietnamese EFL students' views on the influence of a mini EFL listening module of bottom-up activities on EFL learners' listening study and their views on the use of Google Classroom as a tool for the listening module.

The listening module was a part of Listening Speaking Course 1, which used the Skillful Foundation textbook. As a part of the course, the listening module was conducted in a period of ten weeks. It incorporated

listening activities on different bottom-up skills, which are listening for "s/es" ending sounds, connected-speech, "ed" ending sounds, elision, contraction, weak/stressed forms. In each lesson of the module, the teacher gave the students background knowledge about each skill and asked them to practice it by doing some mini-exercises. The activity, on average, was completed within 15 minutes. By the end of each lesson, the students were assigned some bottom-up listening activities as homework on the Google Classroom platform.

To fulfill the purpose of the study, the study was conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of the listening module on EFL students' listening study?
2. What are the students' views on the use of Google Classroom as a tool for the listening module?

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. It collected data through an online survey and a pre-test and post-test with EFL first-year students at Hanoi Pedagogical University 2. In this paper, the results drawn from the online survey data are reported. The online survey questionnaire included two parts that asked the participants about their views on the influence of the listening module on their study of listening skills and the use of the Google classroom as a tool for the listening module. The survey was sent to the participants at the end of the listening module, and it took the students about fifteen minutes to complete. There were 100 students responding to the survey, and the quantitative data from closed questions and qualitative data from open-ended questions were descriptively calculated and thematically analyzed, respectively.

4. Results/Findings and discussion

4.1. Research question 1: Students' views on the impact of the listening module on EFL students' listening study

The students expressed their appreciation for the module as it developed their bottom-up listening skills. The two benefits that the students mentioned the most are improving basic listening skills and increasing motivation to learn. Here are some examples of the students' comments:

It helps my listening skills better and better. Now I can hear the words that I was not able to hear before. And it provides me useful information about how English is naturally spoken.

Listening practice from the basic steps helps me to hear clearly and clearly. It provides the foundation for me to level up my listening skills.

I am now more familiar with phonetics and can recognize exactly what English words are spoken.

My listening skills are better day by day. The module makes me feel excited and has motivation when I learn English listening skills.

It helps improve my listening skills, and I have the motivation to study harder.

About the bottom-up skills that the students reported improving the most, listening for "s/es" ending sounds and listening for connected-speech ranked the first and the second in the list at 98 and 78, respectively (see Figure 1).

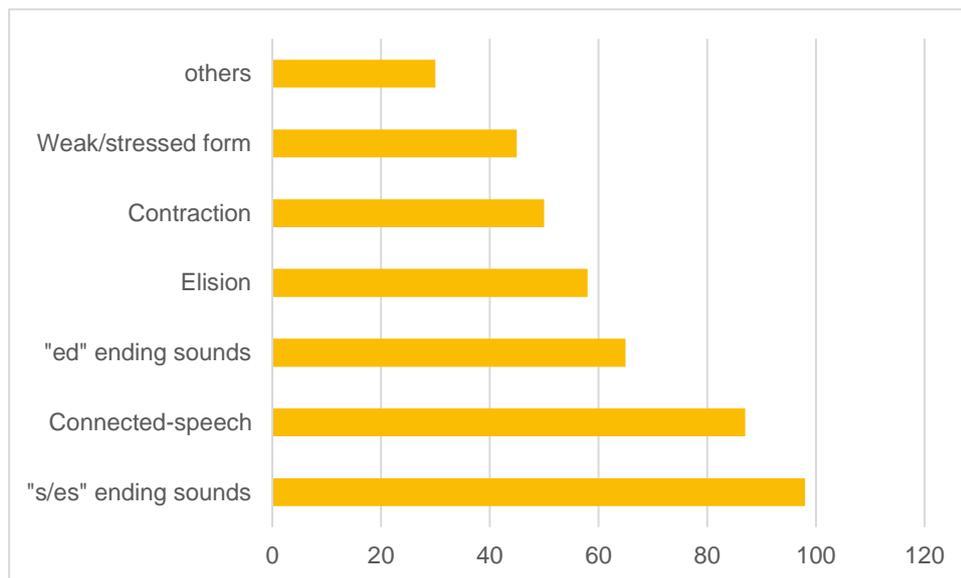


Figure 1. Bottom-up listening skills that the students reported improving

The students also became more aware of "ed" ending sounds, elision, and contraction when 65, 58, and 50 of them reported gaining better ability to listen for these sounds. The figures are illustrated with the students' comments as the followings:

Before, when I heard, I could not detect the s/es ending sounds and how to recognize connected speech. However, after taking this module, I can notice them and know how to practice them every day.

I can realize the ending sounds that I often missed before.

I never heard "elision" before. I think I've understood it, and I always try my best to practice elision. So did connect- speech. It helps me improve my English, including my listening skills and speaking skills.

I understand different sounds, and after practicing, I can hear those sounds in the conversation confidently.

Having seen the positive effects of the practice of bottom-up listening skills, all of the respondents stated that they would apply what they learned from the module to future practice of listening skills. For example, two students said:

I will spend about 30 minutes a day practicing basic listening skills to improve my listening ability.

I will apply the basic listening skills I have learned into my listening practice. For example, I will listen to videos from basic to advanced listening to recognize connected sounds or elisions.

The results support evidence from previous observations (e.g., Field, 2008; Goh, 2000; Siegel & Siegel, 2015) that explicit instruction of bottom-up listening skills helped to develop learners' listening ability.

Another recurrent theme in answers to the survey was that the module had effects on learner autonomy. The respondents reported that their autonomy in learning changed in different ways (see Table 1).

Table 1

Students' perspectives on the effects of the listening modules on learner autonomy

N	Students' perspectives on the effects of the listening modules on learner autonomy	Number of respondents
1.	I can find learning materials independently	95

2.	I feel more active and motivated to learn listening skills	89
3.	I can access learning materials anytime, anywhere	78
4.	I am aware of the objectives of listening tasks posted on Google classroom	75
5.	I feel more curious when searching web-based online listening resources	74
6.	I can select and implement appropriate learning strategies	57
7.	I am able to formulate my own learning objectives	54
8.	I can monitor my own learning	37
9.	I can monitor and evaluate my own use of learning strategies	34

Among many benefits, the students emphasized that being able to find materials independently (95%), feeling motivated to learn listening skills (89%), and accessing listening materials anytime, anywhere (78%) are the three most influences of the module to their autonomy. For examples, they commented that:

This module helps me find materials that are reliable and suitable for my level.

I can study anytime, anywhere with my phone or laptop.

Online lessons are more interesting than lessons on books. Thanks to online lessons, I am able to practice anytime and anywhere.

Besides, the students found the module useful. Seventy-five respondents commented that they became more aware of listening tasks' objectives, and seventy-four of them felt more curious when searching web-based online listening resources.

There are interesting exercises that the instructor uploads to Google Classroom, and from them, I self-study further information on the internet.

In the past, I did listening exercises without caring about how they help my listening ability. But thanks to the module, I understand the reasons why I should take specific listening exercises.

These findings suggest that the listening module increased the time on task for students. They may be explained by the fact that the listening module was designed to facilitate learner autonomy. Every week, the students were provided with theoretical knowledge of the linguistic features of spoken English. In class, they practiced listening exercises to train their ears to specific features. For example, they were listening for contractions, elision, connected speech. After the lesson, the students were required to do their homework by doing more exercises and find out further natural spoken listening input, which had the linguistic features they learned in the class. The activities that the students were required in autonomous learning include data storing, voice recording, shadowing, dictating, designing listening exercises. By doing those assignments, they spent more time looking for suitable listening input and listening to them.

Furthermore, thanks to the features of Google classroom, the students could access materials every time and everywhere. This finding agrees with other studies (Nguyen, 2015a, 2015b), which indicated that convenience and authentic learning materials as the advantages of using technologies for language learning.

Another benefit that the students perceived having gained from the module is that they were able to select and implement appropriate learning strategies and formulate learning objectives. This view was echoed by fifty-seven informants, for example:

The module is designed with specific topics so I can plan my studies easily.

During self-study, I can realize the problems and find the right way to study. I am able to set learning goals and complete assignments.

I can find more online exercises to work on my weaknesses in my spare time.

While preliminary, this finding suggests that the listening module helps raise students' awareness about the specific bottom-up listening skills they need to work on. Accordingly, they can set learning goals to improve their weaknesses. This study confirms that learner autonomy is associated with learners' ability to handle and program their learning (Holec, 1981; Benson, 2001). Indeed, the participants in this study became more independent learners who started initial steps to take control over their learning.

4.2. Research question 2: Students' views on the use of Google Classroom as a tool for the listening module

The respondents found Google Classroom a user-friendly tool for their study (see Table 2). Ninety-six of them mentioned that Google Classroom was easy to use, and eight-nine respondents found it convenient because it is available on a smartphone mode as well.

Table 2

Students' perspectives on the use of Google Classroom as a tool for the listening module

N	Students' perspectives on the use of Google classroom as a tool for the listening module	Number of respondents
1.	Google Classroom is easy to use	96
2.	Google Classroom application is available on my smartphone	89
3.	I can upload materials easily	79
4.	I am timely notified of any assignments and announcements	76
5.	I can keep records of my work	75
6.	I can log in to Google Classroom anytime, anywhere.	60
7.	I can track the progress of assignments	57
8.	I can have feedback on the assignment	45

For example, one student said, "Google Classroom is very useful. With a smartphone, I can do many things on it with convenience."

Other features of Google Classroom that many students reported useful for their study include allowing materials to be uploaded easily (n=79), notifying assignments and announcements (n=76), keeping records of students' work (n=75). Examples of the students' comments as the following:

I love when Google Classroom reminds me of homework and deadlines. Because there is a lot of homework from different courses to do in one week, it is easy to forget. Thanks to this, I have done all my work on time.

It is very easy to use, and it works well to combine classroom learning and self-study.

Instant notifications and forum exchanges make study easy.

This study supports evidence from previous observations (e.g., Albashtawi & Al Bataineh, 2020; Duong, Hoang, & Mai, 2019) that information technology, more specifically Google Classroom, can enable language learners to flexibly and conveniently learn and acquire knowledge.

In addition to the supporting features for language learning, the students mentioned two features of Google Classroom that they had challenges during their study. The first feature mentioned by fifty students is related to the unavailability of Google Classroom when there is no Internet connection. For example, one student said, "when traveling on the bus or on the road, if the phone does not have an Internet connection, you cannot listen to audio files." The other feature is the limitation of teacher-student interaction on Google Classroom. Fifty students reported that Google Classroom was still not so good at facilitating different modes of interaction. For

example, two students said:

Google Classroom does not allow teachers and students to interact and discuss directly but can only teach and learn through preloaded document files on the application.

I do not want my private messages to my teacher to be seen by other classmates all the time.

As Google Classroom is a free learning management system, it might not have all functions as other commercial ones. However, an implication of these results is that Google should improve Google Classroom features to meet teacher's and students' needs.

Taken together, the results indicate that the listening module has helped the students develop their basic listening skills and learner autonomy. For the participants in this study, they found Google Classroom a useful tool for their listening module. The next chapter moves on to discuss the significance of the findings and the implications for practice.

5. Conclusion

This present research study's main aim was to design a listening module to train EFL students on bottom-up listening skills and investigate students' views on its impact on their listening study. The second aim of this study was to examine the students' perspectives on the use of Google Classroom as a learning tool in the listening module. The participants, on the whole, demonstrated a positive attitude to the module. They reported that the module improved their bottom-up listening skills, especially "s/es" ending sounds, connected speech, "ed" ending sounds, and elision. The majority commented that the listening module also developed their autonomy in learning. After taking the module, most students reported having more confidence in finding listening materials and having more time on listening tasks. Finally, the overall response to the question about the use of Google Classroom for language learning was positive. The students found Google Classroom useful and convenient. However, two concerns were expressed about the unavailability of its functions when used without the Internet connection and about its limited functions to facilitate interaction among students and teachers.

These results were very encouraging; however, the generalizability of these results is subject to certain limitations. This study's scope was limited in terms of time and resources so that not all the bottom-up listening skills were introduced in the module. There should be more time for students to practice, and further modules should be developed to continue training EFL students on other skills such as listening for assimilation, intonation, resyllabification, the chunk of language, accents, prefix, and suffix. Another issue that was not addressed in this study was whether the practice of bottom-up listening skills would improve students' listening ability. Further research could be conducted to determine the listening module's effectiveness on students' listening ability by triangulating the survey results with pre-test and post-test data and interview data.

Despite its exploratory nature, the present results are significant in at least three major aspects. The study adds to our understanding of the importance of bottom-up listening skills for EFL learners, especially for beginning learners. It is suggested that teachers consider integrating bottom-up listening exercises in the teaching suitable to their own teaching context and learners. Training should also be provided to both teachers and students to maximize the effectiveness of teaching and learning bottom-up listening skills, which are the foundation for students to develop their listening ability in general. In another aspect, this study has contributed to the rapidly expanding field of learner autonomy. The study indicates that students will be able to enhance their learner autonomy and the twenty-first century's competence if they are guided and nurtured. It is thus recommended that courses can be designed to organize activities to develop learners' responsibility intentionally. Finally, this study strengthens the idea that technology, for example, Google Classroom, can be used to assist students' language learning. In contexts where facilities and resources are limited, a free but user-friendly learning management

system is still a good choice. However, it is important to note that technology needs to be employed with sound pedagogies if it aims to foster language learning.

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