



Difficulties in English Listening Comprehension of First-year Students in Chinese High Schools under the Background of the New Curriculum

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Abstract. With the launching of the Implementation Opinions on Deepening the Reform of Examination Enrollment System in 2014, reformation in Gaokao has taken place in several provinces. In 2021, the Heilongjiang Educational department launched its reformation plan. Students listening tests will join the final evaluation after 2024, which aims at this year's first-year students of senior high schools. Before that, the listening scores did not act as part of the English examination. This article mainly focuses on the listening learning difficulties of the first students in this Gaokao reformation. The essay finds out that senior first-year high school students' English listening difficulties mainly lie in their practice methods, phonology, listening strategies, and mentality.

Keywords: English listening; learning difficulties; senior high school; qualitative research; the new curriculum

1 Introduction

Listening comprehension is critical in effective communication. However, for some reason, students' listening scores have not been included in the final score until the 2021 Heilongjiang College Entrance Examination Reform, which will take effect in 2024. Therefore, students have underestimated the importance of listening for a long time. The listening learning difficulties of senior first-year high school students mainly consist of practice methods, phonology, context, and mentality. In this article, the author will investigate the proportion of students with specific difficulties in English learning through a questionnaire and try to offer the English teachers ideas and solutions, providing referential use for educators in regions of similar situations.

2 Literature review

According to Azmi Bingol, Celik, Yidliz, and Tugrul Mart, there are many difficulties that learners may encounter in the listening comprehension processes, and the purpose

is to be aware of these problems and try to solve them [1]. Some of these problems are as follows:

2.1 Accent

Munro and Derwing pointed out that too many accents in speech block comprehension [2]. According to Goh, 66% of learners mentioned that a speaker's accent is one of the determining factors in listener comprehension [3]. Unfamiliarity with native and non-native accents can cause severe problems in listening comprehension, and a familiar accent helps learners' listening comprehension. Buck indicated that listeners who have only learned about American English and heard an unfamiliar accent, such as Indian English, would first encounter critical difficulties in listening [4]. An unfamiliar accent will undoubtedly interrupt the whole listening comprehension process, and at the same time, an unaccustomed accent makes comprehension impossible for the listeners.

2.2 Unfamiliar Vocabulary

According to Azmi Bingol, Celik, Yidliz, and Tugrul Mart, students can easily comprehend the listening material, including known words. [5]. If students know most of the words, their interest and motivation will arouse, and their listening comprehension ability will be triggered. Novel homonyms can perplex students.

2.3 Length and Speed of Listening

Azmi Bingol, Celik, Yidliz, and Tugrul Mart stated that students vary significantly in their English listening comprehension when they listen to long parts and keep all information in their minds [6]. Lower-level students find it difficult to follow more than three minutes of long materials and complete the listening tasks. Short listening passages make listening comprehension easy for learners and reduce their tiredness. According to Underwood, fast speed complicates students' listening comprehension [7]. If the speakers speak too fast, students may have serious problems understanding L2 words. In this situation, listeners cannot control the speakers' speed, creating critical problems with listening comprehension.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research tool

The author uses a self-designed questionnaire, An Investigation on Senior High School Freshmen Listening Learning. There are 40 questions covering the aspects of the student profile, how the student and their school practice listening, the availability of English context, the phonology grasped by the students, and the student mentality.

3.2 Research method

Sample collection. The author chose Harbin, Heilongjiang Province as an example and collected 63 questionnaires online, mainly from three provincial vital senior highs. The number of valid questionnaires is 63, and the valid rate is 100.00%. The distribution of students is as follows:

Table 1. Distribution of students (credit: original)

Harbin senior highs	Harbin No.1 High School	3
	Harbin No.3 High School	42
	Harbin No.6 High School	15
Other regions or unknown		3

Data collection. The survey used unified guidance using an anonymous way to fill out.

Data analysis. In this paper, EXCEL spreadsheet software processes data.

General preview of the research. There are 63 valid questionnaires. Classifying summary of the gender of the subjects, the proportion of boys to girls is 50.79% to 49.21%, which is approximately equal. Not all the students questioned are currently in their first grade in senior high: only 15 of them, accounting for 23.81%, but the other students answered the questions according to the situation when they were high school freshmen, so the questionnaires are credible.

4 Difficulties that senior high first-year students face

4.1 Practice methods

This part consists of three questions:

5. How often does your school organize English listening practices?
11. Do you practice listening after class?
12. How do you practice after class?

The results are as follows:

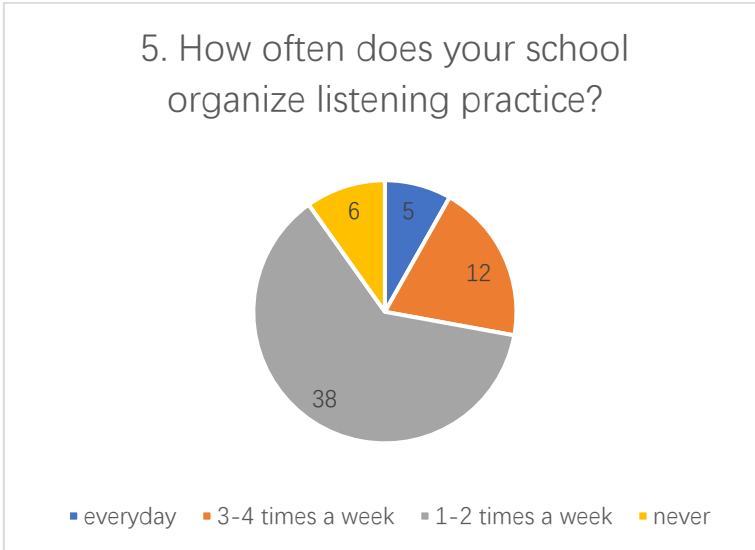


Fig. 1. The answers to question 5 in the pie chart form (credit: original)

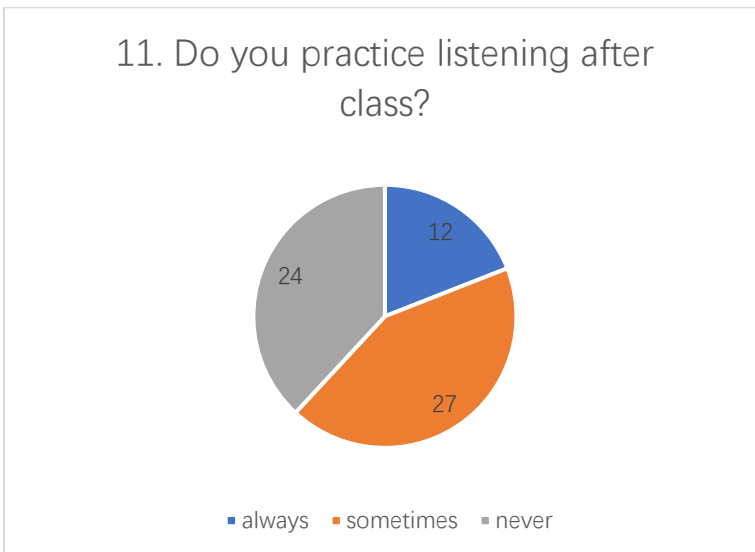


Fig. 2. The answers to question 11 in the pie chart form (credit: original)

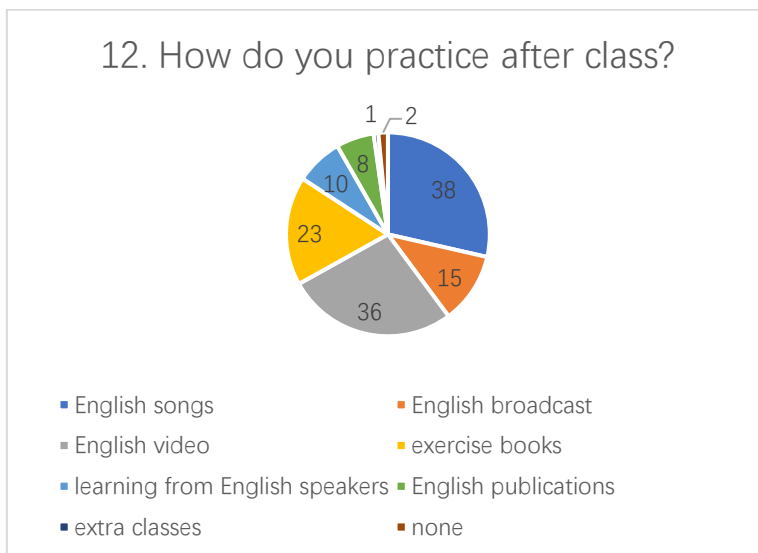


Fig. 3. The answers to question 12 in the pie chart form (credit: original)

4.2 Phonology

This part consists of three questions:

- 22. Can you distinguish a British accent from an American accent?
- 25. Can you recognize the rhythm and stress in English audio?
- 26. Can you understand the linking of English?

The results are as follows:

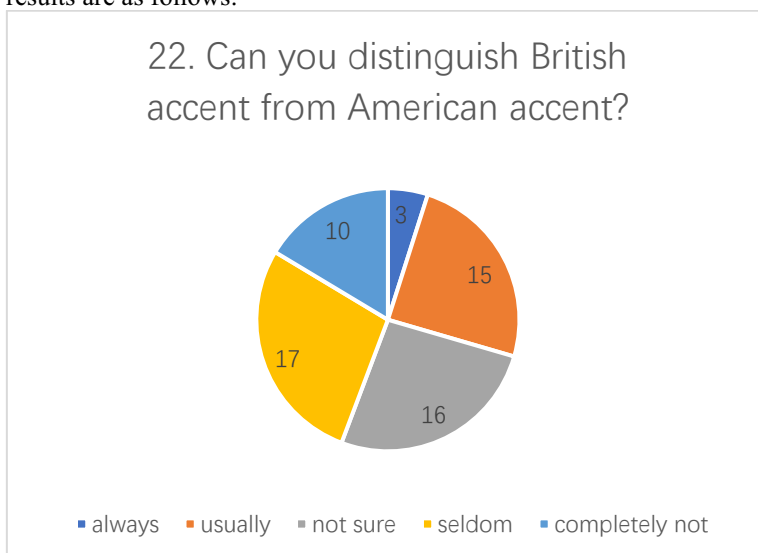


Fig. 4. The answers to question 22 in the pie chart form (credit: original)

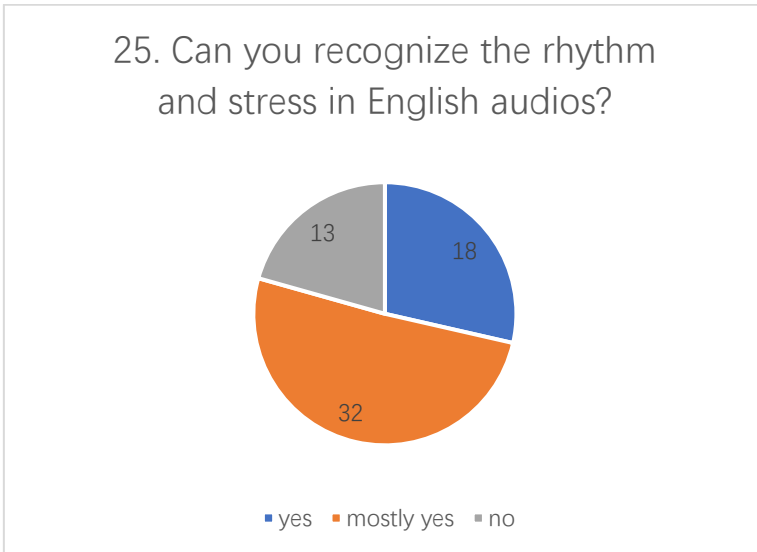


Fig. 5. The answers to question 25 in the pie chart form (credit: original)

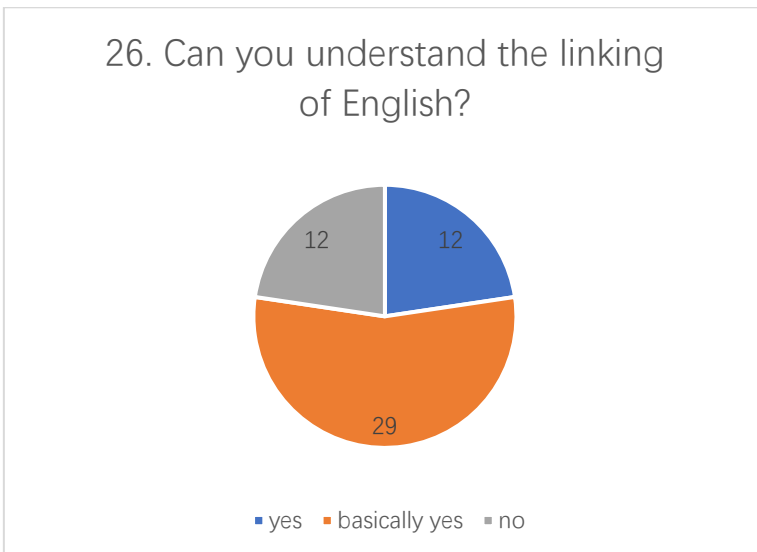


Fig. 6. The answers to question 26 in the pie chart form (credit: original)

4.3 Listening strategies

This part consists of five questions:

- 27. What is your understanding basis?
- 29. Do unfamiliar words occur in your listening?
- 32. Does over-prediction happen in your listening?

33. Does the speed of the material influence your listening?

The results are as follows:

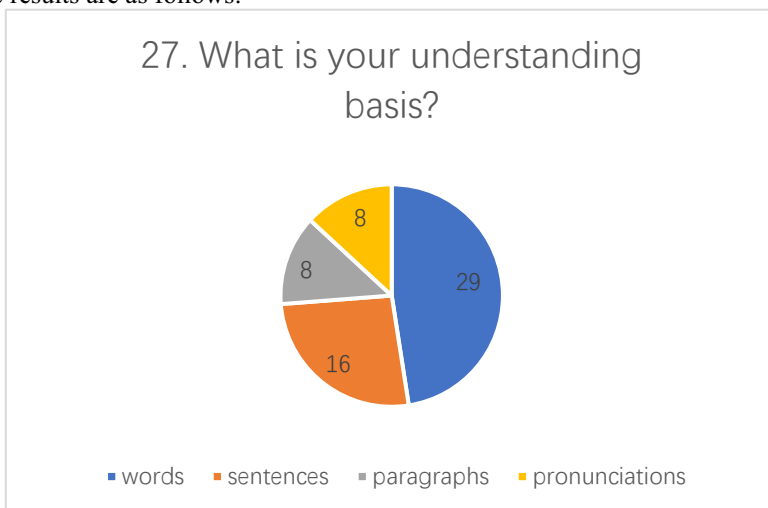


Fig. 7. The answers to question 27 in the pie chart form (credit: original)

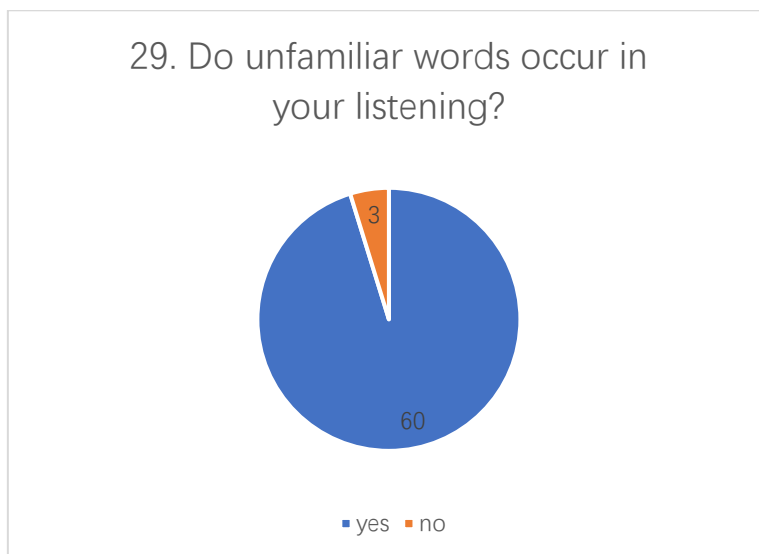


Fig. 8. The answers to question 29 in the pie chart form (credit: original)

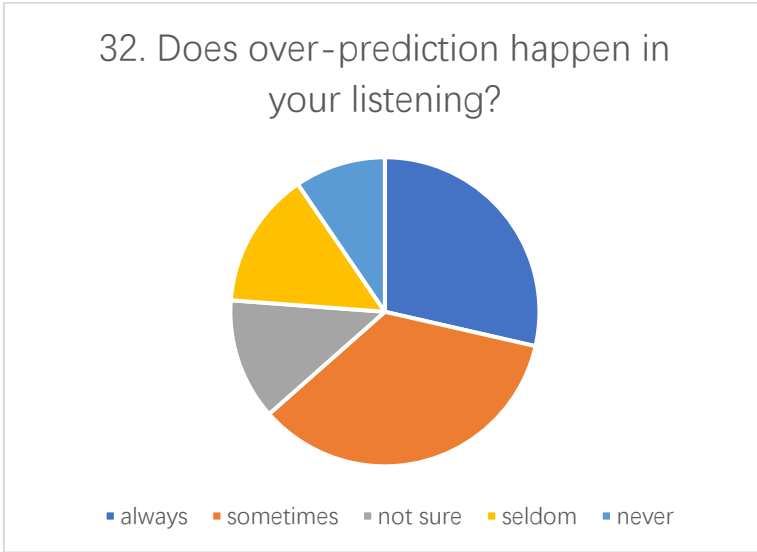


Fig. 9. The answers to question 32 in the pie chart form (credit: original)

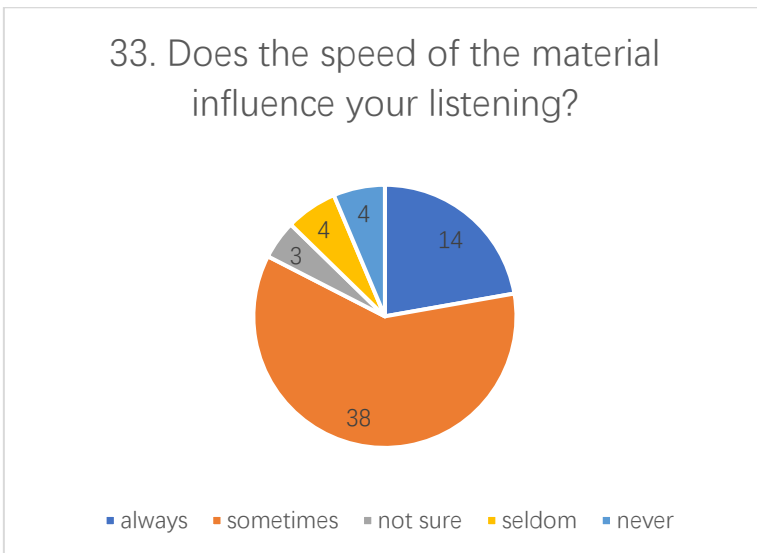


Fig. 10. The answer to question 33 in the pie chart form (credit: original)

4.4 Mentality

This part consists of four questions:

16. Can you adapt to the shift from non-listening-test junior high to senior high?
34. What is the leading cause of the change in your motivation?
35. Do you feel nervous during an English listening test?

36. From where does your nervousness come?

The results are as follows:

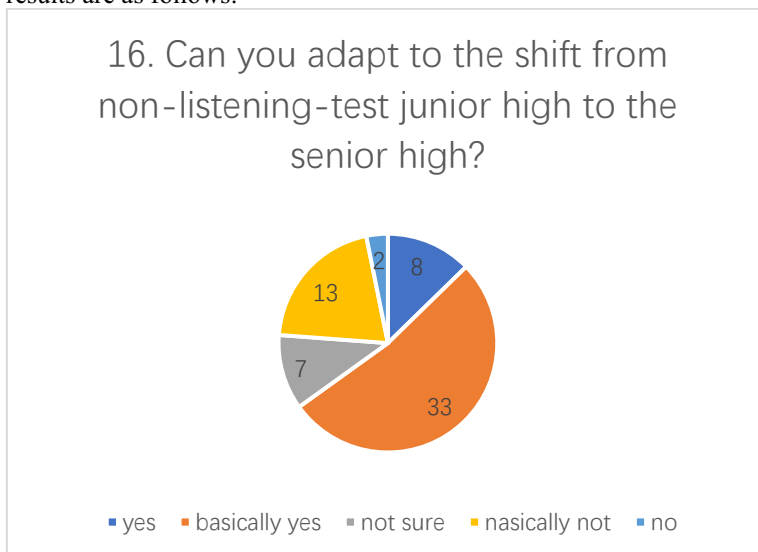


Fig. 11. The answers to question 16 in the pie chart form (credit: original)

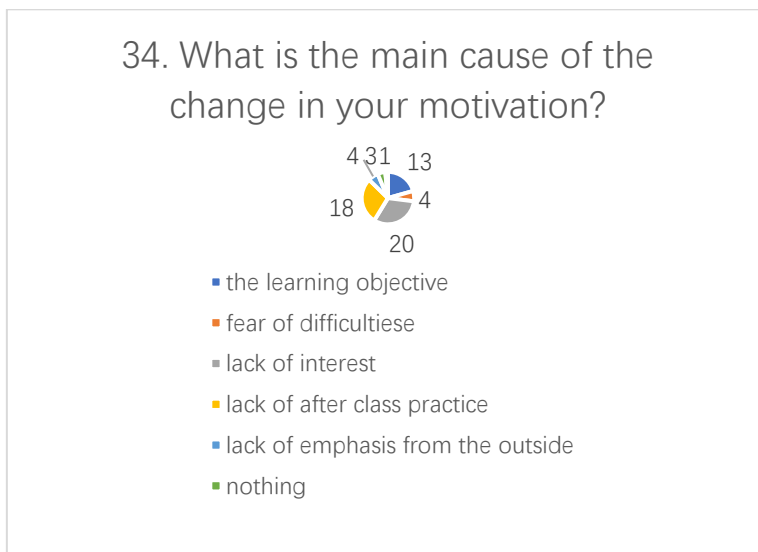


Fig. 12. The answers to question 34 in the pie chart form (credit: original)

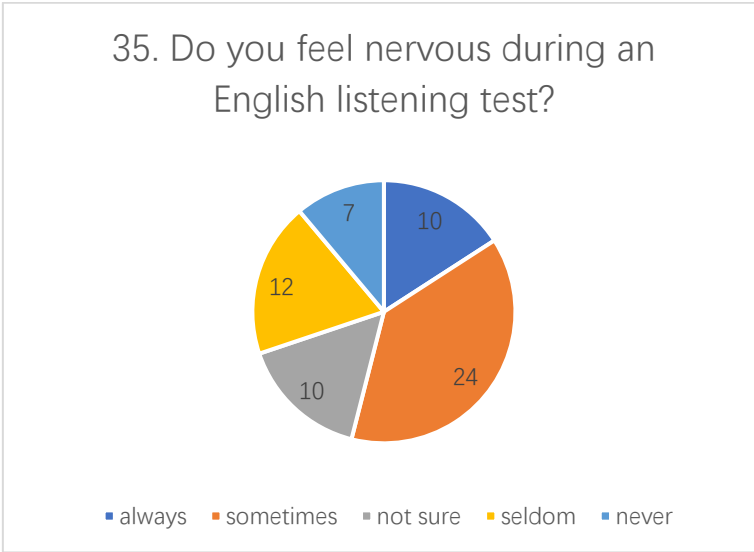


Fig. 13. The answers to question 35 in the pie chart form (credit: original)

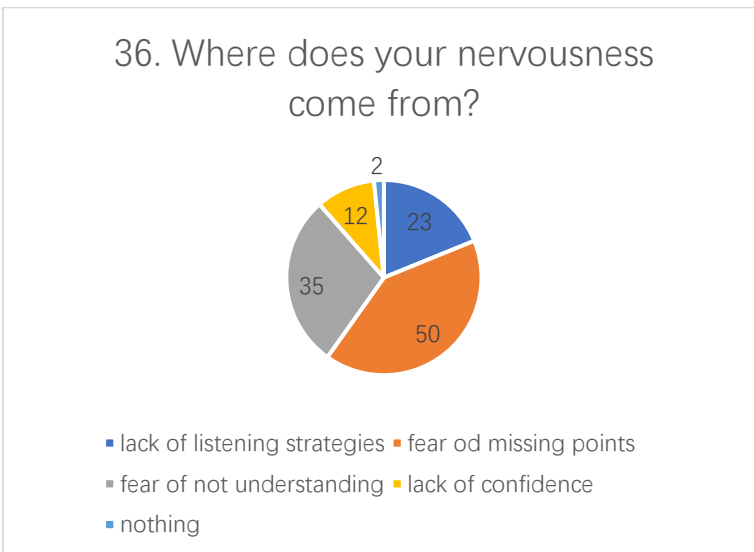


Fig. 14. The answers to question 36 in the pie chart form (credit: original)

5 Discussion

5.1 Practice method

Most senior high first-year students practice listening 1-2 times a week, which is suitable for school arrangements, making room for other subjects. However, this frequency is not enough for a student's English listening improvement. Therefore, students should practice listening after class through traditional tools such as tapes and exercise books or with modern technologies like watching English movies and listening to English songs.

Additionally, teachers should create an English-speaking environment for students. Firstly, teachers should speak as much standard English as possible. Chances are that some expressions are too complicated for students to understand. Under this circumstance, the teachers must illustrate them in English, trying to teach English like Chinese, the students' mother tongue. Secondly, students can seek English speaking environment after class. Telephone conference use at the Open University of Indonesia is a suitable example [8]. In the modern era, the medium can improve through online meetings, which are available for the teachers and students to see each others' faces. Tencent Meeting, Zoom, ClassIn, and Dingtalk are the most popular in China.

5.2 Phonology

Over half of the students researched could not distinguish different accents, seldom had they learned about phonics and linking. Therefore, future English teaching should pay more focus to phonology.

For example, the phonetics and phonology teaching in Columbia has offered a suitable method of improving students' spelling and listening abilities, merging traditional lectures with multimedia in language labs[9]. The People's Education Press edition of high school English textbooks has already included phonology, while the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press edition, which Harbin high schools currently use, has not paid as much attention to phonetics. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to add phonetic knowledge in vocabulary teaching according to students' learning styles.

5.3 Listening strategies

Most students' listening mostly depends on words, easily affected by unfamiliar words. Usually, guessing happens when students can not catch up with what the material has said. Therefore, teachers should illustrate more on listening strategies to help students improve.

According to Anderson and Lynch¹, there are two major strategies in listening: bottom-up and top-down. In the bottom-up strategy, the listeners rely on the language, the sounds, words, and grammar, while in the top-down strategy, the listeners link the background knowledge to the text [10]. Teachers should familiarize the students with the stresses and rhythm of English so they are not perplexed about the main idea and can better follow the speaker.

5.4 Mentality

Most students agree that listening is essential for English learning, with almost half supporting that listening is very important. However, this attention should not be over-emphasized. Many students feel nervous during English listening. Fortunately, 63% of the students researched can adapt to the shift in exam structure well.

The students' main motivations are interest, practice, and learning objectives. On the teachers' part, intriguing the students' attention is of great importance. Game-based learning is a newly-merged and effective method [11].

5.5 Discussion

Another finding is that the quality of the listening materials significantly impacts students' listening comprehension. In question 34, there were originally six options: A. the learning objective; B. fear of difficulties; C. lack of interest; D. lack of after-class practice; E. lack of emphasis from the outside; and F. others, with a blank to be filled, and one of the blanks said: "the quality of the material is poor." It is an aspect that has not been considered or researched in this article, which requires future investigation and discussion.

6 Conclusion

Many English language programs have ignored listening comprehension. Listening comprehension is a complex process. The strategies of listening comprehension must take effect simultaneously. Students must understand the text as they listen to it, keep the information in memory, combine it with what follows and adjust their comprehension of what they hear through previous knowledge and the following information. Teachers should teach students suitable listening strategies. There is no ideal method that fits all types of English classes. Listening activities should be arranged from basic to more complex as the learners learn English. This article indicated the factors that caused severe problems for learners' listening comprehension and offered helpful suggestions for teachers and students to improve their listening comprehension ability. Hopefully, this study's findings will improve teaching and learning in listening comprehension.

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