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Listening Errors at Chunk Level in The Case of Vietnamese University Learners of English as a Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that error analysis (EA) can be a valuable tool for linguistic scholars to collect useful information on second language (L2) acquisition. In the domain of L2 listening development, identifying patterns of learners' erroneous output allows both teachers and students to have an overview of learners' listening problems. On this premise, remedial actions can be taken for the achievement of effective listening comprehension. Having said that, the goal of this study is to investigate the common types of listening errors made by 12 EFL university students at a private university in Vietnam. Specifically, the study attempts to seek an understanding of how listeners process speech at chunk level and how their listening transcriptions reflect their listening processes. Sixty chunks extracted as a separate clip from 15 dialogues with basic features of the oral language were embedded in listening tasks on a self-access online platform. Error analysis of a total of 720 transcriptions reveals that chunks containing errors occupied 44 percent, suggesting that at the chunk level, students still struggled to construct the meanings of the aural input. Major listening errors identified are related to sound misperception, including confusion, omission, addition, and misformation. The findings of this study stress the significance of respecting learners' meaning-making mechanisms in the listening process by giving listeners more control in accessing listening materials. On top of that, it highlights the priority of listening at the chunk level without contextual clues at the earlier stages of listening, which can be a head start for their listening development. More implications for language teachers and researchers in listening are also discussed.

Keywords: Listening; listening errors; error analysis; chunks; Vietnamese EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

In the domain of language teaching and learning, the importance of listening development has been widely acknowledged in acquiring not only the first language (L1) but also the second language (L2) or foreign languages (Ockey & Wagner, 2018; Vandergrift, 1997; Wolvin, 2010). The main reason is that listening is considered a fundamental skill for facilitating the establishment of other skills. Moreover, according to Renandya and Hu (2018), effective L2 listening is a 21st-century essential language skill for successful communication and mutual understanding. Nonetheless, listening, as described by Field (2009), is a very individual activity and the most internalized process. Field (2009) argues that L2 learners' variations in approaching the challenges of making sense of aural input tend to be overlooked in classroom-based listening environments where teachers mostly play recordings to learners and achieving the right answer is the ultimate goal. For this reason, multiple researchers have reported that L2 learners still encounter various kinds of listening problems (Chao, 2013; Dang et al., 2021; Hasan, 2000; Nguyen & Luu, 2022). In particular, Vietnamese learners were reported to be struggling with listening due to linguistic and psychological factors (Nguyen & Luu, 2022). Given this context, identifying errors made by

listeners can provide insights into their listening difficulties. As James (2013) puts it, the act of making errors is inevitable in any learning process and thus, error identification can be beneficial for both teachers and researchers in terms of portraying the procedures of how language is acquired by looking at learners' strategies employed in their language learning. Based on this understanding, remedial lessons or methods can be designed for helping learners make progress in their language-learning journey.

In communication, spoken input is often separated into chunks by speakers (Wells, 2006). These chunks, which can be a sentence, a clause, or a phrase, are also described as thought groups that reflect the organization of the speakers' thoughts into groups (Gilbert, 2008). This is often reflected in the intonation breaks of the speech stream. In this way, a chunk often signals the syntactic boundaries to make the utterance clearer. As a result, listeners find it easier to process the information. The capacity of chunking speech has been proven to have a positive impact on L2 learners' listening skills by some scholars (Tang, 2013; Thalmann et al., 2019; Xi, 2015; Xu, 2016). These researchers have shown that knowing how to listen in chunks enables listeners to reduce the work load of their limited working memory and deal with aural input instantly in an effective and efficient manner. As a result, it is worth conducting thorough investigations into L2 learners' problems when handling chunk listening.

A growing body of literature has recognized the significance of diagnosing listening errors in building listening skills (e.g. Cho, 2021; Light & Tephens, 2011; Masako, 1984; Sheppard & Butler, 2017; Wong et al., 2021; Yang & Kang, 2020). These studies demonstrate that identifying errors made by learners is a valuable aid to both learners and teachers to have a better understanding of learners' listening problems, particularly the intricate nature of the listening process. Yet, the participants in these prior investigations came from different language backgrounds (e.g. Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) which indicates that the common types of listening errors made by Vietnamese learners remain unclear. What is more, these researchers mainly used dictation texts to collect data. Scant attention has been paid to autonomous listening at the chunk level. Meanwhile, in Vietnam, although many studies have examined learners' errors in various aspects of language skills such as speaking skills (Le et al., 2022), interpretation (Nguyen, 2020), writing skills (Nguyen, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021), and translation (Pham, 2017), there is little published data on listening errors. For these reasons, the current study was carried out to fill this void in literature. Having said that, the primary aim of this research was to explore what kinds of listening errors Vietnamese EFL learners made based on their transcriptions when they listened to recorded audio materials at chunk level. Specifically, the paper seeks to answer the two following research questions:

1. How do listeners process speech at the chunk level?
2. How do students' transcriptions reflect their listening processes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE LISTENING PROCESS

The nature of the listening process has been described as a complex phenomenon involving hundreds of variables (Witkin, 1990). The two prominent models that have received much attention from researchers are bottom-up and top-down processing. Although the ultimate goal of the two models is to construct meanings from the incoming speech, the former relies on the

smallest units of acoustic input whereas the latter tends to depend on prior knowledge (Lynch & Mendelsohn, 2010). Apparently, in bottom-up processing, recognizing sounds has a decisive role while in top-down processing, experience and knowledge are more favorable. The question of which model is superior to the other in the comprehension process is still debatable among many scholars. For instance, Wilson (2003) stresses the primacy of bottom-up processing. He proposes a discovery listening approach that focuses on sound and word recognition. In contrast, Siegel (2015) emphasizes the activation of top-down processing before bottom-up processing to narrow down the selection of possible meanings. He adds that the last phase of comprehension requires both processes for achieving effective listening. Meanwhile, those who support the interactive model contend that sufficient listening needs the integration of both top-down and bottom-up processing (Field, 2004; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Lynch, 2006; Vandergrift, 2011). The dependency on either bottom-up or top-down processing is a matter of choice and this is decided by individual preferences, types of texts, and tasks. In this study, learners were allowed to listen to chunks and were asked to write down what they could hear, which is likely to minimize the use of top-down processing. However, it should be borne in mind that there is no absolute elimination of top-down processing due to listener variations.

ERROR ANALYSIS

Error analysis is described as "the process of determining the incidence, nature, causes, and consequences of unsuccessful language" (James, 2013, p.1). This is a powerful tool for linguistic research to collect information on L2 acquisition and improve teaching approaches. According to Corder (1981), error analysis offers guidance for teachers in taking remedial actions for either learners or teachers themselves. Since errors are evidence of the systems of the language that students have learned at a particular point in their language learning, identifying errors helps teachers reevaluate their teaching methods and provide learners with the right remedial actions to alleviate their problems.

Basically, error analysis consists of five steps: selecting a corpus of language, identifying errors, classifying errors, interpreting errors, and evaluating errors (Corder, 1974, as cited in Lennon, 1991). As regards error classification, according to Richards (1973), interlingual errors and intralingual errors are two main sources of errors. Interlingual errors are triggered by the interference of the learners' native language while the intralingual ones reflect learner's competence at a particular stage regardless of their language backgrounds. He further postulates that overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restriction, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized are the causes of intralingual errors.

Meanwhile, James (2013) lists five common ways that learners tend to modify target forms: omissions, additions, mis-formation, mis-ordering, and blends. He further states that these are just the surface of errors and delves into more specific errors such as pronunciation errors (segmental, combinatorial, suprasegmental), lexical errors (misformations, misselection, distortions), semantic errors in lexis (collocational errors, confusion of sense relations), grammar errors (morphology errors, syntax errors), discourse errors (coherence, pragmatic errors). According to James (2013), these error patterns can be detected in products generated by listening, speaking, or writing. In the domain of listening, he describes these errors as receptive errors, which can be the result of mishearing or misinterpretation.

In the current study, as the classifications of errors can be decided by the perspective taken by the classifier relying on its source, cause, surface structure, or the context (Singleton, 2011),

errors were identified, and codified based on previous research and were also customized to accommodate the nature of listening.

THEORETICAL SUPPORT

CHUNK-AND-PASS PROCESSING

According to Christiansen and Chater (2015), there is a fundamental constraint called the Now-or-Never bottleneck and this is caused by the interference of the limited capacity of human memory and the fleeting nature of linguistic input. That is to say, listeners need to be trained to deal with input instantly otherwise they may be overwhelmed by the subsequent signal. Having said that, in addition to utilizing their existing knowledge to construct meanings, listeners have to learn how to organize input into chunks incrementally. This, as stated by Christiansen and Chater (2015), is the Chunk-and-Pass processing which is essential for learners to master for achieving effective listening comprehension.

INTERLANGUAGE THEORY

Interlanguage is defined as "a linguistic system based on the observable output which results from a learner's attempted production of a target language norm" (Selinker, 1973, p. 35). This system, also known as 'an idiosyncratic dialect', is not the same as those translated from the native language and those naturally produced in the target language (Corder, 1971). The theory proposes that errors are indicators of learners' efforts in formulating and testing a hypothesis regarding the target language. As a result, the erroneous output is a valuable resource for analysis to gain an insightful understanding of learners' strategies to acquire the target language. In this case, identifying their listening errors can provide profound insights into their listening processes.

RELATED STUDIES

Given the significance of error diagnosis in listening development, a plethora of research from different contexts has been carried out to gain a better understanding of the listening process based on the analysis of these errors (e.g. Cho, 2021; Light & Tephens, 2011; Lu, 2020; Masako, 1984; Sheppard & Butler, 2017; Wong et al., 2021; Yang & Kang, 2020; Zhang, 2014). One of the earliest investigations was conducted by Masako (1984) in Japan with 55 sophomores. A passage dictation test was administered to the participants. It was uncovered that these students made errors in most cases of content words. Moreover, the dominant errors were confusion of sounds, omissions, additions of sounds or words, shifting order, and word boundaries. However, Masako (1984) categorized these errors into vowel and consonant types without going further to explain the causes of these errors and it was only concluded that dictation is a valid testing device.

Later on, most of the researchers in this domain utilized dictation as a tool to collect data for error analysis but with diverse listening materials. Some used passages (Cho, 2021; Lu, 2021; Light & Tephens, 2011); some used sentences or chunks (Yang & Kang, 2020; Wong et al., 2021), and some used conversations (Lu, 2021; Sheppard & Butler, 2017). At chunk level, Yang and Kang (2020) allowed 22 Korean university students to complete self-annotated transcription and note down their listening difficulties. The results show that they made the five most common errors: segmentation, substitution, omission, spelling and insertion. The analysis also reveals that

the students resolved their listening problems with a combination of both processing modes: bottom-up and top-down. Likewise, perceptual errors of 60 Hong Kong undergraduate students were diagnosed based on the 'slips of the ear' phenomenon among native speakers in Wong et al. (2021)'s study. Chunks of words were embedded into a Microsoft PowerPoint slide for students to play twice and write down what they could hear. The outcome of the study demonstrates that error patterns fall into 2 categories: phonetic set and lexical-syntactic set. Specifically, vowel and consonant errors, and changes in syllable numbers are the most common in the phonetic set while the lexical-syntactic set contains mainly function word substitution and radical restructuring. Wong et al. (2021) argue that the high frequency of perceptual errors is ascribed to the nature of connected speech.

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

Twenty students (11 females and 9 males) who participated in this study were randomly chosen from one of the two intact classes at a private university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. They were informed about the purpose of the study and signed a consent form. These participants were non-English major sophomores and were taking an English course level 5 in the curriculum which indicates their intermediate proficiency level to some extent. At the end of the course, only 12 transcripts of 12 students (7 females and 5 males) met the requirements for data analysis. The other 8 transcripts contained mostly blank texts or scattered words, which made error analysis impossible.

LISTENING MATERIALS

Sixty chunks were extracted from 15 dialogues as a separate clip in some practice books for the Preliminary English Test, one of the Cambridge English Exams for the B1 level. These situational conversations were chosen because of their authentic-like features and the coverage of daily talks with familiar topics. Most importantly, the level of difficulty is appropriate for the participants. Each clip lasts approximately 5 to 8 seconds and contains 6 to 12 words. These clips were embedded in a web-based listening platform consisting of 15 sessions. Each session includes 4 chunks and takes about 5 minutes to complete.

RESEARCH PROCEDURE

The study was conducted as a listening practice outside the classroom. Participants were instructed to use the listening website before being asked to complete 15 sessions during the course. They were told to practice listening on their own whenever they wished to within two months. Their activities would be recorded and supervised automatically through the online learning management system as a part of their ongoing assessment. The frequency of listening to each chunk was 20 times, 10 repetitions of the speech filtered at low-pass frequencies, and 10 repetitions of the normal version. In this way, participants were familiarized with the melody of the utterance first before they paid attention to the content of the audio. After that, they wrote down what they could hear. Once they have submitted it, the script was given for them to compare it with their answer before

they played the next audio. At the end of the course, as 12 transcriptions of 12 participants were appropriate for analysis, in total, there were 720 chunks in which each participant completed 60 chunks.

DATA ANALYSIS

Steps in analyzing errors were adopted from Corder (1981). First, students' listening transcripts were collected and assigned to two raters. Second, the raters, who were two experts in the field, worked separately, and compared students' transcripts with the original texts to identify errors. Third, these errors were put into categories based on prior research reviewed in the literature that characterized the listening process and mainly influenced the listener's interpretation of the input. As illustrated in Table 1, these features are 'confusion', 'addition', 'omission', 'misused forms', 'improvised words', 'disordering', and 'misspellings'. Then, the two raters met and reached the final agreement on the classification. Finally, interpretations and evaluations of these errors were proposed on the premise of related theories and prior research to find out the right remedial approach for helping students overcome their problems.

TABLE 1. Examples of each error type

Error type	Examples
Confusion	*Stone* for *storm; podcast* for *postcard; show me for shall we*
Addition	Why not get her some of (*the*) local perfume?
	But suitcases are so heavy (*have*) to carry
Omission	I (*suppose*) flowers are best
	What about a view of the beach (*in town*) instead?
Misused forms	*Lesson* for *lessons*; *could* for *can*; *had* for *has*; *bought* for *'s bought*
Improvised words	I *try put once instead of* I didn't like it (Correct one: I *tried waterskiing* but I didn't like it)
Disordering	*I'd to like* for *I'd like to*; *is there* for *there is*; *forget mum to send* for *forget to send mum*
Misspellings	*Intersting* for *interesting*; *beginer* for *beginners*; *traverling* for *travelling*

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Data analysis shows that in total, there were 406 non-error chunks (56%) and 314 chunks containing errors (44%). As displayed in Figure 1, the largest portion of identified errors (38%) represents 'confusion', whereas the smallest (1%) undoubtedly is 'disordering'. Less than a third of errors are 'omission', followed by 'addition' with 16 %. Other types of errors including 'misused forms', 'misspellings', and 'improvised words' account for 7%, 4%, and 3% respectively. The error classification was made to have a clear pattern of how listeners process chunks. Yet, they are quite overlapping and interconnected. As misspellings, improvised words, and disordering only occupy a small fraction of identified errors which can be considered local errors in this case (Touchie, 1986), no interpretations will be given.

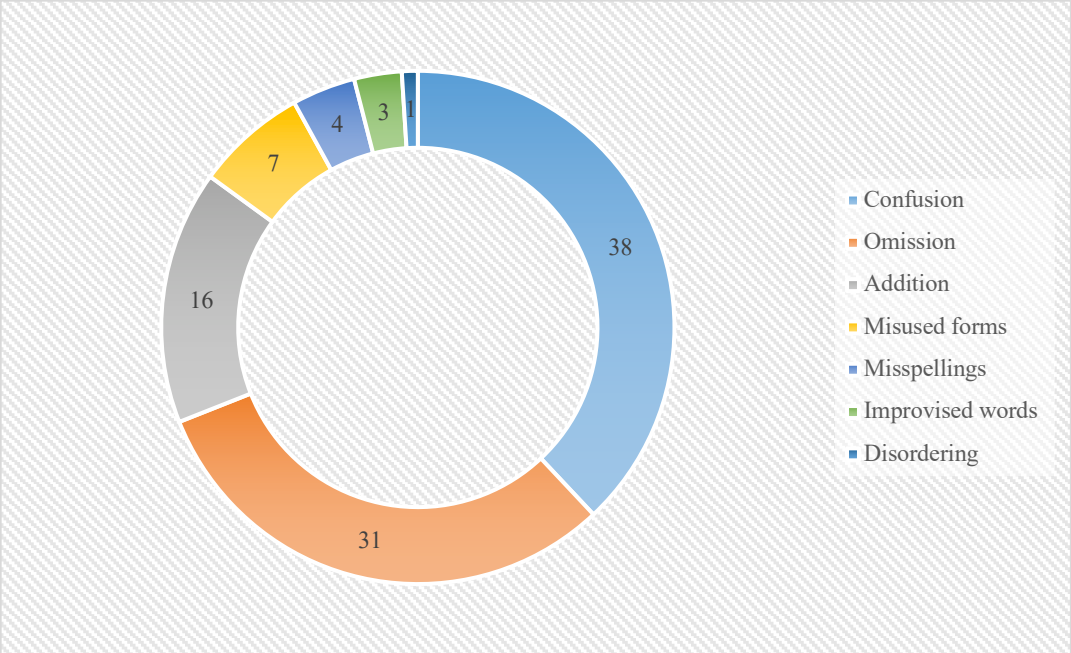

FIGURE 1. Common identified errors made by learners listening to chunks

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: HOW DO STUDENTS PROCESS SPEECH AT THE CHUNK LEVEL?

The fact that the percentage of non-error chunks is higher than that of error chunks suggests that the majority of the students could construct the meanings when they listened to chunks with high frequency. The results are inconsistent with what Lu (2020) discovered in her investigation into Chinese learners' errors. This discrepancy can be mainly attributed to the prosodic features with which students were familiarized prior to the normal speech. The indication is that sensitization to the rhythm of speech has a part to play in assisting students in achieving effective comprehension at the chunk level. However, in a general sense, they still found it quite challenging to perceive the sounds at the chunk level. This finding is in line with the study by Hio (1983) and Zhang (2014) suggesting that misperception of sounds was the most noticeable error pattern among learners. In other words, listeners often have trouble decoding the sounds due to the fleeting feature of the input worsened by the limited capacity of human memory (Christiansen & Chater, 2015). The confusion caused by blurry boundaries between words in the speech stream can lead to a wrong interpretation and omitting/adding the sounds to provide a reasonable output, which accounts for a large portion of errors observed in this research. The length of the chunk also plays a vital role in the student's success in comprehension. Listeners should be exposed to short chunks at the earlier stages until they know how to allocate their attentional resources while listening.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: HOW DO STUDENTS' TRANSCRIPTIONS REFLECT THEIR LISTENING PROCESSES?

The examination of students' transcriptions reveals some indications of the listening process of students. The overview of the error pattern, which includes 'confusion', 'omission', 'addition', and 'misused forms' shows that errors made are primarily related to perception, which is in line with the findings in Wong at al. (2021)'s investigation. They claimed that connected speech was

the chief impediment causing these perceptual errors. However, their conclusions were based on the errors made by native speakers, which may be only applied to L2 learners with a high level of proficiency. In the current research, students listened to the chunks more than twice but still could not figure out their meanings. Regardless of the processing level, the variabilities of spoken speech seem to be the major hindrance for L2 students to interpret the aural signal.

TABLE 2. Examples of errors with single words and word sequences

SINGLE WORDS	**EXAMPLE**	**Occurrences**
One-syllable word = One-syllable word	*Stone (storm)* *If (of)* *Say (send)*	203 (45.7%)
Multi-syllable word= Multi-syllable word	*Vision (exhibition)* *Picked (biscuit)* *Weather (ladder)*	123 (27.7%)
WORD SEQUENCES (WS)		
Multi-syllable word= word sequence	*Adult (of those)* *Resource (with short)* *Stuffing (stuff in)*	34 (7.7%)
Word sequence = multi-syllable word	*Back him (perfume)* *Bus station (exhibition)* *Go skiing (going)*	20 (4.5%)
Word sequence = word sequence	*Want to skin (water skiing)* *We so ugly (with short sleeves)* *Where come a (walk on the)*	64 (14.4%)

The most frequent error that occurred was confusion of sounds categorized into two types: single words and word sequences (Table 2). Single words which were mistaken for other words that have similar sounds falling into consonants, vowels or a mixture of both occupy nearly half of the confusion errors. In this regard, for one-syllable words that were identified as other one-syllable words that have near sound (*stone* for *storm*, *if* for *of*, *say* for *send*), the frequency of errors is the highest. This can be explained by the activation of phantom words in the case of L2 listening which was proposed by Broersma and Cutler (2008). They argue that sequences of sounds in spoken input activate more near-words that differ from real words in a word-final phonological feature and vowels. The more similar words a listener knows, the more they will constrain how any given word should be realized in the speech stream. Another scenario is that of multiple-syllable words (*vision* for *exhibition*, *picked* for *biscuit*, *weather* for *ladder*) that were decoded with substitution of other multiple-syllable words, the occurrences were in the second rank with about 28%. As multiple-syllable words themselves contain unstressed and stressed syllables embedded in a rhythm of a chunk, this causes uncertainty for listeners to identify the words, especially for those who do not have sufficient exposure to authentic listening materials and subsequently mispronounced the words, resulting in their failure of word recognition.

Regarding word sequences, problems occur in three circumstances: mistaking multiple-syllable words for word sequences (*adult* for *of those*, *resource* for *with short*, *stuffing* for *stuff in*), word sequence for multi-syllable word (*back him* for *perfume*, *bus station* for *exhibition*, *go skiing* for *going*), and word sequence for word sequence (*want to skin* for *water-skiing*, *we so ugly* for *with short sleeves*, *when some a* for *walk on the*). Possible interpretations for these errors might be due to students' problems with word segmentation. The findings echo the discovery of Sheppard and Butler (2017). They stated that L2 listeners have difficulties locating the beginnings and endings of words, which is often generated by a lack of vocabulary knowledge in both receptive and phonological forms. Apparently, this has to do with the conventional listening teaching

approaches in Vietnamese contexts in which students are primarily exposed to exam-focused and product-oriented approaches. Such a learning environment seems to neglect the process of listening and focus more on the product of listening.

Other errors committed by omitting or adding words in this study show that content words (64%) occupied more percentage than function words (36%). This corroborates the findings of Cho (2021) demonstrating that students found it more challenging to perceive function words. This is understandable because they are mainly weak or unstressed syllables. As a result, students invented more function words than content words. What's more, misused form errors are basically subject to inflectional morphemes like tenses (*have* for *had*, *try* for *tried*), and plurals (*book* for *books*, *get* for *gets*). These inflectional morphemes are supposed to be triggered by inadequate knowledge of grammatical rules (Masako, 1984; Yang & Kang, 2020); yet at the sound level, they are considered phonological errors.

All in all, the results suggest that for Vietnamese EFL learners, aural misperception due to word boundaries is the basic root for their listening errors which are 'confusion', 'omission', 'addition', and 'misformation'. The analysis of their transcriptions also shows that students have a tendency to construct meanings based on their individual prior linguistic experiences. These findings have significant implications for listening practices and teaching.

CONCLUSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The main goal of the current study was to examine the common types of errors made by Vietnamese EFL learners when they listen to audio-recorded materials. The most obvious findings to emerge from this study were confusion, omission, addition, and misused forms. These error patterns suggest that the main problem with Vietnamese EFL students' listening at the chunk level was misperception. Our results confirm the outcome of previous studies conducted with other participants in other EFL contexts like China, Korea, and Japan (Cho, 2021; Lu, 2020; Wong et al., 2021; Yang & Kang, 2020). Overall, this study strengthens the idea that connected speech in spoken language whether at the chunk level or not is still a formidable barrier to achieving aural comprehension. The research has also shown that students' linguistic knowledge and experience play a prominent role in their meaning-making mechanisms during listening.

The findings of this study have a number of practical implications. First, these results suggest a vital role for error identification in understanding the listening process as well as helping teachers diagnose students' listening problems in the comprehension process at the chunk level. The insights gained from this research may be of assistance to language teachers in terms of rethinking their teaching approach to listening. When designing the listening tasks, teachers should consider respecting learners' unique mechanisms in constructing meanings (Lian & Sussex, 2018; Luu et al., 2021). Specifically, the listening activities with chunks embedded on a self-access web-based platform proposed in this study can be implemented to maximize students' choices and minimize teachers' burden in play and click tasks. In the earlier stages of listening, familiarizing students with chunks can be a head start for them due to their inability to allocate attentional resources. In this way, chunk listening also keeps their resort to top-down processing to a minimum and directs their attention to decoding the sound as a group of thoughts. Gradually, students become sensitized to the speech stream and can move to a more complicated level of listening with contextual clues. What is more, with a data bank of learners' errors, teachers can create specific listening remedial practices for them to overcome these hurdles for achieving better listening

comprehension. Second, the current data can be valuable sources for learners to be fully aware of their own listening problems. Informed about these errors, students acknowledge their weaknesses and opt for the appropriate way to deal with these errors. Most importantly, their attention will be drawn to the importance of massive exposure to authentic speech if they wish to improve their listening. Last but not least, as this study has raised important questions about the nature of the listening process, a one-size-fits-all approach would be ineffective. Consequently, during their experimentation, language researchers can use interventions that prioritize each learner' listening process and target perceptual problems.

Though the study shed more light on understanding the listening process of Vietnamese EFL learners, this analysis was mainly based on their erroneous output. More work using the interview as a research instrument is needed to collect the underlying causes of these errors from students' perspectives. Another issue that was not addressed in this study was how individual learners differ in making errors, which would be a fruitful area for further research.

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