

**Business English Students' Perceptions towards Collaborative Listening**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this research study was to examine the perceptions of EFL Business English students towards collaborative English listening in Listening and Speaking course in an international university in Thailand. Sixty-three undergraduate students participated in the survey research utilizing questionnaires for data collection. Teacher's observation was also conducted for more insightful analysis. The findings revealed that the students' perceptions

towards the usefulness of collaborative listening were at a high level, which benefited them academically and socially. Not only did collaborative listening yield better results than listening individually, but also helped promote their interactions which resulted in more motivation in learning. Apart from providing an insight into students' perceptions towards collaborative listening, the findings concluded with pedagogical implications for EFL teachers to integrate more of collaborative listening approach into their instruction to promote interaction among students especially during this time of pandemic where online classes are being conducted widely.

**Keywords:** English as foreign language, English listening skill, collaborative listening, perception

## **Introduction**

Listening is considered a fundamental skill in language acquisition (Rost, 2011). Several studies indicate that listening comprehension skills in EFL settings play a significant role in increasing the ability of language learners (Brown, 2006; Kurita, 2012; Vandergrift, 2004). However, most language learners perceive listening as the most difficult subject which requires them to understand the speaker's accent, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary delivered in uncontrolled speed (Havid, 2015). In such context of studying English as a second or foreign language, learners face difficulties in mastering their English listening skill (Bei & Xinguang, 2017). Paranapiti (2018)'s study pointed out that there was a similar challenge faced by ESL/EFL learners in Thailand towards English listening skill mastering which could result from inadequate research and ineffective instructions of English listening; therefore, more attentions and research to cope with such obstacles is necessary. Based on the researchers' experiences in teaching English listening skills in an international university in Thailand, classes normally consist of high and low English proficient students. Each student has a different background and possesses different levels of English listening comprehension

ability. Weak students who lack background knowledge related to topics being listened do not even know what they are listening to. Sometimes, they do not understand the meaning of some words used by the speakers and cannot get general ideas. As a result, weak students are not likely to participate in class since they have no idea what the speaker is talking about. In response to these problems, group work or collaborative learning can be one pedagogical approach which facilitates students to share, discuss, or exchange information and knowledge during their listening comprehension process.

Gokhale (1995) defines collaborative learning as “an instruction method in which students at various performance levels work together in small groups towards a common goal. The students are responsible for one another’s learning as well as their own. Thus, the success of one student helps other students to be successful” (p. 22). Several researchers who are in favor of collaborative learning claim that “the active exchange of ideas within small groups not only increases interest among the participants but also promotes critical thinking” (p. 22). Remedios, Clarke, and Hawthorne (2008) state that collaborative learning which is aimed for the purpose of achieving an academic goal has been proved to be useful for students to share their knowledge. By allowing students to listen collaboratively in groups, they can complement each other’s strengths and weaknesses since they need to contribute to the group while at the same time, learn from the contribution of others (Havid, 2015). As a result, weak or shy students who do not like to participate in a large class are more comfortable sharing their ideas in smaller groups. Likewise, more proficient students would feel positive from helping their weaker classmates.

Collaborative listening can help students increase their English listening comprehension ability (Abdulkadir, 2017; Havid, 2015; Patrisius, 2006). However, whether the students acknowledge the benefits and values of collaborative listening is still questionable. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to examine the students’ perceptions

towards collaborative listening in classrooms. It is expected that the paper can provide more evidence for the benefits and values of collaborative listening from the students' point of view in particular.

## **Literature Review**

### ***The Importance of Listening Comprehension Ability***

Listening comprehension is considered a necessary skill in second-language instruction because it is the fundamental basis for developing any language (Rost, 2002). According to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory, language input is the most essential element in language acquisition (Krashen, 1985). Rost (1994) also agrees that listening comprehension is very essential because it is a process through which learners get input. Without understanding input at the right level, any learning simply does not occur. Buck (2001) points out that listening is the natural process of humans in acquiring a new language. Emphasizing the importance of listening in language learning, Peterson (2001) mentions that "... through listening, learners can build an awareness of the inter-workings of language systems at various levels and thus establish a base for more fluent productive skills" (p. 87).

Generally, the listening comprehension involves top-down and bottom-up processes which are mostly mentioned when browsing through literature (Berne, 2004; Rost, 2002). Top-down processing is the use of learners' background or previous knowledge and experiences to understand the information. On the other hand, bottom-up processing refers to the process of "using the information we have about sounds, word meanings, and discourse markers like first, then and after that to assemble our understanding of what we read or hear one step at a time" (Brown, 2006, p. 2). In other words, learners hear the words and combine them together to understand the whole message they hear.

To summarize, listening is a vital skill necessary for language learning since learners receive information and gain insights through their listening ability (Wallace, Stariha & Walberg, 2004). To understand the incoming information, two distinct processes known as top-down processing and bottom-up processing must take place simultaneously in listening comprehension.

### ***Collaborative Learning***

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, collaborative learning has been part of the language learning domain which promotes the quality of learning by having learners work in small groups or in pairs (Fitzgibbon, 2001). Collaboration involves sharing ideas, cooperating with team members, and working on the same project. If students learn collaboratively, they will experience a lively and successful learning process and teachers can produce students with strong academic performance (Brown, 2006). Moreilon (2007) states that collaboration or collaborative learning allows students to discuss, exchange, and share information or ideas with one another when working together. The students benefit from being exposed to diverse viewpoints from various people who have different backgrounds as they listen to different perspectives. This is in line with the results of a study conducted by Afsaneh, Rokhsare, and Afsar (2021) who explored the impact of collaborative listening to podcasts on high school learners' listening comprehension and vocabulary learning. Forty-eight Iranian learners of English were divided into two experimental groups and a control group. Results show that the experimental groups significantly outperformed the control group on listening comprehension and vocabulary tests. Learners also had a positive perception towards podcasts and collaborative listening. In addition, Nayan, Shafie, Mansor, Maesin, and Osman (2010) pointed out that students can better understand certain concepts or retain knowledge in their long-term memory through collaborative learning practice. Similarly, a study conducted by Havid (2015) concluded that teaching listening should be conducted through collaborative

work which helped to improve students' listening comprehension. Students were likely to have more focus and eagerness in listening to the given materials.

In this study, the usefulness of collaborative listening can be categorized into academic and social benefits as follows:

**Academic Benefits.** In terms of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), learners can significantly benefit from collaborative learning. First, it creates authenticity for real-world communications. Kukulska-Hulme and Viberg (2018) point out that learning collaboration through online learning mode increases authenticity in communication by providing learners with the real-world-like communication opportunities, supporting the learners to effectively access the language input and to learn and share their language output through discussing among team members. Second, it promotes negotiation of meanings which yields positive results in language learning. Based on the cognitivists and interactionists, under the concept of Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996), language learning collaboration provides learners with more opportunities for more comprehensible input through adjusted interactions including negotiating for meanings, elaborating, and noticing errors via corrective feedbacks. This helps them learn better and be able to acquire the language more effectively. Last, it creates social interaction for cognitive development. Through the sociocultural perspective, language learning collaboration promotes social interaction significant to knowledge construction and development of the learners (Kukulska-Hulme & Viberg, 2018). In Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, learners' team members who are more proficient play a key role as the peer tutor supporting and enhancing their team members' language learning via feedback, corrections, suggestions, and discussions in their groups (Margolis, 2020; McLeod, 2020). Besides, Joyce and Weil (2003) stated that such active interaction promotes both cognitive and social complexity necessary to the learners' knowledge development.

**Social Benefits.** Learning collaboration also yields several significant social benefits to the learners. First, it promotes enjoyment in learning (Kukulska-Hulme & Viberg, 2018). Second, it increases learners' self-confidence in learning (Berns, Isla-Montes, Palomo-Duarte, & Doderio, 2016; Hwang, Chen, Shadiey, Huang, & Chen, 2014; Kukulska-Hulme & Viberg, 2018; Tai, 2012). The collaborative learning activities can help the students with more English proficiency feel more self-confident when being able to help their weaker team members whereas students with lower English proficiency will not suffer from embarrassments as they are secured by their other team members in language learning collaboration. Third, it increases learners' self-esteem in learning. While the learners are working together in groups, not only do they feel proud of themselves for being able to help others, but they also feel that their friends respect and care for them. Such feelings increase the learners' self-esteem which is one of the factors that can enhance their successful learning (Joyce & Weil, 2003). Fourth, it increases motivation in learning since the interactive, collaborative, and friendly learning environment promotes positive feelings from learning (Joyce & Weil, 2003). Fifth, it promotes friendship and trust in learning. Such collaboration allows learners to build friendship and trust among friends as it offers more opportunities for giving and receiving helping hands during their collaborative learning engagement, decreasing the feeling of being lonely in learning (Joyce & Weil, 2003). Last, it enhances social skills. Learning collaboration also strengthens learners' social skills since they are required to work together to complete the assigned tasks. This enhances their cooperative capacity and social skills while learning (Joyce & Weil, 2003).

### ***Challenges in Collaborative Learning***

Implementing collaborative learning in English instructions may face some problems. Saito, Takahashi, Wintachai, and Anunthavorasakul (2021) critically discussed three key possible factors obstructing collaborative learning in the classrooms in many Southeast Asian

countries. The first one was from the students' hesitation to ask questions during group collaboration due to their lack of new knowledge learning recognition and psychological impacts. The other two were from teacher's inadequate experience to find challenging collaborative learning tasks; and their inadequate ability to observe and reflect while conducting collaborative learning activities. As a result, awareness on such challenges were raised so that the students' needs should be carefully observed to create effective collaborative learning activities.

Moreover, in the context of ESL/EFL collaborative learning, cultural factor could be another challenge for students to culturally adjust themselves to collaborative learning in their classroom. There could be some conflicts between the traditional teacher-centered and student-centered learning styles that the students had experienced (Liang, Mohan, & Early, 1998; Sunasuan & Songserm, 2021). A study conducted by Shafie, Maesin, Osman, Nayan, and Mansor (2010) also argued that collaborative learning could cause learning stress and ineffectiveness in new knowledge acquisition for students with low language proficiency and poor social skills. Therefore, to lessen the elaborated challenges, student-centered learning style should be employed for collaborative learning and teaching.

Despite several academic and social benefits from the collaborative learning enumerated above, not too many research studies have been conducted around collaborative listening particularly from the students' viewpoints. This paper, therefore, aims to examine the students' perceptions towards collaborative listening in the classroom with the following research question: what are the students' perceptions towards collaborative listening in the classroom?



## **Research Methodology**

### ***Context and Participants***

This study was virtually conducted with undergraduate students who enrolled the course EN2230 Listening and Speaking, the major required course of Business English (BE) Department at an international university in Thailand in the academic year 2/2021. According to the curriculum, this listening course was offered to the second-year students as a preparation course which would pave a way to other major required courses. Thus, it did not emphasize as much on productive skills as in other typical conversation courses. Students were required to attend a 90-minute class twice a week for the duration of 15 weeks or 45 hours in total. For the participants' demographic details, they consisted of 63 male and female students. The majority of the participants were Thai (79.4%) while others were non-Thai which included Chinese and Korean. 63.5% of the participants aged between 18 to 20 years. Although EN2230 is the major required course of BE, 9.5% of the participants were students from other faculties who took this course as their free elective. To be eligible to take EN2230, students must have passed the Basic English courses, English I, English II, and English III or they must have taken IELTS or TOEFL exams with the minimum scores of 6 or 500, respectively. It can then be concluded that the participants' English proficiency was at intermediate level.

### ***Instrumentation***

Adapted from the questionnaires by Er and Aksu (2014), Hung and Long (2019), and Joyce and Weil (2003), which were on cooperative and collaborative learning, the questionnaire used in this study contained 20 items where the students were asked to rate their levels of agreement, using the 5-point Likert scale, on the academic benefits and social benefits of the collaborative listening approach. Cronbach's Alpha was employed to gauge

the internal consistency of the items in the instrument. For the overall reliability, the Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.97 ( $\alpha = 0.97$ ). The result indicated the excellent internal consistency of this modified questionnaire.

Apart from the use of questionnaire, teacher's observation in the form of non-participant observer was employed as an additional instrument for more insightful analysis.

### ***Procedures***

Adapted from Gokhale (1995), the research procedures of this study which enabled students to be aware of the benefits and values of collaborative learning were as follows.

1. Students were divided into small groups of three to five. No selection process nor specific criteria were established for grouping the students.
2. Students were asked to listen to the audio text based on the lecture on the environment topic. The listening worksheet was divided into two parts. Both parts required the students to complete the notes with details they heard from the audio text (See Appendix A for the listening worksheet). For the first time of listening, each student took notes and completed their listening worksheets by themselves.
3. The audio text was played again. After the second time of listening, students shared or compared their notes and information they got from the audio text as well as their answers with their group members. At this stage, students also discussed with their group members how they reached the correct response to each question.
4. The audio text was played again for the third time to let students verify their answers under the guidance of the instructor.
5. Each group discussed how collaborative listening helped students to understand the audio text with more accuracy and efficiency.

6. At the end of the session, the questionnaire to examine the students' perceptions towards collaborative listening in classrooms was distributed to all students with sufficient explanation by the teacher.

It should be noted that during the collaborative listening activity, the students were grouped and assigned to their breakout rooms, a feature on MS Teams where students were split into multiple online rooms for discussion and collaboration. The discussion was recorded so that the teacher could check and observe students' participation and contribution later.

## **Results**

The mean scores and SD were applied in calculating the students' perceptions towards the benefits of collaborative listening in the classroom. The findings are demonstrated in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Levels of Agreement towards the Benefits of Collaborative Listening*

Items	Mean	SD
<i>Academic Benefits</i>		
1. Group listening enhanced learning and collaborative skills.	4.35	0.68
2. Group listening offered better results than listening individually.	4.43	0.67
3. Group listening is essential in the classroom.	4.16	0.85
4. Group listening helped me to understand listening texts in the classroom better.	4.32	0.80
5. Group listening helped me to gain useful and helpful feedback for effective listening from other team members.	4.43	0.76
6. Group listening allowed me to exchange knowledge and information from the listening texts with other team members.	4.48	0.69
7. Group listening enabled me to complete listening exercises in a shorter period of time in the classroom.	4.35	0.79

Items	Mean	SD
8. Group listening enabled me to answer listening exercises with more accuracy in the classroom.	4.35	0.81
9. Group listening helped to promote my cognitive thinking.	4.21	0.86
10. Overall, group listening helped to improve my listening comprehension ability.	4.35	0.77
Academic Benefit Average	4.34	0.77
<i>Social Benefits</i>		
11. Group listening is more enjoyable than individual listening.	4.21	0.86
12. Group listening allowed me and team members to guide each other in our learning.	4.30	0.80
13. Group listening allowed me and team members to help each other in our learning.	4.49	0.78
14. Group listening helped me to develop trust towards the team members.	4.30	0.85
15. Group listening provided a positive learning environment.	4.29	0.75
16. Group listening developed positive relationship among team members.	4.30	0.85
17. Group listening reduced alienation and loneliness.	4.25	0.84
18. Group listening allowed team members to be respectful towards each other's ideas	4.38	0.75
19. Group listening increased my motivation in learning.	4.41	0.75
20. Overall, group listening enhanced interaction among team members.	4.48	0.74
Social Benefit Average	4.34	0.80
Overall Average	4.34	0.78

The above statements were divided into two domains: academic benefits and social benefits. To analyze the data, the interpretations of the means are as follows:

$\bar{x} = 4.21 - 5.00$  means Very high degree

$\bar{x} = 3.41 - 4.20$  means High degree

$\bar{x} = 2.61 - 3.40$  means Moderate degree

$\bar{x} = 1.81 - 2.60$  means Low degree

$\bar{x} = 1.00 - 1.80$  means Very low degree

On average, the students' perceptions towards the usefulness of collaborative listening in terms of academic benefits were at a high level ( $\bar{x} = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ). Similarly, the students reported having a high level of agreement towards the benefits of collaborative listening in terms of social benefits ( $\bar{x} = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ).

Apart from the mean scores of each domain, it is worthwhile exploring the mean scores of each item to gain some interesting information. Regarding the academic benefits, the highest mean score was recorded in Item 6 ( $\bar{x} = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ), followed by Items 2 and 5 ( $\bar{x} = 4.43$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ), ( $\bar{x} = 4.43$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ) respectively, showing that students all agreed with the positive impacts resulting from collaborative listening in the classroom. For social benefits, Item 13 earned the highest mean score ( $\bar{x} = 4.49$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ), followed by Items 20 and 19 ( $\bar{x} = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ), ( $\bar{x} = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) respectively, signaling that the use of collaborative listening in the classroom was acknowledged and deemed as useful among the students.

However, in the academic domain regarding the listening collaboration as being essential in the classroom, Item 3 earned the lowest mean score ( $\bar{x} = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ). It can be assumed that online teaching and learning affected the students' perception towards collaborative listening. Since the students did not have face-to-face interaction, they might not regard the collaborative listening as important as it actually was.

Moreover, from the teacher's observation, the teacher noticed that some students read through their listening worksheets while the others started to look up the meanings of unknown words from their mobile phones. It was apparent that the students divided their responsibilities to achieve the task at hand. During the while-listening stage, the students

remained quiet as they concentrated on the audio text. After the first time of listening, the teacher noticed that some students were not able to complete their listening worksheets on their own. However, during the second time of listening, they wrote down something on their notes. After that, they turned to their group members and started to discuss and share what they got for accurate understanding. At the end of the class, every group was able to submit the listening worksheets on time.

## **Discussion**

Since the questionnaire covered the academic benefits and social benefits of collaborative listening, the respective results are presented as follows:

### ***Academic Benefits***

The analyzed data from the questionnaire highlighted the positive impact of collaborative listening as it came with significant academic benefits. It can be clearly seen that collaborative listening emphasized student-student interaction where students can produce scaffolding to other peers to understand the listening text better. This corresponds to Lantolf (2000) who supports learning through peer interaction. He states that learning does not occur only through support from experts but also from their peers whose language proficiency is higher. In addition, language learning can be scaffolded through interaction among students even if their language proficiency is not high.

Particularly, on the aspect of negotiation of meanings, the students strongly agreed that collaborative listening increased opportunities for peer feedback which are useful and helpful for enhancing listening comprehension. This finding echoes a previous study by Long (1996) which reported that through meaning negotiation, elaboration and feedback, input was modified and made more comprehensible for effective listening and understanding. Furthermore, with regard to the social interaction for cognitive development, the students

strongly agreed that the collaborative listening approach allowed them to share knowledge and information for effective listening. In other words, shared learning became apparent. This substantiates the concept of co-constructive cognitive development through social interactions (Kukulska-Hulme & Viberg, 2018; Margolis, 2020; McLeod, 2020) in that the students with higher English proficiency and more background knowledge can help the weaker students acquire new knowledge more effectively through learning collaboration. Therefore, it can be assumed that collaborative listening may be more effective than listening alone.

### ***Social Benefits***

Based on the social perspectives, the students highly agreed that collaborative listening helped promote motivation, build friendship and trust, and improve their social skills. Obviously, these positive impacts are the key social benefits of learning collaboration and social learning which emphasize that relationship and feeling of trust can be strengthened when students help and support one another. When students learn to accept and respect different viewpoints from others, it establishes good relationships among students in the groups (Utley, 2001).

Besides, the teacher's observation confirmed that collaborative listening led to a pleasant learning environment. Through collaborative learning, they felt positive and motivated to participate and learn. Additionally, the finding also shows that working together promoted the feeling of being respected and cared for by their peers. As a result, such a feeling can increase the learners' self-esteem which in turn promotes effective listening and enhances listening comprehension (Joyce & Weil, 2003).

To sum up, it can be seen clearly that collaborative listening is useful and effective in enhancing listening skill and listening comprehension. Not only did it provide students with

more inputs to better their performance, but it also enabled them to be critical in the sense that they could learn to justify their ideas while at the same time be open-minded and receptive to different ideas or perspectives (Jirasataporn, 2018).

### **Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Further Research**

This present study did not investigate the students' achievement of their English listening skill. Therefore, further research should be conducted with the use of experimental and control groups where students' listening performance is compared against each other to measure the actual difference as well as to rule out any factors which may influence the results of the experiment. Audio texts on different contexts such as daily life or business contexts should also be incorporated into the listening activities to examine whether the different contexts affect their listening comprehension. Further study with more classes devoting to collaborative listening activities needs to be undertaken to confirm the benefits of collaborative listening.

Additionally, since this study was conducted with 63 undergraduate students at an international university in Thailand whose English proficiency was at intermediate level, a replication of this study should be conducted with non-English major Thai EFL undergraduate students at other universities to compare and contrast as well as to strengthen the reliability of the current study's findings.

### **Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications**

Through the discussions on the academic and social perspectives, the present study clearly showed that the students were aware of the academic and social benefits derived from collaborative listening approach. During the collaborative listening process, students were engaged in group work where they learned from one another which yielded better results than individual listening. According to Vygotsky (1978), group work is considered useful in



promoting students' higher-order thinking while Ellis (2003) believes that group work helps enhance language development through interactions with others. Especially, as pointed out earlier, it is found helpful and useful especially for students with lower English proficiency. Not only does collaborative listening offer better results than listening individually, but it can improve their self-confidence, self-esteem, as well as increase motivation in learning, all of which are regarded as the crucial factors affecting their learning development. Through such learning collaboration, students can be provided with more opportunities for their social skill development which is necessary for their career and future. Therefore, given the apparent benefits, the pedagogical implication of this study is that teachers of English listening should incorporate more of collaborative listening approach into their instruction as part of listening activities in the classroom so that students can share ideas, exchange information, seek more clarification, or even gain more useful suggestions on how to have a better understanding of the listening content to improve their students' listening comprehension ability. Moreover, a collaborative listening approach should be employed to promote interaction among the students especially during this time of pandemic where online classes are being conducted widely resulting in students' feelings of isolation due to less interaction with peers/classmates as compared to on-site classrooms.

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