The Effectiveness of a Top-Down Approach within a Blended Learning Environment for Enhancing Listening Skills of Students Learning English as a Foreign Language at Nguyen Tat Thanh University

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Abstract

This study examined the effectiveness of the top-down approach in a blended learning environment with an aim of improving EFL students' listening skills at Nguyen Tat Thanh University. A quasi-experimental design was conducted with 302 non-English major students at the B1 level, assigned to either an experimental or control group. The experimental group received top-down listening instruction focusing on prediction, activation of background knowledge, and gist comprehension. Quantitative data from midterm listening scores on the Richmond LMS were analyzed using independent samples *t*-tests, revealing a significant improvement of nearly 20 % in the experimental group, with a large effect size (Cohen's $d \approx 0.82$). A survey with a 15-item Likert-scale questionnaire and open-ended questions was employed to examine learning perceptions, analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The findings indicated that the top-down approach enhanced listening performance and promoted more positive learner perceptions, offering practical implications for EFL listening instruction.

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Keywords

Top-down approach; blended learning; listening skills; EFL students.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

Top-down listening approaches have gained attention for their focus on activating learners' prior knowledge, encouraging prediction, and promoting global understanding of meaning. In Viet Nam, most learners did not frequently employ the top-down approach in combination with the bottom-up approach, the most frequently used one [1]. Learners applied this to compensate for limitations in vocabulary or speech rate. Nevertheless, learners expressed the need for additional guidance in effectively applying this approach [2].

1.2 Rationale to the study

At Nguyen Tat Thanh University (NTTU), where General English courses offer physical classes and online learning via the Richmond Learning Management System (LMS), there is a high demand to integrate more effective listening teaching methods. A top-down listening approach has been suggested as a promising alternative [3]. However, its effectiveness within a blended learning context in the Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting remains underexplored. Hence, this study aims to evaluate whether implementing a structured top-down approach can enhance students' listening performance and create more positive learning experiences at the university.

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1.3 Definitions of key terms

Listening is regarded as obtaining comprehension as its primary purpose. Comprehension is linked specifically to semantic, meaning-oriented processing, which originates in the listener' memory and background knowledge. This is considered as top-down processing, distinguishing it from bottom-up one, which instead originates in the linguistic features of the speech signal itself including sounds, words, syntax [4]. Listening is a dynamic, multi-layered cognitive process involving simultaneous levels of processing, from sound perception and word recognition to discourse-level meaning construction [4]. Building on this distinction, pedagogical approaches have been developed to deliberately strengthen learners' top-down processing during listening tasks.

The top-down approach is a comprehension strategy in which learners use prior knowledge, contextual cues, and discourse-level understanding to interpret spoken input before attending to individual words or sounds [3]. By allowing students to discuss and preview thematic content before listening, this approach reduced cognitive overload and alleviated anxiety during listening tasks. The concept of the psycholinguistic guessing game also supported that reading and listening were not linear processes in which learners decoded language word by word [5]. Instead, learners relied on their prior knowledge, contextual cues, and existing experiences to predict meaning.

Blended learning combines face-to-face classroom instruction with online learning activities, thereby offering learners greater flexibility and access to diverse learning resources [6]. In this study, this environment encompasses both offline lessons and online practice and assessment through the Richmond LMS. Top-down strategies delivered via a LMS significantly reduced cognitive overload and improved learners' comprehension scores, showing that explicit pre-listening activities helped lower anxiety and enhanced higher task performance [7, 8].

2 Methodology

2.1 Research site

The study was conducted at NTTU in which The Foreign Languages Center (FLC) delivers General English Courses to students who are not majoring in English. These courses consist of four to six levels that approximately correspond to levels B1 or B1+.

Each level lasts for a total of 90 periods, of which 70 periods are delivered offline in the classroom, while 20 periods are conducted online. Of the 70 offline periods, 60 were allocated to classroom instruction at 10 periods per unit, with the remaining 10 reserved for student presentations. The 20 online periods covered listening practice, project-based learning, and midterm assessment on the Richmond LMS. Richmond serves as both the publisher of the coursebook and the platform where students perform their online practice and midterm examinations, including the listening.

2.2 Sampling techniques and participants

A quasi-experimental design was employed using convenience sampling. The sample consisted of 302 students, representing the entire accessible population available to the researchers during the study semester. All participants had previously passed Level 2 (A2) of the General English Program, which ensured a relatively equal level of English proficiency at the beginning of the study. The students were drawn from four intact classes. Two of these classes were assigned to the experimental group, which received top-down listening instruction, and the remaining two classes formed the control group, which followed the regular listening procedures required by the coursebook. Because all students had met the A2 exit requirement, no pre-test was administered.

2.3 Description of top-down listening approach at NTTU

All 302 students in both groups had previously been exposed to the bottom-up approach, as it is a compulsory component of the course syllabus. The experimental group received instruction based on a structured top-down listening approach. In contrast, the control group followed the conventional listening procedure included in the coursebook, without explicit training in top-down strategies.

2.3.1 Overview of the lesson plans

Six lesson plans were developed, one per unit of the coursebook *Personal Best B1 Pre-intermediate* (Unit

1: All About Me; Unit 2: Stories and Pictures; Unit 3: Keep on Traveling; Unit 4: The Working World; Unit 5: Mind and Body; Unit 6: Risks and Experience) [9]. The top-down listening intervention was applied exclusively in Units 1, 3, and 5, as these are the only units in the coursebook containing a dedicated Listening skills section. Within each of these three units, three offline periods were allocated to the listening lesson, structured around the pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening stages. In the pre-listening stage, students activated background knowledge and made predictions from contextual cues. During while-listening, they listened for the gist and confirmed or revised those. In the post-listening stage, they summarized or extended the content and reflected on the strategies used. The remaining seven periods per unit addressed grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and writing. This yielded nine intervention periods in total.

The online component, which was about 1 period for each listening lesson, was conducted asynchronously on the LMS and served a consolidation and assessment function: students completed graded listening exercises, reviewed audio tracks linked to the unit content, and submitted reflective self-evaluation tasks. Together, these two modes formed the blended learning environment described in this study.

2.3.2 A sample lesson plan

Coursebook: *Personal Best B1 Pre-intermediate: Student's Book and Workbook Combined Edition A* by Richmond Publishing

Unit: U1 – *All about me*

Level: B1 (Intermediate)

Skill Focus: Listening

Class Duration: 50 minutes

Lesson: Hobbies and Leisure Activities

Table 1 A Sample lesson plan

Stages	Duration	Teacher's Activities	Students' ctivities	Suggested answers
Pre-listening	10 mins	Displays eight hobby-related photos and asks students to match them with the correct words	Match photos with vocabulary items	a-shop online, b-bake cupcakes, c-collect records, d-get together with friends, e-get some exercise, f-go on social media, g-go to concerts, h-play chess
		Organizes pair discussions about hobbies	Discuss with a partner	What do you like doing in your free time? Why? Do you shop online? How often do you play chess?
		Asks some students to share their answer with the class	Volunteer to share answer	Students' own answers
		Introduces the Skill Box strategy of listening for the main idea Provides examples	Listen and discuss	
While-listening	25 mins	Presents the topic Asks students to predict its main idea, then explain	Make a prediction and provide reasons	Students' own answers
		Plays Track 1.8 once and asks students to identify the main idea	Listen and do the task Compare with their initial predictions	2-Many popular hobbies are now online
		Plays Track 1.8 again and asks students to write the online version of some traditional hobbies	Listen again and match	1-play computer sports games 2-learn how to cook online 3-shop online 4-go on social media and chat

		Shows photos of several speakers and asks students to predict each person's hobby	Look and predict	Students' own answers
		Plays Track 1.9 once and asks students to identify the hobby mentioned	Listen and do the task	1-a, 2-c, 3-c, 4-a
		Plays Track 1.9 again asks students to complete a True/False activity	Listen again and do the task	1-F, 2-T, 3-F, 4-T, 5-F
Post-listening	15 mins	Lets students work in groups to compare their own hobbies with those in the web show	Discuss with their peers	Students' own answers
		Distributes reflection cards and asks students to evaluate their predictions and listening strategies	Complete the reflection card	Students' own answers
Online Follow-up (Richmond LMS)	Self-paced	Assigns corresponding listening activities and monitors completion	Complete online listening activities	

2.4 Data collection procedure

The study was conducted over the full duration of the 90-period course, corresponding to approximately seven weeks of both offline and online instruction. Both the experimental and control groups followed the same course outline and assessment structure, with the only difference being the listening methodology implemented during classroom lessons. Data were collected in two main forms: midterm listening scores from the Richmond LMS and survey responses from all participants. The survey consisted of 15 Likert-scale items, rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and 5 open-ended questions with follow-up questions respectively. The survey items were adopted from a study with similar research objectives [7]. The questionnaire was reduced from 25 to 15 items. Specifically, 10 items (Items 3, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 17, 21, 23 and 24) were removed due to redundancy or potential ambiguity for respondents.

The 15-item questionnaire was divided into two constructs. Items 1-10 measured students' perceived listening difficulties, while Items 11-15 explored their learning experiences in the blended environment, including confidence, stress, learner autonomy, self-evaluation, information retention, and learning engagement. The interview questions consisted of five areas, investigating factors that hindered listening comprehension, students' experiences with different types of listening input, their ability to maintain attention during listening tasks, the influence of the learning environment on comprehension, and their preferences for feedback and its impact on listening development.

2.5 Data analysis procedure

The quantitative data, consisting of midterm listening scores and Likert-scale survey responses, were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential testing. An independent sample *T-test* was employed to determine whether there were significant differences in listening performance between the experimental and control groups. Cohen's d was calculated to assess the magnitude of the difference between groups, providing a measure of the practical significance of the intervention. Mean scores and standard deviations were also calculated to summarize students' overall attitudes toward the listening instruction. Qualitative data from the open-ended survey questions were analyzed using thematic framework analysis, in which students' responses were coded, categorized, and interpreted to identify recurring themes related to their perceptions of the listening activities and instructional approaches.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Listening performance

Table 2 Listening test scores among Experimental and Control Groups

Group	Number of participants	Mean	Std. Deviation (*SD*)	Std. Error Mean
Experi-mental	151	79.94	19.06	1.98
Control	151	58.38	32.23	3.34

An independent sample *t*-test was conducted to examine whether there was a significant difference in listening performance between the experimental group and the control group.

The descriptive statistics revealed that students in the experimental group (Mean = 79.94, *SD* = 19.06) achieved considerably higher scores than those in the control group (Mean = 58.38, *SD* = 32.23). This indicates a substantial mean difference of 21.56 points in favor of the experimental group.

Table 3 Independent Samples *t*-test Results for Listening Scores

Variable	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		*t*-test for Equality of Means			
	F	Sig.	*t*	df	95 % Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	38.33	0.00	5.55	184	13.89	29.22
Equal variances not assumed			5.55	149.34	13.89	29.23

Prior to interpreting the *t*-test results, Levene's test for equality of variances was conducted. The result was statistically significant ($F = 38.33$, $p < .001$), indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was violated. Therefore, the results from the "equal variances not assumed" row were used.

The *t*-test results showed that the difference in listening scores between the two groups was statistically significant, $t(149.34) = 5.55$, $p < 0.001$. This finding confirms that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group.

Furthermore, the 95 % confidence interval for the mean difference ranged from 13.89 to 29.23, suggesting that the true difference in listening performance between the two groups is both positive and substantial.

To provide a more comprehensive assessment of the intervention's impact, Cohen's *d* was calculated as a measure of effect size [10]. Using the pooled standard deviation of the two groups, Cohen's *d* was computed as:

$$d = \frac{79.94 - 58.38}{26.44} \approx 0.82$$

The result $d \approx 0.82$ falls in the large effect size range. This indicates that the top-down listening instruction not only produced a statistically significant difference but also a practically meaningful one.

3.2 Students' attitude

Table 4 Reliability analysis of the questionnaire

Item	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's alpha if Item Deleted
Q1	47.85	255.32	0.66	0.97
Q2	47.93	247.11	0.88	0.96
Q3	47.91	249.37	0.91	0.96
Q4	47.81	251.47	0.79	0.97
Q5	47.68	247.54	0.87	0.96
Q6	47.75	247.95	0.86	0.96

Q7	47.65	249.96	0.89	0.97
Q8	47.35	258.30	0.74	0.96
Q9	47.70	251.60	0.87	0,.96
Q10	47.75	250.19	0.90	0.96
Q11	47.81	259.46	0.86	0.96
Q12	47.86	249.17	0.83	0.96
Q13	47.80	252.54	0.80	0.96
Q14	47.45	268.56	0.46	0.97
Q15	48.23	251.98	0.72	0.96

The internal consistency of the 15-item questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The results indicated a very high level of reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = 0.967$. This value suggested excellent internal consistency among the items in the scale.

All items showed acceptable corrected item-total correlation values, ranging from 0.46 to 0.91, which were above the commonly recommended threshold of 0.30. This indicated that all items were positively correlated with the overall scale and contributed meaningfully to the construct being measured.

Additionally, the "Cronbach's alpha if Item Deleted" values ranged from 0.96 to 0.97. Since none of these values exceeded the overall Cronbach's alpha, removing any individual item would not significantly improve the reliability of the scale. Therefore, all 15 items were retained for subsequent analysis.

Table 5 Mean Scores of questionnaire constructs

Item	Number of Participants	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q1	151	1.00	5.00	3.33	1.47
Q2				3.25	1.43
Q3				3.27	1.31
Q4				3.37	1.40
Q5				3.50	1.43
Q6				3.43	1.43
Q7				3.53	1.32
Q8				3.83	1.22
Q9				3.48	1,28
Q10				3.43	1.29
Q11				3.37	1.33
Q12				3.32	1.43
Q13				3.38	1.35
Q14				3.73	1.23
Q15				2.95	1.51

Descriptive statistics were calculated to examine students' perceptions of listening difficulties and their learning experience in the blended learning environment. The results showed that the mean scores of the 15 items ranged from 2.95 to 3.83, indicating a moderate level of agreement overall.

Regarding listening difficulties, several items reflected noticeable challenges. Students reported difficulties in following fast speech (Item 5, Mean = 3.50), maintaining focus when processing individual words (Item 7, Mean = 3.53), and answering comprehension questions (Item 9, Mean = 3.48). These findings suggested that learners still

experienced obstacles related to real-time processing and bottom-up decoding during listening tasks.

In contrast, Item 8 (Mean = 3.83), which addressed the role of prior knowledge in facilitating comprehension, received the highest mean score. This indicated that activating background knowledge plays a crucial role in helping students understand listening content, supporting the effectiveness of top-down processing strategies.

With regard to learning experience in the blended environment, students expressed generally neutral to slightly positive perceptions. Items related to confidence, autonomy, and self-evaluation (Items 11-14) showed moderate mean scores ranging from 3.31 to 3.73. Notably, Item 14 (Mean = 3.73) suggested that virtual learning environments may support independent processing and retention of information.

Finally, Item 15 (Mean = 2.95), which concerned monotony in learning, received the lowest mean score, indicating that students did not strongly perceive the learning process as monotonous.

Overall, the findings suggested that while students continue to face certain listening difficulties, the use of top-down strategies and blended learning elements contributes positively to their comprehension and learning experience.

3.3 Students' perceptions

The qualitative data were analyzed based on the five main interview questions, focusing on factors affecting listening comprehension, types of listening input, concentration, environmental influences, and the role of feedback.

3.3.1 Factors hindering listening comprehension

In response to the first question, most students identified vocabulary, speech rate, and accent as the primary factors hindering their understanding of English listening materials. Among these, fast speech was reported as the most significant barrier, as students found it difficult to keep up with the flow of information.

Unfamiliar vocabulary was another major challenge, with many participants indicating that unknown words prevented them from understanding the overall meaning of the listening text. Additionally, different accents were perceived as problematic, particularly when students were not accustomed to variations in pronunciation.

These findings suggested that both linguistic knowledge and real-time processing demands played a crucial role in listening comprehension difficulties.

3.3.2 Difficulties with different types of listening input

Regarding the second question, students reported that their listening comprehension varied depending on the type of input. Authentic materials such as news broadcasts or unfamiliar topics were generally perceived as more difficult than lectures, stories, or songs. Notably, students emphasized the difference between listening to familiar and unfamiliar content. They reported that when listening to lectures on known topics, comprehension was relatively easier. In contrast, listening to entirely new information, such as online news, required greater effort and often led to misunderstanding.

This highlighted the importance of background knowledge in facilitating comprehension and supports the role of top-down processing in listening.

3.3.3 Concentration and attention span

In response to the third question, many students indicated that they experienced difficulty maintaining concentration during long listening tasks. Most participants reported that they could only focus effectively for a limited period, typically ranging from 5 to 15 minutes.

Students also identified several factors that caused them to lose concentration. These included difficulties in understanding the content, focusing too much on individual words, and cognitive overload when processing complex information.

These findings suggested that attention and cognitive capacity are important factors influencing listening performance.

3.3.4 Environmental factors

The fourth question explored the impact of external factors on listening comprehension. Most students reported that environmental noise and distractions

negatively affected their ability to concentrate. Participants consistently stated that they performed better in quiet environments where they could focus more effectively on listening tasks. External disturbances such as classroom noise or surrounding activities were reported to disrupt concentration and reduce comprehension. This indicated that a supportive and low-distraction environment is essential for effective listening.

3.3.5 The role of feedback in listening development

In response to the fifth question, students generally perceived feedback as an important factor influencing both their emotional responses and learning progress. Many participants reported that feedback helped them identify their mistakes and improve their listening strategies.

Emotionally, students expressed mixed but generally positive reactions to feedback. Some reported increased confidence and motivation, while others claimed that unclear or delayed feedback could lead to confusion or frustration.

Regarding preferences, most students indicated that they preferred receiving feedback immediately after completing a listening task, as it allowed them to better understand their errors and make timely improvements.

Both the quantitative and qualitative findings converge to paint a coherent picture of the intervention's effects. The experimental group's significantly higher listening scores (Mean = 79.94 vs. Mean = 58.38) and the large effect size (Cohen's d ≈ 0.82) provide objective evidence that the top-down instructional approach enhanced listening performance. The Likert-scale survey data complemented these results by revealing that students placed high value on prior knowledge activation (Item 8, Mean = 3.83) and recognized the benefits of virtual learning for independent processing (Item 14, Mean = 3.73), both of which are core components of the top-down approach within a blended environment. The qualitative interview data added depth and nuance to these numerical findings: students' reports of difficulty with fast speech, unfamiliar vocabulary, and limited attention span explained the persistent challenges reflected in items with moderate mean scores (Items 5, 7, 9), while their preference for immediate and strategy-focused feedback aligned with the pedagogical approach implemented in the experimental group. This triangulation of quantitative test data, survey perceptions, and qualitative interview responses strengthens the validity of the study's conclusions and underscores the value of adopting a mixed-methods approach to understanding EFL listening development.

3.4 Strategies for enhancing students' listening skills with top-down approach

Based on the findings, several pedagogical strategies can be proposed to enhance EFL listening comprehension. First, incorporating pre-listening activities, as prior knowledge was shown to significantly support comprehension. For example, before listening to a conversation about job interviews, the teacher can ask students to brainstorm common interview questions, discuss appropriate responses in pairs, or predict possible topics based on the title or a visual prompt. This aligns with top-down processing theories, which emphasize the role of schematic knowledge in meaning construction [5,7].

During listening, instruction should prioritize gist-based tasks rather than word-by-word decoding. For example, students can be asked to choose the best summary of a short audio, identify the speaker's main purpose, or match headings to sections after a first listening. Additionally, the use of graded and repeated input can support vocabulary development and processing fluency [3]. Teachers may let students first listen to a simplified version of a text, then again to a more authentic version of the same content, or complete multiple listenings with different focuses, including first for gist, key details, and specific language use.

Given learners' limited attention span, short and varied listening tasks are recommended to maintain engagement. For example, the teacher can divide a lengthy listening lesson into three short segments: a 1-minute gist listening (students choose the main idea), followed by a 2-minute detail task (gap-fill), and a final quick discussion to personalize the content.

Creating low-distraction classes, particularly in blended or online settings, is also crucial for effective concentration. Take an online class as an example, the teacher can ask students to turn off notifications, use headphones, and keep cameras on during a focused 5-minute listening task, while also minimizing background noise and limiting multitasking.

Finally, providing immediate and strategy-focused feedback can enhance both comprehension and learner confidence. Specifically, after a listening task, the teacher can replay a difficult section and guide students to notice key words or signal phrases (e.g., "however," "in contrast"), rather than simply giving the correct answers, helping them understand how to listen more effectively.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings support the effectiveness of top-down listening strategies in blended learning with the experimental group demonstrating gains that were both statistically significant and large enough to be educationally meaningful (Cohen's d ≈ 0.82). The experimental group's improved performance indicates that activating prior knowledge and focusing on overall meaning can enhance listening comprehension. Despite ongoing challenges such as fast speech and limited vocabulary, appropriate scaffolding and feedback can help learners overcome these difficulties and improve their listening proficiency. Nevertheless, the study was limited by its quasi-experimental design and convenience sampling from a single university, which may affect internal validity and generalizability. Future research should use randomized designs, broader samples, and varied assessments to provide stronger evidence of the effectiveness of top-down listening instruction.

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Hiệu quả của phương pháp từ trên xuống trong môi trường học tập kết hợp nhằm nâng cao kỹ năng nghe của sinh viên học tiếng Anh như ngoại ngữ tại Trường Đại học Nguyễn Tất Thành

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Tóm tắt Nghiên cứu này đánh giá hiệu quả của phương pháp top-down trong môi trường học tập kết hợp nhằm cải thiện kỹ năng nghe của sinh viên học tiếng Anh như ngoại ngữ (EFL) tại Trường Đại học Nguyễn Tất Thành. Thiết kế thực nghiệm bán kiểm soát được áp dụng với 302 sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh ở trình độ B1, được phân vào nhóm thực nghiệm và nhóm đối chứng. Nhóm thực nghiệm được giảng dạy nghe theo hướng từ trên xuống, tập trung vào dự đoán nội dung, kích hoạt kiến thức nền và nắm bắt ý chính của bài nghe. Dữ liệu định lượng được thu thập từ điểm thi giữa kỳ kỹ năng nghe trên hệ thống Richmond LMS và được phân tích bằng kiểm định *T-test* mẫu độc lập, cho thấy sự cải thiện đáng kể, với mức tăng gần 20 % ở nhóm thực nghiệm, với mức độ ảnh hưởng lớn (Cohen's $d \approx 0.82$). Ngoài ra, một khảo sát gồm bảng hỏi Likert 15 mục và các câu hỏi mở cũng được sử dụng để tìm hiểu nhận thức của người học. Dữ liệu được phân tích bằng thống kê mô tả và phân tích chủ đề. Kết quả cho thấy, phương pháp từ trên xuống không chỉ nâng cao hiệu quả nghe mà còn thúc đẩy thái độ học tập tích cực hơn, từ đó gợi ý các hàm ý sư phạm thiết thực cho việc giảng dạy kỹ năng nghe.

Từ khóa Phương pháp từ trên xuống; học tập kết hợp; kỹ năng nghe; sinh viên học tiếng Anh như ngoại ngữ.