

# Competence Based Assessment of Listening Skill for ESL Students

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**Abstract:** Competence based assessment has become a modern and effective way of evaluating learners' competencies, especially in English. This paper focuses on demonstrating the effect of competence based assessment to adjust teaching and learning English listening skill for English as a second language (ESL) students. The tools used in this research are test items which are defined to test certain competencies by English experts (teachers). The collected data is then analyzed by special programs of Statistical Package for Social Service (SPSS) and Conquest program. The study results were then confirmed relied on theoretical base and competence framework as Common European Framework of References (CEFR) for foreign languages.

**Keywords:** Competence bases assessment, competence framework, listening comprehensive competence, analysis programs, ESL students.

## 1. Introduction

For a long time, English has become a key language to the world of knowledge, which requires every people study and use English frequently in daily life. Students are not exception in spite of the fact that it is so hard for them to listen to English among English skills. As a result, teaching communicative English is one of challenges for Vietnamese teachers in the years of international integration. The solutions may lie at changing the textbook, innovating teaching methodology, getting students to be center of teaching activities, and so on. However, the best and most suitable and effective one which not many

researchers mentioned are the way of measuring and evaluating students' achievement.

This paper emphasizes the effect of assessment students' competence in general and in English listening skill in particular. In order to be good at studying a language, apart from the knowledge, skills and attitude to the study, the learners must be equipped with the competence in learning. Competence is a new term in the field of education, which can be measured and enhanced aiming at getting the better study results.

Identifying students' competence in listening comprehensively by Rasch model will assist lecturers and students define the most suitable ways of teaching and learning. Specifically, students' competence is put on a scale which indicates what they can do, and

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which knowledge and competence they need to be provided and improved. By this way, students learn how to study by themselves, how to manage learning scheme to meet the expected learning outcomes. Lecturers play the role of supervisors and guide learners in learning process.

The instruments for measurement are items standardized and designed by experts as TOEIC test form that fits outcomes standards for technical schools. There are 4 groups of items which are supposed to measure 4 kinds of abilities, in terms of knowledge, skills and application. Students' competencies have been shown through the *Map of competence distribution and items' difficulties* by SPSS and CONQUEST program. It can be demonstrated clearly from the map the number of students who achieved any competencies. Moreover, the map indicates students' competencies and items' difficulties through the items located along a scale from the easiest to the most difficult level to measure expected competencies. From this map teachers know which knowledge and skills students need to be supplied and strengthened. Therefore, English teachers can also realize competencies which students lack of and have proper adjustment in teaching method. Identifying each student's competence in listening skill, teachers will have the solution and prompt support for each to achieve higher knowledge and skill.

## 2. Literature review

A number of researchers in Vietnam such as Lê Văn Ân (2006), Vũ Thị Phương Anh & Nguyễn Bích Hạnh (2004), Lâm Quang Đông (2008), Trịnh Vinh Hiến (2008), Lê Thị Thu Huyền (2010), Hoàng Văn Vân (2008), etc. have shown the difficulties, reasons and solutions for ineffective teaching and studying

English in communicative classroom for ESL students. The solutions are then proposed accordingly, however few of them refer to competence assessment.

So far, Vietnamese educators have paid many efforts on researching the method of developing the framework of competences for Vietnam based on Common European Framework for Reference (CEFR) and assessing students' competence on all English skills (as National Foreign Languages 2020 Project). However, this is still in the pilot, and it will be applied for every skill of English for ESL students over the country.

Gilman and Moody (1984) [1] have demonstrated that adults spend 40-50% of communication time listening, but the importance of listening in language learning has only been recognized relatively recently (Oxford 1993) [2]. People may find difficult to continue conversation and interaction if they cannot listen what the speakers are talking about. Listeners must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intention, retain and interpret this within the immediate as well as the larger socio-cultural context of the utterance (Wipf, 1984) [3]. Rost (2002) [4] defines listening in its broadest sense, as a process of receiving what the speaker actually says (receptive orientation); constructing and representing meaning (constructive orientation); negotiating meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy (transformative orientation). Listening is a complex and active process of interpretation; in which listeners match what they hear with what they already know.

Listening comprehension contains the two major aspects of "listening" and "comprehension". "Listening" is to receive, memorize and repeat the sound wave of the voice. "Comprehension" is to explain what one

has listened to (Zhang Delu and Miao Xingwei et al, 2005) [5]. Therefore, the context and purpose of listening play an important role in conducting a listening comprehension. When listeners know the context of a text or an utterance, the process is facilitated considerably because listeners can activate prior knowledge and make the appropriate inferences essential to comprehending the message (Byrnes, 1984) [6].

In addition, Wenden (1998) [7] has shown in his research that when listeners know how to analyze the requirements of a listening task; activate the appropriate listening processes required; make appropriate predictions; monitor their comprehension and evaluate the success of their approach, they are using metacognitive knowledge for successful listening comprehension. This is critical to the development of self-regulated learning.

A part from, Huara Chen (2011) [8] is one of researchers paying much attention to improving English listening comprehension competence. He has pointed out that training of listening comprehension competence is not to blindly listen without any choices. Instead, it requires appropriate methods and to go from shallow to deep. That is the reason, in teaching of English listening, it is necessary to consciously cultivate the ability of students to anticipate. The learners should spend time to know about the topic discussed, the surrounding environment and the cultural background of the language they speak.

The term "competence" is becoming increasingly popular in the field of education. The concept of competence may be general capacity or specific competencies that many researchers have been very clearly defined: "The capacity/competency is not only the description of a task or action learning. It involves measuring the potential of students and measure knowledge, skills, and ability of

application needed to perform a learning task to a certain standard requirements" according to the assessment guidelines of the training capacity of the Australian Commonwealth (2003).

Besides, Kouvenhowen (2010) [9] and Yu (2010) [10] submit the definition of different trends of capacities over the world when analyzing global trends of educational assessment according to ability: (1) Competence is the ability to perform academic tasks reaching a certain standard requirements - defining the outcome associated with the output and talking about the general ability; (2) Competence is the ability to choose and use the knowledge, skills, ability of application, etc. in the implementation of a learning task to a certain standard requirements - this definition tends to link the specific competencies; (3) Competence is a system comprising of the knowledge, skills and abilities - by definition associated with the inputs and tend to link the specific competencies; (4) Competence is a list of what students can do - this definition is tied to output, but focuses on the direction and specific activities; (5) Combination of above four definitions.

Based on these definitions and from the growing needs of students in the capacity to learn English, in this article, the author would like to emphasize on a range of specific competencies in English listening skill. We all know that communication skill - our first birth experience is listening, that's how we learn and acquire language. Accordingly, listening and speaking are always inextricably linked and support each other. However, listening is often the most underdeveloped skills although it is the first communication behavior of the human being.

Listening capacity includes more specific types of communicative competence, which can be measured. The hypothesis is that listening

comprehension capacity may vary according to the training sectors, hometown, age, socio-economic characteristics, duration and English level before attending university; teaching and learning methods; more important reason may be the personal efforts of students in the learning process of each school year, etc. To test these hypotheses, a number of countries have conducted competency assessment examination for all students. Based on Quest and Conquest programs, it is indicated whether the factors mentioned can really affect the students' listening competence.

The theory base that is used to build the test items is the competence scale of English listening skill (specified in *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*) [11] which includes level of A1 and A2 (beginning level), B1 and B2 (intermediate level), C1 and C2 (advanced level). English teachers should develop 24 test items by the level of difficulty, discrimination as well as measure the expected knowledge, skill and application abilities by 4 groups of competencies.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research methodology

In this research, documentary research is used to have overview of internal and external opinion about the research issue. Apart from, developing instruments (test items) based on Common European Framework is conducted by expert evaluation method to measure the expected competence traits in listening comprehension.

The data collected is then analyzed by Statistical Package for Social Service (SPSS) and Conquest program. It provides data analysis based on a comprehensive and flexible range of item response models

(IRM), allowing examination of the properties of performance assessments, traditional assessments and rating scales.

The study results were then confirmed by the Item Response Theory (IRT) which is the study of test and item scores based on assumptions concerning the mathematical relationship between abilities (or other hypothesized traits) and item responses.

#### 3.2. Research population

The study is done with the help of teachers and students at X University in Hanoi. Research population includes 282 students from 5 majors: 65 are in Information Technology, 48 are in Electricity - Automation, 62 are in Architect, 36 are in Construction Economy, and 71 are in Civil Construction.

#### 3.3. Data collection

In order to conduct this study, a set of instruments includes 24 test items designed as the form of TOEIC test, checked and supervised by English teachers from X University where they are teaching English for general purposes. These items are defined as the difficulty and discrimination level.

After piloting survey with 57 students, the instruments are then adjusted to assure testing the expected competencies which are the final tools for assessment.

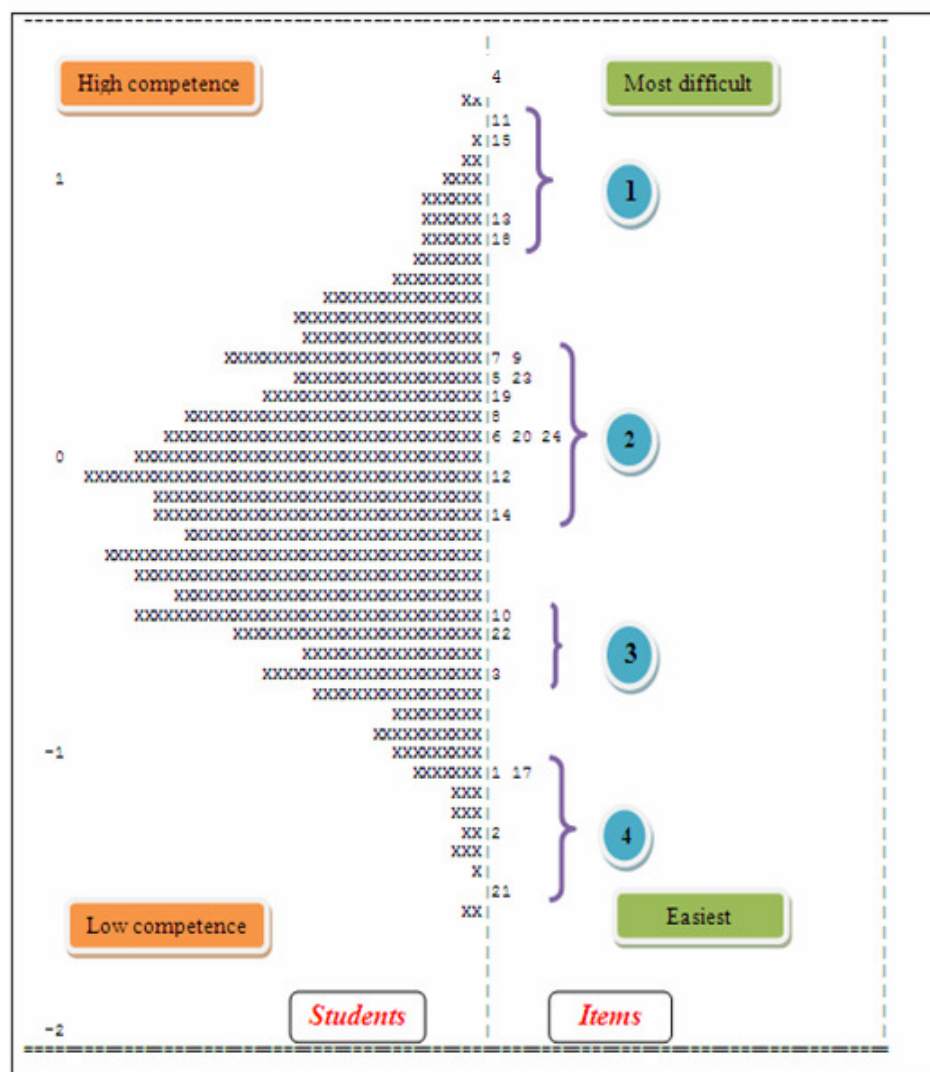
The official survey (examination) is conducted with 282 students to do 4 listening exercises in 25 minutes. The test papers are then collected to be imported to SPSS file for processing by Conquest program.

### 4. Results

The Conquest program has demonstrated the relationship between students' competence

and items' difficulty (Graph 1.) through the test of 24 items as the Rasch Model. The left hand side of the map shows that student ability is roughly normally distributed around the logit value of zero, with a maximum of one point five (the highest competence) and a minimum of minus one point six (the lowest competence). The right hand side of the map indicates the difficulty of the items also distributed around the mean of zero, with: the top represents the difficult items; the bottom represents the easier items.

From this map, teachers learn which knowledge and skills students need to be strengthened and supplied. English teachers can also realized competencies which students lack of and have adjustment in teaching method to improve students' competence in learning. By these tools, each student's competence is identified in listening and then English teachers have the solution and prompt support for each student to achieve higher knowledge and skill.



Graph 1. Map of distribution between students competence and items difficulty.

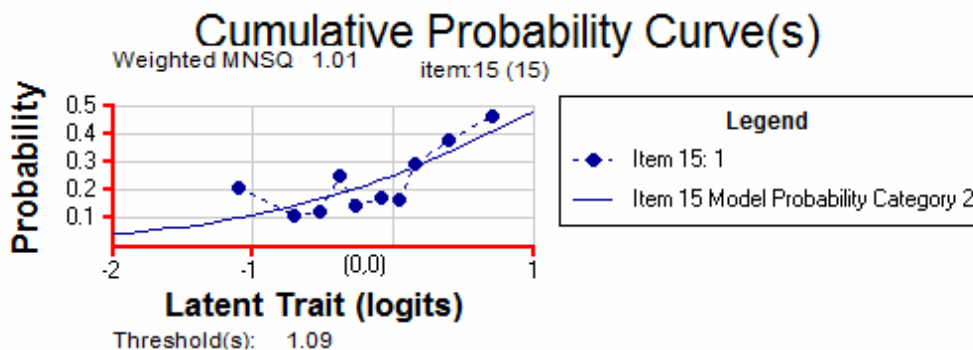
In details, the study assessed the competence of ESL students at X University is based on TOEIC Test at international standard format and gained the follow results:

4.1. Test items are grouped in 4 areas which are expected groups of competences as the expert designed from the easiest (items number 1, 2, 17, 21) to the most difficult level (items number 4, 11, 13, 15, 18), in which each group tests certain competencies designed and identified by English teachers.

In those hard questions which check the abilities equivalent to level B2, students got the following disadvantages: not catching the main ideas of complex texts (item 4, 18), limited range of vocabulary in some specializations (item 11), high degree of fluency of the conversation (item 13, 15), etc. In order to assist students to improve those skills of listening, lecturers could introduce

some pre-listening activities such as: supplying the leaners with more new words during the lessons; focusing on guiding the standards of pronunciation, the technique to catch the main idea of the text as each question, and so on. For the learners, they should pay more time and effort on improving vocabulary, the skill of pronunciation and brainstorming what might happen in the text, and other techniques, etc.

The Graph 2. below shows the latent traits of item number 15 which is proved to be a relative difficult item for this group of students. Students are discriminated clearly based on this graph, only students with high competence and well knowledge should do this question right. In contrast, for an easy item (number 20 in the Graph 3.) the latent trait is more stable and students may get less probability to do the question wrong.



Graph 2. Latent trait for item 15.

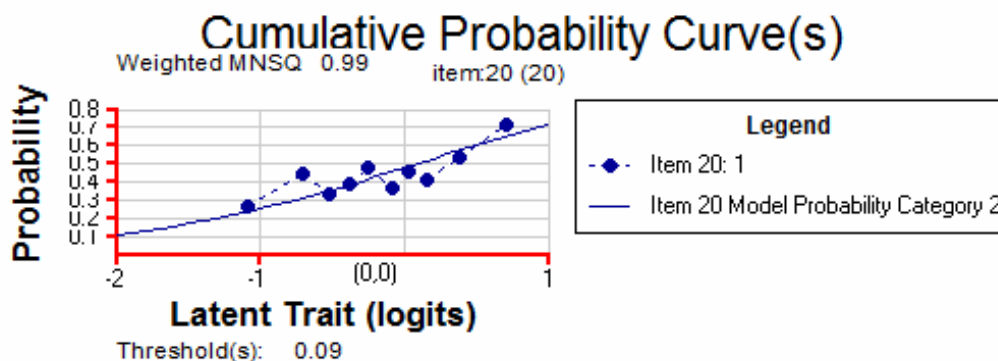
In question number 15, students are trapped by the fluency and logic of the sentence when the speaker says "... on Thursday, NOT Tuesday". However, a few of students recognize this challenge and often give the answer right at the first words of listening. As a result, there are 61 students get the right answer taking account of 21.6%. It means, at the same time, the rest of 78.2% is weak at this tested

ability. Therefore, teachers need to have the suitable guidance in giving techniques to catch the main idea of the text. Above all, it requires student spend time to study the picture before listening to get higher achievements.

Item 20 (Graph 3.) checks the comprehension competence of the main points of clear standard input on school matters and describing personal interest. Apparently,

students are familiar with the topic of school subjects as well as talking about the hobby, so most of students (appropriate 50%) find it easy to do this question. The students who get it

wrong need to practice more about acquainted contexts in life around. It is proved that the more practice the students perform, the higher probability of answering the items is.



Graph 3. Latent trait for item 20.

4.2. The competence of students is not lower than the general level of college students. There are 8 students with poor competence may not get the probability to give the right answer for easy items, 6 students with high competence can do all the questions correctly. Most students achieve the A1 level (13%), some higher competence students achieved level A2, B1 (83%), B2 (4%). This suggests that, to achieve higher competence in listening skill, the students need to change the approach to knowledge and learning methods. The study results also showed that there is no difference in the ability of students to listen to English among specialties, genders, hometowns or the course of students.

4.3. The elements that make up the English listening ability of the students are: knowledge, skills and application ability. Knowledge has been providing fully from junior and senior high school to tertiary level; however it needs to focus on developing skills and application ability to study English at higher degree to be able to promote the knowledge they have learned. There are some limitations for students

to listen to English that English teachers should first mention in the preparation stage of studying (mental attitude) and studying methods.

4.4. By interviewing the teachers and learners, the hypothesis has been checked that those solutions such as: various vocabularies (45%), exact pronunciation (35%), correct intonation (15%) and other factors (5%) have aided students a lot in improving listening skill.

To sum up, studying methods, curriculum, methods of teaching are not really effective in assessing learners' capacity, leading to the fact that graduates did not meet the demands of labor market and employers in the use of language proficiently in integration period. Choosing the suitable assessing methods of learners' achievements may be the solutions to enhance the outcomes and competencies of students.

## 5. Discussion

The evaluation of English listening ability is still a very new method in higher education. Meanwhile, X University has launched

computer based tests for English listening skill, so extracting test results to assess the competence becomes entirely possible and feasible. Data is extracted and then transferred to SPSS, Conquest program and analyzed. Student capacity is shown on the results of data processing and evaluation capacity framework based on European standards (depends on each school to develop their own framework).

Key solution to improve English listening competence is necessary to change the method of teaching and learning. Teachers need to know the potential capacity of the students to be able to adjust their teaching plans. Students need assessment feedback to adjust learning methods to identify which modules of knowledge should be enhanced.

In short, studying capacity can be fully measured as knowledge, skills, and application ability. In order to improve the quality of teaching and learning competence, we should innovate the assessment methods. If we maintain an effective evaluation, it will determine exactly what the shortcomings of training process are. In this study, it should consider the quality of the input, curriculum, teachers, teaching facilities; learning capacity of students is entirely possible assured. When weaknesses and strengths are identified in learning and teaching, the new plan will be set to improve and enhance the training quality.

In the study of forming the assessment method for listening competence for ESL students at X University, the author has encountered a number of limitations due to the scope of study:

Expert method is not really effective for assessing competence only based on the common European reference framework; sub-listening skills are not given in observation and verification. In the following study the author should pay more efforts in identifying more

precisely the level of competence in each test item. The test items should be standardized to assure the accuracy and efficiency of the measurement tool.

There are no differences among factors such as genders, hometowns, majors, quantity of time studying. These issues can be analyzed in term of differential item functioning (prejudice and bias) between groups of students in further researches to have objective perspective to this matter.

## **6. Conclusion and recommendations**

Listening has emerged as an important component in the process of second language acquisition, in his research Feyten (1991) [12] provides the base to support for the pre-eminence of listening comprehension in instructional methods, especially in the early stages of language learning. Each teacher in giving the lectures must aware that guiding students through the process of listening not only provides them with the knowledge by which they can successfully complete a listening task; it also motivates them and puts them in control of their learning (Vandergrift, 2002) [13].

Moreover, Mendelsohn (1998) [14] notes a gap between the interests of listening researchers and classroom practitioners in that classroom materials do very little to develop metacognitive knowledge through raising learners' consciousness of listening processes. It is imperative to teach students **how** to listen. This shifts the emphasis of listening practice from product to process and the responsibility of learning from the teacher to the student, thereby helping students become self-regulated learners.



In conclusion, teachers play the role of an instructor in guiding learners how to listen to English effectively. Huaru Chen (2011) has mentioned in his research that listening comprehension is quite a complex process of receiving information, analyzing information then applying the information. It should not be denied that, much listening indeed is a positive means to enhance the listening comprehension competence, but it calls for perfect teaching methods to attain an ideal effect. This study may help English teacher manipulate listening competency assessment in English to adjust and adapt the training process, while overcoming the limitations that the author encountered. The author would like to have an opportunity to develop specific competence framework for ESL students for each skill: listening, speaking, reading and writing for university students in other studies.

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## Đánh giá theo năng lực kỹ năng nghe tiếng Anh của sinh viên không chuyên Anh

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**Tóm tắt:** Đánh giá theo năng lực đã trở thành phương thức đánh giá người học một cách hiện đại và hiệu quả trong việc hỗ trợ và định hướng cho người học, đặc biệt là môn tiếng Anh. Bài báo này tập trung vào việc mô tả hiệu quả của phương thức đánh giá này để điều chỉnh việc dạy và học kỹ năng nghe tiếng Anh cho sinh viên không chuyên Anh. Công cụ đánh giá được sử dụng trong nghiên cứu này là các câu hỏi thi được định cỡ để đánh giá các nét năng lực nhất định bằng phương pháp chuyên gia (là các giáo viên tiếng Anh). Dữ liệu thu thập được sau đó được phân tích bằng các phần mềm chuyên biệt như SPSS và Conquest. Cuối cùng, kết quả nghiên cứu được xác định dựa trên cơ sở lý thuyết về khung năng lực nghe tiếng Anh (trích từ Khung tham chiếu chung Châu Âu về chuẩn ngoại ngữ (Common European Framework of References)).

**Từ khóa:** Đánh giá năng lực học tập, năng lực nghe hiểu tiếng Anh, khung đánh giá năng lực ngoại ngữ, phần mềm đánh giá năng lực học tập, sinh viên không chuyên Anh.