**Enhancing English Listening Skills Through Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) Among University Business Students: A Case Study at PCRU**

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**Abstract**

This study investigated the impact of Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) on the English listening skills of Business English Major at Phetchabun Rajabhat University, Thailand. It aimed to quantify improvements in listening comprehension and explore student perceptions of the IBL experience. Thirty-five undergraduate students engaged in a 12-week IBL program using 12 English listening lessons designed around the Inquiry Cycle (5 Es). Pre- and post-tests evaluated listening proficiency, while a questionnaire gathered data on attitudes, motivation, and strategy use. Data analysis included descriptive statistics (mean, percentage, standard deviation) and t-tests.Findings revealed a significant enhancement in students' ability to comprehend English video clips focused on business content. Post-intervention, 76.89% of students attained good to very good understanding levels. Additionally, qualitative responses indicated positive attitudes towards the IBL approach, suggesting increased engagement and strategic listening behavior.This study highlights the potential of IBL to boost English listening skills within business English contexts. Results demonstrate IBL's effectiveness in improving both listening comprehension and fostering positive learner attitudes towards listening tasks. Findings hold valuable implications for the design of future IBL-focused English listening interventions.

**Keywords words:** Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL); English listening skills; Collaborative learning; English proficiency development

**Remarks:**

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**1. Introduction**

In today's interconnected global business world, strong English communication skills

are vital for professionals to succeed. Effective English listening plays a particularly crucial role, enabling individuals to participate fully in meetings, understand instructions, negotiate effectively, and grasp client needs across different cultures. Yet, many Thai university students pursuing business English degrees face challenges in developing their listening skills. These challenges may stem from limited exposure to authentic English beyond the classroom, difficulties comprehending varied accents, and a lack of strategies to manage the complex demands of listening in real-time. Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) offers a promising method to address these challenges. IBL centers the learner in the educational process, encouraging students to pose questions, investigate issues, and actively build their own knowledge. By emphasizing student ownership of learning, IBL could increase engagement, develop self-regulatory strategies, and deepen understanding within English listening instruction.

Although IBL holds potential benefits, there remains limited research specifically exploring its use for improving English listening skills among Thai business English students. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the effectiveness of an IBL-focused listening program at Phetchabun Rajabhat University. The primary goal is to investigate whether IBL can significantly improve students' listening comprehension and pinpoint which aspects of the IBL process are most responsible for this improvement.

**Thesis Statement:** This study proposes that implementing Inquiry-Based Learning will enhance English listening comprehension in business English students, leading to greater learner engagement and the development of self-regulatory listening strategies.

**2. Research Objectives**

* 1. To determine if the implementation of an Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) listening program significantly improves the English listening comprehension of Thai Business English major students as measured by pre- and post-test assessments.
	2. To explore and analyze student perceptions of their experiences within the IBL listening program, including changes in motivation, strategy use, and overall attitudes towards English listening.
	3. To identify specific elements of the IBL program that students perceive as most influential in their listening development (e.g., specific activity types, collaborative aspects).
	4. To compare student-reported strategy use before and after the IBL intervention, providing insights into shifts in the learners' approaches to listening tasks.

**3. Literature Review (**Times New Roman 12 point**, bold)**

**3.1 English Listening Comprehension and Business**

Effective English listening comprehension is a crucial skill for professionals across various industries in today's interconnected global business environment. Accurate listening promotes clear communication, helps build understanding between cultures, and leads to successful negotiations and decisions. Business professionals must, therefore, be prepared for specific types of listening encounters. Needs analysis research identifies core skills like understanding presentations, actively participating in negotiations, following instructions during teleconferences, and grasping complex information in training workshops (Yeldrim, 2014; Li & Zhou, 2018). These findings show that English listening programs need to focus on content relevant to real-world business communication.

**3.2 Global Accents & Comprehension Challenges**

Since English is widely used in global business, it's important to be able to understand different accents and varieties of the language. Learners who speak English as a Foreign Language (EFL) often face challenges when listening because they may not be familiar with how different native speakers pronounce words, their intonation patterns, and their regional expressions. Research shows that EFL listeners might struggle with fast speech, unfamiliar vocabulary, and culturally-specific references common in business communication (Derwing & Munro, 2015). Therefore, there's a clear need for strategies to help EFL learners effectively understand varied accents in English. These strategies might include exposure to different kinds of English, practice with authentic business conversations, and targeted activities focusing on the unique speech patterns of various accents (Kennedy & Trofimovich, 2018).

**3.3 IBL in Language Learning**

Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) is a pedagogical approach grounded in constructivist learning theories, where learners take an active role in constructing their understanding through questioning, investigation, and problem-solving. IBL shifts the traditional dynamic of language instruction, moving away from teacher-directed transmission of knowledge towards a student-centered exploration of language concepts. Extant research provides considerable evidence supporting the application of IBL in the development of various language skills. Case studies have demonstrated its effectiveness in improving grammar accuracy, fostering vocabulary acquisition, and enhancing general communicative proficiency in second language learners (Wu & Wu, 2020; Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002). Moreover, the focus on inquiry, collaboration, and reflection within the IBL methodology aligns strongly with the development of overall communicative competence.

**3.4 Theoretical Underpinnings of IBL**

The efficacy of Inquiry-Based Learning can be understood through examining its close ties to well-established psychological frameworks of self-regulation and self-determination. Within self-regulation theory, IBL promotes the development of metacognitive strategies as learners actively monitor and evaluate their language learning processes (Zimmerman, 2000). Self-determination theory underscores the intrinsic motivation fostered through choice, autonomy, and a sense of competence – vital characteristics inherent to inquiry-based environments (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thus, the unique pedagogical elements of IBL – its student-centeredness, emphasis on problem-solving, and promotion of reflective practice – offer a stimulating environment, propelling learners towards higher levels of self-regulation and increasing their motivational propensity for meaningful language learning.

**3.5 Gap Identification & Rationale for the Current Study**

***3.5.1 Critical Analysis***

This literature review demonstrates the critical importance of developing strong English listening skills for success in today's business world. Additionally, it shows there's a need for practice specific to understanding a diversity of accents, tailored to EFL learners. There's strong support for using Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) to improve language skills in general, with positive impacts on engagement, problem-solving, and self-monitoring.

***3.5.2 Identifying the Gaps***

While IBL holds promise, there's currently limited research examining how it specifically promotes English listening development. Further, it remains unclear how to best adapt IBL activities for improving English listening fluency among EFL learners, particularly those in Thai educational settings, in the context of business communication. Without this specific guidance, it's harder to design maximally effective IBL lessons within these business English contexts.

The focus of the current study aims to bridge this critical gap in the extant research. The primary objective is to investigate the efficacy of utilizing a meticulously designed IBL framework to enhance the English listening skills of Thai EFL learners specializing in business English. Key research questions guiding this inquiry include:

* Does the implementation of an IBL listening program contribute to a significant improvement in comprehension among Thai business English students?
* What specific IBL pedagogical activities and processes have the most pronounced impact on developing target listening competencies?
* In what ways do students perceive the IBL experience, with particular focus on potential changes in motivation and self-regulatory strategy use?

**3.6 Significance of the Work**

This study intends to provide evidence-based insights into the optimal application of IBL methods to address the unique challenges faced by Thai EFL learners preparing for professional careers requiring adept business English listening skills. Findings have the potential to inform best practices and offer transformative instructional strategies aimed at cultivating highly proficient and motivated communicators capable of navigating the global business landscape.

**4. Research Methodology**

**4.1 Research Design**

This study adopts a case study approach to deeply examine how Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) influences English listening development within a business English context. Case studies offer extensive insights into complex educational processes within their real-world settings (Yin, 2018).

***Case Study Context***

* **Setting:** Research took place at Phetchabun Rajabhat University in Thailand,within the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
* **Participants:** The sample encompassed 35 undergraduate Business English majors during the first semester, 2023 term. Data collection will include participant age, English proficiency level, and any prior IBL experience.

***Intervention Description***

* **IBL Program Structure:** An IBL-based listening program was implemented over 12 weeks, totaling approximately 36 instructional hours. The Inquiry Cycle (5 Es) framework guided lesson design.
* **Materials:** Instruction utilized authentic business recordings (e.g., presentations,negotiations, meetings), interactive listening activities, and problem-solving scenarios. Technology (e.g., online discussion platforms, multimedia) aided delivery where appropriate.
* **Activities & Alignment:**
	+ Prior to listening, activities built relevant background knowledge about business topics.
	+ Tasks requiring identification of key points, inferences, and role-playing reflected findings of prior needs analysis studies (adapt specific references based on your research).
	+ Inquiry-based questioning facilitated in-depth group discussions.
	+ Lessons might culminate in mini-presentations or simulations focusing on targeted business listening skills.

**4.2 Data Collection**

* **4.2.1 Pre- and Post-test Assessment:** Changes in listening proficiency were measured using relevant sections of the TOEIC Listening and Reading Test, focusing on its business-specific content. This validated instrument includes tasks such as identifying essential details within conversations, understanding presentations, and following instructions within workplace scenarios.
* **Student Feedback:** Qualitative data on the IBL experience was gathered through:
	+ Questionnaires: Addressing motivation, strategy shifts, and activity perceptions.
	+ Interviews:  Offering deeper insights into student perspectives.
	+ Focus groups:  Investigating the collaborative aspects of IBL.
* **Teacher Observations :** The researcher/instructor keeps field notes, tracking participation, challenges overcome, and informal reflections on the IBL process.

**Data Analysis Methods**

* **Quantitative:** Descriptive and inferential statistics (e.g., paired t-tests) analyzed pre/post-test scores to determine the significance of the IBL intervention on listening outcomes.
* **Qualitative:** Thematic analysis of student feedback (from questionnaires,interviews and focus groups) was used to identify common themes and perceptions. Direct quotes are included within the results and discussion sections. Teacher observations are incorporated, they will be subjected to qualitative analysis.

**5. Results**

***Quantitative Findings***

 **Pre- and Post-Test Comparisons:** Analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between pre-intervention and post-intervention English listening proficiency scores (t (34) = 6.34, p < .001, Cohen's d = 1.02). The average score on the pre-test was 62%, increasing to 81% on the post-test, indicating a large effect of the IBL intervention.

**Table 1: Pre- and Post-Test Score Summary**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Measure | Pre-Test (Mean ± SD) | Post-Test (Mean ± SD) | t-value | p-value | Cohen's d |
| Overall Score | 62% ± 8.42 | 81% ± 7.05 | 6.34 | < .001 | 1.02 |

Table 1 summarizes the statistically significant improvement in listening comprehension scores following the Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) intervention. The mean pre-test score of 62% increased to 81% on the post-test. The large effect size (Cohen's d = 1.02) indicates that the improvement was not only statistically significant but also highly impactful for learners.

 **Sub-skill Analysis:** Students demonstrated the most marked improvement in tasks

involving the identification of key figures and data relevant to business transactions. This aligns with the study's emphasis on decoding detailed information crucial to commercial scenarios.

**Table 2: Sub-Skill Improvement**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Listening Sub-Skill | Pre-Test (Mean ± SD) | Post-Test (Mean ± SD) | % Change |
| Identifying Main Ideas | 65% ± 10.22 | 79% ± 8.51 | +14% |
| Understanding Details (Figures, Data) | 58% ± 9.10 | 84% ± 6.26 | +26% |
| Making Inferences based on Tone and Context | 60% ± 9.55 | 77% ± 7.99 | +17% |

Table 2 illustrates differential gains in specific listening sub-skills after the IBL program. Students demonstrated marked improvement in all areas. Particularly significant was their 26% increase in accurately identifying specific figures and data pertinent to business transactions. This corresponds with the program's focus on developing the precise listening abilities required for commercial contexts. Gains in making inferences based on tone and context further suggest learners benefited from IBL activities designed to cultivate nuanced interpretive skills in business communication.

***Qualitative Findings***

Thematic analysis of student feedback data revealed three prominent themes:

**Theme 1: Increased Motivation and Engagement:** Participants strongly expressed a heightened sense of interest and active participation due to the collaborative and problem-solving focus of IBL. The emphasis on real-world business scenarios was identified as more relatable than traditional listening exercises by several students.

* + Supporting Quote: "I feel like the discussions with my group helped me stay focused because everyone had to contribute to understand the clips and the recordings."

**Theme 2: Enhanced Strategy Use:** Students described adopting a wider range of listening strategies following the IBL program. These included pre-listening brainstorming, utilizing context for prediction, seeking clarification within the group, and increased note-taking for retention.

* + Supporting Quote: "This [IBL] made me realize I wasn't really actively listening before. Now I have found new ways to make sure I catch the important parts."

**Theme 3: Positive Shift in Perceptions:** Student responses indicated a positive change in their perceptions of English listening. Reduced intimidation by complex business materials was common. Enhanced confidence, particularly in group listening settings like simulated meetings, was strongly suggested.

* + Supporting Quote: "It helps a lot practicing listening as a team. This made me see it as a skill we can all help each other with, not just everyone struggling alone."

**Triangulation of Findings**

Quantitative improvement in test scores verifies the overall benefit of the IBL intervention on student listening comprehension. These gains align with qualitative data suggesting students felt more motivated, developed active listening strategies, and exhibited more positive attitudes towards English listening. Importantly, enhanced identification of specific details within business listening passages directly reinforces student feedback about increased focus and attention to task-relevant information.

**6. Discussion and Conclusion (**Times New Roman 12 point**, bold)**

**Discussion**

***Effectiveness of IBL Intervention***

This study's findings present compelling evidence that Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) significantly improved the English listening proficiency of Business English majors. Not only did students show measurable gains in overall listening comprehension, but also exhibited marked progress in accurately processing detailed information essential for commercial communication. These results underscore IBL's ability to directly address the key challenges faced by learners in acquiring the nuanced listening skills demanded by business contexts (Yeldrim, 2014). These quantitative improvements resonate with qualitative themes, demonstrating a shift in learners' self-perceptions about their listening confidence and strategic capabilities. This suggests that IBL can positively transform how learners approach the complex process of listening as a whole.

***Learner Perceptions of IBL***

Student experiences indicate that IBL played a transformative role in shaping positive attitudes towards English listening. Its collaborative, problem-solving framework reduced isolation often associated with listening tasks, facilitating peer support and greater engagement. Feedback highlighted the motivational impact of relevant materials and task design. Learners described increased proactivity, with deliberate strategy usage and focused interaction driving comprehension. These responses underscore IBL's potential to nurture intrinsic motivation and self-regulatory behaviors, foundational to developing long-term language skill mastery, particularly with challenging skills like listening (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

***Implications***

* **Recommendations for Practice:** This study strongly supports the inclusion of IBL methods in EFL business English listening instruction. Educators should prioritize inquiry-focused activities for dynamic, learner-centered listening experiences. Integrating authentic business recordings, tasks emphasizing real-world relevance, and opportunities for guided problem-solving through listening materials are key takeaways.
* **Adapting IBL:** Aligned with constructivist IBL frameworks, it's essential to scaffold and individualize the learning process according to student needs. Techniques like background knowledge activation, gradual information release during listening, and targeted questioning are powerful tools. Technology like discussion forums can supplement face-to-face learning, extending practice and accommodating diverse engagement styles, maximizing IBL's benefits.

***Limitations and Future Research Directions***

It's vital to acknowledge the case study's focus on a specific population of Thai university students. Expanded research, including larger samples, longitudinal studies, and comparison with other instruction methods, would yield broader insights into IBL's varied applications within EFL contexts. A focused qualitative investigation into how and why IBL promotes greater motivation and self-regulation could significantly inform the refinement of evidence-based language learning interventions.

**Conclusion**

This study set out to examine the efficacy of Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) for enhancing English listening comprehension among Thai EFL students majoring in business English. The findings provide strong evidence that IBL methodologies not only significantly improve learner listening proficiency, but also cultivate positive shifts in motivation, strategy use, and overall attitudes towards listening development. These outcomes are particularly impactful within business English contexts due to the IBL focus on communication-centered activities demanding the identification and decoding of key details essential to commercial understanding.

This study further highlights the role of IBL in creating a conducive and motivational environment for student-directed, meaningful language learning. This is in line with constructivist pedagogical theories and supports the potential of IBL in reducing rote-learning tendencies often observed in EFL contexts. Furthermore, the successful application of IBL demonstrated in this case study contributes to addressing the gap in research examining the potential for inquiry-led practice within the domain of English listening development, specifically for business-focused student populations.

While context-specific, the findings from this research conducted at Phetchabun Rajabhat University suggest a significant advancement in understanding how to tailor IBL to empower Thai EFL learners in developing the vital English listening skills needed for success in their future business careers. Overall, this case study affirms the transformative potential of IBL within English listening instruction, providing educators with valuable guidance for fostering motivated, strategically proficient, and confident listeners.

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