

บทความวิชาการ (Academic Article)

EFL LEARNERS' LISTENING PROBLEMS, PRINCIPLES OF TEACHING LISTENING AND IMPLICATIONS FOR LISTENING INSTRUCTION

Received: January 12, 2018

Revised: May 11, 2018

Accepted: June 4, 2018

Wasina Suwannasit^{1*}

¹Chulalongkorn University Language Institute, Bangkok 10330, Thailand

*Corresponding Author, E-mail: onwasina@yahoo.com

Abstract

It is well accepted that listening is an integral skill for academic and professional achievement. However, in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), many students have limited exposure to the real-life use of English and find listening skills difficult to master. In attempts to seek ways to help EFL learners with their listening skill development, researchers, teachers and scholars have investigated into the causes of EFL learners' listening problems and suggested ways to address them. This article presents the causes of listening problems faced by EFL students, experts' opinions regarding teaching listening principles, and implications for listening instruction in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Listening Problems, Teaching Listening Principles, Listening in EFL Contexts

Introduction

Listening is crucial to success in both education and career. Poor listening skills adversely affect communication at work and effective listening is extremely important for career growth (Piamsai, 2011). Moreover, it is generally accepted that career success in a digital globalized society of the 21st century requires effective communication in English, which undoubtedly involve competencies in both of the oral skills--speaking and listening. English proficiency has become

a necessity even in countries where English is spoken as a foreign language (EFL contexts). EFL Teachers and educators have therefore made efforts to improve the English proficiency of their students. However, many EFL learners find listening difficult to learn (Renandya & Farrell, 2011). A large body of research has therefore been carried out to investigate causes of listening problems among EFL learners so as to address the problems more efficiently. Several listening experts also offer helpful advice on how to improve the listening skills of language learners. This article presents insights from research about listening problems faced by EFL learners, experts' opinions about principles of teaching listening and pedagogical implications on teaching listening in EFL contexts.

Causes of Listening problems faced by EFL learners

Listening problems among EFL learners seem to lie in what they do when listening. Unlike first language (L1) listeners, who can automatically process what they hear without much conscious attention to word-by-word input, most language learners need to consciously decode the details and construct the meaning of the listening input (Vandergrift, 2004). That is to say, they usually try to listen to every single word and cannot ignore parts of the input that are not necessary for understanding the message. Moreover, studies have suggested that the common causes of listening problems among EFL learners involve not only the learners themselves, but also the listening input and the teaching and learning activities. Those causes can be classified into three types, that is, the learner factor, the input factor, and the teaching and learning factor.

1. Learner factor

The first type of causes of EFL learners' listening problems includes the learners' inadequate linguistic knowledge, limited working memory, low motivation and attention failure. Many studies report these problems among EFL students. For example, Bennui (2007) found that many Thai EFL students in his study had poor background of English linguistic elements. Likewise, Chen (2013) found that Taiwanese EFL students had trouble figuring out the main ideas of the message, remembering what was heard, and keeping themselves concentrated on the following part of the input while processing the previously heard part. These Taiwanese students also had problems due to the linking sounds between words. That is to say, the causes of listening problems among Taiwanese students in Chen (2013) were their lack of linguistic knowledge, limited working memory and attention failure. On the other hand, Piamsai (2011) and Hamouda

(2013) reported problems with anxiety and lack of concentration among EFL students in Thailand and Saudi Arabia. In short, EFL listeners' lack of linguistic knowledge, working memory and concentration as well as their anxiety and attention failure contribute to their comprehension breakdown.

2. Input factor

This type of causes of EFL learners' listening problems covers the difficulties with the listening texts: the fast speed of delivery, unfamiliar terminology and concepts, and the length of the listening input. According to Hasan (2000), Arabic EFL learners had problems with the fast speed rate of delivery and new vocabulary in the listening texts. Likewise, Graham (2006) and Bennui (2007) found that the main listening problems reported by EFL learners were related to the speedy delivery of texts, which resulted in the learners' failure to identify and recognize words in a stream of input. Taiwanese students in Chen (2013) also identified problems regarding lack of background knowledge, unfamiliar vocabulary, rapid speech rate and unfamiliar accent. University students majoring in English in China, likewise, reported difficulties listening to English due to lack of background knowledge about the topic of the listening texts and unfamiliarity with English names and places (Jiang & Yang, 1999). Similarly, Kajornboon (2011) found that factors inhibiting Thai EFL medical students' listening comprehension were unfamiliar language used, unfamiliar accents and unfamiliar pronunciation. EFL students in Saudi Arabia also shared the problems about the speaker's accent, speed of listening input and unfamiliar vocabulary (Hamouda, 2013). Piamsai (2011) added that, apart from lack of vocabulary and speakers' speed, another factor affecting the listening comprehension of Thai university students in her study was the length of the input.

3. Teaching and learning factor

This type of causes of EFL learners' listening problems includes their lack of access to extra-curricular and real-life activities in English. For example, Jayawasu (1988 as cited in Bennui, 2007) reported listening problems among Thai university students in Bangkok due to inadequate listening practice and ineffective communicative listening activities. Similarly, Boonyakarn (as cited in Bennui, 2007) identified a lack of opportunity for language experience among Thai EFL students. Almost twenty years later, the problems of inadequate practice and limited exposure to actual use of English were still found among EFL learners in Thailand (Bennui, 2007; Chonprakay, 2009)

despite a variety of English input through radio, movies and other media. This may be due to the fact that English was not demanded as a survival tool in an EFL context.

The listening problems regarding the learners, the listening input and the teaching and learning activities in EFL contexts discussed above contribute to EFL learners' difficulties in attaining effective listening skills. The learners of English in EFL contexts seem to need help with not only knowledge of the language but also guidelines on how to learn and practice using the language. EFL teachers' awareness of causes of listening problems faced by EFL learners should enable them to deal with the problems more successfully. EFL teachers may also benefit from experts' views about teaching listening principles presented in the following section.

Principles for Teaching Listening

Listening is defined by many scholars as an active mental process of constructing meaning from what is heard. It is a purposeful processing of information which the listener selects and interprets from spoken input (Helgesen, 2003; Rost, 2002). Helgesen & Brown (2007) have expressed their opinions and collected ideas about principles of teaching listening from several listening experts. Some of the ideas are similar; others are varied. Helgesen and Brown (2007) explained that such a wide variety was due to different priorities, teaching situations and goals, and the complexity of listening teaching and language teaching in general. However, they were all derived from teaching and learning theory and tempered by classroom and real-life experience.

1. Principle about processing of the listening input

EFL learners should be trained to process listening input the same way they do in their first language. That is to say, they should use both bottom-up processing and top-down processing when listening in a foreign language text (Helgesen, 2003). Instead of trying to catch all the words uttered by the speaker, EFL listeners need to learn to make sense of the input by focusing on different parts of the language such as vocabulary, grammatical structure and sound system (referred to as the bottom-up processing). At the same time, EFL listeners need to learn to use top-down processing to figure out what they hear by relating it to their background knowledge which includes both the general knowledge of the world derived from the listener's experience and previous learning (called content schema), and knowledge of the language and content needed in different situations (called textual schema). However, EFL learners should be trained to balance both kinds of processing because excessive focus on either bottom-up or

top-down processing could lead to misunderstanding (Helgesen & Brown, 2007). Such balance can be achieved through pre-listening activities, in which listeners complete tasks to activate their background knowledge related to what they will hear (top-down processing) and at the same time, notice vocabulary and forms that will carry the content (bottom-up processing).

2. Principle about goals of teaching listening

Listening instruction should be carried out for dual goals: listening for comprehension practice and listening for language acquisition. It is normal in a listening lesson to have students listen to the same text twice. Therefore, students could focus on comprehension first, and after they have understood the meaning, they could be involved in Focus on Form (FonF) activities, in which they notice language forms, grammar and the ways the language is used. In this way, the input they have received from listening can be transformed to conscious intake that leads to language acquisition (Helgesen & Brown, 2007; Richards, 2005).

3. Principle about listening materials

According to Helgesen and Brown (2007) and other experts cited in their book, listening materials should include a variety of authentic and prepared texts, and tasks of various types and purposes. As for texts, students should be exposed to both authentic and simulated listening input and to English spoken by native and non-native speakers. Besides, listening texts should be interesting enough to keep students motivated. As far as listening tasks are concerned, pre-listening while- listening and post-listening activities should be properly used for specific teaching purposes such as schema activation, global listening, listening for specific information and inference. Moreover, listening tasks should promote learners' involvement, provide opportunities to apply listening strategies and should be made realistic. After-class practice should also be encouraged.

Helgesen & Brown (2007) also add that a listening task should give learners a purpose to listen. This is different from traditional listening materials which require students to listen to a text and then answer questions after listening. The problem with this approach is that students do not know where to focus and may fail to answer the questions because they have forgotten the information. On the contrary, when a listening task is given, students know what to listen for, the same way as when they listen to something in real life.

4. Principle about listening strategies

Several listening experts cited in Helgesen and Brown (2007) explicitly advised that teachers train students to use listening strategies. For example, students should learn strategies for listening in live conversation, such as asking clarification questions, giving ongoing feedback and confirmation, making short comments to support the speaker, and redirecting the topic, so that students can become active listeners. Moreover, teachers may find it necessary to introduce to students such strategies as listening for main points, listening for key words, making inferences and note-taking, and to help students with short-term memory training.

Different scholars have developed different systems for classifying learning strategies. Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) revised version for learners of English as a second or foreign language (1990) comprises 50 strategies for language learning in general (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). Flowerdew & Miller (2005) identified 34 strategies specifically used for listening while Rost (2002) lists only six listening strategies used by successful language learners. Teachers may need to choose strategies they find appropriate for their students and their context. For example, Chen (2013) chose to teach his Taiwanese students to use 15 listening strategies which can be classified into 3 types as follows:

1. Metacognitive strategies: pre-listening planning, while-listening monitoring, directed attention, selective listening and post-listening evaluation
2. Cognitive strategies: listening for gist, listening for details, inferencing, prediction, elaborating, visualizing, summarizing and note-taking
3. Social/affective strategies: cooperation and confidence building

Several foreign language listening researchers share the view that strategy training is beneficial to listening skill development. Liu (2008) suggests that strategy-based instruction is required for increasing students' conscious learning and for enabling them to apply strategies they have learned in class to various situations outside the classroom. Hanafiyeh and Mafakheri (2013) evaluated the effectiveness of a five-week metacognitive strategy training program provided for university students of intermediate level of proficiency in Iran and found that they performed significantly better in their listening achievement test.

Some researchers found that listening strategy training together with the development of accuracy or the form-focused instruction contribute to the improvement of listening skills of EFL learners. For example, Kettongma and Wasuntarasobhit (2015) reported

significant improvement in the test scores of low-intermediate Thai EFL learners after they were trained to use cognitive listening strategies of visualization and inferencing, and learned about English pronunciation, word stress and sound linking. Piamsai (2011) argues that EFL learners need to learn how to use appropriate strategies for different tasks, so the teacher should train them to be aware of the purpose of each task and choose suitable strategies accordingly.

To conclude, listening experts' advice is varied and covers different aspects of listening teaching: ways of processing listening input, goals of teaching listening, material preparation and lesson planning, and listening strategy training. Individual experts have different priorities in their teaching depending on their learners, teaching goals and situations. Nevertheless, a lot of implications can be drawn from these varied ideas and are presented in the following section.

Implications for listening instruction

As previously discussed in the first section of this article, the listening problems faced by EFL learners can be classified into three types according to the causes of the listeners' difficulties: learner factor, input factor and teaching and learning factor. This part of the article attempts to address those causes of difficulties based on the ideas about teaching listening discussed in the previous section. Pedagogical implications are drawn with reference to various experts and researchers in English language teaching.

1. Implications for listening problems concerning the learner factor

Problems faced by EFL listeners that concern the learners themselves as discussed in the first part of this article include learners' inadequate knowledge of the language, their limited working memory, low motivation and attention failure, anxiety and lack of concentration. Possible solutions to each of the problems are presented below.

First of all, to address the problem regarding inadequate linguistic knowledge of the EFL learners, teachers may need to figure out which elements of the language their students lack. For example, if students do not have enough vocabulary to understand listening texts, the teachers may consider equipping them with new words in pre-listening activities. This not only contributes to the likely success of the forthcoming listening task but also increases the students' vocabulary. As far as vocabulary is concerned, around 8,000 word families are needed for learners to successfully understand unsimplified texts (Nation, 2006). Another concern of listening teacher

is the fact that EFL learners are not familiar with the pronunciation of some key words in the listening text they are going to hear and that they are not aware of features of spoken English such as stress, intonation, assimilation and reduction patterns. This can be resolved by providing lessons and practice on those problematic areas of the language so as to improve the students' knowledge of English. However, if class time does not allow for such direct instruction, EFL teachers may consider assigning their students to work on computerized or online English lessons such as Tell Me More. A lot of practice is essential for the improvement in learners' listening skills (Helgesen & Brown, 2007); therefore, teachers need to provide ample opportunities for students to learn and practice.

Nonetheless, no matter how extensive knowledge EFL learners have of the language, their learning and performance can still be inhibited by the way they process listening input. This is a common situation in EFL contexts where students have learned a lot of language, especially vocabulary and grammar, but cannot use English to express themselves. These learners are referred to as 'false beginners' by Helgesen & Brown (2007). This situation could be remedied by training them to process input using both top-down and bottom-up processing through a combination of tasks, some of which require them to use their background knowledge (for top-down processing) and others of which encourage them to use their vocabulary and grammar knowledge. For example, in the first listening, students may be given a task of identifying the main idea or the sequence of a series of events, and then in the second listening of the same text, students may be asked to focus on verbs used in the text (Helgesen & Brown, 2007).

As for the issue of limited working memory, EFL learners can be trained to use some language learning strategies such as memory strategies, which are techniques that help the learner remember better by using key words and putting new words in context. According to Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995), memories strategy include grouping, imagery, rhyming and structured reviewing. Memory strategies are one of the six categories of strategies in Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which has been "the most often used strategy scale around the world" as it shows "predictive and correlative link with language performance (course grades, standardized test scores, ratings of proficiency)" (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995, p.1). Although memory strategies are not limited to listening performance, they contribute to quicker, easier and more effective learning (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). EFL teachers may therefore consider

incorporate memory strategies training in their lesson planning to enhance their students' language learning, which will in turn increase their motivation to learn more.

The third problem encountered by EFL learners involves low motivation and attention failure. EFL teachers may help boost their students' motivation through a wide range of interesting in-class and out-of-class activities. Songs, movies, TV series, game shows, video clips, news broadcast, recorded interviews and live anecdotes can be used as motivating input that can sustain their attention to their listening lesson. According to Rost and Wilson (2013, p. 3), "Strong motivation can even compensate for weaknesses in language aptitude and for a scarcity of learning opportunities." It is therefore crucial for EFL teachers to keep their students motivated despite their limited exposure to the language in the context of English as a foreign language.

As regards problems with anxiety and lack of concentration, teachers may have to figure out why their students feel anxious about listening. One possible reason for this negative feeling may be the students' misunderstanding about listening goals. Ur (1984) points out that many EFL learners expect themselves to hear and understand every single word they listen to even though they would not do so in their first language. Bloomfield et al (2010 p. ii) explains that 'if a listener is anxious or in some other way distracted and unable to pay attention, it will be more difficult to accurately determine what was said'. Apart from directly making students aware that it is unnatural and unnecessary to listen to every word, EFL teachers may help them focus on specific parts of the input by setting goals for each listening task such as listening for gist (or global listening) or listening for specific details. Moreover, EFL students' lack of concentration may be due to their lack of interest in the listening topic. In this case, teachers may try to link classroom tasks to their everyday life by showing them how those tasks will help them achieve effective real-life listening goals (Helgesen & Brown, 2007). Teachers may consider contextualizing listening tasks by simply introducing the topic to class and inviting students to share what they know about the topic before moving on to the listening task.

Last but not least, training students to use listening strategies may be another way to handle the problems regarding the learners. As mentioned earlier, researchers and writers have different lists and classifications of listening strategies, and teachers should know best which strategies should be appropriate for their students. Therefore, EFL teachers may find it helpful to consult research studies conducted with EFL learners in a situation similar to their own. For example, teachers of Thai EFL learners in a university may consider discouraging the students'

use of translation strategy based on the findings of Naresuan University International College (NUIC, n.d.) and Piamsia (2011), both of which reported an inverse relationship between university students' language proficiency level and their use of translation strategy. On the contrary, Thai EFL adult learners may be encouraged to employ concluding strategy, rule-applying strategy, note-taking strategy and planning strategy as Piamsai (2005) found that Thai university students who performed better in the listening test used those strategies at a significantly higher level than students whose test performance was lower. Moreover, the fact that EFL learners with a high level of proficiency in Piamsai's (2011) study used strategies of making prediction, listening for main ideas and details, making use of context and background knowledge, visualizing and taking notes may prompt EFL teachers in a similar context to design tasks that require the use of those strategies. Liu's (2008) preliminary findings of her qualitative research regarding the listening comprehension strategy use of two students in Taiwan may help EFL teachers decide to train their students to use strategies of comprehension monitoring, directed attention, inferencing, elaboration and making use of prior knowledge, which were used by the more proficient student.

Li's (2013) study also provides evidence that students who used more planning, monitoring and evaluating strategies tend to have better listening performance because they can regulate their cognitive process more successfully. However, Li (2013) argues that a large amount of after-class practice is also needed so students can successfully apply proper metacognitive strategies in specific contexts, which in turn will help boost their confidence in listening. Noom-ura (2008) supplied evidence that low-proficiency EFL learners benefit from language learning strategy training together with the development of accuracy or the form-focused instruction. Similarly, Kettongma and Wasuntarasobhit (2015) reported significant improvement in the test scores of low-intermediate Thai EFL learners after they were trained to use cognitive listening strategies of visualization and inferencing, and learned about English pronunciation, word stress and sound linking.

2. Implications for listening problems concerning the input factor

EFL listening problems caused by listening input factor involve the fast speed of the delivery, new terminology, concepts and the length of the listening texts, and the unfamiliarity with accents and pronunciations.

The problem of the speed of the delivery is a common concern of EFL learners. This may partly be due to their misconception that they need to hear and understand every single

word. If such misunderstanding is cleared up, but students still feel that the listening text is too fast, their teachers may need to reconsider their selection of listening input. Listening materials provided online such as those in BBC learning English and VOA (Special English) programs, which are specially designed for teaching English and offer listening texts that are delivered at a quite slow speed of delivery, could make authentic and effective listening materials for EFL classes.

The listening problems caused by new terminology in and concepts of the input can be resolved with pre-teaching activities. Students could be prepared for listening texts that contain unfamiliar terms and concepts by pre-teaching new key words and supplying new concepts and relevant background knowledge. All these inputs will facilitate EFL learners' decoding and making sense of what they hear shortly afterwards. For example, a listening text may contain cultural references which some students may not be familiar with. The teacher may introduce these unfamiliar references to students through a group discussion in which students share what they know about the concepts, or they may compare and contrast those unfamiliar cultural concepts with those in their own culture (Helgesen & Brown, 2007). After these pre-listening activities, students should have enough schemata for listening.

The listening problems concerning the length of the input may be alleviated by dividing long texts into parts and assign tasks related to each part instead of having students listen to the whole text and do all the tasks at once.

Finally, problems caused by unfamiliar accents and pronunciations can be solved by providing students with exposure to English spoken by native and non-native speakers of English. This can be done through video clips shown in class or assigned for self-study outside of class. Students should be made aware that native speakers may have variations of accents and pronunciations depending on countries or regions of residence. Besides, EFL teachers may make use of computerized dictionaries to provide British and American pronunciations of words and use online media such as YouTube to show students examples of various accents of the language.

3. Implications for listening problems regarding teaching and learning factor

The last type of causes of listening problems involves the context where English is taught. In an EFL context, the language is mainly used for academic and professional purposes. EFL learners are exposed to the language in class and do not need it in their daily life. With little access to extra-curricular activities and lack of exposure to actual use of English, EFL learners have inadequate practice of the language use. Apart from getting students involved in communicative

listening activities in class, EFL teachers may need to encourage students to use English outside of class. Extra-curricular activities may be provided and encouraged. EFL learners may be assigned to listen to songs, or to watch movies and video clips in English as homework. Teachers may also recommend or require that students do further listening practice through educational materials online and offline.

Not only do students need further practice on listening skills but they also benefit from out-of-class practice on the use of listening strategies. Li (2013) argues that a large amount of after-class practice is needed so students can successfully apply proper metacognitive strategies in specific contexts, which in turn will help boost their confidence in listening.

Conclusion

While some 21st century teachers of English are moving towards innovative teaching methods and approaches such as Syneetics instructional method in order to teach English while promoting creative thinking (Wattanatorn, et al., 2017), other EFL teachers still need to prepare students with low listening ability for active learning. These students are not ready to communicate in English because they do not understand what people are saying to them. It is therefore necessary for the teachers of English to help equip these students with effective listening skills first. Listening problems encountered by these students need to be identified and properly addressed. To enable these ‘false beginners’ to compete successfully in the 21st century globalized world, teachers need to provide them with linguistic knowledge, and in-class and out-of-class activities to improve their listening skills while building up their confidence and motivation to improve their proficiency despite the lack of exposure to real-life English use in their EFL contexts.

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