

Chapter One

Introduction

This chapter consists of the motivation, the purpose and the significance of this study, providing a general overview on the effectiveness of pre-listening activities on listening comprehension in elementary English teaching.

Motivation

Listening is important in second or foreign language learning. The listening skill fosters the development of other language skills. As Nord (1981) stated that proficiency in listening comprehension is “readily transferable to other language skills, (including speaking and reading)”, it is without doubt that listening is the first bridge to speaking, reading and writing, which is built to connect both communication and language learning. Most researchers now agree that listeners are active participants in any communication experience and listening comprehension is in fact the cornerstone of language acquisition (Feyten, 1991; Field, 2000). Also, listening is the most frequently used language skill in communication. Of the time in communication, 45% is spent in listening, 30% in speaking, 16% in reading, and approximately 9% in writing (Nichols & Stevens, 1957).

It is necessary for students to learn how to listen. Although listening was once regarded as a receptive or passive language skill, or even as Scarcella & Oxford (1992) stated, as “an enabling skill, not worthy of attention on its own” (p. 139), the status of listening instruction has changed enormously over the past decades from non-teaching listening to a listening strategy instruction (Mendelsohn, 1998), which could be attributed largely to the development of communicative approaches to language teaching (Asher, 1977; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Krashen, 1982; Ommaggio Hadley, 2001). With more and more attention given to the importance of listening, many researchers

have begun to create a lot of listening activities and design several teaching methodologies for listening (Brown, 1990; Mendelsohn, 1998; Rost, 1990; Thompson & Rubin, 1996; Underwood, 1989; Ur, 1984). In addition, some researchers have begun to investigate the factors or strategies affecting listening comprehension (Blau, 1990, 1991; Griffiths, 1991; Teng, 1994; Vandergrift, 1996). Joiner (1991) and Rubin (1994), reviewing the state of listening instruction, treated listening skills as separate elements in L2 pedagogy and stressed the importance of listening in second language acquisition. Teaching listening not only improves learners' listening comprehension but also enhances their confidence toward the second language, and thus motivates learners to explore the language. The study of Thompson and Rubin (1996) showed that strategy instruction can improve listening comprehension. In their extensive and longitudinal empirical study, the experimental group of students of Russian as a Foreign Language not only did significantly better in listening comprehension than the control group, but the experimental group showed an increase in willingness and confidence to watch Russian movies on their own. In other studies, advance organizers have been proved to have positive effect on listening comprehension. In the study of Omaggio Hadley (1979), it was found that pictures aid listening comprehension in French as a foreign language. According to Mueller (1980), research revealed that although visual contextual aids significantly enhance listening comprehension for college students of German at the lower level of proficiency, the converse holds true at higher level of proficiency. Herron (1994) tested the effect of a single advance organizer on listening comprehension in a French video series. Participants were 38 college students, including 8 males and 30 females. For the advance organizer plus video condition, the instructor wrote six sentences on the board in chronological order, depicting the major scenes of a 10-minute video session.

In the control condition, students watched the video only, with no introductory statements or other manipulation of the material by the instructor. Herron found that students in experimental group performed significantly better in listening comprehension when compared with students who had viewed video only. Furthermore, Herron, Hanley and Cole (1995) compared the effects of two advance organizers on the comprehension of 39 college students in an introductory French course. Results indicated that the Description + Pictures condition significantly improved comprehension when compared with Description Only condition. It was interpreted by the researchers, that listening comprehension is facilitated by the visual support that advance organizers provide. The findings of these studies show the benefits of using advance organizers in second / foreign language classroom, suggesting teachers to introduce appropriate advance organizers to facilitate students' listening comprehension.

In the learning of second or foreign language, learners spend far much less hours in listening to the target language than in their native language. A child aged 6 has listened to his native language for a minimum of 17,520 hours, equivalent to more than 50 years of college instruction (Asher, 1982). In contrast, the average time spent by a second or foreign language student who completes one year of foreign language instruction reaches only about 160 classroom hours, with perhaps, in a very generous estimate, an additional 50 to 100 hours of language lab exercises, interaction with native speakers, or other voluntary listening practice (Elkhafaifi, 2005). In Taiwan, the teaching of listening comprehension has not been much noticed for a long time. As a result, it can possibly be inferred that students in Taiwan do not receive as much practice in listening as in reading and writing. According to Wu (2004), there are mainly two reasons accounting for this phenomenon. First, there are not many

teaching activities designed for teaching listening comprehension. Second, in Taiwan, English teaching focuses on reading and writing because there are not listening tests in Basic Competence Test, a nationwide primary entrance examination of senior high school taken by junior high graduates. Even a senior high school student is not confident of his listening ability. In Lai's (1985) study, most of her 1,684 subjects valued highly on the importance of listening comprehension but still admitted that listening competency is the least emphasized language skill in their learning of English.

Although most recently published English textbooks include a section of listening comprehension, which aims to comply with the English competency benchmark set by Taiwan's Ministry of Education because of the Nine-year Integration Curriculum, there are some problems that elementary students encounter in listening activities. First, students' limited vocabulary results in their inability in identifying content words in listening practices and tests (Ur, 1984). Young learners' incompetence in deriving meaning from a larger context becomes one of students' problems in listening. Second, children always assume that they have to understand every word in a listening passage, and tend to listen to every single word distinctively, so they always stop listening when encountering a certain word that they do not know (Ur, 1984). They may try very hard to figure out the meanings of unfamiliar words. As long as children start to become obsessed about this habit, they are likely to fail to listen to the whole passage, and then would possibly become extremely frustrated and unconfident. Third, foreign language learners' pre-existing knowledge helps very little in listening to the target language because learners have different cultural background and discourse pattern from that of native English speakers (Ur, 1984; Harmer, 2001).

Purpose of This Study

The first purpose of this study is to identify effective teaching activities that improve elementary EFL students' listening comprehension. It is important for elementary EFL learners to cultivate their confidence in listening to English and for them to experience the success, which positively affects students' affective factors in learning the foreign language. The classroom is one of the main occasions that provide English learning opportunity for EFL learners, and teachers need to be active in creating students' engagement by providing them with different tasks.

The second purpose of this study is to investigate when learners rely on top-down processing, such as background knowledge and semantic cues, on bottom-up processing, such as acoustic features and stress, and on parallel processing. By receiving listening activities, young learners are likely to develop their own listening strategies and thus enhance their communication ability in English.

The third purpose is to investigate problems and difficulties that elementary EFL students usually encounter in the process of listening. Teachers, accordingly, can design listening activities or modify their listening teaching methods and provide the most appropriate learning environment for young EFL learners.

Significance of This Study

The result of this study is expected to help teachers review, evaluate and modify either their teaching methods in listening or their design of the curriculum, thereby providing more effective learning strategies for children in listening comprehension. Listening ability requires a large amount of consistent practice. Classroom activities should ideally provide each student enough opportunities of practicing. If it is possible for students to practice listening through classroom activities in an effective way, it is likely to boost their interest in improving listening and to cultivate a good

listening habit which is of great help in their future English learning.

In addition, information provided by this study is expected to offer some suggestions for textbook writers with much more various perspectives regarding listening teaching design. It would be a benefit for EFL students if more helpful listening activities are offered in their language learning textbooks. Learners, then, would become more active and independent in learning English. They would improve their listening competence even there is no assistance or instruction from their teachers.