

Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter consists of six sections: the first section includes the summary and discussion of the findings of this study; the second section entails the implications of the study; the third section includes suggestions for listening teaching; the fourth sections sketches the limitation of this study; the fifth section includes directions for future research; the sixth section entails the conclusion of the present study.

Summary and Discussion of the Findings

There are mainly three purposes of the present study: first, to identify effective listening teaching activities for elementary EFL learners; second, to understand when learners rely on top-down and bottom-up processing in their process of listening, and third, to investigate difficulties that elementary EFL learners usually encounter in the process of listening.

For the first purpose, both interactive and bottom-up pre-listening activities were observed to be effective in facilitating EFL learners' listening comprehension. However, there was no sufficient support for significant improvement between pre- and post-tests to identify which type of pre-listening activities was more effective for all the fifth graders in elementary school, namely the population. The finding of this aspect is consistent with previous studies of Johnson and Long (2007), Ozeki (2000), O'Malley et al. (1985) and Seo (2000). Caution must be exercised in interpreting the above finding since the result of *t*-test may limit the conclusion to be drawn to the population. Some possible reasons may account for the limited finding of this study. First, the schemata, which are important in the interactive approach, are limited to certain extent for children under twelve. Children may not successfully associate their

experiences or background knowledge with listening tasks because of their limited schemata and world knowledge, failing to activate effective top-down processing. Thus interactive pre-listening activities did not facilitate learners' listening comprehension to the expected extent. Second, children may relate their listening with incorrect schemata even if they have background or prior knowledge (Jensen & Hansen, 1995). According to Jensen and Hansen (1995), selecting appropriate schemata depends on successful interaction between the acoustic input, linguistic knowledge and world knowledge to construct the meaning of the discourse. In order to comprehend a message correctly, students need to successfully integrate the incoming input with his own knowledge system. Third, EFL/ ESL learners tend to widely employ bottom-up processing rather than top-down processing when listening (Long, 1990; Shohamy & Inbar, 1991). Participants in this study may tend to listen word by word and decode the incoming data with lexical meanings even though they had been provided previously with some top-down pre-listening organizers, such as content pictures. Fourth, although participants in this study seemed to be unfamiliar with techniques of top-down processing, they had reported in the questionnaire that they employed top-down processing; however, some of them needed more directions or hints from the instructor to make meaningful inferences or association. In picture inferring activities, some students had difficulty drawing inferences by merely looking at pictures; the instructor needed to guide them with different questions or uncompleted Chinese sentences so that they could focus on the main idea instead of on insignificant details of the pictures.

For the second purpose of this study, it was observed from the questionnaire that although listeners reported it helpful to discuss content pictures before listening (a

type of top-down processing activity), 34 out of the 42 participants in the interactive group employed bottom-up processing when they found listening texts difficult to understand, 36 participants usually translated key words into Chinese in the process of listening (bottom-up processing), and 39 participants agreed that understanding every single word was the key to comprehend listening texts (bottom-up processing).

For the third purpose as difficulties encountered in the process of listening, learners in this study were observed to be relying on word-by-word processing. Most learners seemed to need very high lexical familiarity for good listening comprehension, which is consistent with Bonk's (2000) findings. Osada (2001) explained that beginner-level EFL listeners tend to adopt a mental translation approach to listening, so it is difficult for them to construct meaning when they process connected speech merely on a word-by-word basis. Segalowitz and Segalowitz (1993) proposed that automatization of word recognition skills, that is, fluent bottom-up processing, is critical for successful listening comprehension. However, due to the lack of grammatical knowledge and vocabulary, word recognition skills of ineffective EFL listeners are not fully automatized (Meccarty, 2000). Learners in this study tended to employ a word-by-word method when they encountered unfamiliar listening content, so little vocabulary of which do they understand, and thus little do the listeners comprehend. On the other hand, they needed plenty of contextual support to compensate for the lack of automatized linguistic decoding skill (Wallace 1992). However, they were observed to be somewhat unfamiliar with top-down processing. This could possibly imply that students, especially beginners, do not frequently employ top-down processing in their regular listening or reading activities. And it is reasonable to assume that this

unfamiliarity could potentially result from insufficient instruction of school teachers regarding top-down processing trainings. It would be interesting to follow up on how school teachers arrange their teaching in listening or reading to see if learners are provided with sufficient chances to employ their top-down processing.

Implications of this Study

Some implications of this study could be drawn for EFL teachers and textbook writers. For EFL teachers' listening teaching in elementary school, providing more top-down processing activities before listening could help learners activate their schemata. By providing listening activities adequately, learners are expected to cultivate good listening habits, such as intentionally focusing attention and blocking out distractions and getting ready both mentally and physically (Gans, 1994), activating pertaining schemata (Ellermeyer, 1993; Fitch-Hauser, 1990; Kintsch, 1989) and defining goals and perspectives (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1989; Flammer & Tauber, 1982; Pichert & Anderson, 1977). Furthermore, EFL teachers could help elementary EFL learners develop and apply listening strategies. It has been supported that the using of strategies during listening, when appropriately adapted to the listening context, facilitated listeners' information processing from aural input (Imhof, 2001).

For textbook writers, various types of pre-listening activities are suggested to be considered in the edition or compilation of textbooks, focusing not merely on word or sound recognition, but also on practicing learners' top-down processing, as well as strategies for good listening (Janusik & Wolvin, 1999). The selection criteria of English textbooks for elementary school in Taiwan seems to put much focus on the teaching of phonics, the listening quality of CDs, and the presence of songs or chants

(詹，民93). Limited types of listening activities are designed in elementary English textbooks, most of which are bottom-up oriented, such as circling the sound you hear in phonics section. Learners would find it interesting and challenging with some top-down pre-listening activities, such as predicting the coming listening passage based on related pictures. EFL students could benefit in listening comprehension if various types of listening activities are provided in the textbook, and EFL teachers could effectively design their listening lessons with useful textbook resources.

Suggestions for Teaching of Listening

Some suggestions can be made for the application of top-down processing activities and listening strategy instruction. Top-down processing activities in this study included picture-inferring and discussing, which seemed to be attractive to the majority of elementary EFL learners. During picture-inferring and discussing, the researcher, same as the instructor, guided students with open-ended questions in Chinese which were mostly based on students' living experiences, producing an easy and safe atmosphere for students to think and reply questions. Participants were strongly encouraged to express their inferences and opinions in Chinese without any right or wrong judgement from the instructor which could probably foster their willing and confidence of listening.

For the instruction of listening strategy, three types of cognitive strategies in Imhof's (2001) study were identified, namely interest management, asking pre-questions, and elaboration strategies. First, for interest management, it has been concluded that topic interest changes the quality and the quantity of information processing (Schiefele & Krapp, 1996). Elementary EFL teachers could build learners' interest by choosing appropriate listening topics based on their daily life experiences

and their language level, and also providing positive, immediate feedback right after learners' listening. Second, asking pre-questions can help listeners filter incoming information in advance and aid them in deciding if a piece of information is relevant; thus facilitating inference and the integration of new information into the listeners' existing schemata (Pichert & Anderson, 1977; Imhof, 2001). Teachers can ask useful, relevant and interesting pre-questions to foster elementary EFL learners' interest and prepare them for the following listening tasks. Third, elaboration strategies can be defined as a variety of processing activities that help listeners relate new information to prior knowledge, create interrelations between individual pieces of information and stimulate inferences (Imhof, 2001). Elaboration strategies take various forms, such as creating personal examples, contrasting the target concepts, and expanding on the target concepts (Hamilton, 1997). It has been observed in Mayer's (1980) and Imhof's (2001) study that learners instructed to use elaboration strategies are able to process information at a deeper level and are better at transforming and applying information in a problem-solving context. Teachers can provide such processing activities to foster EFL learners' listening and make them more and more familiar with listening strategies. In addition, it is suggested that before listening, teachers should show keywords in the listening text that may interfere with student's overall comprehension (Shang, 2008). This approach, based on Vandergrift (2004), can build beginning-level listeners' confidence and help them learn to use effective combinations of top-down and bottom-up processing strategies.

Limitation of This Study

Two limitations of this study should be noted. First, the sample size of this study was rather small, 34 participants in the bottom-up group and 42 in the interactive

group. There is a risk of drawing an overall conclusion that interactive pre-listening activities are more effective than bottom-up pre-listening activities for all fifth elementary EFL learners in Taiwan, based on the performances of the two groups of the sample. Opinions collected from the questionnaire could represent the tendency of listening behaviors of the interactive group rather than that of all the fifth graders in elementary school. Further research is necessary based on a larger number of participants to ensure the conclusion for the population. Second, merely 24 females out of the total 76 participants were sampled, which could be a problem in gender distribution. It would be more worthwhile and meaningful to investigate the listening performance of a more gender-balanced group.

Directions for Future Research

As for directions for further research, future studies are suggested to put focus on either the integration of top-down, bottom-up processing and listening strategy with a larger sample size or the evaluation of the effects of various types of pre-listening activities with purposes of training EFL learners both linguistically and cognitively, especially for elementary EFL learners, and developing an overall systematic teaching plan concerning listening instruction. Furthermore, it would be useful to follow up on how teachers teach listening in instructional settings in elementary school classrooms. To present, the majority of listening studies have been conducted with university students and not with kindergarten through 12th graders (Beall *et al.*, 2008). It is hoped that through the understanding of how elementary EFL teachers teach listening, there would be a better balance between the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing.

Conclusion

From the discussion above, some important conclusions may be drawn for the teaching of listening. First, teachers need to provide a variety of different pre-listening activities, featuring top-down, bottom-up or interactive processing, as well as listening strategies, such as interest management, asking pre-questions and other elaboration strategies for learners to listen more effectively and efficiently and further prepare them with the ability of self-learning in the future. Second, it would be helpful to ask for feedback on strategy use (Graham & Macaro, 2008) and reflection on listening behaviors (Imhof, 1998) from learners. Learners could not be expected to improve their listening abilities until they learn to appreciate their listening inadequacies (Imhof, 1998; Ford *et al.*, 2000). With such feedback and reflection from learners, learners' awareness of the complex set of behaviors required for effective listening could be enhanced, and listening instruction, in this way, could be more helpful to young learners who could treat listening with heightened sensitivity, which would ultimately enable them to acquire another language more efficiently. Besides, EFL teachers could improve and tailor their listening teaching based on such feedback and reflection from learners. Finally, it is suggested that textbook writers should consider the variety of pre-listening activities, focusing not merely on word or sound recognition, which are more bottom-up oriented, but also on practicing learners' top-down processing, as well as strategies for good listening (Janusik & Wolvin, 1999). As for the content of listening texts in textbooks, natural, native-like listening texts are suggested to prepare EFL learners for communication as it exists in the real world (Shang, 2008). Learners would find listening interesting and challenging if they were provided with different types of pre-listening activities as well as authentic and

interesting listening materials. EFL students could benefit in listening comprehension if various types of listening activities and attractive listening texts were provided in their textbook, and EFL teachers could effectively design their listening lessons with useful teaching material resources. Although there is still much to be desired concerning researches on listening comprehension, it is believed that with adequate listening teaching, young learners would build their confidence in listening and ultimately progress in their English proficiency.