

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a review of theories and previous researches relevant to the present study in four dimensions. Section one reviews the studies on EFL learners' difficulties in listening comprehension. Section two takes a look at the concept of authenticity and the way this notion has evolved in material design. Section three goes over the studies on language testing in listening comprehension. Section four probes into the prior researches and theories of learner-centered curriculum and autonomy, including (1) the skills and knowledge necessary to help students become more autonomous as learners, and (2) teacher's role and students' strategies in promoting autonomy in their classrooms.

2.1 Studies on EFL Learners' Difficulties in Listening Comprehension

For many years, language teaching has been focused on the written language in Taiwan. It is only recently that the authorities concerned and more and more English teachers as well as schools have focused their concern on the importance of teaching spoken language. However, as defined by Chien (1999), "understanding spoken language is a highly complex process in which the listener constructs meaning from the information provided by the speaker. Learners of English as a foreign language often have difficulty in processing spoken language information"(p.85). Students may spend hours in lab booths listening to or repeating the playing of tapes, but still feel frustrated when listening to spoken language outside the lab and classroom, especially "real" "authentic" spoken English.

A lot of researches (Brown, 1977; Brown et al.,1983; Huang, 1991; Rings, 1992; Fan, 1993; Ou, 1996; Chien, 1999; Lin, 2000; Hsiung, 2002) have pointed out from different aspects some major listening problems encountered by EFL learners, whose native language is not stress-timed. An investigation conducted by Lin (2000) with senior high school students reveals that the high-achievers had difficulties in understanding the phrasing and slang, and their major problem was distraction. However, the vital problem for the low-achievers was to keep up with the speaker's fast speaking pace. The problem of fast pace of speech is also mentioned in Huang's (ibid.) survey among 279 students in a five-year junior college in Taipei. In addition, he points out that the difference between spoken English and written English is the other major difficulty encountered by his subjects. Other than the above-mentioned problems, the writer of the present study, from the feedback responses of the subjects, finds another two factors of difficulties—linkage of speech or stream of utterance, and vocabulary.

2.1.1 Fast Pace of Speech

Most EFL learners suffer when they can't catch up with the fast utterance of native speakers. "They feel that the utterances disappear before they can sort them out"(Ou, 1996, p.36). Students feel depressed by missing the next slur of speech while they are so busy grasping the meaning of one part of the message.

In terms of number of words per minute, Chien (1999), citing Pimsleur, et al. (1977), indicates that the delivery rate of English broadcast is approximately 180 words per minute, which is more difficult for L2 learners to understand and that the listeners can't control "the flow of words". However, Huang (1991) points out that "speakers do not aimlessly speed up over certain stretches of their speech and slow

down over others” (p.39). As to when speakers speed up their utterance, Huang (1991, p.39) cites Lennerberg’s (1967) and Stanley’s (1978) investigation as follows:

1. *Use common phrases or clichés (Lenneberg, 1967, p.90).*
2. *Use prepositional evaluators (Stanley, 1978,p.88).*
3. *Utter a group of words rapidly together as an idiomatic term of phrases (Stanley, 1978).*
4. *Rapidly insert imprecise references(Stanley,1978).*
5. *Deliver verbal phrases such as combinations of auxiliaries plus main verbs and verbs plus particles.*

2.1.2 Division of the Stream of Utterances

EFL students often have great difficulties in dividing the rapid stream of utterances into words. In Ou’s (1996) investigation, he argues that “the established learning habits of listening to the Chinese language mislead Chinese students” (p.31). Since Chinese language system is syllable-timed while English is stress-timed, Chinese students tend to listen word by word. In addition, Ou points out that the mislead instructions by teachers, such as, repeating and pronouncing words carefully, or speaking slowly and pausing frequently, even discourage students when they listen to the natural speed of the English language. Brown et al. (1983) claims that in spoken language, native speakers “break down speech into smaller groups of words” (p.3). With regard to “micro-skills” of listening, Richards (1983) suggests that the ability to retain chunks of language of different lengths for short period is required for conversational listening. The problem in finding longer utterances is pointed out in Brindley’s (1982) investigation among learners at the second level. His subjects failed to understand longer utterances, especially those containing subordinate clauses, because of their limitations on short-term memory load.

Brown (1977) and Ur (1984) further divide the stream of utterances into “tone groups”, which, cited by Peng (1999), “are strings of syllables run together to form a

single sequence, and generally characterized by one heavily stressed ‘tone’, and to a lesser extent on other minor stresses.” Brown (1977) mentions that in ‘ideal utterance’, “each tone group contains a phrase: a noun phrase, followed by a verb phrase, followed by a prepositional phrase, the three phrases forming one complete sentence” (p.92).

However, as is often found in most real-life speech, a sentence is not clearly marked off by tone groups because of the ungrammatical or less structured feature of spontaneous speech. In this sense, the division of utterances is another great problem encountered by Chinese senior high school students, who are highly oriented on grammar and syntax in their English learning. Therefore, it is highly suggested that teachers should expose their students more to authentic natural speech to familiarize the learners with the breaking down of their message into the stream of significant information.

2.1.3 Vocabulary

With limited vocabulary, EFL learners are often hindered in the process of listening comprehension. “It is obvious that the choice of vocabulary is in the hands of the speaker, not the listeners” (Ou,1996, p.37). Cited by Chiang (2000), concerning the problem of limited vocabulary, Underwood (1989) asserts that “ for people listening to a foreign language, an unknown word can be like suddenly dropped barrier causing them to stop and think about the meaning of the word and thus making them miss the next part of the speech”(p.7).

However, the researcher of the present study finds that even with the hint of the vocabulary by the teacher, the low-achievers still have difficulties in discriminating sound of words in the stream of utterances. Even though they learned the words in

their junior high school years, they have trouble in recognizing and understanding them due to their incorrect division of sound streams. Yien (1986) and Chen et al. (1999) also find the problems in their researches and imply that EFL students can improve their listening comprehension by listening more to real tasks with familiar topics but simple, short passages. In addition, it is suggested by the writer of the present study that teachers should give students sufficient hearing training of chunks of words, but not word by word.

2.1.4 Limited Exposure to Spoken Language

Brown (1978) stresses that “spoken language is produced very differently from written language. The most obvious difference is that spontaneous speech is usually produced in an interactive situation where the speaker has to take account of the hearer” (p.271). Ur (1984) also proposes that the written language has been “well-described” with standard grammar and does not “vary greatly over a couple of centuries.” Richards (1983) reviews some factors of spoken English and indicates that spoken discourse differs from written texts.

However, in Taiwan almost all the so-called communicative listening comprehension activities in textbooks are printed in unnatural written form, and therefore, students inevitably suffer hindrance when listening to ungrammatical stream of utterances. Hsiung (2002) offers some evidence in his investigation that the differences between spoken English and written English affect listening comprehension. Hence, for effective listening, teachers should avoid only using written texts as a major source of listening and begin to extract ‘real’, ‘authentic’ listening material as supplement. In the meanwhile, students are encouraged to use spoken-language form spontaneously, not simply to utter ‘written language sentences’

(Ur, 1984).

2.2 Studies on Authenticity

The term ‘authenticity’ originated in the mid 1960s in applied linguistics. However, with the development of the communicative approach, the concept of authenticity has been considerably debated. On the one hand, there has been different interpretations of authenticity over the years (Morrow, 1977; Widdowson, 1979; Breen, 1985; Rogers et al., 1988; Cathcart, R. L. 1989; Bacon, 1992; McDonough et al., 1993; van Lier, 1996). On the other hand, the language of the real world has been increasingly explored in authentic use both in material design and language testing.

2.2.1 Definition of Authenticity

Despite the unanimous debates on authenticity, a review of the various definitions of authenticity needs to be attended to for a better understanding of it.

Among the different interpretations of authenticity, Widdowson (1979) further distinguishes ‘genuineness’ from ‘authenticity’ and argues that:

Genuineness is a characteristic of the passage itself and is an absolute quality. Authenticity is a characteristic of the relationship between the passage and the reader and has to do with appropriate response.
(in Jo, 2000, p.43)

In other words, Widdowson (1990) believes that genuineness is the innate quality of the texts, while authenticity is the features of the texts to particular group of students or audience. However, concerning classroom language learning, Widdowson (ibid.) claims that “in this way the meaning of the word authenticity is generalized to such a degree that it becomes virtually useless” (p.46).

Nevertheless, Breen (1985) puts forward a reconceptualization of authenticity. He proposes that the notion of authenticity, instead of being “absolute”, is a “relative”

quality, which is in relative to texts, to tasks and to social situations of the language classroom (in Jo, 2000, p.48).

McDonough et al. (1993) argue that authenticity is a term which loosely implies as close an approximation as possible to the world outside the classroom, in the selection both of language material and of activities and methods used for practice in the classroom.

As van Lier (1996) concludes in his research, “ authenticity is the result of acts of ‘ authentication’ , by students and their teacher, of the learning process and the language used in it” (p.128). In other words, ‘ authenticity’ stresses authenticating the setting and the interaction between teachers and students. Van Lier (ibid.) also suggests that a good teacher may be able to promote authenticity in some setting, and the teacher’ s authenticity may stimulate authenticity in students as well.

2.2.2 Authenticity of Materials

According to Clarke (1989), the use of authentic materials has been one of the most characteristic features of material design in the last 10 or 15 years, and therefore authentic materials should be taken into consideration for effective listening comprehension. Little et al. (1988) assert that an authentic text is “ created to fulfill some social purpose the language community in which it was produced” (p.27). In other words, the use of authentic texts “ is helping to bridge the gap between classroom knowledge and a student’ s capacity to participate in the real-world events” (Wilkins, 1976, in Guariento et al., 2001, p.347).

As for the effect of authenticity on text difficulty, Guariento (ibid.) points out “authentic material has become available for use in the classroom...that will stretch the learner in terms both of skills development and of the quantity and range of new

language” (p.348). He advocates that such authentic, unsimplified materials can be available for learners at post-intermediate level. However, for lower levels, he mentions Lynch’s (1996) suggestion that “simplification—that is ‘successful’ simplification— contributes both to the current communicative event and to long-term language development” (p.348). Both of their views justify the writer’s application of Easy News, simplified authentic news, in the present study.

With respect to teacher’s development of authentic texts, Swaffar (1985) underscores the crucial role of teacher to develop their own authentic texts by asserting that “if the teacher can determine what authentic texts are of particular interest to a class, learning is greatly enhanced” (p.18). Therefore, such authentic texts, through teacher’s deliberate selecting and developing, provide the option of variety within the current curriculum and are ideal for learners’ exposure to pleasure learning, hence arousing a high interest for motivation. As is also supported in van Lier’s (1996) research:

If learners are to successfully authenticate their language learning environment and activities, they clearly need to develop a critical awareness of language and of educational processes, and also develop the ability and will to take charge of their own learning. (p.135).

2.2.3 Application of Authentic Texts in Listening Comprehension

According to Don et al., (1981) authentic texts are structured for special purpose. In their research, they highly recommend radio commercials, weather forecasts and station announcement as suitable for learners to ‘scan’ listening: recognition of brand names or noting down information (price, phone numbers, addresses, temperature, etc.). They assert that “a radio commercial is brief and striking, designed to be heard many times, and relays a small quantity of information very dramatically. It is designed to attract attention...” (p.43). The learners should experience the range of

listening in the classroom to accustom themselves to the pattern of spoken language.

In choosing radio broadcasts as authentic listening comprehension materials, Morrison (1989) states that “the radio offers a wide range of different types of materials which can be selectively exploited as part of a listening comprehension program.” In his report, he further suggests how to conduct news broadcast for students of different levels.

Another researcher, Morrow (1991), uses weather forecasts on the radio to link classroom activity to real-world language activity and suggests that the application of weather forecasts is efficient in teaching listening comprehension for EFL students.

Several other researchers (Hafernik et al., 1979; Wipf, 1984; Morrison, 1989; Tsai, 1994; Jie, 1994; Moriarty, 1998) apply different authentic radio materials in their listening classes and they all reveal plausible results not merely in promoting students’ learning proficiency but also in increasing students’ awareness of the type of spoken language used in the real world and confidence in approaching authentic speech outside of the classroom.

2.3 Studies on Testing Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension is a complex process of input. From a practical point of view, testing is an assessment of skill attainment of such input for test-takers (students) and test- designers (teachers) as well. As Rost (1990) asserts, “testing is a crucial area in language education; as a result, testing often influences the future of learners, the professional evaluation of instructors, and the direction of curriculum design” (pp. 175-176).

With the increasing importance of communicative approach in language teaching, “authenticity as a concept has been a major concern in language testing over

the past decade” (Hoekje et al., 1994, p.110). However, as Chastain (1979) points out, in traditional view, tests are used mainly to give grades, and the instructor use the scores to “rank students in the class or to give them a percentage grade on their test” (p.88). The testing program, in a way, lacks its activation. Since the testing program has been one of the weakest aspects of many second-language programs (Chastain, *ibid.*), in testing listening comprehension, test design, task types and test specifications (*i.e.* item stems and response format) (Rost, 1990, p.182) should be taken into serious consideration.

2.4 Studies on Learner-Centered Curriculum and Autonomy

Contrary to the traditional notion of curriculum design, the learner-centered curriculum design is relatively much more flexible than that of the former. More often than not the design of the curriculum usually undergo several modifications after thorough evaluation of students’ responses as a result of the different activities done in class. An in-depth review of the features of learner-centered curriculum will facilitate any instructors to design effective curriculum which, in the long run, assists develop learners’ autonomy.

2.4.1 Features of Learner-Centered Curriculum

Learners’ Needs

Many scholars and educators have strongly affirmed that context in the learner-centered curriculum should be justified in terms of importance and motivational relevance for the learners. As O’grady and Kang (1985) claim:

The provision of a learner-centered which assists clients define their educational goals and offers courses in response to their expressed needs...can be effected only through clear channels of communication between learners and the course provider...The achievement of a

learner-centered system is dependent on a mechanism whereby LI access is available client as a matter of course to define clients' needs and to facilitate their ongoing control of their learning.
(in Nunan, 1988, pp.48-49)

Thus, in the present study, the selection of materials and listening training provided for the subjects are in accordance with the criteria attested by the study of O'Grady and Kang (1985).

Concerning learners' needs, Brindley (1984) supports that "Learners' wishes should be canvassed and taken into account, even if they conflict with the wishes of the teacher" (p.111). This is done so because valuable learners' data can usually be obtained only after several class sessions conducted and teachers and students' relationships established. Therefore, teachers who habitually gather information from students to plan activities in line with the learners' expressed needs not only make the lesson viewed as relevant to the learners, but in one way or another "the learners will be sensitized to their own preferences, strengths and weakness" (Nunan, 1988, p.53).

Context Selection towards Learners' Goals

Likewise, context selection is crucial criterion for learner-centered curriculum. As Rowntree (1981, p.35) points out that analytical approaches to content selection and providing learners with explicit objectives and defined contexts would eventually train learners to set their own goals which in turn yield diverged benefits, for example, learners would have a relatively more concrete idea of what can be achieved in a class.

Activities Related to Real Life

More importantly, most of the classroom activities are closely related to

learners' real-life needs, making the frequency of students more rigorous a channel that eventually leads to natural internalization of the language on the part of the learners. Nunan (1988) suggests that at some stage teachers should encourage their learners to engage in class in some of the behaviors they will be required to use in their real life.

Not only the authentic materials but also the activities focusing on learner-centered curriculum make students more motivated in their learning, and provide them with the outmost training needed to polish their listening proficiency. The most striking feature of this study is that a general consensus of their interest is conducted prior to the design of all activities. This in turn facilitates learning.

2.4.2 Guidelines for Autonomic Strategy Training

The following guidelines suitable for listening strategy towards autonomy are extracted mainly from Wenden's (1991).

What should be taken into consideration first is that the training should focus only on the context of the subject matter—the subject matter closely related to the students' experience (p.107).

In addition, instruction on pre-listening strategy should be presented before the listening drills. That is to say, the strategy should be presented in response to the problems encountered by students on the actual listening drills. By so doing, the relevance of the strategy is emphasized (p.109).

Wenden (1991) also emphasizes that strategy training should be interactive, allowing students chances to witness the use of the strategy. He believes that to sharpen and strengthen students' strategic skills, teachers should provide students constructive feedback and remedial measures as they meet obstacles in their attempts

to use the strategy. Such interaction allows teachers to observe more closely the learners' development, and enables the teachers to identify the most appropriate feedback they provide "when training is no longer necessary" (pp.106-107).

Training students to become proficient in their use of strategies towards autonomy is time-and-energy-consuming but the reward is beyond comparison after students have internalized such strategies in themselves.