

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Motivation

In Taiwan, English listening comprehension has long been neglected and is the least taught skill in junior high English class. As the Basic Competence Test for Junior High School Students does not include listening comprehension, teachers spend little time in helping students develop the skill. Several years ago, taking into account the importance of listening ability in daily communication, the authorities concerned began to emphasize listening comprehension by requiring junior high schools to evaluate students' English listening comprehension. As a result, junior high school English teachers began to stress English listening comprehension.

To increase students' listening ability, the researcher always asks the students to practice their listening ability by a listening comprehension exercise. According to the researcher's observation, when listening to the tape in a listening activity, junior high school students get high scores in the test styles such as "selecting an appropriate illustration to match the sentence heard" and "circling the word appeared in the sentence heard." Nevertheless, they get low scores in the test styles of "selecting an optimal choice after listening to a dialogue or a passage." That is, most students have difficulty in understanding a dialogue or a passage and answering comprehension questions about a dialogue or a passage. Also, students need aids to hone their listening skills to understand a dialogue or a passage on the tape by listening to the

same content several times. This phenomenon is consistent with Sebranek and Meyer's (1985) argument that listening is neither spontaneous nor instinctive. Namely, listening needs a systematical training.

During the period of the listening comprehension training, many researchers, such as Ur (1984) and Carroll (1999), found that listeners encountered some difficulties in listening. To overcome the difficulties in listening, a lot of methods, like listening to the same content several times (Brooks, 1964) and ignoring function words (Ur, 1984), have been proposed. Note-taking is one of the methods. Also, Frase (1970) claimed that note-taking assists learners in concentrating on their listening. Peter and Mayer (1978) also assumed that note-taking facilitates learners to deal with the incoming message to a meaningful level. The intent of this study is to explore the effect of note-taking on listening comprehension.

Significance and Purpose of the Study

This study may possibly be of great importance since junior high school students in Taiwan want to learn how to improve their listening ability. English teachers here also hope to know how to help students polish their listening comprehension. Nevertheless, without any learning instruction or strategies, many teachers conduct a listening test by asking them to listen to the tape one time, to answer the questions, and to correct the answers. Students still do not improve their listening ability after each listening test. Aware of the problem, the researcher decided to adopt the learning strategy of note-taking to increase students' listening comprehension.

In Taiwan, Zheng (1995) conducted an experiment on college students and concluded that students show a positive attitude on the memory-aid function of note-taking. However, no researcher in Taiwan explored how note-taking affects on listening on junior high school students. Therefore, the research can serve as a pedagogical guide for both teachers and students.

As mentioned above, this study focuses on the following purposes. First of all, this study tries to explore what the most difficult listening test style perceived by the students is.

Furthermore, this study attempts to overcome the disadvantages of tape listening (no authentic situation or non-verbal messages) by letting the junior high school students listen to the same content several times. Quite a lot of junior high school students in Taiwan try to increase their listening ability by listening to the content on the tape but feel that they make little progress. In fact, on one hand, tape listening needs great concentration to avoid “tape hypnosis” because it offers neither authentic situation nor non-verbal message for learners to guess unknown words (‘Critical Languages Programs’, 2004). On the other hand, tape listening is undoubtedly the most convenient activity in an EFL environment because students are able to listen to the same content repeatedly.

Moreover, the study also explores whether a teacher’s explanation of the content of a listening test really helps students improve their listening comprehension. Since students did not do well on “selecting an optimal choice after listening to a dialogue or a passage,” the researcher hoped to know if students could make progress through the teacher’s explanation.

In addition to the above purposes, the researcher also hopes to introduce one of the learning strategies, note-taking, to help students catch the main idea, organize the content, and answer the questions correctly. Learning strategy, defined by Oxford (1990) as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations,” (p. 8) aims to facilitate learners to improve their learning. Undoubtedly, note-taking, not only serves the above purposes but also helps avoid distraction. Furthermore, note-taking facilitates to combine new and old information and thus makes the message more impressive. Nevertheless, not every learning strategy fits every learner. This study aims to find out if most junior high school students could benefit from note-taking while understanding a dialogue or a passage by listening to the same content several times.

. This study also investigates whether note-taking is advantageous to high proficiency students or low proficiency ones. Although note-taking could solve some problems in listening, there are still some debates over the effect on note-taking. Frase (1970) and Mayer (1975) agreed that note-taking brings benefits to learners. However, Berliner (1971) indicated that note-taking benefits only learners with a good memory span. Hale and Courtney (1994) argued that note-taking is inefficient in listening because of short memory span, rapid speed and easy content.

Last, this study collects the subjects’ opinions on this experiment for the purpose of pedagogical implications.

Research Questions

The study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What is the most difficult listening test style as perceived by the subjects?
2. Could junior high school students improve their listening comprehension in understanding a dialogue or a passage by listening to the same content several times on the tape followed by the teacher's teaching instruction?
3. Do junior high school students who are asked to take notes perform better in listening comprehension than those who do not?
4. Does note-taking benefit only high proficiency subjects or only low proficiency subjects?
5. How did the subjects feel about the experiment? In other words, what are the most useful and useless instructions in the listening activity? What are the first three improved aspects the subjects point out during the experiment? How does note-taking help the subjects?

Definition of Terms

For easier understanding, some terms should be explained. In this part, 8 terms are defined as follows. They are defined according to the related literature or defined with some necessary modification.

1. Junior high school: In Taiwan, junior high schools refer to the schools, which provide three-year program for elementary school students for further study.

Therefore, junior high school students in the third grade are equal to those in Grade 9 in the U.S.A. The main principle of junior high school is to equip students with basic

skills and knowledge. Nowadays, most graduates in junior high school go on to senior high school, vocational high school or five-year college.

2. Listening comprehension: It is also called speech recognition or speech perception.

The study of listening comprehension focuses on the role of individual linguistic units (e.g. phonemes, words) as well as the role of the listener's expectations, the situation and context, background knowledge and the topic.

3. Dialogue: A model conversation which is used to practice speaking. Dialogues are often specially written to practice language items, contain simplified grammar and vocabulary, and so may be rather different from real-life conversation.

4. Passage: It means a short speech or a piece of writing.

5. Teacher's teaching instruction: In this study, the teacher's teaching instruction includes two domains. One is the pre-listening instruction. It involves the teacher's reminding the subjects of how to tell the teacher's accent from the speaker's in the tape, to know the different spoken and written languages about the contents, to be aware of linking sounds, to catch the main idea, to predict what to hear and to deal with noise and redundancy. The other is post-listening instruction. The researcher would always read each sentence of the script and would explain meanings of the sentences with subjects.

6. Note-taking: According to O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper and Russo (1985), note-taking is defined as "writing down key words or concepts in abbreviated verbal, graphic, or numerical forms while listening or reading." (p. 583)

7. High proficiency subjects: In this study, the subjects who got 60 or above out of 100 in the pretest belonged to high proficiency subjects.

8. Low proficiency subjects: In this study, the subjects who got 60 below out of 100 in the pretest were placed as low proficiency subjects.