

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter aims to give an overview of the research in five scopes. The first section takes a look at the definition of English listening comprehension. The second part describes the difficulties arising during a listening activity and solutions to the difficulties. The third segment talks about note-taking.

English Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension, also called speech recognition or speech perception (Brown & Yule, 1983; Rost, 1990), involves linguistic knowledge, background knowledge, meaning construction, and responding. According to Brown & Yule (1983) and Rost (1990), listening comprehension is the process of decoding colloquial language. It gets through the meaning construction and the output of personal linguistics (Richards, 1983). Dunkel(1986) noted that background knowledge plays an important role during the process of listening comprehension. In addition, Emmert (1994) asserted listening comprehension also contains non-spoken messages and the message responses.

Listening comprehension could be discussed from both physiological and psychological aspects. In terms of physiology, the function of hearing exists in the higher brain, which also contains the functions of memory and thought. In terms of psychology, listening comprehension can be achieved simultaneously through the

following six steps: (1) Learners understand structures of sentences through the knowledge of grammar (Rubin, 1975). (2) Learners “guess at unknown words or phrases.” (Willis, 1981) (3) Out of the long-term memory, learners distinguish transitions to seek the contextual script (Bernhardt & James, 1987; Willis, 1981). (4) Learners evaluate the purpose with the knowledge of the world (Boyle, 1984). (5) With the aid of background knowledge, learners come to understand the meaning (Coakley & Wolvin, 1986). (6) Learners retain the whole message and react appropriately (Emmert, 1994).

Difficulties Encountered in EFL Environment in English Listening

Comprehension and Solutions to the Difficulties

Most researchers agree that English listening comprehension is such a complicated process that EFL learners, one way or other, encounter some difficulties when they listen. Likewise, many experts and researchers such as Ur (1984) and Richards (1983) have tried to offer some solutions to these problems.

From the viewpoint of physiology, echoic memory (auditory store) assumes the role of passing the raw data for transactions, the short interest span assumes the part of transporting enough information to the perpetual memory for decoding the input (Carroll, 1999). However, learners tend to forget what they listened when the sentence is too long for them to remember. Because of short interest span, learners often fail to put together the messages they heard. Chastain (1976) pointed out that short interest span is an obstacle in listening comprehension. Brindley (1982) also concluded from his trial that the short-term memory stopped his examinees from

absorbing long sentences with subordinate clauses. Besides, as for the number of times listeners are allowed to listen in a listening activity, when allowed to listen only one time, listeners feel frustrated easily because they have little time to decode the content (McDonough and Shaw, 1993). To solve the problems, Brooks (1964) suggested that in teaching listening comprehension, teachers should provide sufficient practice by letting students listen to the same text from three to five times. Later, Frase (1970) advocated that note-taking helps learners to pay attention to their topic and avoid distraction. As a result, note-taking is a useful method to overcome short memory span. Besides, Richards (1983) advised that learners had better equip themselves with the ability to retain the holistic message for understanding, especially in conversation. For example, the instructor could allow learners three times to listen: for the first time, ask learners to catch the main idea; for the second time, ask them to take notes, and ask them to double check what they listened for the third time.

During a listening activity, Ur (1984) stated

The foreign language learner, whose grasp of meaning is slower than that of a native and demands more of an effort, finds these gaps far more difficult to take in his stride. He is, it is true, used to coping with them in his own tongue, but, when he has to do the same in another language, he finds he cannot do so with anything like the same facility.” (pp. 12-13)

That is, learners often miss the information that follows because their decoding speed is slower than the speech of the speakers.

As for the solutions to slow decoding speed, Ur (1984) pointed out

The ability to make do with only a part of what is heard and understand the main message is a vitally important one for effective listening in a communicative situation. It is a mistake to think that this ability will be automatically carried over from the native language.” (p. 15)

Obviously, Ur (1984) suggested that an instructor had better inform learners to ignore function words. Also, Chastain (1971), Underwood (1989) and Lin (2000) agreed that a learner's error in trying to catch each word could stop them from catching the main idea. Therefore, a learner cannot comprehend the whole message received if they try to decode each word heard.

Psychologically, Ur (1984) stated

Tasks that involve a lot of reading (such as answering multiple-choice questions) or writing (such as taking notes) have one disadvantage that should be noted. There is a huge difference between the time taken to understand heard information (and draw conclusions from it), and that taken to read possible paraphrases or write one's own. Even many native speakers find it quite difficult to do multiple-choice listening exercises or make notes from lectures simply because of this problem;" (p. 26)

This shows that learners tend to be distracted when a listening activity lasts too long.

When it comes to phonology, there is fairly general agreement that the personal knowledge shortage of phonology also blocks off listening comprehension. From the viewpoint of phonology, on the one hand, some English sounds do not exist in learners' native language (Ur, 1984). For instance, English phonemes such as the high back vowel in *would*, the velar voiced stop in *grass*, the palatal voiceless fricative in *chef*, and the palatal voiced affricate in *judge*, do not exist in Chinese mandarin phonology. On the other hand, some English words may disappear in sounds (Ur, 1984). For example, "evening" and "average" are often pronounced "evning" and "avrage".

So far as syntax is concerned, Ur (1984) referred to the fact that the sequences and juxtapositions of English words are different from those of learners' native tongue. Take the word "enough" as a contrast to its Chinese equivalent "夠", "enough" is put after an adjective in English but "夠" before an adjective in Chinese. For instance, the

English sentence “ He is not tall enough.” equals the Chinese one“他不夠高(He is not *enough tall.*)” Similarly, Morton& Patterson (1987) and Hsiung (2002) claimed that learners who come from non-English speaking countries have difficulty in analyzing syntax and semantics of the target language. However, native speakers do not have to pay heed to grammar when they listen or speak because grammar has become an interactive mechanism. Apparently, in the acquisition of mother tongue, no one has learned the sequences or juxtapositions of the language.

The amount of vocabulary also influences EFL learners’ performance in listening comprehension. Ou (1996) stated since speakers control choices of words, learners are likely to stop to think the meaning of a new word and thus miss the information that follows. Lin (2003) also observed from the feedback questionnaire in her study that the limited amount of words increased difficulty in listening comprehension.

The stress and intonation patterns of English may also lead to mishearing, especially those minor stressed function words. As Ur (1984) wrote in his book, “ Intonation and stress patterns play an important part in supplying ground for certain kinds of expectations.” (p. 16) He also pointed out native English speakers often pronounce lightened syllables very fast not to break the rhythm of speech. As to intonation, Ur (1984) pointed out that “ It often influences the meaning of an utterance.” (p. 13) Dunkel (1991) mentioned that different stressed words in the same sentence imply variant denotation in English. That is, intonation in English functions as criteria for distinguishing the overtones of the speaker. Therefore, if an EFL learner has no idea how to identify the implication by distinguishing intonation patterns, they

will miss such emotional hints as anger, humor or seriousness.

As for the solutions to psychological phenomenon, learners could become keener in their awareness if they could make good use of the knowledge of psychology. Sebranek and Meyer (1985) listed four ways for learners to improve their listening ability: (1) to integrate into the listening condition; (2) to avoid distracting by concentrating on the listening activity and thinking about the underlying hint;(3) to predict what to listen to, and (4) to keep away from ill behaviors such as bemusing, giving up, prejudging and emotionally interfering. With regard to phonology, syntax, vocabulary, stress and intonation, according to the experiments led by Chiang & Dunkel (1992) and Schmidt-Rinehart (1994), the subject's performance is influenced by the familiarity of the content. They agreed that when listeners are familiar with the content, they are also familiar with the sounds, grammars, vocabulary, stress and intonation. Therefore, listeners wouldn't become distracted easily because they could predict what to listen to.

In respect of semantics, identifying the meaning of words like “ but” or “therefore” could help predict and thus save learners' decoding time. As Ur (1984) described, “Other predictions may depend on total familiarity with the clichés, collocations, idioms and proverbs commonly used; a non-native speaker cannot usually be expected to know that ‘ rosy’ often collocates with ‘cheeks’ or ‘jaded’ with ‘appetite’···” (p. 16) That is, without grasping the overtones of vocabulary, a learner probably misunderstands the listening content. Noblitt (2004) also showed that native speakers prefer semantic parsing than syntactic parsing.

As for solutions to semantics, Sebranek and Meyer (1985) suggested that

listeners have to decipher what is heard. Besides, Underwood (1989) thought that students should know about what they will listen to.

When it comes to schema, Underwood (1989) pointed out that a small amount of background knowledge causes a hindrance to listening comprehension. Long (1990), Chiang and Dunkel (1992) and Lin (2000) agreed that learners' background knowledge and linguistic knowledge do affect their performance in a listening activity. In a word, learners with less schema could face more difficulties.

There is an agreement that taking notes serves as a bridge between old and new schema. From the outlook of the generative theory (Peter & Mayer, 1978), note-taking is deemed as a medium for linking the new material to the learners' prior knowledge and form new schema. In other words, learners build up their own integration between the old and new information. Sebranek and Meyer (1985) also held the same point of view. They suggested that listeners should make conclusions for the whole listening content, which would be of great help to connect the old schema to the new message. Also, O'Malley (1987) stated in her research that the content for a listening training should be consistent with the background knowledge of the learners.

A lack of learning strategies forms another kind of difficulty. Finding that listening comprehension is often hindered by so many difficulties, many experts tried variant learning strategies to help learners with quality listening. Murphy (1985), Bacon (1992) and Vandergrift (1996) thought that learners without learning strategies feel difficult to overcome physical limitation (short memory span).

To solve the difficulties in listening comprehension, researchers in the 1980s'

recommended learning strategies. As Henner-Shanchina(1977) and Chamot &Kupper (1989)asserted, with learning strategies, learners could learn better than those without.

At first, McDonald, Dansereau, Garland, Holley, and Collins (1979) assumed that social-affective strategy can help with learners' progress. In other words, learners benefit greatly how cooperating with others to obtain pool information or seeking clarification by asking instructors or native speakers.

Later, Brown and Palinscar(1982) categorized the learning strategies into cognitive and metacognitive ones. Cognitive strategy is a direct way of focusing on the content itself while metacognitive strategy involves the activities about the material, like planning and monitoring.

However, learning strategies depend on both different situations and learners. For the learners with the same physiological quality, Anderson (1983) maintained that different learning strategies are adopted in different stages during the process of listening comprehension. In the first perceptual processing stage, learners select attention by catching key words and monitor themselves to keep concentrating. After that, learners group the content with syntactical knowledge and select the model of processing such as Top-down processing (Lung, 1991; Richards, 1990), Bottom-up (Richards, 1990) or the integration of Top-down and Bottom-up (Richards, 1990). Then learners could infer from the context in the stage of parsing. Finally, the last stage is utilization, in which learners elaborate on the listening information with the world knowledge and personal experience to end the process of listening comprehension.

After a series of discussions on learning strategies in the 1980s', Oxford gave

a definite explanation and advocated two other learning strategies. Oxford (1990) defined the learning strategies as follows: “ Learning strategies are 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) She also advocated dividing the social-affective strategy into social strategy and affective strategy. In addition, she created memory and compensation strategies.

Learning strategy instruction is as important as learning. Chamot and O’Malley (1987) and Huang (2003) also pointed out that learning strategy instruction should be integrated into the teaching schedule, rather than isolating it from the regular course. Lee (2001) affirmed the value of learning strategy instruction. In addition, she proved that the more time the subjects spend in listening, the more progress is made in listening skills. Moreover, she found that teachers’ attitude about the listening training and the parents’ support also affected the performance of the subjects. Therefore, in acquiring listening comprehension skills, it is essential to have a well-assessed learning strategy teaching.

Although learning strategies have many merits, they do not guarantee absolute triumph. As O’Malley and Chamot (1990) contended, learning strategy instruction does not assure success due to variables like the instructor’s enthusiasm in teaching and the learners’ eagerness to study. Also, Cheng (1999) concluded that learners would improve their ability if they could take advantage of learning strategies that fit them well. She also found it better to instruct only one or two strategies, not all, at one time.

The speed of the speakers also influences English listening comprehension. As

Underwood (1989) pointed out, listeners cannot set the speed on their own. They have to follow the speed of the speaker. Furthermore, Ou (1996) claimed that learners in a situation of conversation feel more difficult because different speakers speak with variant speeds. Since learners have to adapt themselves to different speeds, they often feel confused. Lin (2000) also viewed the speed of the speakers as the major problem for her low proficiency subjects.

In terms of the number of words per minute, Rivers (1981) set the rate of delivery into five levels: (1) fast (above 220 words per minute); (2) moderately fast (190-220 wpm); (3) average (160-190 wpm); (4) moderately slow (130-160 wpm) and (5) slow (below 130 wpm). Later, Sebranek and Meyer (1985) suggested that listeners notice the transitions or signal words to follow the speakers. They also suggested that listeners take notes on important information and questions. Furthermore, Blau's (1990) study showed that the speech rate from 145wpm to 185 wpm does not sway the performance of intermediate and advanced L2 learners. Thus, an instructor should choose listening materials in line with the learners' level.

Listening comprehension difficulties also involve accents of speakers. Obviously, different persons have different accents. Fan (1993) and Noblitt (2004) claimed that ESL/EFL learners who are used to their English teachers' accents lack the ability to adapt themselves to other English accents. As for variant types of "noise", such as background music and special sound effects distract learners from focusing on the content (Ur, 1984).

To solve these problems, Ur (1984) suggested that instructors should acquaint learners with different accents and ask learners to find hints from the background

sounds, namely, noise. That is to say, instructors should offer learners more opportunities to listen to different accents, reminding them to focus on key words instead of function words.

As for tape learning, many English teachers in EFL or ESL countries instruct listening skills with audiotapes. However, opinions vary as to tape learning. Ur (1984) agreed that using a tape in listening training is convenient. Noblitt (2004) thought that practicing with tapes facilitates learners to build norms. Another reason to use tapes for EFL learners is that repetition of listening to the same tape script promotes learners to master listening comprehension ('Critical Languages Program', 2004). However, there are also some anti-tape learning arguments. Ur indicated that most of the listening training tape scripts do not provide real-life materials and that learners have difficulties when they face natural communicative conditions. Also, Ur pointed out that listeners do not know about what they are going to listen because the resources of tapes are diverse. Noblitt reflected that listening training with tapes offers no chance to interact with speakers and to handle redundant signals and thus it is the last way to learn a foreign language. In Taiwan, an EFL environment, junior high school students usually acquire listening comprehension by listening to tapes. However, tape listening requires such great concentration that learners have to find their "tape attention span," which may last from twenty to thirty minutes ('Critical Languages Programs').

When a listening activity with tapes lasts too long, there will be "tape hypnosis" resulting from undirected tape work and from trying to do a lot of listening at one time ('Critical Languages Programs'). One way to avoid "tape hypnosis" is to

adopt the strategy of note-taking while engaging in a listening activity so as to lengthen the time of concentration and additionally help learners focus their attention on the content. Frase (1970) claimed that learners can focus on their listening through learners' concentration and retaining what they received during an acoustic activity. Hence, learners can lengthen "tape attention span" with the aid of note-taking by concentrating on writing down key words and organizing the contents.

Note-taking

Note-taking belongs to one of the cognitive strategies that aim to solve some problems in learning. However, there are still a lot of debates concerning the effect of note-taking. Some scholars agree that note-taking brings learners a lot of benefits. Others have different views.

Frase (1970) advocated that note-taking helps learners pay attention to their topic and avoid distraction. Note-taking is proved a useful method to overcome short memory span. Mayer (1975) viewed note-taking as an accelerator to assist learners to deal with the incoming information in a short time while maintaining a meaningful level. To take notes, learners have to encode what they heard in their own words. That is, note-taking facilitates learners to integrate their old and new knowledge as Peter and Mayer (1978) pointed out that note-taking helps learners link new and old information and thus form new schema. Sebranek and Meyer (1985) also agreed that learners could connect the old schema to the new message by making conclusions while taking notes.

Many scholars such as O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper and

Russo (1985) classified note-taking as one of the cognitive strategies that help learners handle the message with mental activity. Thus, they defined note-taking as “writing down key words or concepts in abbreviated verbal, graphic, or numerical forms while listening or reading.” (p. 583) Therefore, as learners take notes, they should jolt down the main idea, not details. While taking notes, learners should ignore the formal written forms and accept individual styles so as to take notes quickly. Over and above, learners could also provide themselves with an opportunity to review what they listened to by organizing the note (Dunkel, 1988). Kiewra and Benton (1988) also confirmed that there is relationship between academic achievement and not-taking. In Teng’s study (1997), she found that note-taking actually assists listening comprehension. Cheng (1999) pointed out that 5% of her subjects most often adopted note-taking because by doing so they could remember the content easily. Undoubtedly, supporters of the note-taking theory believe it really helps learners remember more, listen with concentration, and on their own organize what they have heard.

To take good notes, learners had better follow the techniques provided by Brown (1985). First, before class, learners have to read the materials that would be taught and review the notes from the previous class. Also, learners have to make sure that they bring the right tools such as highlighters and pencils. In addition, learners make up the lost notes from their classmates or friends before class. Secondly, in class, learners had better sit near the front of the class if possible so as to see better and to be less distracted. Also, learners should listen carefully to catch the main idea, to jolt down key words and summarize the content. Thirdly, after class, learners should review the notes.

Note-taking is not always helpful, however. Some scholars believed that note-taking fits the learners who have good memory span and the ability of induction. Berliner (1971) assumed that note-taking does not always benefit listening in the perspective of psychology. Only the learners with good memory span can benefit from memorizing and taking notes. But learners with short memory span would rather listen carefully than to bury themselves with note-taking. Di Vesta and Gray (1972) conducted a study and found that the poor memory-spanned subjects performed better on the test than the good memory-spanned ones in the non-note-taking group. Only with cognitive activities such as thinking, reasoning and remembering, does note-taking make sense. Sebranek and Meyer (1985) also pointed out “do not, however, take so many notes that you miss some of the important points or the overall idea of what is being said.” The experiment done by Dunkel (1989) also induced that the subjects allowed to take notes while listening did not perform better than the non-note-taking subjects. In Hale and Courtney’s study (1991), they divided the subjects into three groups: note-taking allowed, note-taking urged and non-note-taking. The result of their study is concluded as follows: The performance of the two groups, note-taking allowed and note-taking urged, was not significantly better than non-note-taking. Furthermore, note-taking urged group did not perform as well as note-taking allowed group. In sum, non-note-taking group performed best, followed by note-taking allowed and then note-taking urged groups. Thus, they assumed that taking notes in detail does not help. Sometimes, it even hinders EFL listeners’ listening comprehension. Hale and Courtney (1994) further considered note-taking as little help for three reasons: rapid speed, short memory span and easy

content. They concluded that note-taking should be valued before being adopted. In Cheng's (1999) study, 75% of her subjects disliked note-taking because they did not have time to take notes while listening. Huang (2003) also indicated, according to the responses of her subjects, that note-taking is the least effective strategy among the four strategies: scanning, skimming, linguistic inferencing and note-taking. The outcome of the questionnaire she designed shows that the subjects do not think highly of note-taking.

To sum up, note-taking has the following five values: (1) to avoid distraction; (2) to make the content meaningful to the learners; (3) to combine new and old information; (4) to review the main idea quickly before a test, and (5) to make the message more impressive.

The opposite argument, of course, views note-taking as inefficient because it is limited by short memory span, rapid speed and easy content. Besides, learners will get little profit if they take notes without mental participation.

With reference to note-taking instruction, many experts have offered some suggestions for instructors. Carrier and Titus (1981) advised that teachers should spend some time letting students review their notes before a test. Kiewra (1985) also encouraged teachers to provide students with notes after class so that they can revise their notes taken. He also considered that teachers have responsibility to polish up students' note-taking skills.

In short, there are so many difficulties encountered during the training of listening comprehension that many solutions are offered to solve these problems. In addition, note-taking helps learners concentrate on their listening, deal with the

coming message to a meaningful level and link old and new schema. Therefore, this study was designed to explore how note-taking benefited the subjects. Likewise, the personal profile was designed to explore the factors that might affect the research, and the feedback questionnaire was designed to understand what kind of difficulties could be encountered after a period of training listening comprehension with note-taking.