

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The learners in this study were made of 14 physical education students. When they were admitted to senior high, they were admitted for their exclusive athletic talents. Thus, their academic scores were much lower than other regular enrolled freshmen. They had low learning motivation and negative learning attitudes toward school subjects, especially English. Consequently, they were labeled as low achievers in academic performance.

Low achievers are a neglected minority owing to their poor academic achievement in school (Coren, 1992). Low achievers often face discrimination from peers (i.e. regular students), teachers, and school administrators (Wenze & Wenze, 2004). In general, low achievers' self-perception of academic ability are significantly lower than their peers (Chapman & Boersman, 1980). As a result, low achievers academically fared worse than peers, which resulted in peer rejection and peer isolation (Bryan & Bryan, 1990; Aronson, 2004). Low achievers confirmed the stereotype's allegations of intellectual inferiority and delinquents in the eyes of teachers and school administrators (Aronson, 2004). Thus, teachers are normally less patient for low achievers' mistakes and see their academic failure as evidence of an unalterable limitation (Aronson, 2004).

Low achievers didn't receive a fair right to education at school. Low achievers are all alike in having the right to an equal opportunity to learn in three aspects: (a) instructional materials (b) remedial programs (c) teacher expectation (Kerman, 1979). The overall objective of the educational policy has been to provide equal opportunities for everyone (Bonesronning & Rattso, 1994). Therefore, the initial level of knowledge of low achievers when they enter senior high school must be taken into account (Bonesronning & Rattso, 1994). On the contrary, the school administrators purchased the unitary

textbooks suitable for regular students, which neglected the appropriateness of textbooks in relation to both low achievers' needs and low achievers' level of proficiency (Wigzell & Al-Ansari, 1993). Consequently, low achievers are potential losers under the school policy due to inappropriate textbooks that led to low achievers' frustration in academic achievement. In addition, under the existing school system, many school administrators didn't arrange remedial programs for low achievers to promote their linguistic ability. Consequently, many teachers perceive low achievers as being incapable of following curriculum content because they are unprepared, slow, or confused while calling on in class (Kerman, 1979). Thus, teacher interaction with low achievers is less motivating and less supportive. Teachers provide low achievers with less response opportunities and less time to respond to questions. When low achievers do have difficulty, teachers tend to neglecting, give less or no clues (Kerman, 1979). The biases demonstrated in Teacher/low achievers interactions are mostly unconscious. Discriminatory interactions can be identified between teachers and low achievers (Kerman, 1979).

Although teacher bias affects low achievers' linguistic ability, especially for low English-language ability (Stedman & Adams, 1973), even the lowest achievers can be taught to improve their academic achievement through the use of specific learning strategies (Haynes, Comer, & Lee, 1988). Mizelle (2005) pointed out that facilitating low achievers' adjustments to senior high school linguistic curriculum requires remedial programs. A similar study conducted by Summers & Wolfe (1977) and Bonesronning & Rattso (1994) indicated that low achievers performed better in small group in second language acquisition. According to Mizelle (2005), Summers & Wolfe (1977), and Bonesronning & Rattso (1994), the researcher arranged remedial programs each week to enhance low achievers' linguistic ability in the present study. In addition, the remedial programs integrated the beginning level of English for junior high school (i.e. low achievers were initiated from first-year level English language course) with small group

activities. Consequently, remedial programs helped low achievers get along with their peers and feel more confident in English learning. Most students had higher grades in language art, and benefited the most in terms of self-esteem and academic performance (Cognato, 1999; Mizelle, 2005).

In fact, Wigzell's & Al-Ansari's study (1993) implied that to alleviate the sense of failure and alienation, comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982; Gass & Madden, 1985) integrated systematic instruction and a bilingual approach served the interests of the low achievers. Thus, the researcher of the present study employed not only spiral instruction (i.e. the arrangement of listening activities was to repeat and to practice a lot in various ways to help low achievers to master vocabulary, phrases, grammar) but also systematic instruction and a bilingual approach to enhance low achievers' linguistic ability. As Roe (2004) found that with sufficient instruction and practice, low achievers had chance of improving in the process of second language acquisition. Based on pragmatic competence, relaxing the demand for precision and accuracy motivated low achievers to actively perform in the English classroom (Wigzell & Al-Ansari, 1993). Generally speaking, low achievers' linguistic ability was improved under peer cooperation and peer assistance (Wigzell & Al-Ansari, 1993), especially getting through difficult reading passages, and finishing writing tasks. To enhance their linguistic ability from a practical perspective, low achievers' listening comprehension competence should be taken into account (Cardelle-Elawar, 1995).

Listening plays an essential role in language learning, especially in verbal communication (Rost, 1990). Listening relates to understanding a construct process of knowledge in verbal communication in cognitive science (Rost, 1990). Rost (1990) viewed verbal communication in terms of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986) which holds that communication is basically a collaborative process involving ostension (i.e. production of signals by a speaker) and inference (i.e. contextualizing those signals

by a listener). Hence, being a proficient listener, listening ability comprises listening for the main idea, listening for specific information, and listening between the lines (Helgesen & Brown, 1995).

As the language-facilitator (Rardin, 1977, p385) and homeroom teacher for low achievers in the present study for two years, the researcher's sense of responsibility impelled her to motivate low achievers to improve their English listening ability from the beginning level. To provide low achievers with chances of reviewing linguistic elements (i.e., vocabulary, phrases, sentence structures) with sufficient instruction and practice (Roe, 2004), low achievers' listening ability needs to be nurtured. Besides, among the four skills of second language acquisition, the learners in this study, who were considered low achievers, did favor listening comprehension treatment. This was for two reasons. First, listening is practical. The learners in this study had a lot of opportunities to participate in many international competitions abroad. For example, after taking part in the World Championship in Europe in the year of 2000, they had a sense of achievement when they were able to understand some English or English songs from the broadcast on the plane or conversation with foreign athletes. Second, they always gained better grades on listening comprehension tests (i.e. activities on listening comprehension tests were not restricted to pencil-and-paper.) than those on pencil-and-paper. Hence, the researcher selected authentic listening materials (i.e. English songs & English passages) based on Krashen's "i+1" input hypothesis and Ausubel's cognitive learning theory. To enhance the learners' listening ability, listening materials were intentionally made related to what the learners had previously learned in junior high school in order to help the learners in this study develop self-esteem and self-confidence (Brown, 2000; Dornyei, 2001).

In addition, to motivate the learners in this study, affective factors were taken into account (Krashen, 1985; Ellis, 1999; Brown, 2000) to create a pleasant and supportive listening environment. Moreover, integrating MI theory into the present curriculum

development led to collaborative group work of listening activities (Slavin, 1989, 1996; Johnson and Johnson, 1994; Muijs & Reynolds, 2003) which generated relevant practice opportunities and provided immediate feedback to the learning sequence (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986).

In summary, although listening instruction for low achievers was an especially challenging task (Karge, 1998), it is worthy to educate low achievers about becoming effective listeners based on equal schooling opportunity (Hale, 2004).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Being high school seniors, low achievers in the present study considered studying school textbook (e.g. Far East English Reader for High Schools Book I) the most difficult task for them owing to complicated vocabulary, phrases, sentence patterns, and context. Poor linguistic ability of low achievers in the present study resulted in frustration in English learning. In English class low achievers in the present study showed no interest in the four skills of language learning, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing. To motivate them, listening materials were selected from the beginning level (e.g. English for Junior High School Book I). Their self-confidence was thus built through comprehensible listening text. Nevertheless, they still had limited capabilities to understand listening text equal to the level of the second graders in junior high school, and were unable to converse with peers in simple English. In addition, they were even unable to read a complicated sentence equivalent to the level of the second graders in junior high school, and they lacked the ability to make a grammatically correct sentence. Hence, they felt discouraged and depressed in English learning, especially when taking pencil-and-paper English tests.

1.3 The Gap

Although many studies (Lin, 2000; Chen, 2002; Wang, 2002; Wu, 2004) have been done on listening pedagogy for high school students and some literature (Leslie Eloise, 2000; Lo, 2002; Yang, 2002; Chiang, 2003; Sun, 2003; Hsu, 2003; Chen, 2004) is available on the effects of songs, rhymes, rhythms, chants, and music teaching for children, adolescents, college students, and adults, little information is available on improving low-achievers' listening ability through songs.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was (a) to investigate what kind of listening materials meet low achievers' cognitive needs; (b) to motivate low achievers in listening course; (c) to apply MI theory into listening curriculum development for low achievers; (d) to trigger low achievers extrinsically and intrinsically in English class.

To sum up, on the students' part, this study would promote cooperation among the peers in the listening process to maintain low-achievers' self-esteem and to increase their self-confidence so that they would be motivated to become effective listeners as well as autonomous learners in English class. On the teachers' part, this study would remind the teachers that everything they do in the classroom will have a motivational influence on low achievers.

1.5 Research Questions

A study was conducted to attain the goals mentioned above and the following research questions were presented:

1. What kind of listening materials meet low-achievers' cognitive needs?
2. How to motivate low-achievers in listening course affectively?
3. How to apply MI theory into listening curriculum development for low-achievers?

4. How to trigger low-achievers extrinsically and intrinsically in English class?

1.6 The Content of the Present Project

The content of the present project are listed below:

Chapter 1: Introduction; Chapter 2: Literature review; Chapter 3: Methodology; Chapter 4: Results; Chapter 5: Discussion and conclusion.