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METHODS TO OVERCOME COMMON LISTENING PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY THAI STUDENTS LEARNING ENGLISH

Abstract:

Listening is one of the most important skills in learning English as a foreign language. The purpose of this study aimed at investigating problems Thai Students face when listening to spoken English and factors affecting students' listening skills. The participants were 401 undergraduate non-English major students who registered to study Communicative English for Careers in the academic year 2016. They were all Thai. The research instruments used in this study were a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The statistical techniques used were percentages with the mean value (\bar{x}) and standard deviation (SD). The findings revealed that the major problem was not being able to have words repeated. The second largest problem was not being able to remember what was heard when distinguishing between similar sounding words. This was followed by not being able to grasp the main ideas. Factors affecting students' listening skills were unfamiliar vocabulary, speakers' speech rates, speakers' accents, a lack of background knowledge about the topic that they hear and a lack of concentration.

Keywords:

listening problems, undergraduate, non-English major students, Communicative English for Careers

JEL Classification: I20, I29

1 Introduction

In Thailand the English listening skill may not be deemed as important as the reading or writing skills. This is probably because English is not spoken here as a second language or used as a means of communication. The listening skill is a basic and important skill in language learning. Learning takes place when the learner absorbs and understands the information he receives. Rost (1984) states that the listening skill is important in a language classroom since it enables the learner to receive information. The learning of (new) information is key to the skill development of the learners. Krashen (1985) states that language learning occurs when the learner understands what he hears thus the language acquisition is achieved mainly through receiving understandable input and listening ability is a critical component in achieving understandable language input. Therefore, the learner should start listening before he starts to speak. The reading and writing skills should be practiced after the learner has mastered speaking and pronunciation of sounds in the language. Speaking as well as writing is one way to express one's thoughts. However, speaking involves the use of speech organs so the learner must imitate the teacher (Thunasuwan, 1987). The listening proficiency is an important factor in the success of learning a language. The listening skill is not only key to the understanding of information, it also helps develop the speaking proficiency. Rost (2002) points out that the development of the listening skill is the key to the advancement of the speaking skill. The way to achieve the goal in language teaching is to teach the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Wilgar (2005) points out the teaching which focuses on reading and writing skills and the learning of grammar rules and memorization of vocabulary is not teaching real language because it lacks the practice of listening and speaking skills, an important part of language learning. Krashen (1981) has claimed firstly that comprehension plays a central and possibly predominant part in the process of language learning. Listening is a process of receiving a message and it involves active participation on the part of the receiver to understand and decode the meaning. Listening provides comprehensible input for the learner which is essential for any learning to occur. Secondly, learners need to interact with speakers to achieve understanding. Thirdly, listening exercises help the learner draw attention to the new form. Therefore, listening provides the right conditions for long term acquisition and the development of other language skills (Krashen, 1989).

2 Literature Review

Underwood (1989) states that listening is an activity which requires interest and concentration so as to understand the person who is trying to communicate. Listening is a process of learning meaningful information. The listener must be able to get the gist of what is being spoken, to interpret and to analyze what he hears. He must be able to get the correct meaning of the information. The listening skill is a complicated process relating

to learning, understanding thought and memory. Hayati (2010) states that the process of successful listening depends on many factors such as the success of speaking or sending information, speech rate (Conrad, 1989; Blau, 1990), the knowledge of vocabulary (Rost, 1992), sounds and background knowledge of the subject (Long, 1990; Chiang and Dunkel 1992). Successful listening also depends on the syntax and situations in which listening and speaking occur. Buck (2001) identifies the speed of delivery and the unfamiliar accent of the speaker, the lack of interest and the motivation on the part of the listener can affect the listening ability of a person.

The understanding in listening is a process of understanding words spoken i.e. word units, grammatical structures, the listener's anticipation, scenarios, context and background knowledge. Morley (2001) also sees the importance of listening. He believes the listening skill is needed in everyday life and can be developed more quickly than the other language skills.

Hamouda's study reveals that the listening skill is a problem of English learning at the college level. The lecturer/teacher often pays more attention to grammar, reading and vocabulary building and neglects to develop the listening skill. This finding is in line with the study of Persulesy (1988:50) who relates that the teacher believes that the listening ability comes naturally when a learner has acquired the speaking skill. The steps in teaching listening can be divided into 3 phases based on Rixon (1986) pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening phase:

Pre-listening phase

The "pre-listening" phase is a kind of introduction to establish a context, activate the learner's interest and set a purpose for listening. The purpose of the pre-listening phase is to prepare the listener in terms of the context, vocabulary, structure and content, so the students can listen to the passage purposefully. The pre-listening phase may consist of a whole range of activities, for example, the teacher provides the vocabulary and structure that the students will hear in the listening passage, gives pre-questions, gives background information, asks the students to read something relevant to create interest and discusses the topic/situation with the students (Richards:1985, Underwood: 1989). The teacher can also do a vocabulary review by having students work from the vocabulary they already know.

While- listening phase

The aim of "while-listening" activities is to help students develop the skills of eliciting messages from what they hear (Underwood, 1989:45). The listening task was carried out as the students listened to the input after their general knowledge was activated. In doing the task, the teacher helped the students by pausing the audio between chunks of information so that students had time to digest the information. After completing the task, feedback was given. Activities in this phase are not to test the students' listening but are part of the "listening practice for understanding." While doing these activities, the learner

should not be engaged in doing other activities such as reading, writing or speaking. Activities teachers should encourage are: answering comprehension questions, filling in the missing word, completing the table etc

Post-listening activities

A “post-listening” activity represents a follow up activity and aims to utilize the knowledge gained from listening for the development of other skills such as speaking or writing. These activities give students more practice in the use of the language after they have listened. Writing or discussing the material they have listened to about the emotions or attitudes of the speaker will consolidate students’ learning of the new material.

3 Methodology

The lack of listening skills among Thai students has not been thoroughly studied so further study of the issue will lead to better understanding of the situation and to help students and teachers to overcome the problems of listening incompetence in English learning. Therefore the following research question is raised:

Table 1: Examples of research questions and instruments

Questions	Instruments
1. What listening problems do Thai students face when listening to spoken English?	Questionnaire
2. What are the factors affecting the students’ acquisition of the listening skills?	Questionnaire & Semi-structured interview

Background of the study

From the teacher’s reflection on her teaching, it was found that the students had difficulty in listening to English. Students stated that it was very difficult for them to understand what was said in the audio.

Participants

The participants were 401 second to fourth year undergraduate non English major students from the Faculty of Engineering, Agriculture, Education and Development, Liberal Arts and Science and Fishery.

Instruments

A questionnaire was administered to 401 students. The questionnaire included two parts. The first part consisted of general questions about the participants’ listening skills. The second part asked about problems students encountered while they were listening.

Table 2: Number and percentage of participants

Faculty	Number	Percentage
Arts and Science	104	37.3
Fishery	34	6.5
Education and Development	60	10.8
Engineering	105	31.7
Agriculture	98	13.7
Total	401	100.0

Table 2 showed the number and percentage of participants from each faculty. They had enrolled in Communicative English for Careers. They had passed the three compulsory foundation courses in English.

Table 3: Problems and Factors affecting students' listening skills.

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Problems		
Listeners encounter an unknown word	4.54	0.65
Listeners fail to distinguish between similar sounding words	4.08	0.78
Listeners cannot always have words repeated	4.18	0.85
Listeners cannot remember what was heard	4.18	0.85
Listeners cannot segment the speech	4.08	0.78
Factors		
Listeners cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks	4.36	0.75
Listeners cannot understand the speaker's accent	4.20	0.86
Listeners cannot figure out the main ideas of the message	4.12	0.77

Listeners lack background knowledge about the topic	4.06	0.87
Listeners lack concentration	4.04	0.73

As can be seen from table 3, the students' main difficulty in 'listening' was unfamiliar vocabulary. The second largest problem was not being able to have words repeated and segment the speech. The third problem was not being able to remember what was heard when distinguishing between similar sounding words. This was followed by not being able to grasp the main ideas. Factors affecting students' listening skills were speakers' speech rates, speakers' accents, a lack of background knowledge about the topic that they hear, lack of concentration and inability to get the main ideas.

4 Data Analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using means (M), and standard deviation (SD). Percentages were used in the analysis of students' reading strategies.

5 Findings

The results of this study will be presented in two parts: listening problems and factors affecting students' listening skills.

The data from the results of semi-structured interviews

The results of the semi-structured interviews revealed some of the factors that influence students' English listening comprehension skills i.e. vocabulary knowledge, rate of delivery, different accents, background knowledge of the topic and inability to concentrate.

The following are some quotes from the students' stated reasons:

"I cannot understand what the speakers say because I don't know much vocabulary."

" I could not follow the listening because I did not know the vocabulary."

" The conversation in the audio is very difficult and I don't have any idea what it is about."

"I can't guess what the story is about because I don't have any background knowledge about the story."

"I have to pay attention to what I hear in order to catch the meaning."

"The listening is too long and it is difficult for me to concentrate."

"The speakers speak too fast and I don't know what they are talking about."

“ I don't know the vocabulary and I can't guess the meaning and catch the main idea.”

Factors affecting students' listening comprehension are as follows:

1. Students do not have enough linguistic knowledge (e.g.vocabulary, structure) therefore, they could not catch the main idea of the listening passage.
2. Students are not familiar with the speed and intonation of a native speaker because Thai is mostly used in English classes. Moreover, the students have little opportunity to listen to native speakers speaking English in real life situations.
3. Students do not have background knowledge about the topic. Sharing mutual knowledge and common content makes communication easier. Even if listeners can understand the surface meaning of the text, they may have considerable difficulties in comprehending the whole meaning of the passage unless they are familiar with the context. (Gilakjani & Ahmadi 2011).
4. Students cannot control the speed of delivery. In a classroom, the decision to replay a recording or a section of a recording is in the hands of teachers. It is difficult to judge whether or not the students have understood any particular section of what have heard (Underwood, 1989).

To assist students in listening, some suggestions are as follows:

1. The teacher should provide opportunities for students to practice listening skills and become actively involved in the listening process.
2. The teacher should provide the opportunity for the students to listen to real life situations or simulated situations such as listening to teacher's instructions, requests, conversations with peers, telephone conversations, everyday conversation songs, news, films, radios and television programs.
3. The teacher should not ask the students to listen to the passage without giving them any preparation. Before asking the students to listen, the teacher should provide adequate pre-listening phase for them.
4. The teacher should activate the students' background knowledge about the topic by making predictions about what the text is about or what the speaker is going to say next.
5. The teacher should teach students correct phonetics and sounds in order to grasp native speakers' accents.
6. The teacher should help the students expose themselves and get familiar with precise pronunciation of native speakers and the teacher should be trained to have good and acceptable pronunciation which can help students to become better listeners.
7. The teacher has to familiarize the students both British and American accents.
8. The teacher should check the quality of the listening text before allowing students to listen to it. This is because the clarity of a tape is not only based on the words spoken, but also on the way the words are spoken and the clarity of recording.

9. The teacher should allow the students to listen to the tape at least twice. The first time is to listen for specific information. However, if the teacher considers the passage to be a bit difficult or the students have a lot of difficulty in listening, the teacher should let them listen again until the students can get the general idea and specific information from the passage.
10. The teacher should find appropriate and interesting materials to teach the students.

6 Conclusion and discussion

The results of this study revealed some of the factors that influence students' English listening comprehension skills i.e. vocabulary knowledge, rate of delivery, different accents, background knowledge of the topic and inability to concentrate. The results imply that in teaching listening, the teacher should pre-teach some vocabulary and the correct pronunciation, activate students' background knowledge in the pre-listening phase and provide more practice activities to help the students overcome their listening problems.

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