

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension ability is considered important by most teachers and learners. While many textbooks for junior high school students do include listening practices, whether such design of exercises matches students' real listening needs remains questionable. The analysis of students' English listening needs, therefore, becomes worthy of being emphasized and prudently explored.

Motivation and Goal

Listening is more than merely hearing words. Wipf (1984) preferred to regard the people who process listening as the ones who must be able to discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intention, retain and interpret that within the immediate as well as the larger socio-cultural context of the utterance. Beginning in the 70's, attention was brought to the role of listening as a key factor in facilitating language learning. Broughter (1978), Lundsteen (1979), Wolvin (1979), Burley-Allen (1982) and, Richards (1990) believed that listening is the first language mode that children acquire, and with such ability, a foundation is provided for all aspects of language. From then on, listening has emerged as an important component in the process of language acquisition, playing a life-long role in the processes of learning and communication essential to productive participation in life.

Likewise, foreign language listening—is crucial in the development of foreign language competence (Brown, 2001). It forms an integral part of the communication

process and should not be separated from the other language arts. Listening comprehension complements reading comprehension. Verbally clarifying the spoken message before, during, and after a presentation enhances listening comprehension. Writing, in turn, clarifies and documents the spoken message. As such, EFL educators, such as Feyten (1991) acknowledged it as an important skill in EFL learning and urged language teachers to devote more class time to English listening activities.

However, on the one hand, English listening comprehension is complicated and involves a large number of different activities. On the other hand, different students intrinsically have different learning needs about English listening comprehension skills. Therefore, educators normally rely on the teaching strategies that they believe to work well for boosting students' English listening comprehension ability, considering little about students' English listening learning needs.

Actually, the learner should always be placed above any other concern and consideration while any instruction planning is under way. Evidently, every student is unique, and students' learning needs play a fundamental role in how well students acquire their knowledge. A teacher's role is considered best not to be a sheer dominator but to be a facilitator that provides a nurturing context for learning (Brown, 2001). A teacher should develop his or her students' multiple intelligences and potentials with their learning needs in mind. In brief, to promote better learning, learner needs naturally come first and require careful assessment.

The concept of assessment for learning needs is not new, since much literature reviewed notes the importance of needs assessment. It is basically underpinned by the confidence and belief that learners are unique and that learner needs are essential. Assessment, a practice of collecting evidence of student learning, is designed so as to assess what students are expected to learn, i.e., learning targets and content. Feedback

of it can then be given to students and teachers to form basis on decisions as to what to do to improve learning and teaching. And so, students' multiple intelligences and potentials are better developed.

Accordingly, the analyses of learners' English listening needs are essential before any instructional activities pertaining to the learning of English listening can be designed or selected. Richards (1983) and Teng (2000) also brought forth the importance of assessing learner needs, believing that the first and crucial step in starting any curriculum reform is to realize the requirements or expectations of the EFL learners. After all, listening should be taught with motivation, interest and variation so students can keep interested in it, feeling that what they are learning exactly meet what they really need. The EFL instructional activities being "listener-friendly," students can make good progress in listening comprehension and so will their ultimate goal, foreign language competence, be improved.

Unfortunately, however, judging from the present situation of the teaching of English listening in most junior high schools in Taipei, the fact is quite disappointing. The development of English listening skills has not received considerable attention in EFL classrooms, nor has English listening instruction placed high premium on EFL students' listening needs.

First of all, English teachers mainly teach reading and writing, the reason being that the entrance examination to senior high school does not include listening section (Chen, 2002). So, despite a substantial acceptance of the importance of listening comprehension for EFL learners, much less formal training is given to students, if compared respectively to the other three aspects of language: reading, writing, and speaking. This is why Nunan (1997) called L2 listening "the Cinderella skill" (p. 47) in EFL learning.

Secondly, those EFL teachers who have tried to allot similar time to each of the four skills mostly have their students listen to the tape or CD again and again to learn certain new difficult words, to repeat and develop a better pronunciation for speaking, or to give correct answers to some comprehension questions (Chien, 1999). Such an approach to “teaching” listening does not take students’ real need into consideration. It is more like “testing” listening because students are simply exposed to a succession of listening texts on a tape or CD and then are tested how much they have understood in terms of a lot of comprehension exercises.

Apart from the status quo of listening instruction in junior high schools in Taipei, there is also an obvious lack of detailed description or accurate analysis about the English listening needs of junior high school students in research or case studies. As a result of the three critical problems mentioned above, the writer believes that junior high school teachers in Taipei are not certain about how best to teach EFL listening, and naturally, no substantial progress will happen to their students’ listening competence.

All in all, since teaching students English listening is complicated and worthy of the best and brightest educators that secondary schools can prepare, junior high school students deserve EFL teachers who understand how they learn, how their curiosity can be captured, how their needs can be satisfied, and how their learning can be measurably advanced. So vital is this to the writer that a study about students’ English listening needs should be committed to better understand the complexities in educating EFL learners with different needs resulting from factors such as different levels of listening proficiency or different genders.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this research is to analyze what is taught and learned about

English listening in EFL classrooms and to investigate what is truly needed from the stances of the junior high school students in Taipei. An ideal listening class should provide both practice and instruction according to the real learner needs. Students need the instruction that truly improves their English listening comprehension ability, and teachers require guidance about how to do so effectively.

However, due to the fact that reading and writing are the only skills that are tested in the High School Entrance Examination (or Basic Achievement Test for Junior High Students), there is a great deal of concern that most EFL teachers and schools in Taipei pay little attention to, if not neglect, the instruction of English listening. They fail to help students acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are crucial for life outside Taiwan or in the English speaking countries. They may even spend a lot of time merely “testing” their students a large number of listening comprehension questions without giving any instruction for help. Namely, the challenge or problem EFL teachers face is how to make the formal learning of listening comprehension skills in schools truly useful, authentic, and contextualized for students so that they are better equipped to understand native English speakers when and where they have to communicate in English beyond school.

In brief, EFL teachers cannot simply play the tape and ask their students to listen and repeat. Instead, they need to have a clear idea about what listening comprehension ability their students require. Furthermore, they also need to examine sensibly whether their students truly benefit from the curriculum designed to improve English listening comprehension skills. Bearing these in mind, the present writer strives to provide evidence of students’ listening needs while taking into consideration their listening proficiency levels or the gender differences that may influence student

learning and development of English listening.

Significance of Study

English listening competence is a complex skill that needs to be developed consciously. In this research, new insights deriving from the investigation of English listening needs of junior high school students will be provided to educators and teachers.

Apart from giving new insights to educators and EFL teachers, the present writer also hopes to point out new directions for textbook editors and course designers. By providing data analyses and empirical evidence, this research, hopefully, will contribute to our understanding of the English listening needs by junior high school students in Taipei. In addition, results of the study can be served as a suggestion to those publishers to consider more about students' listening requirements and integrate necessary instructional materials.

More specifically, new insights into English listening needs for different listening proficiency levels as well as different genders help EFL instructors understand better what skills are truly beneficial to different levels of junior high school learners and what abilities are truly necessary for EFL classrooms. Hence, this study is a dedication to education policies, school programs and classroom instruction, offering the considerations and implications concerning the English listening needs for different proficiency levels and different genders. Hopefully, this study can lead educators to pause to re-examine their English teaching within the EFL classroom.

Guiding students through the process of listening with their concern in mind not only provides them with the knowledge needed to successfully complete a listening task, but motivates them and puts them in control of their learning (Vandergrift, 2002). To teach listening and see the gain in listening ability, to successfully connect school

learning to real life contexts or situations, and to make listening classes more worthwhile, this research is trying to do something for help.