

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the English listening needs of junior high school students in Taipei. This study tried to realize the requirement about English listening, to explore the relationship between such requirement and students' English listening proficiency, and to discover the gender difference in English listening needs. Data in the previous chapter provide preliminary observations, evidence and useful insights. Discussions from data provide important questions for educators regarding pedagogical theories and practice. In the subsequent sections, detailed discussions of the major findings on the basis of the results will be presented in the way of answering the three over-arching research questions one by one.

English Listening Needs: Conversational & Academic Abilities

[Research Question 1]:

Are there differences in the importance between the needs of conversational listening abilities and those of academic ones, and what are the required conversational and academic abilities exactly?

To begin with, it was discovered that among the fifty-one English listening abilities the *academic* ability 'to follow different modes of lecturing: spoken, audio, audio-visual' has the highest average frequency. This finding provides support for the previous study about the pre-eminence of listening comprehension when students encounter different instructional modes of lectures, especially in the early stages of EFL learning (Taguchi, 2005). Normally, students encounter English words through

reading texts and memorize their visual images. However, naturally-spoken English often sounds differently from what they expect from its written form. They therefore have difficulty recognizing it as the English they have already learned, most cases of which lead to their anxiety about EFL learning. If the lecture is given through visual aids, students can take their time recognizing English words one by one. Through spoken or audio modes, however, students must recognize and understand English very quickly without pausing to think. With the fact that spoken English often has few pauses between words or sentences, most students are afraid that they cannot divide what they hear into meaningful chunks and therefore have a hard time understanding the lecture. As a result, the listening comprehension ability ranking first in students' minds is the ability to follow different modes of lecturing: spoken, audio, audio-visual.

The No.2 important English listening need is the *conversational* ability 'to discriminate among the distinctive sounds of the target language.' Provided that the definition of listening can be simplified as sequential phases like how sound is received, comprehended, and acted upon (Hirsch, 1986), this finding exactly reflects students' beginner level of English proficiency. Before listeners are able to interpret what they hear within the immediate as well as the larger socio-cultural context of the utterance, their being able to discriminate between sounds is always the first goal to achieve (Wipf, 1984). Therefore, this finding reveals the fact that junior high school students have only acquired very basic level of L2 listening proficiency and that they actually require pretty much amount of English listening instruction.

Belonging again to the *conversational* needs type, the third and fourth most necessary are the 'ability to recognize vocabulary used in core conversational topics' and the 'ability to detect key words, i.e., those which identify topics and propositions.'

Such discovery makes it clear that, for most junior high school listeners, vocabulary acquisition is regarded as the critical strategy for listening comprehension, and that if they have the ability to recognize key words, they can follow spoken discourse or make their listening comprehension improved. This echoes Devine's (1982) suggestions in improving students' listening comprehension by teaching students to recognize key signal expressions such as example words, time words, addition words, result words, and contrast words. These two needs being satisfied, students' comprehension can surely be improved. On the contrary, vocabulary knowledge insufficiently received, learners' comprehension abilities would be severely interfered or hampered (Laufer, 1986).

The fifth highest English listening requirement as well as the second highest *academic* listening ability goes to the 'ability to follow lecture despite differences in accent and speed.' Among the fifty-one English listening abilities, the highest is the academic ability 'to follow different modes of lecturing: spoken, audio, audio-visual' as was mentioned at the beginning of this section. From the result of the second highest academic listening ability, 'to follow lecture' again, it seems reasonable to conclude that junior high school students put high premium on English lectures, hoping to fully understand what EFL teachers are talking about, if the teachers do use English to teach. Since students receive the majority of their in-school information through listening from their instructors, being able to follow lecture in spite of different modes, accent and speed become naturally vital. Moreover, since listening is the ability to identify and understand what speakers are saying, which involves understanding their different accent, pronunciation, or speed, and grasping their meaning simultaneously, the fundamental requirement for becoming an effective listener, then, ought to be the ability to listen without being discouraged or bothered

by the speakers' personal accents or pronunciation.

What also received pretty much of the participants' attention is another *academic* need—able to recognize instructional/ learner tasks—that wound up in the third place among the eighteen academic abilities and the sixth among all the fifty-one. This ability is closely related to the listeners' background knowledge or world knowledge. Lack of socio-cultural and factual knowledge of the target language may present an obstacle to listening comprehension. This finding is consistent with Brooks' (1960). In improving English listening, Brooks asserted that it is necessary to give consideration to the interdependence of language and culture; for example, register, expletives, verbal taboos, culture-bound vocabulary. In other words, to listen to and understand speeches, some listeners depend upon linguistic competence and some depend upon previous knowledge that is not necessarily of a purely linguistic nature. The listener must have a 'set of knowledge' to listen and recognize different tasks, and as s/he hears the utterance, that 'set of knowledge' may help him/her to process the information and accomplish the tasks successfully.

As a result, to prepare for a successful listening experience, teachers can help build prior knowledge by providing the appropriate background information including information about the speaker, topic of the speech, purpose of the speech, and the concepts and vocabulary that are likely to be embedded in the speech. The listening materials offered should also consist of examples of native usages from as versatile sources as possible, so that the students can experience a variety of topics, situations, and speakers.

Generally speaking, results of the study indicate that the participants had more needs for *academic* listening than for *conversational* listening, yet such finding did not reach a significant level for generalization. Such discovery is not that surprising,

since preparing students for their high school education is always the major focus of the three-year junior high school education. There are always a wide variety of ‘preparatory’ examinations that students must pass before entering into high schools. Students that do not perform satisfactorily on these examinations or their schoolwork will very possibly be denied the opportunity to receive an education from their school of choice, which entail more pressure from their teachers, parents, and even themselves. As teachers and parents lay more emphasis on academic skills and meanwhile students have no or little chance to deal with situations that need them to communicate in English, students at their teens naturally require more about academic abilities than about conversational or real-life ones.

English Listening Needs: Different Proficiency Levels

[Research Question 2]:

Are there differences in the requirement of listening abilities among different English listening proficiency groups, and what are the respective English listening needs by each group of students?

As for the correlation between English listening requirement and English listening proficiency, the finding is contrary to what was expected. Instead of feeling insufficient in the training of English listening, low proficiency group (LPG) of participants did not have the most need to possess English listening abilities. Among the three different proficiency groups—high proficiency group (HPG), intermediate proficiency group (IPG), and LPG, HPG requires the most, no matter whether for conversational or for academic abilities. Horwitz’s (1987) offered the key to an understanding of this result. In his study, Horwitz claimed that learners’ beliefs about language learning seemed to be apparently related to “the understanding of student expectations of, commitment to, success in, and satisfaction with their language

classes” (p. 283). If students lose confidence in the language classes due to their low language achievement, they may have less interest, compared with the other two proficiency groups, in receiving more of such language training. In contrast, students having better language achievement possess more positive and active beliefs about foreign language learning, have stronger motivation, and hold favorable attitude (Cheng, 1996).

Students have more need for *academic* listening abilities, as was stated above, and so do HPG and IPG. For both groups of students, academic need is stronger than conversational one. What deserves careful attention is that such was not the case for LPG. For this group of participants, *conversational* listening abilities are considered more necessary. One interpretation of this outcome is like what Victori and Lockhart (1995) proclaimed in their study about poor learners or low-achievement learners. Poor learners often have stronger classroom anxiety and more negative attitude toward anything related to schoolwork or formal learning. Besides, they often hold limited beliefs about their capacity to perform instructional tasks. These unconstructive thoughts often cause their resistance or indifference toward academic learning. On the basis of this assumption, LPG’s favor toward conversational abilities rather than academic ones thus become reasonable.

This issue being more explored, several elaborate findings were produced. First of all, for both HPG and IPG, ‘the ability to follow different modes of lecturing: spoken, audio, audio-visual’ was deemed most essential. However, such ability is not even on the Top 5 needs list for LPG. What LPG regarded as No.1 important listening need is ‘the ability to discriminate among the distinctive sounds of the target language,’ which seems to be inversely related to other proficiency groups by such result as No. 2 important for IPG and No. 5 for HPG. Furthermore, the ability

mentioned just now is the only place that a chorus of ideas can be found on the Top 5 needs lists for the three groups. Obviously, with the proof of the statistics, different proficiency groups really hold significantly distinct viewpoints toward English listening needs. As what Rubin (1981) noted in her study, successful learners would differ to some extent in the particular sets of behaviors that they engaged in. Their confidence has the potential to influence both their experiences and actions as language learners.

Another interesting finding about the three groups is that the higher level of proficiency the participants achieve, the clearer visions or goals they have toward English listening. For HPG, they have precise decisions over the five most important listening abilities, whereas for IPG, seven abilities stand along on the Top 5 need list with two abilities striking No. 1 and two scoring No. 4. What is even more surprising, a total of fifteen abilities have the qualification to be on the Top 5 list for LPG due to the outcome of four No. 3s, three No. 4s, and six No. 5s. LPG's Top 5 need list examined carefully, it was discovered that for LPG, almost every ability is equally necessary, including the ability to distinguish sounds, to tell different meanings of words, to identify words in distinctive stress patterns, to recognize discourse markers, and to realize the communicative functions of utterances. Rubin's (1975) research about different proficiency groups of learners offered a reason for this discovery: advanced learners generally know better what are 'appropriate' for them to learn and try to acquire 'appropriate' skills to assist the storage and retrieval of information. These skills also explain their outstanding performance. In contrast, ineffective learners may assume that any skill or ability would compensate for their weakness in learning or improve their language performance.

English Listening Needs: Different Genders

[Research question 3]:

Are there differences in English listening needs between male and female students, and what listening abilities are considered necessary by the two genders respectively? Gender differences in English listening need targeted, the study yielded several noteworthy results. To begin with, gender is a remarkable variable that causes different degrees of emphasis on listening needs, at least for *academic* abilities. The evidence comes from the result that females require significantly more for *academic* listening abilities than males do. This finding can be best explained by Gurian (2001) when he suggested that boys and girls learn differently and that boy students are less committed to school, showing less interest in academic learning. To be more exact, this result does not indicate that boy students are negligent in their studies but that although they know the importance of learning and also show their willingness to learn, their need for academic information is not that strong in comparing with the opposite sex.

The finding, nevertheless, demonstrates both genders' more focus on *academic* abilities than on *conversational* ones. This result reflects again the socio-cultural environment that emphasizes a great deal about schoolwork. The backwash of the Basic Competence Test takes great effect on students' junior high school lives (Chen, 2002) and becomes strengthened by the indirect support from many EFL teachers' targeting purely at academic performance and students' parents' looking down upon anything irrelevant to the studies. Consequently, conversational abilities compared with academic ones, the former is apparently less urgent for students to attain.

There are gender differences in academic needs; however, boys' and girls' Top 5 academic needs lists prudently examined, both genders are unanimous in the

appreciation of several abilities. For instance, both genders stress the most on the ability 'to follow different modes of lecturing: spoken, audio, audio-visual,' which is also the No. 1 ability for the majority of the participants, the HPG, and the IPG. Moreover, both genders stress sound distinction, vocabulary acquisition and key-word identification. Hence, although there is certain disparity, gender influence does not exist in certain aspects. In effect, such similarity eases EFL teachers' pressure in designing suitable listening activities for the satisfaction of both genders.

The literature suggests that understanding gender better may help plan a more effective set-of-solutions for improving student performance (Abraham, 1995; Acker, 1994). Different genders may have different degrees of learning needs for English listening or have different orders of desired abilities; nonetheless, their target abilities are pretty much the same.