

**TEACHERS REPORT ON THE USE OF PRE-LISTENING ACTIVITIES IN
ACTIVATING STUDENTS' PRIOR KNOWLEDGE IN A MALAYSIAN ESL
CLASSROOM IN KUCHING**

by

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ABSTRACT

Teachers report on the use of pre-listening activities in activating students' prior knowledge in a Malaysian ESL classroom in Kuching

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This study is to find out the theory or model of listening lower secondary school English Language teachers employed in teaching the listening skills; the pre-listening activities employed in activating students' prior knowledge; and the criteria English Language teachers employed in the selection and designing of the pre-listening activities. The study is based on the qualitative research design and the research instrument employed was the semi-structured interview. Fifteen lower secondary school English Language teachers having five years and above experiences from five secondary schools in and around Kuching Division were selected as samples for the purpose of this study. The findings revealed that 60% of the English Language teachers employed the top-down model in the teaching of listening skills while another 40% employed the bottom-up model. The main pre-listening activities employed by the English Language teachers were oral questioning, introducing the related vocabulary and distributing pre-text questions. The findings also showed that most of the English Language teachers took into consideration the students' level, suitability and practicality, the related topic, and the context when selecting and designing their pre-listening activities.

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ABSTRAK

Laporan guru-guru mengenai penggunaan aktiviti-aktiviti pra-mendengar dalam mengaktifkan pengetahuan lepas pelajar-pelajar di dalam kelas Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua Malaysia di Kuching

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Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenal pasti teori atau model mendengar yang digunakan oleh guru-guru Bahasa Inggeris dalam mengajar kemahiran-kemahiran mendengar; aktiviti-aktiviti yang digunakan oleh guru-guru Bahasa Inggeris dalam mengaktifkan pengetahuan lepas pelajar-pelajar; dan kriteria-kriteria yang digunakan oleh guru-guru Bahasa Inggeris dalam penghasilan aktiviti-aktiviti tersebut. Kajian ini berbentuk kualitatif serta menggunakan teknik temuduga separa struktur dalam pengumpulan data. Untuk tujuan kajian ini, lima belas guru Bahasa Inggeris sekolah menengah rendah yang mempunyai pengalaman mengajar lima belas tahun ke atas dari lima buah sekolah menengah di kawasan Kuching telah dipilih menjadi sampel. Hasil dapatan mendedahkan 60% guru-guru Bahasa Inggeris menggunakan model *top-down* dalam pengajaran kemahiran mendengar mereka manakala 40% lagi menggunakan model *bottom-up*. Aktiviti-aktiviti yang sering digunakan oleh guru-guru Bahasa Inggeris dalam mengaktifkan pengetahuan lepas pelajar-pelajar adalah soalan lisan, pengenalan perbendaharaan kata yang berkaitan, dan mengedarkan soalan-soalan teks pra-mendengar. Hasil dapatan juga menunjukkan tahap pelajar-pelajar, kesesuaian dan praktikaliti, tajuk-tajuk yang berkaitan serta konteks di ambil kira oleh kebanyakan guru-guru Bahasa Inggeris dalam penghasilan aktiviti-aktiviti pra-mendengar.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	i
ABSTRAK	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
CHAPTER	
ONE	INTRODUCTION
1.0 Introduction	1
1.1 Background of the Study	2
1.2 Purpose of the Study	6
1.3 Objectives of the Study	7
1.4 Research Questions	8
1.5 Significance of the Study	8
1.6 Definition of Key Terms	9
1.7 Conclusion	13
CHAPTER	
TWO	LITERATURE REVIEW
2.0 Introduction	14
2.1 Language Learning	15
2.2 Listening	17

2.3 Listening Process	20
2.4 Teaching of Listening	24
2.5 Activation of Prior Knowledge	26
2.6 Types of Pre-Listening Activities	27
2.7 Conclusion	29

CHAPTER

THREE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction	30
3.1 Research Design	31
3.2 Sample	32
3.3 Research Instrument	33
3.4 Semi-structured Interview Questions	35
3.5 Data Collection Procedure	37
3.6 Data Analysis Procedure	39
3.7 Limitations of the Study	40
3.8 Conclusion	41

CHAPTER

FOUR ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.0 Introduction	42
4.1 Findings and Discussions	43
4.2 Conclusion	60

CHAPTER

FIVE

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.0 Introduction	61
6.1 Summary of the Study	62
6.2 Conclusions	63
6.3 Implications of the Study	64
6.4 Recommendations for Future Research	65

BIBLIOGRAPHY

67

APPENDICES

71

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LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Fig. 1	22
<p>Rixon's (1986) components of a successful listening performance which will help to distinguish the difference between the top-down and the bottom-up approaches to teaching listening comprehension.</p>	
Fig. 2	23
<p>A diagram showing the interrelationship of the three levels (Global Message; Grammar and Vocabulary; and Sound System).</p>	

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to lay the ground for the study as a whole. This chapter discusses the teaching of English Language as a second language in Malaysian schools which also includes the roles of the teacher and their teaching styles in response to the students' learning styles. In the course of laying the ground for the present study, this chapter will rationalize the purpose and significance of conducting the study. This chapter also provides the definitions of key terms and concepts that are within the context of the study. These definitions of key terms and concepts are profoundly essential to the understanding of the study.

1.1 Background of the Study

In Malaysia, English Language is taught as a second language. It is to be taught as a compulsory subject in Malaysian primary and secondary schools and offered for five to six hours per week throughout the eleven years of compulsory schooling. Recently, Science and Mathematics are also taught in the English Language. This shows that the language have made a significant impact in the Malaysian education system. The teaching of the English Language is expected to enable students to interact effectively and efficiently in the language for different purposes while schooling or after completing their formal education in schools. Nesamalar et.al (2000) claimed that those responsible in teaching the English Language in Malaysian schools must help students realize the value of learning the language and motivate them so that they want to learn; there must be opportunities for students to explore and analyze the language; there must be sufficient input of real-life language use to encourage acquisition.

Students are taught the four fundamental language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. The present study focuses on listening, and as a receptive skill, it gives way to productive skills. The teaching of listening is more communicative in nature. Therefore, there must be an integration of language skills where listening lesson is concerned. Saricoban (1999) gave two reasons for using integrating activities in language classrooms. These reasons include to practice and extend the learners' use of a certain language structure or function; and to develop the learners'

ability in the use of two of the skills within real contexts and communicative framework.

A research by Swanson (1984) found out that teachers tend not to emphasize the teaching of listening as they assumed that listening develops naturally. There is an assumption that the teaching of listening is not emphasized because teachers may not be well-equipped to teach listening themselves which leads to uncertainties of the appropriate way of teaching it. A study by Swanson (1986) revealed that teachers do not get sufficient training in the teaching of listening whereby his survey proved that only 82 pages out of 3,704 pages from 15 textbooks utilized in teacher education programmes emphasized on listening.

In teaching listening, teachers need to acknowledge the existence of the theoretical framework in selecting and designing instructions. Like reading, listening also has its top-down and bottom-up processing models and involves simultaneous production of skills such as phonology, syntax, semantics and text structure. Pearson and Fielding (1983) agreed that both reading and listening make use of similar comprehension processes. Anderson and Lynch (1988) both agreed with Riley (1981) that in order to be able to listen effectively in an interactive listening situation, listeners need to activate their mental processing.

Teachers' teaching styles can either motivate or demotivate students' interest towards learning the English Language. Determining the appropriate styles of teaching the English Language is presumably essential as to gain the students' attention towards understanding the language and negotiating meanings using that language. Learning a second language is not an easy task nor can it be acquired quickly. It needs to be learned patiently. The learning ability of the students and how they perceive language learning is taken into account in teachers' style of teaching.

Nesalamar et.al. (2000) listed out six roles teachers play in the classroom. The roles are giving information and imparting knowledge; providing guidance and helping students to practice language skills; motivating students by setting a variety of suitable and interesting tasks that provide opportunities to use the language learnt; organizing purposeful activities and ensuring that students can carry out these activities in non-threatening environment; encouraging students by giving praise as to give students satisfaction that their contributions are recognized and is an important motivational force; and eventually, assessing and evaluating students' English Language proficiency.

Grasha (1996) claimed that the teachers' responses to students' learning styles, the students' capabilities to handle the course demands, teachers' ability to directly control classroom tasks, and the willingness to create a cooperative teacher-students relationship are important elements to consider in determining the teaching styles to

be adopted in a classroom. He categorized four teaching styles which include formal authority, demonstrator, facilitator and delegator. This study will also touched on the role of the teacher as a facilitator in activating students' prior knowledge in the pre-listening stage through the activities as to familiarize students with the topic of the day and how these teachers facilitate the teaching of listening skills by selecting and designing the lesson based on the theory or model of listening process. Teachers, having the facilitator style of teaching, focus on activities and emphasize student-centred learning.

Vandergrift (1999) claimed that listening comprehension plays an essential role in facilitating language learning whereby a preliminary emphasis on listening through teachers' talk and real-life recordings will sufficiently exposed students to good language models, instead of the inappropriate utterances exchanged among the students in the classroom. Moreover, the emphasis of listening skills can be seen through the continuous inclusion of listening activities throughout a language programme. This inclusion is not only limited to the lower level but also at the advanced level. Gary (1975) stressed that an initial emphasis on listening comprehension should be seen as a more natural way to learn a language. He explained that by emphasizing speaking before listening is like 'putting the cart before the horse'. In other words, listening skills should be given emphasis before other language skills as to promote language learning.

In listening, Underwood (1989) claimed that the content schema must be activated in order for the students to access their prior knowledge. Before the students listen to the listening text, teachers are expected to determine their students' level of prior knowledge on a certain topic in the pre-listening stage. Generally, the purpose of the pre-listening activities is to activate students' prior knowledge as to prepare them for the particular listening text. With regards to this, teachers should provide a remedial lesson to students lacking specific content schema on the topic as to bring their level of content schema to the level where they can better comprehend the text. Teachers facilitate students in the pre-listening stage by employing the appropriate activities as to be able to assess students' level of prior knowledge and this will enable them to know how far the students are familiar with the topic that they are about to present. Teachers' ability to apply the appropriate theory or model of listening in their listening lesson is also essential in determining whether their listening activities are applicable in activating students' prior knowledge. The top-down model, bottom-up model and interactive model are the three models of listening that are able to assist teachers in teaching listening.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The pre-listening stage plays an important role in gaining students' interest and to prepare the students for the while-listening stage. The traditional way of teaching listening is more like testing listening whereby listeners are simply exposed to a

series of pre-recorded listening texts on a tape, and then are tested how much they have understood by answering a lot of comprehension exercises rather than being taught how to listen and how to cope with their listening problems in the classroom (Brown, 1990; Anderson and Lynch, 1988; Field, 1998). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to find out whether teachers facilitate students in the pre-listening stage through appropriate activities employed and the types of activities employed as to activate students' prior knowledge in a Malaysian ESL classroom. The study is also to investigate whether Malaysian ESL teachers employed any theory or model of listening in teaching listening skills.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate what theory or model of listening teachers employed in teaching listening skills in a Malaysian ESL classroom in Kuching.
2. To find out the activities teachers employed in facilitating students' activation of prior knowledge in the pre-listening stage in a Malaysian ESL classroom in Kuching.
3. To find out the criteria teachers employed in the selection and designing of activities for the pre-listening stage in a Malaysian ESL classroom in Kuching.

1.4 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What theory or model of listening teachers employed in teaching listening skills in a Malaysian ESL classroom in Kuching?
2. What are the activities teachers employed in facilitating students' activation of prior knowledge in the pre-listening stage in a Malaysian ESL classroom in Kuching?
3. What criteria teachers employed in the selection and designing of activities for the pre-listening stage in a Malaysian ESL classroom in Kuching?

1.5 Significance of the Study

Vandergrift (1999) stressed the importance of pre-listening activities in the teaching of listening whereby through these activities teachers are able to prepare students for what they will hear and what they are expected to do. The pre-listening activities will hopefully guide students on what to focus on when they are listening to a text. A research done by Zhang (2000) revealed that most teachers do not give much emphasis in the pre-listening stage but focused more on the while-listening stage. Most teachers might not consider the pre-listening stage crucial but Vandergrift (ibid) considered this stage as a critical phase in the listening process. In practice, Underwood (1989) claimed that listeners often take on a top-down approach to

predict the likely theme of what they are listening to and then adopt the bottom-up approach to check their understanding of what they have listened. In the teaching of listening, teachers need to have a certain theory or model as to develop students' listening ability in understanding the message conveyed via the listening text. Rost (1990) explained that successful listening involves a coordination of the perception skills, analysis skills, and synthesis skills which are within the top-down and bottom-up processing. It is hoped that this study will help teachers to realize the necessity to have a theoretical framework in planning a listening lesson. This study may also imply to teachers the importance of the pre-listening activities and a guideline for teachers to select and determine the appropriate activities employed to facilitate students' activation of prior knowledge.

1.6 Definition of Key Terms

1.6.1 Teacher/Facilitator

The teachers' role in a listening lesson is commonly as a facilitator because a listening lesson usually constitutes a lot of activities and it is also emphasizing on student-centred learning. Grasha (1996) stated that a facilitator model teaching style tend to focus on activities and emphasizes student-centred learning. Furthermore, he stressed that there is much more responsibility placed on the students to take

initiative for meeting the demands of various learning tasks. The goal of the facilitator is usually defined by the students' abilities to act and competently performing intellectual work. A facilitator teaching style usually designs group work activities leading to active learning, students' collaboration and problem-solving.

1.6.2 Listening

Listening is different from hearing. Listening involves much more than just hearing. Listening is an active process whereas hearing is a passive process. Underwood (1989) defined listening as the activity of paying attention to and trying to get meaning from something we hear.

1.6.3 Pre-listening activities

Vandergrift (1999) stressed that the pre-listening activities help students make decisions about what to listen for and, subsequently, to focus attention on meaning while listening. Pre-listening activities can help students to become aware of what they do not know so that they may become aware of what they want to find out. The activities are expected to lead on to the while-listening activities. A teacher can prepare students for a certain pre-listening task by encouraging them to have a

whole class discussion or by asking them to discuss the task in pairs. After attempting the pre-listening task, the students are presumably having an understanding of the topic and subject matter of the listening text that is about to be presented to them in the while-listening stage of the lesson.

1.6.4 Pre-listening stage

Nesalamar et.al. (2000) explained that the common aims of a pre-listening stage are getting students interested in the topic; activating relevant previous knowledge to help students understand the text and to see how it fits in with what they already know. Furthermore, this stage is also significant in preparing for the language they may find difficult in the text they are about to listen. Hedge (2000) stressed that the major implication for the teaching of listening is the need for a pre-listening stage in which existing prior knowledge can be activated and missing prior knowledge can be introduced.

1.6.5 Background knowledge / Prior knowledge

Rubin, J. (1994) claimed that background knowledge includes all experiences related to a listening text: life experiences, educational experiences, knowledge of how the texts can be organized rhetorically, knowledge of how one's first language

works, knowledge of how the second language works, and cultural background and knowledge. Students who are unfamiliar with the background knowledge required to make sense of a listening text will experience difficulty in inferring and interpreting meaning.

1.6.6 Top-down and bottom-up processing

Underwood (1989) explained that the top-down and bottom-up processing are two ways of processing a listening text. Top-down processing refers to utilizing background knowledge and global understanding as to derive meaning from and interpret the message. Bottom-up processing refers to deriving the meaning of the message based on the incoming language data, from sounds, to words, to grammatical relationships, to meaning. In top-down processing, students use their knowledge to make predictions about the listening text whereas in the bottom-up processing, the students rely on their linguistic knowledge to recognize linguistic elements such as vowels, consonants, words, sentences to understand the meaning of a listening text or a message. In other words, the bottom-up processing assumes that listeners perceive speech by building up an interpretation in a series of separate stages. It begins with the lowest level units, that is, the phonemes, and consequently working up to the larger units such as utterance. From the larger units, the listeners then derive their interpretation of the speakers' meaning.

1.7 Conclusion

After establishing the ground for the study as a whole, the subsequent chapter will present a review of literature on the study.

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CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter aims to review a number of related studies as to support the need to facilitate pre-listening stage and employing activities as to activate students' prior knowledge. Most of the related studies are foreign researches but these studies are essential as a foundation for the present study.

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2.1 Language Learning

Brown (2000) defined language as a system of arbitrary conventionalized vocal, written, or gestural symbols that enable members of a given community to communicate intelligibly with one another. In other words, language is a meaningful systematic set of arbitrary symbols that are primarily vocal and visual.

On the other hand, he defined teaching as showing or helping someone to learn how to do something, giving instructions, guiding in the study of something, providing knowledge, causing to know or understanding. Basically, language is used for communication and people acquired and learned it quite in a similar way.

Kimble and Garnezy (1963) defined learning as a rather lasting change in a behavioural tendency and is the result of reinforced practice. These definitions reveal the relationships between teaching and learning whereby it can be said that teaching is a process of providing guidance and facilitation towards learning. Through this process, learners will be able to learn and setting the conditions for learning. Therefore, learning a language involves the formal and conscious knowledge of a language which can be supported through formal teaching. Brown (ibid) explained that a theory of teaching will spell out governing principles for choosing certain methods and techniques which is in accordance with the teacher's integrated understanding of the learners and subject matter to be learned.

Stephen Krashen, as cited in Krashen and Terrel (1983), proposed a theoretical model of second-language development that includes five hypotheses. In the first hypothesis, Krashen (1982) defined language acquisition process for a first language as one that is subconscious and that occurs in a natural environment out of the learner's need to communicate. Krashen (ibid) characterized language learning process for a second language as conscious attention to structure, verbalization about rules followed, and in the classroom by particular exercises to internalize the matter under consideration.

In Krashen (ibid) second hypothesis on the natural order to the acquisition process, he mentioned that not all learners will acquire specific grammatical structures in similar order as certain structures might be acquired earlier. The acquisition of skills involved in any communicative task requires the organization of information from multiple domains. As listeners have limited mental capacities, many required skills must be automatized for the listener to function in communication. Listening tasks and instruction are expected to facilitate students' understanding of the sounds the speaker uses so that they could respond to relevant aspects of what is heard.

When a second language is acquired, a silent period occurs. As stated in Krashen (ibid) third hypothesis, during the silent period, the learner attends to the sounds of the language while attempting to create logic of the sounds. Typically, no linguistic output is produced during this period which illustrates that comprehension precedes production. Based on this hypothesis, listening instruction should allow students to