



Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human
Development

**LISTENING STRATEGIES AND PROBLEMS IN COMPREHENDING
ENGLISH LECTURES**

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**Bachelor of Education with Honours (TESL)
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This project is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a
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The project entitled 'Listening Strategies and Problems in Comprehending English Lectures' was prepared by Siaw Yuan Yii and submitted to the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Education with Honours (*TESL*).

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ABSTRACT

Listening is a critical element in the competent language performance of adult second language learners, whether they are communicating at school, at work, or in the community. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate on the use of strategies in facilitating listening comprehension of lectures conducted in English among education undergraduates in UNIMAS, and problems that hinders these undergraduates' comprehension when listening to lectures conducted in English. The participants for this study are one-hundred forty-nine ESL and TESL students. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were the two instruments employed in this study. The findings revealed that the most frequently employed strategies by these participants to facilitate their lecture comprehension are selective attention, note-taking, resourcing, inferencing, monitoring, and self-management strategies. Meanwhile, the exploration on the difficulties or barriers confronted by these participants reveals that they frequently encounter problems in relation to their personal, visual support and physical setting factor. The findings imply that the awareness of the listening strategies frequently employed and factors that affect listening enable the education personnel to assist the adult ESL learners to develop a better listening comprehension of lectures conducted in English in the future.

ABSTRAK

Kemahiran mendengar adalah penting bagi pelajar-pelajar dewasa yang belajar dalam bahasa kedua untuk membantu mereka berkomunikasi dengan cekap, mahupun di sekolah, di tempat kerja, atau dalam masyarakat. Oleh itu, tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk menyelidik mengenai penggunaan strategi mendengar yang dapat membantu mahasiswa-mahasiswa dari jurusan pendidikan di UNIMAS dalam kefahaman ceramah-ceramah yang dikendalikan dalam Bahasa Inggeris, dan masalah-masalah yang menghalang kefahaman mahasiswa-mahasiswa ini apabila mendengar ceramah-ceramah yang dikendalikan dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Sebanyak seratus empat puluh pelajar ESL dan TESL telah dipilih untuk menjadi peserta dalam kajian ini. Borang soal selidik dan temubual merupakan dua kaedah yang digunakan untuk mengumpul data bagi kajian ini. Hasil penemuan daripada kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa strategi-strategi yang sering digunakan oleh pelajar-pelajar TESL dan ESL bagi memahami ceramah-ceramah adalah pemerhatian berpilih, pencatatan nota, 'resourcing', 'inferencing', memantau, dan strategi pengurusan sendiri. Sementara itu, penerokaan tentang masalah-masalah yang dihadapi oleh pelajar-pelajar ini mendedahkan masalah-masalah yang sering dihadapi adalah berkaitan dengan sokongan peribadi, visual dan faktor latar fizikal. Hasil kajian ini memberi implikasi bahawa kesedaran mengenai strategi mendengar dan masalah-masalah mendengar membantu para pengajar dalam pembinaan pemahaman mendengar ceramah-ceramah Inggeris di kalangan pelajar ESL dewasa supaya menjadi lebih baik pada masa hadapan.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ESL English as Second Language

TESL Teaching English as Second Language

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter Overview

This chapter discusses the background of the study, the statement of the problem, the research objectives and the research questions. In addition, this chapter also discusses about the significance of the study, the operational definition of terms and the scope of the study. A chapter summary is also provided at the end of this chapter.

1.1 Background of the Study

Listening is often a neglected area of study because more emphasis is placed upon the other three skills, speaking, reading and writing in the teaching and learning environment, especially in the school setting. In the school context, the teaching of the listening deems to get little attention compared to the other skills, speaking, reading and writing skills. This can be supported with Swanson's (1986 cited in Hyslop & Tone, 1988) survey of fifteen textbooks used in teacher education programs. It revealed that out of a total of 3,704 pages of text, only 82 pages mentioned listening study; and it indicates that teachers who have undergone the teacher education programs are not well-equipped with the strategies to teach listening. Consequently, the classroom activities in school tend to focus on the reading, speaking and writing skills while neglecting the listening skills.

Although the listening skill is assumed to be a passive activity and meriting little classroom attention at one time, it has now gained recognition and is given equal emphasis with other language skills (speaking, reading and writing) in the school as teachers are required to emphasize both, the *oracy* (listening and speaking) and the *literacy* (reading and writing) skills (Nunan, 1997). Besides, Lund (1990) pointed out that listening to learn has become an important element in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom and thus, listening skills are less likely to be neglected in the classroom activities in school (cited in Duzer, 1997).

Furthermore, listening has now gained recognition and is considered critical to the second language acquisition (Morley, 1999 cited in Vandergrift, 2004). This is due to the recent theories of second language listening that suggest listeners are active processors of information rather than passive receivers of oral stimuli. In this view, listeners construct meaning from the oral input by drawing upon their prior knowledge of the world and of the target language. Listeners will also utilise different listening comprehension strategies, that is, steps taken by learners to help them acquire, store, retrieve, and/or use information to comprehend the oral input, (O'Malley, Chamot, & Küpper, 1989; Vandergrift, 1992 cited in Young, 1997). These listening comprehension strategies are beneficial because it helps listeners to develop listening skills to help them understand what they have listened.

Listening strategies are also crucial for students in the tertiary level of education because lectures are the most common form of tertiary teaching style. In the tertiary setting, lecture is usually employed as the method of instruction as it provides opportunities for an instructor to explain a particularly equivocal ambiguous point of idea, or a complicated, difficult, abstract process or operation (Burns and Surfield, 2003); and also provide students with information that is unavailable elsewhere, especially when the lectures are based on the unpublished research

projects and on the crystallized wisdom out of the life-long academic pursuits of the instructor (Marshall and Rowland, 1993). Therefore, tertiary students need to equip themselves with skills such as coping with the lecturer's speech characteristics (e.g. accent, speed, intonation, expressions), identifying the main ideas, and note-taking in order to comprehend the lectures given (Huang, 2004).

However, many tertiary students find it difficult to comprehend lectures because listening to lecture is different from the everyday conversational listening. Tertiary students may find it difficult because students only need to bring in their general knowledge while they listen in the everyday conversational setting but they need to have specific background knowledge when they listen in lecture setting (Flowerdew, 1994). Flowerdew (1994) also pointed out that student may also find listening to lecture a challenge because students do not apply their usual turn-taking conventions in their everyday conversational listening in the lecture setting as the turn-taking in lectures will only happens if questions are allowed from the students or come from the lecturer.

Apart from the difficulty due to the difference between conversational and lecture listening, tertiary students also finds it difficult to comprehend lectures as the listeners' role in listening deviates from the straightforward 'chalk and talk' pattern that is usually utilised in the school setting. This 'chalk and talk' pattern in the school setting involves presentation of writing on the board with detailed explanations given by the teachers. However, lectures in the university setting include audience participation in which even advanced second language learners experienced difficulties (Mason, 1994 cited in Rost, 2002). When the lecture includes audience participation, the students do not take the role of a passive listener but an active listener as they need to listen and attend to what is being said by the lecturer by giving an appropriate feedback (producing an instant speech). If they cannot understand the lecturer's speech or were not physically capable in attending to what

is being said (such as having hearing problems), they may not be able to provide appropriate response to what is being said when they are asked to participate.

In addition, affective factors, such as fear of tasks with a heavy cognitive load can also cause processing difficulties among the English as second language learners (Smit, 2006). Tertiary level students may find tasks such as completing assignments, comprehending and taking notes from academic lectures too demanding and they may not be able to cope up with it. Therefore, these difficulties need to be investigated in order to find means to improve students' capability in comprehending academic lectures.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Lecture comprehension is crucial to learners who are studying in the tertiary level because the lecture medium remains a major part of most university study. This is due to the information of a course that the professor or lecturer feels is important for students to learn will be explained and transmitted to the students through lecture (Nist and Holschuh, 2000). Tertiary learners who enter the university are expected to be able to take the responsibility for their own learning, which includes creating their own sources of information such as reliable notes taken during lecture (Smit, 2006). In addition, students are expected to participate through group discussion or tutorials when they are attending lectures (Rost, 2002). When students listen to the lectures, they need to attend selectively to information and record, organize and most importantly, integrate that information cumulatively with other information gained over the period of their study. Then, they will eventually be required to recall that information, in some integrated form for the purposes of assessment, such as in the final examination at the end of each semester.

In this study, the participants are students who are undergoing the course for teaching profession in UNIMAS. These students are categorised into the Teaching of English as Second Language (TESL) and English as Second Language (ESL) learners groups. These TESL and ESL groups of students are observed to be passive in attending to what the lecturer is saying in the class in my initial informal observations, as they rarely responds to the lecturer's probing questions while they are attending to the academic lectures. Apart from that, only a few write down notes during lectures because they are given the handouts of the day's lectures and their attention seemed to be easily distracted by the slightest disturbance, such as jokes or the sound of a ringing phone. Moreover, these tertiary level students did not seem to ask many questions after the lectures. These initial formal observations suggest that students may not be employing beneficial listening strategies to facilitate their listening comprehension of lectures conducted in English and their actions are in contrast with what they are expected to do in order to facilitate their comprehension of English lectures in the tertiary setting. Consequently, it evokes my interest in conducting a survey to identify the listening comprehension strategies used by this particular group of language learners as the awareness of beneficial listening strategies can help students in attaining academic success in their tertiary education (Smit, 2006).

Apart from that, my initial informal observation also reveals that there are a number of students with puzzled expressions when they listen to the English lectures given and they rarely voice out their predicament when they are given the opportunity during the "Question and Answer" session at the end of their lectures. Besides, Carter, Bishop and Kravitz (2000) mentioned that even the best listeners can have some difficulties in comprehending what they have heard and hence, the exploration on listening problems is regarded to be useful in assisting students' comprehension. Consequently, I am also interested to find out the problems that these second language learners encountered when they listen to the English lectures. Moreover, the

exploration of the problematic areas may provide some useful insights for the teaching and learning of listening comprehension skills (Duzer, 1997).

1.3 Objectives of the Research

The participants of this study are TESL and ESL students who are pursuing their first degree in Education in UNIMAS. The objective of the research is to investigate the use of listening strategy among the education programme students in facilitating their listening comprehension of academic context, especially lectures conducted in English. In addition, this study is also to examine the problems that these language learners encountered while they listen to academic lecture. The data are collected using questionnaires; and semi-structured interviews are used for the subsequent cross-checking with the data collected via questionnaires, thus permitting a degree of triangulation and therefore a potential to enhance the reliability of the survey questions.

1.4 Research Questions

This study aims to investigate the use of listening strategies in facilitating listening comprehension of academic lectures; and to find out the problems that these language learners experience while they are attending to the lectures. Based on the objectives of the study, the research questions are formulated as follows:

- (i) What are the strategies that the undergraduates of Education programme utilize to facilitate the comprehension of lectures conducted in English?
- (ii) What are the problems affecting their comprehension of English lectures?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The findings on factors that hinder the language learners' comprehension of the lectures provide useful feedback for the education personnel, especially the lecturer in the tertiary setting. These feedbacks help the lecturer to find appropriate means to solve the problems in order to ensure that students are able to learn what is taught in the lecture. For instance, the findings revealed that students have difficulties in listening or concentrating on the lecture due to the long stretch of lecture hour with 'chalk and talk' approach in teaching, the lecturer can help by ensuring that breaks are given in an interval manner and improvising the way the information is presented in the lectures. The lecturer can give fifteen minutes break after forty-five minutes of lectures and make their lectures interesting through the use of various visuals and sounds, such as video clips and animations that are relevant to the lectures to enhance students' potential in comprehending the lectures given.

In addition, the participants' self-perceptions of the use of listening strategies that can facilitate listening comprehension during lectures may also raise awareness among the participants about the type of strategies that they have employed in facilitating their own comprehension of lectures. It may also create awareness among the participants in adopting the most frequently used listening comprehension strategies that may facilitate their understanding when they listen to lectures in future.

Moreover, this research can provide insights to the academician and researchers who aims to investigate the teaching of listening strategies to facilitate second language learners' comprehension because the findings of this study will provide useful information with regards to the listening strategies that aids one's understanding of the academic lecture, and thus probe for further research on which listening strategies is the most beneficial and should be taught in the classroom context for aiding listening comprehension.

1.6 Operational Definition of Terms

1.6.1 Listening Comprehension

Listening is an active process of involving listeners themselves in the interpretation of what they hear, bringing their own background knowledge and linguistic knowledge to bear on the information contained in the aural text. Scarcella & Oxford (1992) further define the process of listening by suggesting four areas of comprehension which operate simultaneously in a non-hierarchical way depending on the nature of communication: namely understanding of isolated words, phrases, sentences and discourses. In addition, Brown (1990) also suggests people listen for the meaning of the message and not to how it is pronounced, as listeners are not automatic processors of acoustic signal but active participants who utilize their background knowledge to make sense of the words uttered by the speaker (cited in Chan, 2001). Listeners always try to understand what was said and predict what will be said; and hence, will use their knowledge (context, speakers and topics) in their interpretation of the input. While attending lecture, students need to listen and process what they have understood from the information that they have orally received. Therefore, listening strategies are employed by the students to ensure that the input they received orally is understandable.

1.6.2 Listening Strategies

Listening strategies are techniques or activities that contribute directly to the comprehension and recall of listening input. Listening strategies can be classified by how the listener processes the input. According to Nunan (1997), there are two views of listening that have dominated language pedagogy over the last twenty years: top-down processing and bottom-up processing.

For the top-down processing, listener taps into background knowledge of the topic, the situation or context, the type of text, and the language. This background knowledge activates a set of expectations that help the listener to interpret what is heard and anticipate what will come next. Meanwhile, the listener relies on the language in the message, that is, the combination of sounds, words, and grammar that creates meaning in bottom-up processing.

Apart from Nunan (1997), Field (1999) also states that 'bottom' or the lowest level of processing is the phonetic feature in listening. A simple analysis might present the listener as combining groups of features into phonemes, phonemes into syllables, syllables into words, words into clauses, and clauses into propositions whereas, at the 'top' is the overall meaning of the utterance, into which new information is integrated as it emerges.

In this context of study, the language learners employ listening strategies such as reading about the topic prior to the lecture as well as listening to the linguistic devices such as discourse markers that signals structural changes in the discourse patterns and indicate when a new direction is taken or when the speaker returns to a previous topic to facilitate their comprehension of the lectures.

1.6.3 Lecture

Lecture is a medium of instruction that is often encountered in the university for the informational transmittal purposes (Dunkel, 1985 cited in Mac, 1991). According to Chaudron and Richards (1986), the function of a lecture is to instruct by conveying information in such a way that a coherent body of information is presented (cited in Flowerdew, 1994). Lecture is also claimed to be a valuable part of a teacher's instructional method which can stimulate reflection, challenge the imagination, and develop curiosity and a sense of inquiry if the presenter is