

TOPIC FAMILIARITY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a study on the impact of topic familiarity on listening comprehension. The study addresses two major questions. It investigates the effect of topic familiarity on listening comprehension and how far certain aspects of the language are likely to be influenced by topic familiarity. Data were elicited from thirty four intermediate level students who were majoring in Business Studies at a private tertiary institution. A comparison between the pretest and posttest scores showed that the subjects achieved significantly higher marks after the treatment lessons. The findings of this study indicate that topic familiarity has an influence on listening comprehension.

Introduction

Listening is one of the most challenging skills for ESL learners to develop as it is probably the least explicit of the four language skills (Vandergrift, 2004). It is a demanding process, not only because of the complexity of the process itself but also due to factors that characterise the listener, the speaker, the content of the message and any visual support that accompanies the message (Brown and Yule, 1983).

Vandergrift (2004) states that listening plays a very important role in the learning of a second language. This is because it gives the learner information from which to build the knowledge necessary for using the language. Listening provides the necessary input for learners to acquire the language needed for practicing a language. Rost (1990) points out that understanding spoken language is a necessary condition for language acquisition.

For too long listening has been given little attention in the English language classroom. This could be due to the fact that there has been a lack of research interest into listening. Furthermore, listening has often been considered as a

passive skill which learners just “pick up”. Teachers believe that exposing students to spoken language is sufficient instruction in listening comprehension (Miller, 2003).

The lack of emphasis on listening skills has led to problems faced by students in comprehending listening texts. Previous research has identified a few problems that hinder comprehension to take place. Anderson & Lynch (2000) state that one of the reasons why the listener fails to process incoming speech is that the speech contains words or phrases that the listener can hear adequately but is unable to understand because of serious problems with the syntax or semantics of the language. This is a common problem faced by students as the topics that they have to listen to may often contain new or unfamiliar words.

Another problem is the lack of background knowledge on the topics discussed. Lack of socio-cultural, factual and contextual knowledge of the target language can also present an obstacle to comprehension because language is used to express culture (Anderson & Lynch, 2000). This indicates that background knowledge plays an important role in interpreting meaning, as this forms a foundation for listeners to connect new information to their existing knowledge.

Gebhard (2000) points out that background knowledge relates to our real world experiences and expectations that we have. This knowledge is very important when we consider the language processing problems of students. Listening then is not only concerned with identifying the linguistic features of the text but also with matching speech with what the listener already knows about the topic. He further adds that in the process of listening, comprehension can only occur when the listener can place what he hears in a context. If the listener knows something about the speakers and his intention, comprehension is much easier. Familiarity with the topic makes listening easier for the listener as he is able to relate to his own background knowledge.

Purpose of the Study

This study was driven by the need to determine the problems that students face when listening to a text. Specifically, this study was carried out in order to investigate if listening comprehension could be improved by providing the necessary background knowledge. Vandergrift (2002) stresses that listeners use both bottom-up (linguistic knowledge) and top – down processes (prior knowledge) to comprehend a text. Thus, knowing the context of a listening text greatly reduces the burden of comprehension on the listener.

Secondly, the researchers were interested to find out if topic familiarity influences listeners' language output. This serves as a measure of whether familiarising them to the listening task facilitates their comprehension of the passage.

This study probed the following questions:

- a) What is the effect of topic familiarity on listening comprehension?
- b) How does topic familiarity influence language output?

This study focuses on students of intermediate level English proficiency at a private tertiary institution in Malaysia. In their English module, the listening component is included at least once a week. The listening component is tested in both the mid-term and final examinations. Very often, the achievement of students in the listening task is low. This indirectly brings down the grades achieved for the English module at the end of the semester.

As the students came from different parts of the world, they have different cultures and experiences. For topics that they are familiar with, they would be able to answer the questions posed. However, if they have no background knowledge on a particular topic, they may not be able to demonstrate their comprehension on the questions asked. This could be due to the fact that the prescribed text book is published in the United Kingdom and therefore the topics are related to the English culture. Most of the students are not exposed to this culture and this could lead to problems in processing the listening input. As teachers, our lessons should focus on providing the listeners with specific knowledge required for comprehending the listening text rather than just concentrating on linguistic aspects.

Methodology

Sample

This study was carried out at a private tertiary institution. The subject of this study are students from the School of Business and Information Technology and they are currently in Semester Two. English 0211 is a compulsory module for these students and it is taught over a period of fourteen weeks. Classes are held twice a week.

Subjects from two English 0211 classes participated in this study. In total, there are thirty-four students aged between 18 and 21. These students come from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, China, Tanzania, Botswana, Kenya and Malaysia.

Most of the foreign students have been studying in Malaysia for at least a year. This class is made up of seven female and twenty-seven male students.

A majority of these students have completed an equivalent of the ‘O’ levels at high schools in their respective countries. As for the Malaysians, the entry requirement is SPM. Based on a placement test conducted at the beginning of the semester, the English proficiency level of most of these students is intermediate. At college, the medium of instruction is English. Therefore, they get a lot of exposure to the English language.

Placement test

During the first English lesson in the semester, subjects sat for a placement test. The purpose of this test was to determine their proficiency level in English. This test is compulsory for all new students who enrol at this institution. The one-hour paper consisted of one hundred questions where students had to fill in the blanks with one word each. This paper tested grammar, vocabulary as well as spelling.

The results of the placement test are shown in Table 1 below. The results indicate that the students scored between 60 and 75 marks.

Table 1: Placement test marks

Score	No of Students
70 -75	10
65-69	16
60-64	8

The Listening Text

Since the aim of this study is to examine the effect of topic familiarity on listening comprehension a listening passage which the students are not familiar with was chosen. The selected passage was entitled ‘The Keys to Advertising.’ This listening passage was taken from a supplementary work book for the English 0211 course.

This passage was chosen because the students were in Semester Two majoring in Business and Information Technology. The choice of the listening passage was crucial as it had to be unfamiliar in content but at the same time something that appealed to them. Van Duzer (1997) points out that when learners

listen with a purpose and listen to things that interest them and relate to their experiences, they will be motivated to listen and pay attention to. This is an important aspect as they need the motivation to listen.

Mead & Rubin (1985) advocate the use of materials that model the language that students might be expected to hear in the classroom, in various media or in conversations. They add that since listening performance is strongly influenced by motivation and memory, the passages should be interesting and relatively short. To ensure fairness, topics should be grounded in experience common to all students, irrespective of sex, geographic, socioeconomic or ethnic background. The topic of advertising is a neutral topic and was suitable for the learners from various cultural backgrounds. Three teachers who were teaching English 0211 were consulted to determine the suitability of the content of the listening passages.

The Listening Experiment

This listening experiment was carried out over a two-month period. All the tests and treatment lessons were carried out during the English 0211 class for two hours per week. The experiment was carried out in the order shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Plan for the listening experiment

Week 1	Pre-test
Week 2	Treatment Lesson
Week 3	Treatment Lesson
Week 4	Treatment Lesson
Week 5	Post-test

The Comprehension Questions

In this study, the students had to listen to a passage entitled ‘Keys to Advertising.’ In the pre-test, they had to answer a total of 14 questions related to this passage. There were five multiple choice questions, nine True/False questions and two open-ended questions.

Multiple choice questions were used because the scores are determined and reported objectively as there is only a single correct answer. Mead & Rubin

(1985) however caution that multiple choice questions should focus on the important aspects of the passage and the answers be derived from the passage without much reliance on student's prior knowledge.

Open-ended comprehension questions act as activators of knowledge as they give the students the freedom to select and organise relevant information (Oded & Stavans, 1994). In the final part of the listening comprehension test, students had to answer 4 open-ended questions. This type of questions also encouraged the learners to present their personal views on the topic.

Pre-test

A total of thirty-four students from two different classes were the informants for this study. All these students had completed the English 0102 in their first semester and had passed the module. Before the experiment was conducted, these students were given a placement test to determine their level of English. The results indicate that the students from both classes are of intermediate proficiency level.

A week later, the pre-test was carried out. Since this pre-test was carried out in both classes at the same time, both the researcher and the teacher discussed the procedures involved in carrying out the pre-test. This included giving clear instructions to the students. The tape would be played twice. This was important as to give the listeners a second chance at retrieving information that they had missed out the first time. The teacher was also reminded to stop playing the tape at the end of each part in order to give the students ample time to complete writing their answers.

In this test, students listened to a passage which contained information that they were not familiar with. The test was conducted simultaneously in both classes.

The Treatment

After the pre-test was administered, the treatment lessons were carried out over four weeks. The materials for these three treatment lessons were obtained from the same book as the listening passage 'Contemporary Topics: Advanced Listening Comprehension.' These passages were adapted to suit the students' proficiency.

The treatment provided background knowledge on advertising and how companies make them effective for consumers. Therefore, activities were

tailored to help learners understand this concept.

Each lesson was carried out for one hour a day for three consecutive weeks. In all the treatment lessons the students did the required activities in pairs or groups. The activities in the treatment lessons activated learners' background knowledge. Lingzhu (2003) states that as listeners rely on their background knowledge for comprehending a text, it is only beneficial to activate their background knowledge before the listening task takes place. The advantage of doing this is to provide the necessary context for that specific listening task. Activities such as pictures, maps and diagrams help learners comprehend unfamiliar texts (Nunan, 1999).

In the treatment lessons, learners are given a lot of visuals to help them understand the concepts involved in advertising. For example, learners examined advertisements with popular personalities and decided why they were effective. Word association was used to determine what prior knowledge learners bring with them before they listen to a passage (Lingzhu, 2003). The use of semantic webbing, which requires learners to connect various concepts and key words, is an integration of learners' pre-existing knowledge and new knowledge.

The final type of activity suggested by Lingzhu (2003) is giving ideas or suggestions. This activity encourages the use of words and phrases that students already know and thus motivate them to listen. The researcher incorporated all the above mentioned activities into the treatment lessons to activate the learners' knowledge on the subject.

The Post-test

Four weeks later, and after three treatment lessons, the post-test was administered. Both classes had the post-test at the same time. The same listening passage entitled "The Keys to Advertising" was used for the post-test and the students had to answer the same questions that they had answered earlier in the pre-test.

Analysis of Results

In order to evaluate the effect of topic familiarity on listening comprehension, the scores from the pre-test and post-test were analysed. The written responses were analysed qualitatively to check the quality of language output in the post-test. These analyses indicated if topic familiarity helped learners to better comprehend the listening text.

To answer the first question, learners' scores in the pre-test and post-test

were analysed. A t-test was carried out to find out if there was a significant difference between the learners' pre and post-test scores.

The written responses of the subjects in the open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively to find out if there was any improvement in the learners' answers in the post-test. This was to investigate how topic familiarity influenced language output.

Semi Structured Interviews

After the pre-test, an interview was carried out with three students to find out if they had faced any problems during the listening test. The purpose of this interview was to find out how unfamiliarity with the topic had affected the listeners' comprehension.

Analysis of Students' Written Work

Samples of students' answers to the open-ended questions in the listening experiment were analysed. A comparison was made between learners' responses in the pre and post-test to see if there was any improvement in their language output after the treatment lessons.

Findings

The Effect of Topic Familiarity on Listening Comprehension

In the pre-test, the subjects were required to answer a total of sixteen questions. There were five multiple-choice questions and nine close-ended questions, which in total carried 16 marks. The two open ended questions in the final section carried a total of 4 marks. Therefore, the highest possible score in the pre-test was 20 marks.

The mean score in the pre-test was 13.23 with a standard deviation of 2.35. The minimum score obtained by the subjects was 7, while the maximum score was 16.

The post-test in the was administered 3 weeks after the pre-test. The subjects were required to listen to the same text and answer the sixteen questions that they were given in the pre-test. An analysis of their results shows that, there is a marked improvement in the subjects' scores. The mean score for the post-test was 16.06 with a standard deviation of 2.03. The minimum score obtained was 11, while the maximum score was 19. A summary of these results is presented in Table 3 and Figure 1.

Figure 1: Performance in pre-test and post-test

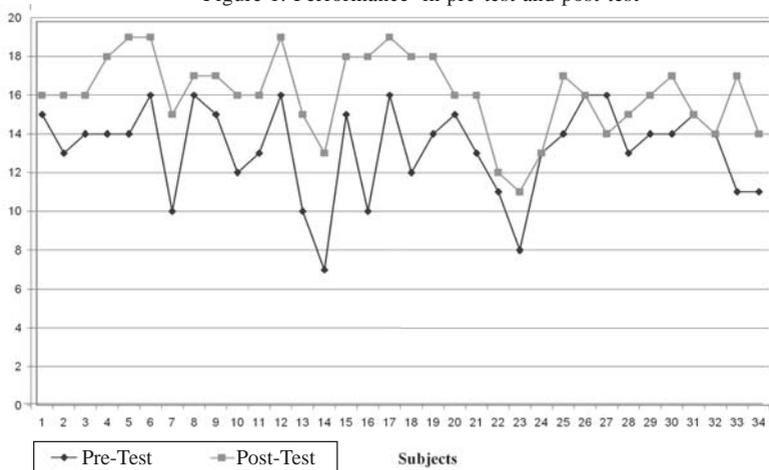


Table 3: Results of t-test

Test	Subject	Mean score	Std. Dev	p value
Pre	34	13.23	2.35	.000*
Post	34	16.05	2.03	

* $p < 0.01$

The results indicate that the higher mean score in the post-test is significantly different at $p < 0.01$. This significant improvement in the post-test is attributed to topic knowledge that the subjects gained from the treatment lessons.

In the pre-test, subjects were unable to determine answers to the comprehension questions as they faced a lot of barriers in the form of new vocabulary and advertising concepts. As they tried to overcome this, the process of interpreting the text was interrupted. Therefore, they could not identify the main ideas and information in the lecture that they needed to answer the comprehension questions.

According to Anderson & Lynch's (2000) view of 'Listener as Active Model-Builder,' successful comprehension in listening takes place when the listener has schematic knowledge, knowledge of the context and systemic knowledge. The treatment lessons had successfully provided the subjects with these three

categories of knowledge.

In the treatment lessons, the subjects had the opportunity to deal with key vocabulary items that were presented in the same context as they would hear in the lecture. Other activities that allowed them to relate content to their own experiences like identifying effective advertisements and the elements that make them appealing also gave them an insight into the field of advertising. Creating an advertisement for their own product gave the subjects a chance to put into practice their newly acquired knowledge on this topic. This familiarity of topic enabled the subjects to successfully identify the facts and details of the advertising techniques, as well as details that support these main ideas. This ability facilitated their understanding of the text which explains why they performed significantly better in the post-test.

This is consistent with previous studies (Van Duzer, 1997 & Schmidt – Rinehart, 1994) indicating that familiarity with the topic facilitates listening comprehension.

The Effect of Topic Familiarity on Language Output

In order to gauge improvement in language output, namely in vocabulary and content knowledge, students' written answers in the pre and post-tests were examined qualitatively. Answers to the two open-ended questions were closely examined in order to find out if there was an improvement in the use of new vocabulary and phrases in the post-test. The background knowledge gained from the treatment lessons would be reflected if their answers in the post-test showed a better understanding of the topic of advertising.

All the written responses in the pre and post-test were thoroughly examined for any differences in the quality of the language used. However, six subjects' answers are discussed in this section as they exhibited a major improvement in language output. Selection of these subjects was purposive in nature based on the difference between their answers in pre-test and post-test.

The two open ended questions in this listening experiment were:

1. What is the definition of advertising? (2 marks)
2. What is the difference between factual appeal and emotional appeal? (2 marks)

The six students' answers for question one are presented below.

Question 1: What is the definition of advertising?

Suggested answer: Advertising is the transmission of a message designed to promote a product, service or idea.

Subject 1 : *Galal*

Answer in pre-test: *Advertising is influence in many ways.*

Answer in post-test: *It's a message, idea or service and it's designed to promote a product, its service in business.*

Galal has demonstrated a better understanding of the concept of advertising in his post-test answer. He used appropriate vocabulary and ideas to define the word clearly.

Subject 2 : *Zhou*

Answer in pre-test : *no answer*

Answer in post-test: *Advertising is a message to promote a product and service.*

Zhou did not attempt to answer this question in the pre-test. In the post-test, he demonstrated the ability to use the vocabulary that he had learnt.

Subject 3: *Alim*

Answer in pre-test: *Is a serious business and are used to convince customers to by services, products and goods*

Answer in post-test: *Advertising is to promote a product, service or idea provided and attracts the attention of the customers.*

Alim has shown an improvement in his post-test answer. He has included vocabulary like 'promote', 'attract' and 'attention' that he learnt in the treatment lessons.

Subject 4: *Faiz*

Answer in pre-test: *First, convince. Second, interesting*

Answer in post-test: *Firstly, it should be interesting to attract people and secondly, it gives information about how to use the product.*

Faiz too has shown a marked difference in his understanding of the term

advertising in his post-test answer. He too has accurately identified the main ideas in the listening text.

Subject 5: *Sunil*

Answer in pre-test: *To promote products and increase company products.*

Answer in post-test: *It's a message to promote the sales of product and encourage people to buy the product*

Sunil has presented a more concise answer in his post-test answer as compared to the pre-test. He has used words like '*promote sales*' and '*encourage people to buy*' which were all used in the treatment lessons.

Subject 6 : *Sharon Lim*

Answer in pre-test: *A kind of message transmission to promote product/services*

Answer in post-test: *A kind of message to promote a service, idea or product. It creates attention to customer to buy the product through the promotion and convinces customer to buy specific product using testimonial as a method.*

Sharon Lim used knowledge gained from the treatment lessons to define the term advertising in detail.

In general, the analysis of the subjects' answers in the pre-test and post-test shows an improvement in their language output in relation to Question 1. There is clear evidence that the subjects' answers in the post-test are better than those in the pre-test.

This improvement could be attributed to the fact that they have gained new knowledge from the treatment lessons. In the post-test, learners were able to relate the gained knowledge to new input they had to process. As advocated by Anderson & Lynch (2000), prior knowledge has assisted the subjects to interpret the text more meaningfully. This is the reason why the post-test answers display a distinct improvement in the use of vocabulary as well as knowledge related to the topic.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that background knowledge has a significant

effect on listening comprehension. Providing the learners with background knowledge as well as systemic knowledge as advocated by Anderson & Lynch (2000) provides learners with the necessary information to facilitate comprehension of an unfamiliar topic. These findings are consistent with the results of previous studies carried out on the effects of topic familiarity on listening comprehension (William & Thomas, 1991 & Schmidt–Rinehart, 1995).

The findings show that listening comprehension can be improved by providing appropriate instructions. Teachers have to re-evaluate their methods and start to recognize that they have to concentrate on the listening process rather than the listening test results.

The second implication of this study is that topic familiarity is an important aspect in listening comprehension. The background knowledge that students bring with them helps them to perform the listening task more successfully. This knowledge helps the learners to match new information with what they already know about the topic. Teachers should prepare learners for the listening stage.

Another implication of this study is that teachers must do more than just provide learners with linguistic knowledge. New information that is acquired should be put into practice. Thus, learners should be provided with the opportunity to use language for communication in a meaningful context in the class. This will help the internalisation of new input.

In conclusion, this study has established that topic familiarity is an essential factor in the comprehension of unfamiliar texts. It is hoped that these findings would serve as a guide to teachers, curriculum planners as well as text book writers to gear their materials and classroom activities towards a more effective approach to the teaching and learning of listening.

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