

ANALYSIS OF BARRIERS IN LISTENING COMPREHENSION AMONG JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract: This research paper identifies barriers and difficulties in listening comprehension faced by junior high school students. The research questions were what barriers did students encounter and how did they use strategies to overcome those barriers. This study used a qualitative method and was a case study involving 40 students and one English teacher. The data were obtained by ways of conducting a test of listening taken from TOEIC test. The tests indicated that the results scores were not quite satisfactory. This is primarily caused by speech delivery of the native speaker which was too fast. This means that students faced listening barriers especially in processing information. The data also indicated that students were also nervous when doing the test as a habitual barrier. Strategies used to overcome these barriers are by making students get used to listen and use English and making them familiar with certain contexts in real life.

Keywords: *listening barriers, listening comprehension, TOEIC test.*

INTRODUCTION

English is one of important subjects to study for junior high school students in Indonesia. Indonesian Decree No. 20, 2003 on National Education System verse 37 states that English is an international language which is essential for international communication. Hence, the government of Indonesia includes English as one of the subjects to be tested in the national examination for junior high school, along with Mathematics and the Indonesian language.

The School-based Curriculum for junior high school also states that English teaching is conducted in 4 lesson hours in a week which consists of 40 minutes teaching and learning in each hour. But there is no exact time allocation for each listening, speaking, reading and writing skill. On the whole

for each 7th through 9th grade, English teaching spends about 36 weeks of effective schooling period. The sum of lesson hours for English is the same with those allocated for Mathematics and Indonesian Language.

In a study about listening comprehension by Suryanti (2002), it was indicated that listening was indeed a difficult subject for students to learn. Another study by Chen (2005), explored the barriers confronted by the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners while comprehending listening during a training program. The findings indicated that the obstacles confronted by the learners were multi faceted (Chen, 2005). She found out that listening barriers were associated with the internal factors of learners such as their affective statuses, listening habit, information processing capacities,

English proficiencies and their beliefs about their listening abilities. Other barriers were concerned with the nature of listening strategies and the listening material used.

This research explored the barriers in listening comprehension experienced by 9th grade students identified as the source of obstacles the hearer experiences in getting the right message from the spoken language. Spoken language has distinct characters from written language. These differences may cause barriers in listening comprehension. Eight characteristics of spoken language which are adapted from several sources (Dunkel, 1991; Richards, 1983; Ur, 1984; in Brown 2001:252-254) are as follows.

The first characteristic of spoken language is clustering, that is breaking down speech into smaller groups of words. The second is redundancy like rephrasing, repetitions, elaborations, and little insertions of "I mean" and "you know." The third is reduced forms like phonological, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic reduction (Brown, 2001: 253). The fourth is performance variables such as hesitations, false starts, pauses, and corrections. The fifth is colloquial language like idioms, slang, reduced forms, and shared cultural knowledge. The sixth is rate of delivery which indicates number and length of pauses used by a speaker. The seventh characteristic is stress, rhythm, and intonation which are very important because English is a stress-timed language. And the eighth characteristic is interaction which rules include negotiation, clarification, attending signals, turn-taking, and topic nomination, maintenance, and termination.

Chen's study concerned with barriers in learning strategies in listening comprehension. She categorized listening barriers into seven categories; affective, habitual, information processing, English proficiency, strategic, belief, and material barriers (Chen, 2005). These barriers are the foundation to conduct this research.

METHOD

The focus in this research is students' barriers in listening comprehension. To find out their listening barriers the research used qualitative research. As mentioned by Denzin and Lincoln, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative research studies things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln in Gall, Gall and Borg, 2003, p. 24).

The primary data in this research were obtained from two kinds of sources. They were questionnaire and interview. The first source of data came from the questionnaires followed by the second source that was in-depth interview with the students and their teacher to explore insight toward this research. The interview also served as a tool to cross check the data from questionnaire.

The data from questionnaire and interview were the primary data which would be used as a mechanism of analysis of the barriers and the TOEIC test serves as secondary data to support the questionnaire.

This research was conducted in a private junior high school in Bandung, West Java. Meanwhile the participants of this research were one English teacher

and one class of 9th grade students which consisted of 40 students in a private junior high school in Bandung in academic year 2006-2007. Those students were chosen from five classes of ninth grade students. From each class there were eight representatives which were recommended by their English teachers. The 40 students were expected to represent the number of population of each class.

Questionnaire used in this research was a written questionnaire which consisted of thirty three items and two open ended questions. Respondents were expected to record a written or typed response to each questionnaire items to find out their perception towards listening comprehension. Those options are given according to Likert scale (attitude scale) procedure which elicits informants' subjective responses (Wray, Trott and Bloomer, 1998:175).

Interview used for this study was a semi structured interview (Gall, Gall and Borg, 2003) in which questions by the interviewer were based on a list of questions prepared. In this research the interviews were conducted following the interview guidelines which had been set before. Six respondents were taken as sample for interview. There were fourteen pairs who were consistent with their result from TOEIC test 1 and 2. A pair of students who joined in consistent groups, higher, middle and lower level, were chosen for the sample. The first two students belonged to the consistent groups taken as sample for interview in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the data collection involving TOEIC test, distribution of questionnaire and interview to the respondent, the analysis for those data

was using reflective analysis method. Reflective analysis is a process in which the researcher relies primarily on intuition and judgment in order to portray or evaluate the phenomena being studied (Gall, Gall and Borg, 2003).

The primary data from the questionnaire obtained from the respondents were presented in the form of table. Those tables were arranged according to listening barriers categories. Eight tables of those categories were used to present data in a form of frequency distribution of the responses by using percentage formula:

$$P = \frac{f}{n} \times 100\%$$

P in this formula means the result of percentage, f means the number of responses, and n means the number of the whole responses (Sudjana, 2001:129).

Identifying listening barriers concern with recognizing the obstacles or difficulties in listening comprehension found in the data from the respondents. In this case recognizing categories of listening barriers are identifying those as mentioned in Chen (2005) and Janusik (2006).

After the process of identification, "each data was categorized into eight major categories of barriers, either affective, habitual, information processing, English proficiency, strategic, material, belief" (Chen, 2005, p. 9-10) or distraction barriers (Janusik, 2006).

The eight categories of barriers were distributed into thirty three questionnaire statements. To obtain data from those statements, students chose the most appropriate answer according to their condition during the listening comprehension test from five options.

The result of TOEIC Test which was far from satisfactory indicated several barriers which might be encountered by students in listening comprehension. Barriers in listening were shown by result of TOEIC test which was not quite satisfactory. From twenty items in TOEIC listening section given during the first test, on the average students could only answer about 8.5 or 42.5%. On the second test the average number of the items answered correctly on the test was 8.75 or 43.75% .

The questionnaires were distributed to 40 respondents on 28th of November 2006. Data from questionnaire indicated that there were several barriers students encountered in listening comprehension. To follow the

classification of listening barriers, the listening barriers students encountered will be classified into; affective, habitual, information processing, English proficiency, strategic, belief, material barriers and distraction barriers.

The followings are findings from questionnaires which are put into categories of listening barriers. They are put that way so that it is easier for the researcher to explain the findings.

Affective barriers are defined as students' attitudes such as anxiety, distress, frustration and resistance which can influence their listening comprehension. Students' responses to affective barriers' statements were recorded as follows.

Table 1. *Respondents' answer to affective barriers' item questions*

Items No.	Questions	Range of options									
		1		2		3		4		5	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	I feel nervous when listening to questions in English	2	5	7	17.5	24	60	6	15	1	2.5
2	I just want to give up when listening to questions in English	7	17.5	14	35	17	42.5	2	5	0	0
3	I don't like English lesson	11	27.5	18	45	10	25	1	2.5	0	0
4	I'm not optimistic in facing national examination because there will be listening section on the test	4	10	16	40	11	27.5	7	17.5	2	5

Based on the table above, 33 out of 40 respondents seemed to be nervous during listening comprehension test (77.5%). This is in line with the affective dimension as mentioned in Mac Intyre and Noels (1996, in Chen 2005) that puts forward affective variables including anxiety, motivation, attitude, etc as aspects that affect students' performance in listening comprehension. Despite

nervousness, the surprising fact was that 95 % of respondents or 38 pupils did not want to give up easily in doing the listening test.

The results from the questionnaires showed that, 92.5% of respondents often lost their concentration when listening to verbal question. With regard to students understanding of individual word, the

data from questionnaire indicated that they still had some difficulties in this aspect. The result showed 95% of respondents were having trouble in understanding every word in listening test though they had listened carefully to the text. Concerning vocabulary practice, 75% of respondents stated that if they had vocabulary practice, their burden during listening would be lessened.

Information processing barriers deals with students' ability to process the information from the utterances they have heard from the speaker. The respondents found that the speaker spoke too fast.

The ability in guessing the context in listening comprehension was one of important parts in listening, there were 90% of the respondents who tried to guess the context of questions by pictures during the test. This is in line with Richard (1990) and Rost (1994) taxonomy of general listening skills (in Rost, 2002:119).

English proficiency barriers concern with what students' think of their English competences and whether these competences help them during listening test.

It was found that 87.5% of respondents felt unfamiliar with the speaker's accent in the listening test. This was also shown in Chen study which indicates some of her respondents' problems with the accent of native speaker (2002:10).

In this study all respondents were having difficulties in remembering the words that the speaker was saying. There were also 100% of the respondents who recognized the words in listening test but forgot their meaning.

The followings are findings from interview which are put into categories of listening barriers. They are put that

way so that it is easier for the researcher to explain the findings.

During the interview the teacher expressed her difficulty in teaching listening. This is Mrs. SaA's excerpt of interview:

"In my opinion, emm... teaching listening is so difficult because I have to emm... what is it... I have to teach to the students of how to concentrate, how to receive information, to focus on the sound while they are listening to the sound, listening (to the) material itself." She said clearly that there are a lot of factors which caused difficulties in teaching listening materials to the students.

Despite barriers mentioned by respondents during the interview above and barriers stated in the questionnaire, one of the students, Elr still showed her optimism in facing listening in the upcoming English national examination because for her it was a challenge.

The barriers related with material of listening were expressed in these following interview excerpts by San and Res.

San : "Yes... I think (the material taught in listening classes) help a little."

Res : "Emm... it's good. There're loudspeakers (in the lab), everything that students need to listen and to speak is very complete."

Apart from separate hours for listening and speaking lesson, Res suggested more hour lesson for practicing listening. San added that listening material given in the language lab has proven to be useful for the students in facing listening test.

The following is the example of distraction barriers that indicates that Agg distracted when there were a lot of noises from other students who didn't

pay attention during listening test, while other student, Des often lose his concentration when some students around him were asking for answers.

Agg : "I feel distracted when there are a lot of noises from other students who didn't pay attention (to the listening test)"

Spoken English materials are actually abundant. There are TV programs like news, quizzes, films, songs or other activities that use English. This is also supported by students' answers in the questionnaire. Students can actually learn from them as well as be entertained by them. Chen respondents also trained themselves by listening to the news and watching movies to increase their skill in listening (Chen, 2005:10).

From the interview of six respondents found the applied strategies such as using music when they were practicing listening at home (Res, Fit and Yuy). Songs in English are useful for practicing English pronunciation, tone, recognizing slang words, etc.

CONCLUSION

With regards to the first research question, this study supports the findings of the previous research in listening barriers. There are eight barriers that students encounter during listening comprehension. First, Affective barriers, most students seemed to feel nervous but were optimistic when listening to questions in listening comprehension. Second, Habitual barriers, students often lost their concentration when listening to the spoken question, though they always tried to listen carefully, but they still had trouble in understanding every word.

Third, Information processing barriers, students believed that the speaker spoke too fast during listening comprehension test and as a result they got low scores in the listening comprehension tests. English proficiency barriers, students did not understand the accent of the speaker and they agreed to the assumption that they have trouble in memorizing the words that the speaker said, they weren't familiar with some English words, sometimes forgot the meaning of the words and felt that their English grammar knowledge is not good enough.

Fourth, the strategic barriers, most respondents stated that they sometimes forgot to apply the knowledge of answering listening comprehension questions and they also thought that there were a number of rules and methods to be remembered when they tried to answer the listening comprehension questions. Fifth, Belief barriers, some of the students felt that even though they knew they have a weakness in listening, they did not know how to overcome the problems. So, they agreed if listening comprehension test was taken out of the national examination test rather than taking a risk of failure during national examination test.

Sixth, material barriers, students felt difficult in getting the main idea from the text, they felt they couldn't remember the words because they unfamiliar with the spoken text's topic or theme, the level of the test was difficult, the text was long. But they did not feel that the materials given during listening lesson was the cause in the failure of understanding listening comprehension. Seventh, distraction barriers, students agreed that handphone rings or noises from other

students often made them lost concentration. And further the students think that the limited school equipments as a barrier in a listening comprehension.

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