Effects of Listening Supports on Listening Performance of Thai First-Year University Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the effects of three forms of listening supports on the listening performance of Thai first-year students at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. The subjects were 180 first-year students at KMUTT. They were divided into three groups of high and low English ability. There were, therefore, six groups, i.e. three groups for each ability level, namely three groups for 1) High Question Preview, 2) Low Question Preview, 3) High Vocabulary Preview, 4) Low Vocabulary Preview, 5) High Repeated Input, and 6) Low Repeated Input. 3x2 ANOVA was employed to analyze the data. The findings revealed that 1) listening supports significantly affected the listening performance of Thai first-year students. Repeated Input is the most effective listening support and Vocabulary Preview is the least effective; 2) the levels of English ability also significantly affected the listening performance of the students; 3) however, no interaction effect was found. The findings suggest that providing listening supports has an effect on students' performance. The opportunity to listen to the listening text more than once enhances the listening performance of students, but providing vocabulary support would not produce immediate effects on test-takers' listening performance.

Keywords: Listening Supports, Questions Preview, Vocabulary input, Repeated Input, Listening Performance, First-Year Student

1. Introduction

Listening comprehension is an essential aspect for language learning, especially for EFL learners because comprehending spoken English is not easy. Buck (2001) claimed that it may be due to the incredible complexity of the listening process. Vandergrift (2007) also stated that *"listening is the least researched skill among the four language skills because of its implicit nature, the ephemeral nature of acoustic input and the difficulty in accessing the processes"* (p.191). However, the attention on listening has increased in the past decades with an emphasis on various aspects of listening skills such as listening comprehension process, factors affecting listening comprehension, and listening strategies (Vandergrift, 1997, 2002; Goh, 1998, 2002, Chang and Read, 2006). According to Buck (2001),

listeners usually rely on two sources of information in processing listening input. First, they have to rely on their linguistic knowledge, which includes knowledge of phonology, lexicon, semantics, syntax, pragmatics, and so forth. The second type of knowledge is schematic knowledge, i.e. "the knowledge about the topic, about the context, and general knowledge about the world and how it works" (p.2). This knowledge goes through different processes: a bottom-up process, a top-down process, or an interactive process in the listeners' heads in order to comprehend the listening input. However, completing this process may be interrupted and comprehension might not occur. The factors affecting listening comprehension, therefore, have become the interest of many researchers. Brindley and Slatyer (2002) identified three factors that affect the listening ability of students:

- The nature of the input: speech rate, length of the passage, syntactic complexity, vocabulary, discourse structure, noise level, accent, register, propositional density, amount of redundancy, etc.;
- The nature of assessment tasks: the amount of context provided, clarity of instructions, response format, availability of Question Preview, etc.; and
- The individual listener's factors: memory, interest, background knowledge, motivation, etc.

These factors influence the listening comprehension of the listeners. In a testing situation, these factors influence the test performance of students. Therefore, several studies have focused on the factors affecting listening comprehension or performance of listeners and one of these factors is defined as listening supports. In other words, providing listening supports is a way to investigate how the performance of students may be affected by different factors.

1.1 Listening Supports

According to Nation and Newton (2009), in teaching listening, providing listening supports to students can be beneficial for them. However, in a testing situation, the way to support listening is slightly different. Underwood (1989) mentioned that it is not fair for foreign language learners to suddenly listen to a listening text, even in a testing situation; they should be adequately "tuned in" through a variety of pre-listening activities such as previewing questions or pre-discussion about the topic, etc. These pre-activities can help students to draw on their linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge, provide a context for interpretation, and activate background knowledge (Buck, 1995 cited in Chang and Read, 2006). Similarly, Mendelsohn (1995) suggests that the pre-listening activities are "to activate the students' existing knowledge of the topic in order to link what they comprehend and to use this as a basis of their hypothesis-information, prediction, and inferencing" (p.12). According to Chang and Read (2006), listening supports can be divided into two types. The first type concerns pre-activities

such as vocabulary preparation, providing background knowledge about the topic, etc. The second type of supports includes those incorporated in the listening test design such as repeated listening or contextual visual. However, the studies on these listening supports have not much been conducted in the Thai context, especially at the university level.

Thus, this study explored the effects of three forms of listening supports, namely Question Preview, Vocabulary Preview, and Repeated Input on Thai University students' listening performance in a testing situation. Question Previewing is the opportunity to preview the questions of the test items in advance, which has been found to facilitate the listening performance of the subjects. According to Sherman (1997, cited in Buck 2001), Question Preview did not significantly increase the performance of students. In 1999, Teng studied the effect of Question Preview and found that the subjects believed that question preview facilitated their comprehension, and a study from Wu (1998, cited in Buck 2001) also showed that advanced listeners were facilitated by the preview of multiple-choice questions, but less advanced listeners were not. The second form of listening support is Vocabulary Preview. According to Brindley and Slatyer (2002) one of the factors affecting listening comprehension of learners is vocabulary. Vocabulary was reported to be the most difficult in listening in Goh's 1998 study. Therefore, previewing students with vocabulary that occur in the listening text might reduce this difficulty; hence, increase listening comprehension and listening performance of students.

In 2000, Chiang examined the effect of various ways to present vocabulary on the listening comprehension of Taiwanese university students. The results showed that giving vocabulary clues in advance could help listeners to have a better understanding of the text. Hsu (2005) studied the effect of lexical instruction among Taiwanese EFL students. The study revealed that participants in lexical collocation instruction groups got the highest scores. Tsai (2005) investigated the relationship between receptive English vocabulary sizes and listening comprehension competence of EFL students and the results showed that there was a significant positive correlation between a listening vocabulary level test and a listening comprehension test. However, in 2006, Chang and Read studied the effect of four listening supports, which included vocabulary instruction. The result indicated that the students in the vocabulary instruction group obtained the lowest scores. The studies on the effect of Vocabulary Preview or preparation seem to reveal that vocabulary preparation solely does not facilitate listening comprehension. Findings concerning the effect of vocabulary preparation are still inconclusive; in fact, if we focus on the effect of vocabulary preparation incorporated in the test, the finding is still limited.

Another form of listening support that has been studied is the effect of repetition or Repeated Input. Cervantes and Gainer (1992) investigated the effect of repetition on listening comprehension, and the study showed that repetition facilitated the listening

comprehension of students. In 2002, Chung investigated the effect of repetition on the listening comprehension of Taiwanese college students. The study revealed that there was no concrete evidence to show the relationship between repetition and the enhancement of listening comprehension. In fact, there was even a negative relationship between listening proficiency and listening frequency. Moreover, Elkhafaifi (2005) examined the effect of pre-listening activities—Question Preview, Vocabulary Preview, and repeated exposure—and reported that repeated exposure could enhance listening comprehension scores of Arabic students. The findings showed that all forms of supports have certain positive effects on listening comprehension, but repeated exposure had greater effects than the others. However, the answer to the effect of different forms of listening support is still inconclusive and further study in the field is needed. Table 1 summarizes previous studies on listening supports.

Table 1: Summary of previous studies on listening supports

Researchers	**Listening supports**	**Findings**
Sherman (1997)	Question Preview	The results from the questionnaire indicated that the subjects had strong affective attachment to previewed questions.
Teng (1999)	Question Preview	The results indicated that providing questions in advance facilitated the listening performance of the subjects.
Wu (1998)	Question Preview	Advanced listeners were facilitated by the preview of multiple-choice questions, but not less advanced listeners.
Elkhafaifi (2005)	Vocabulary Preview, Question Preview, and repeated exposure	The findings indicated that repeated exposure was the best predictor of students' improved performance in listening.
Chang and Read (2006)	Previewing test questions, repetition of input, providing background knowledge, and vocabulary instruction	The results showed that the most effective type of listening support was to provide the subjects with the information about the topic, followed by repetition of the listening input.

The research addresses the following questions:

1. Do different types of listening supports have a significant effect on students' listening performance?
2. Do different levels of English ability have an effect on students' listening performance?
3. Is there an interaction effect between listening supports and English ability?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 180 students from three faculties, namely the Faculty of Engineering, the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Industrial Education and Technology, at King Mongkut's University of Technology in the second semester of the 2010 academic year. The students were randomly selected using the stratified random sampling technique. Then, grade was used to distinguish high ability students from low ability students. Within the high ability group, the students were divided into three small groups that received 3 different listening supports: 1) Question Preview, 2) Vocabulary Preview, and 3) Repeated Input. Similarly, within the low ability group, the students were divided into three small groups with 3 different listening supports.

2.2 Instruments

The English Language Proficiency Test (ELP-Test) was designed as an instrument for this study and it is a proficiency test to assess the general listening ability of the participants. The ELP-test was validated to find IOC by three experts in the field of language testing. Then, it was piloted to find the item difficulty and item discrimination index. Based on the acceptable levels of both indices, of 45 items from the pilot study, only 30 items were selected for the main study. The ELP-Test focused on two types of comprehension based on the listening sub-skills framework of Weir (1993), namely " direct meaning comprehension" and "inferred meaning comprehension", the most common listening abilities to be assessed and found in standardized tests. The listening texts were selected and adapted from authentic materials, later verified by one native EFL lecturer. The listening texts were 2-3 minutes long. There were 30 test items for the ELP-Test, and it was divided into three parts. There were two dialogue listening texts in Part One with six test items for each listening text. The second part contained one monologue listening text with 7 test items and the third part contained two monologue listening texts with 11 test items. The test format was multiple choice with four options with a fixed time allotment. The items appeared in the same order as the relevant information presented in the listening text. The speakers for the listening text were a male native speaker with American accent and two female speakers, native Thai and Myanmese, with experience in teaching English.

2.3 Procedures

According to the research design, there were three conditions that each ability group would undergo in a different sequence: Condition 1: Question Preview (QP), Condition 2: Vocabulary Preview (VP), and Condition 3: Repeated Input (RI). The first condition was assigned as "Question Preview", that is, the students were given questions of the listening test before test-taking. They were given 10 minutes and were allowed to write any information that they thought would be the answers to the questions. These questions were aimed to activate the topical knowledge of the students. Then, they were given the ELP-Test paper. The time allotment was based on the time of the listening text. In the second condition "Vocabulary Preview", the students were given a list of words with simplified meanings, taken from the listening texts as lexical supports. The words included in the lists were based on each listening text. The students were given 10 minutes and were allowed to write any information such as the meanings of words in Thai. These vocabulary items were given in order to provide key vocabulary items for the students. The third condition was "Repeated Input", where, unlike the two previous conditions, the listening support was the frequency of listening input, i.e. in the previous two conditions the students were allowed to listen to the listening test only once, but in this condition the students listened to the listening texts twice.

3. Data Analysis

This study explores the effect of listening supports by examining the scores obtained from the English Listening Proficiency Test (ELP-Test). Both factorial ANOVA was employed in the quantitative analysis. This study is a 2x3 design, with two levels of English ability, namely High Ability Student (HAS) and Low Ability Student (LAS) on the ELP-Test, and three different forms of listening supports, namely Question Preview (QP), Vocabulary Preview (VP), and Repeated Input (RI). Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17, the statistical analysis of the effects of listening supports was carried out. Table1 shows the descriptive statistics, the mean scores, and the standard deviations of the ELP-Test scores performed by the three groups of students.

3.1 Data Presentation

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of the Scores of Different Listening Supports

Listening Supports	Level of English ability	N	Mean	SD.
Question Preview *(QP)*	High Ability Student	30	15.13	3.58
	Low Ability Student	30	13.67	3.35
	All	60	14.40	3.51
Vocabulary Preview *(VP)*	High Ability Student	30	14.77	3.20
	Low Ability Student	30	12.03	3.20
	All	60	13.40	3.46
Repeated Input *(RI)*	High Ability Student	30	17.63	2.41
	Low Ability Student	30	14.03	3.86
	All	60	15.83	3.67
Total		180	14.54	3.66

As shown in Table 2, the mean of the whole test is 14.54, which is just slightly below half of the full score. With regard to the score of each listening support, the descriptive statistics are as follows: the students' mean score with the Repeated Input setting is the highest (mean=15.83), which is higher than 50% of the total score and is higher than the mean of all subjects, followed by the Question Preview group (mean =14.40), and the lowest score comes from the students in the Vocabulary Preview group (mean= 13.40). The result shows that in a testing situation, Repeated Input is the most effective listening test support for both groups of students while Vocabulary Preview is the least helpful. In addition, in terms of the effects of listening supports on the performance of the students, the result shows that the high ability groups received higher scores for all three listening supports, especially the result from Repeated Input.

Table 3: Main and Interaction Effects between Listening Supports and English Ability Levels

Variables	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.	Partial Eta square
(A) Listening supports	82.178	2	41.09	3.525	.032	.087
(B) English Ability	168.20	1	168.20	14.43	.000	.138
A*B	66.53	2	33.27	2.85	.060	.018
Error	2028.40	174	11.66			

*p<0.05

Moreover, in order to examine whether the students' performance differed statistically due to either different forms of listening supports or different levels of English ability, a Two-way ANOVA was performed. In Table 3, the listening supports significantly affected the listening performance of the students (F=3.525, p≤0.05) and the levels of English ability also significantly affected the listening performance of the students (F=14.43, p= ≤0.05). However, there was no interaction effect between these two main effects.

Table 4: Post-hoc Comparison on the Effects of English Ability Levels

	(I) LS	(J) LS	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
HAS	QP	VP	.36667	.80124	.901
		RI	-2.50000*	.80124	.010
	VP	QP	-.36667	.80124	.901
		RI	-2.86667*	.80124	.003
	RI	QP	2.50000*	.80124	.010
		VP	2.86667*	.80124	.003
LAS	QP	VP	1.63333	.89896	.198
		RI	-.36667	.89896	.920
	VP	QP	-1.63333	.89896	.198
		RI	-2.00000	.89896	.090
	RI	QP	.36667	.89896	.920
		VP	2.00000	.89896	.090

**LS = Listening Supports
HAS = High ability students
LAS = Low Ability Students
QP = Question Preview
VP = Vocabulary Preview
RI = Repeated Input

Furthermore, to examine which of the listening supports was more helpful for each level of English ability, the post hoc Scheffe test was performed. In Table 4, for the high ability group, the result shows that there was a significant difference of test scores between the students from the Question Preview (QP) group and from the Repeated Input (RI) group (p.≤05) with the mean difference being -.2.50. Therefore, Repeated I nput was more helpful for the students than Question Preview. Also, a significant difference was found between the students from the Vocabulary Preview (VP) and Repeated Input (RI) groups; therefore, for high ability students, Repeated Input is more helpful than Vocabulary Preview.

On the other hand, for the students in the low ability group, the post hoc test indicated that there was no significant difference between any of the pairs tested. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no listening support which is more helpful than the others. In other words, the three listening supports tested in this study equally affected the performance of the students from the low level ability groups.

4. Summary of the findings

A two-way ANOVA factorial design was used to examine the effect of listening supports on the listening performance of Thai first-year students at KMUTT. There is a significant effect of listening supports on the listening performance of the students. Repeated Input appeared to be the most effective listening support for the students and the least effective listening support was Vocabulary Preview. The levels of English ability also significantly affected their listening performance. Despite the fact that the main effect had significant effect on the listening performance of the students, no interaction effect was found. The findings of the study revealed that listening supports had some effects on the listening performance of Thai first-year university students. The findings also suggest that having an opportunity to listen to a listening text more than once could enhance the listening performance of students, but providing vocabulary support would not produce immediate effects on test-takers' listening performance.

5. Discussion and Implications

This study investigated three forms of listening supports in a testing situation. The results from this study revealed that listening supports significantly affected the listening performance of Thai first-year students at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi who enrolled in the academic year 2010. In this study, Repeated Input is the most effective listening support for these students regardless of their level of language ability. The finding of this study is similar to that of Chang and Read (2006). Possible explanations for these results are as follows. Repeated Input is the most helpful listening support because it enables the students to check whether their answers are correct. As suggested by Hatch (1993, cited in Chang and Read 2006, p.378), "repetition provides more processing time and clarifies the relationship of syntactic forms".

Moreover, the result from the present study was consistent with the study of Elkhafaifi (2005), which examined the effect of pre-listening activities, including Question Preview, Vocabulary Preview, and repeated listening exposure on listening comprehension of Arabic learners. The result showed that repeated exposure was the most effective activity for the subjects, followed by Question Preview, and the least effective was Vocabulary Preview. Therefore, it can be seen that regarding the effect of listening supports on the listening performance of students, the result was quite similar to previous studies, especially on the effect of repetition of the listening text.

In relation to the second most effective listening support, Question Preview, the result of this study partially supported some findings of previous studies, but also contradicted others. As found by Sherman (1997, cited in Buck 2001), Question Preview did not significantly increase the performance of students while Teng's 1999 study indicated that question preview facilitated their comprehension. Additionally, similar to the study by Wu (1998, cited in Buck 2001) advanced listeners were facilitated by the preview of multiple-choice questions, but less advanced listeners were not. Therefore, the effects of Question Preview remain inconclusive. However, from this study, it can be concluded that Question Preview was more effective than Vocabulary Preview but less effective than Repeated Input. However, on the effective side, Question Preview is a good listening prompt for students to make use of listening strategies. It can give the students directions to what to listen for as well as some clues and allows students to grasp important information to answer questions. Although the result shows that preview questions are beneficial to some students, their benefit is limited. The questions in the ELP-Test are not only on "direct comprehension"; therefore, if the students rely on the questions to answer each item, they might not be prepared to process the information in order to answer every item in the test.

The least helpful form of support is Vocabulary Review, and this may be due to the fact that the students need more time to remember the words and the meaning of the key words. Also, the vocabulary provided may be out of context; hence, the students could not process meaningfully when they listened. As suggested by Buck (2001, cited in Chang and Read, 2006, p. 393), a "… listening test situation requires them to process the spoken form and meaning of the words very rapidly, if not automatically".

As for the insignificant effect of Vocabulary Preview, this finding seems to be consistent with some of the previous studies. For example, Chang and Read (2006) asserted that vocabulary instruction was the least effective form of listening support for any proficiency level. Also, Osuka (2007) studied the effect of providing questions related to the main ideas in advance, slowing speech rates, supplying the meaning of important vocabulary words in advance, and providing background information about the topic in advance on 64 Japanese college students majoring in business administration at a private university in Tokyo. The results revealed that supplying the meaning of important vocabulary words in advance had no effect on the performance of the students.

Therefore, despite empirical data that vocabulary is one of the major factors affecting listening comprehension, providing vocabulary does not necessarily facilitate English listening performance. This is because students may even be able to guess the content of the test from the vocabulary in the context. However, it takes more than just knowing the meaning of words to understand the listening text. As Berne (1995) pointed out, it is not conventional for listeners to study vocabulary prior to listening in order to grasp the meaning of spoken messages in daily life. The result may imply that knowing vocabulary as a written form might not be an adequate source to facilitate listening ability. Therefore, it seems that Vocabulary Preview does not seem to be effective for the Thai first-year university students who participated in this study, despite the fact that not knowing vocabulary was claimed to be the factor that could affect their listening performance.

Even though Vocabulary Preview was considered the least effective form of listening supports in this study, it is still an important issue for the students. As suggested by Tsai (2005), the more vocabulary the students know, the better listening comprehension the students have. Also, as shown in the study of Mehrpour and Rahimi (2010), providing students with a vocabulary glossary significantly affected the performance of Iranian students. Their scores were much higher than the group that had no vocabulary glossary provided. Moreover, the vocabulary need to be previewed by the students not just by the meanings, but they need to be informed about how to pronounce the words, and how they are pronounced in real sentences with the natural pauses and paces of fluent speakers.

To summarize, the finding of the study shows that listening performances of EFL students can be affected by the forms of listening supports provided. The students performed better in the twice-heard condition listening test. This part of the finding reinforces the importance of repetition in a listening test. This repetition might not be applicable in a standardized test or summative assessment, but it might be useful in the formative assessment as a part of instructional procedure. As Ross (2005, cited in Vandergrift 2007) suggests, a process-oriented assessment may lead to more engagement of learners and can have positive impacts on L2 listening success. However, it is important to point out that the setting for this study was strictly of a testing situation where materials could be given but verbal explanation was not allowed for Question Preview and Vocabulary Preview; consequently, the result might be in favor of Repeated Input being more effective than other types of listening supports focused in this study.

6. Recommendations for Further Research

The finding of this study indicated that the listening performance of the students may be affected by different forms of listening supports. This study has investigated the

effect of three types of listening supports: Question Preview, Vocabulary Preview, and Repeated Input. It is recommended that further research investigate other types of listening supports, or other factors that may influence the performance of listeners such as speech rate. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine different types of listening supports. Moreover, as it was found that there have been only a limited number of studies of the listening skills of Thai EFL learners in a classroom setting and testing setting, as well as listening strategies, further studies on listening skills in these aspects are recommended. Listening assessment is well established in all standardized tests as summative listening proficiency tests. However, listening skills can be assessed through different forms of assessment i.e. formative testing especially in classroom situations where listening skills are limited. Therefore, further studies may focus on formative tests and how they differ from typical summative tests. Moreover, regarding the testing of listening skills, it will be interesting to have a test that reflects a real-life situation where students are given an opportunity to ask for repetition of a certain part of listening. In addition, it is important to consider teaching listening skill in class. According to Nation, I.S.P, and Newton, J. (2009), pre-activities are very important for teaching listening skills. This will engage students in the learning as well as activate their prior knowledge which is very important for listening comprehension. Last but not least, supports can play a valuable part in leaning. The importance may depend on the availability of supports, and whether students want to use those supports can be another aspect to consider.

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