Improving listening comprehension through familiarization with features of spoken English

Sukhum Wasuntarasobhit
Department of Foreign Languages, Khon Kaen University

Suvalee Chinkumtornwong
Department of Applied Linguistics, KMUTT

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to investigate if familiarization with features of spoken English could enable students to improve their understanding of native-speaker speech at normal rates of delivery. Test results showed that most students did improve their listening comprehension in this area. However, supporting data obtained from their diaries indicated *that about a half of them personally felt that they had not made any* improvement. The implications of the contrast between the qualitative and quantitative data obtained from the study are discussed.

Problematic Features of Spoken English for Thai Learners

An important aim of teaching listening is to train EFL learners to understand authentic speech, or English as spoken by native speakers in real-life communication (Underwood, 1990). However, one of the main sources of listening difficulties for a learner of English is the weak relationship between English sounds and their written forms as a result of changes in sound which occur in rapid, connected speech (Tresnadewi, 1994). In other words, spoken features of English such as weak forms, linking and elision can hinder listening comprehension (Wu, 1987). Generally speaking, two of the most important characteristics affecting the comprehension of spoken English are rate of delivery and pronunciation features.

Rate of delivery: According to Brown and Yule, "speed of delivery is one of the factors that can affect the difficulty of oral language" (cited in Nunan, 1991: 24). At authentic speed, learners feel that the words disappear before they can determine what they are.

Pronunciation features: Learners may also have difficulties with the following specific pronunciation features:

Stress: As English is a stressed-timed language, many difficulties in spoken English derive from stress (Ellis & Sinclair, 1991). In fact, Boyle (1984) argues that stress problems can be sufficiently large to hinder comprehension.

Vowel reduction: In addition, vowel reduction is another pronunciation feature that causes difficulty for a learner of English. Eastman (1990) says that vowel reduction differentiates English from both its written

forms and from syllable-timed languages, whose speakers typically pronounce English syllabically. Therefore, vowel reduction causes some learners to face considerable difficulty in discrimination of English words in natural speech.

Linking: Finally, an English speaker often makes an utterance sound smoother by linking the last sound of a word with the first sound of the next word within a thought group, thus pronouncing the two words as one. Linking can cause difficulty to Thai students because, in the Thai language, spoken words are not closely linked together. Thai students may therefore identify words wrongly as they listen to native speaker speech because they expect to hear English words pronounced as if in isolation.

In this study, students were trained to recognize the three features of spoken English mentioned above. It was expected that by becoming familiar with them, the students would be able to identify individual words in connected speech more easily and therefore to improve their listening comprehension.

Research procedure

The subjects were 30 first-year undergraduate students (24 females and 6 males) in an English class. They were from the Department of Microbiology in the Faculty of Science at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. They were mixed ability students and most of them were quite weak at listening to English speech as spoken by native speakers.

In this study, three listening passages were chosen from the textbook, *Interface* (Hutchinson and Waters, 1984). One passage, taken from the original cassette enclosed with the textbook, was used for both the pre-test and the post-test. A 10-item, four-choice multiple choice test based on this passage was constructed to measure the students' ability to understand it as read by a native speaker. The other two selected passages were used for the treatment during the experiment. Each of them was re-recorded by a different native speaker at slow, medium and normal rates of delivery. In addition, five familiarization exercises on pronunciation features were written up from each of the treatment passages.

The study was implemented as follows:

> *Pre-test:* All subjects were tested on their listening comprehension with the use of a multiple choice listening test.

> *Training in Pronunciation Features:* The students were intensively trained in recognizing three specific pronunciation features: stress, linking and vowel reduction.

Treatment: The students listened to the tape starting from slow speed before listening to medium and normal speeds respectively. While listening to the tape, they completed the pronunciation exercises.

Post-test: After the treatment, a post-test was conducted to evaluate the students' listening ability. (The results from the post-test were compared with those of the pre-test to determine the effectiveness of the technique.) The students were also asked to write a diary entry, expressing their feelings towards the post-test. A questionnaire was distributed to find out the attitudes of the students towards the technique.

Results

It was found that most of the students got higher scores in the post-test. Four students received the same scores in the post-test as in the pre-test and only three students had lower scores in the post-test. A T-test confirmed that the difference between the pre- and post-tests was significant at the 0.05 level (see Table 1).

Table 1. *The T-value for the Pre- and Post-Multiple Choice Listening Tests*

Tests	No. of students	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	T-value	T-table	Level of significance
Pre-test	30	5.3			
Post-test	30	7.0	5.564	2.045	0.05

It can be therefore concluded that training in pronunciation features and gradually increasing rates of delivery helped the students improve their listening comprehension considerably.

In contrast to the findings from the comprehension test, the data from the students' diaries showed that a little less than half of the students felt that they had become better in their listening ability, while others said that they had not improved at all. As one subject expressed it in her post-test diary:

> *I felt that this listening was not different from the first time. I still could not comprehend the passage. I tried to apply what I had learned in class. I could recognize some words, but I still could not follow the main points.*

The findings from the questionnaire indicate that, overall, most of the students had positive attitudes towards the technique. They agreed that the technique was effective, helped them in word recognition and made them become aware of pronunciation features while listening.

Discussion

Overall, it can be concluded that after being trained with the technique, most of the students improved their listening comprehension, though there was a contrast between the quantitative data and qualitative data from the students' diaries. The contrast in the data may be explained in several possible ways.

First of all, the students may not have been conscious of their improved level of competence. Because of the short time involved, they were not confident that they had progressed even though they did get higher scores in the post-test. As Tarone and Yule (1991) suggest, when learners give correct answers but have low confidence in them, their perceptions of their own ability can be misleading.

Individual differences could also have influenced their feelings about learning. It could be that as individuals, the students had different needs, styles and interests (Sheerin, 1989) and consequently reacted to the learning experience in different ways. It is also possible that there might have been problems with measurement. The expectation in this study was based on the assumption that accuracy test of results is the most appropriate way to measure the change in a student's performance. Actually, the test scores by themselves cannot clearly prove that improvement occurs after a period of instruction (See Tarone and Yule, 1991).

Finally, it could be that what the students had learned from the training was not sufficient for them to deal with meanings, i.e. they were trained to deal with words but tested on meanings. In this study, the technique itself was based on a bottom-up approach in which the students were trained at the word level only. However, in listening comprehension listeners need to deal not only with words but with meanings also. Both bottom-up and top-down approaches should therefore be applied together. Learners should learn how to deal with language at both word and discourse level.

The findings from this research study also suggest that teachers should be aware of their students' confidence levels. If teachers want to help students become more aware of their success in learning, they should pay attention to confidence as well as competence. Language learners should receive encouragement not only from the successful results of their efforts but also from the psychological support given to them by their teachers.

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