

THE RELATIONSHIP OF TOPIC FAMILIARITY AND LISTENING COMPREHENSION

Ririn Ovilia¹

¹ FBS Universitas Negeri Padang, Padang, Indonesia, ✉ ririn.ovilia@fbs.unp.ac.id

Abstract

In listening, topic familiarity – knowledge on particular topics - is considered important to decode and comprehend the message correctly. This profound role makes listening undergoing influential changes from passive to active process. Due to this fact, great number of researchers and practitioners have carried out considerably number of studies related to listening, especially factor that contributes to listening which is topic familiarity. Hence, this study aimed at investigating the contribution of topic familiarity to students' listening comprehension. Undergraduate students of ELT were the samples of this study and two tests namely topic familiarity and listening comprehension test were administered. The result revealed that there was correlation between topic familiarity and listening comprehension which signified the more familiar the students with the topic, the higher listening comprehension they would get. Besides, the contribution of topic familiarity to listening comprehension was 33.6 %.

Keywords: Topic Familiarity, Listening Comprehension.

Introduction

Listening, in the past, got less attention compared to the other three skills namely speaking, reading and writing (Richard & Renandya, 2002; Nunan, 2002; Richard, 2005; Goh, 2008; Cahyono & Widiati, 2009; Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Allidoost, 2014). A small number of studies were carried out to investigate the suitable materials, strategies and methods in teaching listening (Cahyono & Widiati, 2009). Until recently, this skill was considered as a passive skill. However, there has been such a shifting paradigm toward listening skill in the field of English language teaching that it is now regarded as an active skill.

The shifting paradigm aforementioned is indicated by the complicated process the students undergo in order to comprehend the information. While listening, the students are actively decoding the message and interpreting it based on the clues (auditory and visual) to comprehend the message that the speaker is trying to convey (Rubin and Meldesohn, 1995). After undergoing the influential and essential changes, listening is, now, regarded as a vital skill in English language teaching (Cahyono & Widiati, 2009). The importance of listening skill in the language teaching field can be referred to the purpose of listening which is to bridge the effective oral communication (Goh, 2008) and the comprehensible input hypothesis, as proposed by Krashen, which requires the students to be provided with the comprehensible input in order to learn and acquire new language (Nunan, 2005). Along with the popularity of comprehensible input hypothesis, listening skill automatically receives increasing attention from the researchers. Due to the increasing attention, a number of studies concerning the nature of teaching listening, the processes involved in listening, the methods and the strategies to achieve listening comprehension are increasing as well.

Concerning the knowledge involved while listening, there are two kinds of knowledge needed while decoding, interpreting and comprehending the message accurately; linguistics knowledge and non-linguistics knowledge (Buck, 2001). Linguistics knowledge deals with the knowledge of the language itself: phonology, lexis, syntax, semantics, and discourse structure, while non-linguistics knowledge is the knowledge that the listeners bring while listening (Buck, 2001). This knowledge is also called prior knowledge which essentially refers to the same definition. In general, Brandao et al (2005) mention that prior knowledge is the knowledge a person has related to the content of the text. To be precious, prior knowledge is the knowledge possessed by the students, which can be from experience, reading the book, or looking at surroundings, and later the students bring it while listening to the audio.

The role of prior knowledge is undeniably profound in listening. Bilokcuglo (2014) points out that "listening comprehension is interaction process between prior knowledge and expected knowledge in spoken text." Further, bringing up their prior knowledge about a particular topic helps then in predicting the content and the structure of the text (Rost cited in Rahimi, 2012; Sulisty, 2011). Some researchers carried out experimental studies to strengthen the significance of prior knowledge. Hu (2012), for instance, conducted an

experimental study about applying schema theory mode in teaching listening by providing some activities such as teaching new words and expression, questioning, predicting in pre- listening phase. Those activities were undeniably effective to improve students' comprehension ability.

Regarding the reference of prior knowledge, prior knowledge is categorized into two types: content schemata and formal schemata (Rost, 1990; Tudor & Tuffs;1991; Carrel; 1983). However, this study only focuses on content schemata. Content schemata mostly deal with the content of the spoken and written discourse which can also be called as topic familiarity. Chiang and Dunkel (1992) conducted an experimental study which aimed at finding out the effect of building students' familiarity on topic. It was found that the students who listened to familiar topic got higher score than students who listened to unfamiliar topic. Besides, in the stance of reading comprehension, Priebe et al (2012) also conducted experimental study. This study shared similar finding with the studies conducted by Chiang and Dunkel (1992).

Empirically, a number of experimental studies have been carried out to investigate the effect of activation of topic familiarity to students' comprehension in listening. Zohrabi et al (2014) conducted an experimental study to investigate the effect of topic familiarity to students' listening comprehension. The students in experimental group were familiarized with the topic by drawing the picture on the board, discussing the topic, and providing them with additional information related to the topic as the treatments. Then, they were required to verbalize their thought toward the topic. On the other hand, control group was taught using conventional technique without discussing the topic and providing additional information. The result showed a significant difference in students' post-test scores. It was found that the students were able to link the existing knowledge to the new material which significantly improved their listening comprehension.

The results of the previous experimental study yielded the positive results in achieving greater comprehension in listening. Giving treatment to build students' prior knowledge about the topic of the text is highly and significantly successful in enhancing the students' listening comprehension. Furthermore, several studies on the contribution of prior knowledge have been carried out as well. However, the focus on these studies are in students' reading comprehension. Rahmaniah (2015) conducted an ex post facto research to find out the correlation of prior knowledge (formal and content schemata) to listening comprehension. The result showed that students' familiarity to the topic contributed to enhance students' reading comprehension. Furthermore, Eidswich (2010) investigated correlation of students' interest, prior knowledge and their reading comprehension. There were three categorizations for topics; high interest and high prior knowledge (HH), low interest and low prior knowledge (LL), and high interest and low prior knowledge (HL). Then, three descriptive topics; Michael Jackson (HH), Ghost (HL), and Concrete (LL), were chosen. The result revealed that the students' interest and prior knowledge enhanced their reading comprehension indicated by the higher score on HH topic.

To summarize, based on the findings on some correlational studies and theories, topic familiarity contributes in achieving higher comprehension. However, this significance of topic familiarity has not been dug up in stance of listening comprehension. This present study aimed to investigate the degree of contribution of topic familiarity to students' listening comprehension and the research question is "Is there any significant correlation between topic familiarity and listening comprehension?"

Method

This study investigated the relationship between topic familiarity and listening comprehension and the contribution that the topic familiarity would give. Thus, correlational study, particularly the prediction correlational study, was selected as it was deemed suitable. As it is stated by Aryet *al* (2010), Creswell (2012) and Latief (2015), correlational study examines the degree of relationship between two or more variables.

The samples of this research were the fourth semester undergraduate students who were learning listening III course. These samples were chosen due to suitability reason in which they have undergone basic and intermediate listening courses in the previous semesters. In other words, they were in the advanced level and they were able to listen to dialogue as well as monologue texts. Samples were selected using stage random sampling. 93 undergraduate students registered in 2015/2016 at Universitas Negeri Malang were the samples of this study.

The data were gathered by administering two tests; topic familiarity test and listening comprehension test. Topic familiarity aimed to find out the students' background knowledge about the topic and how far they know about the topic. This test was in the form of multiple-choice test. However, there were not any questions provided in the test. There were merely clues given in forms of words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs. What the students needed to do was to identify the topic based on the clues. Topic areas which are closely related to students were selected. Time allotment to do the test was 30 minutes and it was done during listening class.

The second test, listening test, was to measure the students' listening comprehension. Listening test administered in this research was in the form of objective test. There were 30 questions from 7 audios. This test was adapted from TOEFL Longman and TOEFL IBT Barron. Besides, the audios from TOEFL IBT were necessarily shortened since they were too long. The length of the audio was about 40 to 80 seconds. The data were analyzed with bivariate statistics through simple regression performed in SPSS 20. In terms of variables, topic familiarity served as the predictor variable and listening comprehension served as criterion variable.

Results and Discussion

Normality and linearity tests were administered prior to linear regression analysis. The result showed that the scores in both listening comprehension and topic familiarity were normally distributed and linear. Then, the data were listed and calculated in Excel to find the mean score and standard deviation. Table 1 shows the description of statistical data.

Table 1. Description Statistical Data

N		Min		Max		Mean	SD
		f	Score	f	Score		
TF	93	4	50	1	93.3	70.55	10.34
LC	93	2	23.3	1	96.7	60.83	14.09

The result showed that the mean score for topic familiarity was 70.55, and the mean score of listening comprehension was 60.83. To see the correlation between topic familiarity to listening comprehension, simple linear regression was done. The results of the regression analysis can be seen in Table 2

Table 2. Result of Regression Analysis

Variable	Correlation coefficient	significance	Conclusion
TF	0.58	0.000	Significant

To find out whether there was significant correlation between topic familiarity and listening comprehension, the sig value was needed. Table 2 shows the p value was 0.000 indicating that there was significant correlation between topic familiarity and listening comprehension since $p < 0.001$. Besides, Table 2 also shows correlation coefficient / r produced in SPSS output which was 0.58. Then the r score was squared to show the variability shared between these two variables. The analysis showed that topic familiarity and listening comprehension shared 33.6% variability between them.

As aforementioned, the main purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between topic familiarity and listening comprehension. The result revealed moderately strong positive correlation between topic familiarity and listening comprehension (Muijs, 2004). It signifies that the more familiar the students were with the topic, the higher listening comprehension they had. Furthermore, this finding shared similar findings with previous studies conducted by Rahmaniah(2015)and Rydland (2012).

Rahmaniah (2015) tried to figure out the relationship of topic familiarity as well as genre familiarity and reading comprehension. The findings showed that topic familiarity had strong relationship to students' reading comprehension, while genre familiarity did not. Looking at these results, it can be said that topic familiarity highly contributed to students' comprehension both in reading and listening. Moreover, Rydland et al (2012) provided supporting evidence that topic familiarity enhanced students' comprehension. It is reported that prior topic knowledge was correlated with reading comprehension.

Beside the results of these correlational study, experimental studies also provide plenty of evidence about the effect of building students' prior knowledge on the topic. Zohrabi et all (2014), for instance, conducted experimental research. They investigated the effect of building students' familiarity towards the topic. The result showed positive impacts of building students' familiarity. Furthermore, in stance of reading comprehension, building students' background knowledge significantly enhances students' comprehension as it was done by Chang (2006). It was found that topic familiarity had an effect in facilitation mental image in order to understand that the students were reading.

The result of this study signifies the crucial role of topic familiarity in listening. It is no doubt that when students are familiar with the topic that they listen to, they will understand the message delivered easier. Moreover, this result emphasizes that even though the teachers do not do any activities to build students' background knowledge on topic, the students' familiarity itself has assisted them to comprehend the information.

Conclusion

To conclude, the study showed that there was moderately strong, positive, and significant correlation between topic familiarity and listening comprehension. Looking at the result of this study, some suggestions are put forward. Firstly, as topic familiarity was correlated to students' listening comprehension, the teachers are suggested to build the students' familiarity toward the topic that they are going to listen to in pre-listening stage. Additionally, regarding the materials used in listening, the familiar topic is best chosen since they already have background information on the topic. The familiar topic enables them to relate what they know and what they hear which, as a result, help them interpreting the message quickly and correctly.

Finally, in terms of predictors in listening comprehension, this study only focused on one type of prior knowledge, content schemata. There is another type of schemata which is formal-schemata. Formal schemata deal with the knowledge of rhetorical pattern of a text. For future researchers, it is suggested that they include formal schemata as another predictor variable. Then, they can determine the better predictor of listening comprehension, either content schemata or formal schemata.

REFERENCES

- Ary, D., Lucy C.J., Chris S. & Asghar R. 2010. *Introduction to Research in Education (8th Ed)*. Canada: Wadsworth, Language Learning.
- Bilokcuglo, H. 2014. A Schematic Approach to Teaching Listening Comprehension. *EUL Journal of Social Science*. 5(1), 76-87.
- Brandao, A.C.P., & Oakhill, J. 2005. How do you know this answer? Children's use of text data and general knowledge in story comprehension. *Reading and Writing*, 18, 687-713.
- Brown, D., & Heekyeong, L. 2015. *Teaching by Principle: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy (4th ed)*. New York: Pearson Education.
- Buck, G. (2001). *Assessing Listening*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cahyono, B.Y & Utami, W. 2009. The Teaching of EFL Listening in the Indonesian Context: the State of Arts. *TEFLIN Journal*. 20 (2), 194-211.
- Carrel, P.L. 1983. *Some Issue in Studying the Role Schemata, or Background Knowledge, in Second Language Comprehension*. Paper presented at the 1983 TESOL Convention, Toronto. Canada.
- Chang, A.C-S. 2016. Teaching L2 Listening: In and Outside the Classroom. In Renandya, W.A., & Widodo, H.P (eds), *English Language Teaching Today, English Language Education*. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
- Chiang, C.C., & Dunkel, P. 1992. The Effect of Speech Modification, Prior Knowledge and Listening Proficiency on EFL Lecture Learning. *TESOL Quartely*. 26 (2), 345- 374.
- Cresswell, J. W. 2012. *Educational Research (fourth edition)*. Boston: Pearson.
- Eidswick, J. 2010. Interest and Prior Knowledge in Second Language Reading Comprehension. *JALT Journal*, 32 (2), 149-168.
- Gilakjani, A.P., & Ahmadi, M.R. 2011. A study of Factors Affecting EFL Learners' English Listening Comprehension and the Strategies for Improvement. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*. 2(5), 977-988.
- Goh, C. M. 2008. Metacognitive Instruction for Second Language Listening Development: Theory, Practice and Research Implications. *RELC Journal*, 39(2), 188-213.
- Hu, X. 2012. The Application of Schema Theory in College English Listening Teaching. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(2), 282-288.
- Latief, M.A. 2015. *Research Methods on Language Learning An Introduction*. Malang: Universitas Negeri Malang.
- Lin, Z. 2002. Discovering EFL readers' perception of prior knowledge and its role in reading comprehension. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 25 (2), 172-190.
- Muijs, D. 2004. *Doing Quantitative Research in Education with SPSS*. London. Sage Publication.
- Nunan, D. 2002. *Language Teaching Methodology: A Textbook for Teachers*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Nunan, D. 2002. Listening in Language Learning. In Richards, J.C., & Renandya, W.A. (Eds). *Methodology in Language teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice (pp.238-241)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Phillips, D. 2001. *Longman Complete Course for the TOEFL Test*. London: Pearson Longman.
- Priebe, S.J., Keenan, J.M., & Miller, A.C. 2012. How Prior Knowledge Affects Word Identification and Comprehension. *Read Writ*. 25, 11-149.
- Rahimi, A.H. 2012. On the Role of Strategy Use and Strategy Instruction in Listening Comprehension. *Journal of language Teaching and Research*. 3(3), 550-559.

- Rahmaniah, S. 2015. *Genre Familiarity vs Topic Familiarity as Factors Affecting EFL Reading Comprehension across Gender*. Unpublished thesis master. Universitas Negeri Malang.
- Richard, J.C. 2005. Second Thought on Teaching Listening. *Regional Language Centre Journal*. 36 (1), 85-92.
- Richard, J.C &Renandya. 2002. *Methodology in Language teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rydland, V., Aukrust, V. G., &Fulland, H. 2012. How word, Vocabulary, and Prior Topic Knowledge Predict Reading Comprehension: A study of Language Minority Students in Norwegian Fifth Grade Classroom. *Read Writ*. 25, 465-482.
- Salahshuri, S. 2011. The Role of Background Knowledge in Foreign Language Listening Comprehension. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*. 1(10), 1146-1451.
- Schmidt & Rinehart, B.C. 1994. The Effect of Topical Familiarity on Second Language Listening Comprehension. *The Modern Language Journal*. 78, 178-189.
- Sharpe, P.J. 2008. *Barron's TOEFL iBT, Internet Based Test (12th eds)*. New York: Barron.
- Shu. B. 2009. *Modern Foreign Language Teaching Methodology (2nd)*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Sulityo, G. H. 2015. *Assessment at School: An Introduction to Its Basic Concept and Principles*. Malang: Bintang Sejahtera.
- Sulityo, G. H. 2011. *Reading for Meaning*. Malang: Bintang Sejahtera.
- Tudor, I & Tuffs, R. 1991. Formal and Content Schemata in viewing L2 Comprehension. *RELC Journal*. 22(2), 79-97.
- Zohrabi, M., Farhman, F., &Sanaz, R. 2014. The Effect of Topic Familiarity on Iranian EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension. *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World (IJLLAL)*. 7(1), 15-33.