

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION



1.1 Background and Statement of the Problem

Listening comprehension had not gained recognition in terms of the development of teaching methodology, materials and also teaching techniques until recently (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Nevertheless, its importance has not been ignored. The listening skill has long been considered a crucial element that determines whether an adult learner possesses competent language performance. It plays a vital role in every context. It is regarded as the most significant skill at school, at work and in one's community.

One of the reasons that accounts for its importance is the overwhelming amount of the listening input in everyday life. Generally, the listening skill is used nearly twice as much as the speaking skill and four to five times as much as the reading and the writing skills (Rivers, 1981, cited in Duzer,1997). It was reported by the Learning Assistance Center of City College of San Francisco (2005) that students at school spend about 20 percent of all school related hours just listening. If this includes television watching and conversations, listening accounts for approximately 50 percent of their waking hours. Regarding those hours spent in the classroom, the amount of listening time can be almost 100 percent. In a business context, listening is also viewed as important. Its significance is claimed for company staff at all levels since the problems arising at work are mostly related to one's poor listening skill (Kannika Kreutanu,1998).

With regard to language instruction principles at present, aural comprehension is recognized as a threshold to language learning. Peterson (2001) argued that listening is a mode to access various sources of knowledge, which support the theory of language input and acquisition. Reception should come before production since it generates production. Nord (1981), cited in Peterson (2001) emphasized the possibility of learning

to understand without speaking, and the impossibility to learn to speak without understanding.

Despite its importance, few Thai learners of English have confidence in their competency of the listening skill. Like ESL and EFL students in other countries, most Thai students rank the listening skill as the most difficult of all the four language skills. Their views were supported by Lynch's (2005) article underscoring the difficulty in both learning and explicitly teaching the skill. Revealed in the work conducted by Oranoot Chirdchoo and Jirada Wudthayagorn (2001) were Thai students' views towards the listening skill. Students reported that between the two receptive skills: listening and reading, they had more difficulty to comprehend the listening input due to their having less control over it.

Perhaps considering the definition of the listening skill itself is sufficient to demonstrate why it is regarded as difficult. According to Howatt and Dakin (1974) quoted in Yagang (1993), listening is one's ability to recognize and comprehend what people are saying. An able listener must be able to simultaneously handle the understanding processes, which include the comprehension of the following aspects: a speaker's accent and pronunciation, his grammar, his vocabulary and also the meaning that is being conveyed. Yagang (1993) listed four components that affect the degree of difficulty: the message, the speaker, the listener and the physical setting.

The first component is the message which involves the verbal message that comes as fast as the twinkling of an eye. As opposed to the same message in a written form, the latter is easier to decode. Furthermore, in a spontaneous conversation, interlocutors often change topics, which can be related to any aspect of life. The unfamiliar topics will certainly cause them trouble in comprehension. Most of the time, unlike the written mode, conversations lack organization. Topics can always shift which makes it hard to follow. Moreover, some messages such as those delivered on the radio cannot be repeated or read at a slower speed, increasing the degree of difficulty. Last but not least, the linguistic aspects of speech also account for the difficulty. The liaison,

colloquial words, expressions and slang, as well as ungrammatical structures are listed as factors enhancing the incomprehension.

Correspondingly, Buck (2001) provided four characteristics of speech that can be linked to problems in listening comprehension. Firstly, the combination of small elements of sounds and the modification of sounds next to them in normal speech increase the degree of difficulty to identify and distinguish each sound. Secondly, the speed of conversations is accelerated when people share knowledge of a topic or have the same background knowledge of the subject matter. Thirdly, speech takes place in real time. Listeners, therefore, have no chance to review what they have heard. They must process the input at the same speed determined by the speakers. And since there is no text involved, the conversations must mainly depend on memory. These processes are considered cognitive, which involves two types of processes: controlled processes, which refer to the activities that listeners must pay attention to, and automatic processes, which mean the listening activities happen automatically. If learners can automatically decode an input that is produced at a normal speed of conversations, it means that they pay no conscious attention to accomplish the tasks. And to be an efficient interlocutor, the automatic processes must come into play. Lastly, the linguistic structures employed in speech are different from the written structures. For example, slang can trigger problems and cause listeners to fail to comprehend the spoken input.

Secondly, the speaker can also increase or decrease the degree of difficulty. Speakers have various accents and spoken styles. Students may find those whose accents deviate from their teacher difficult to comprehend, while some redundant utterances caused by repetitions, false starts, rephrasing can also lead to failure in communication. Moreover, natural dialogues are dominated by hesitations, pauses, and uneven intonation.

The third component is the listener. It is important that the listener has sociocultural, factual, and contextual knowledge of the language in order to promote

comprehension. Most foreign language learners devote more time to reading than to listening, which gives them less exposure to the skill.

The last component that is the physical setting refers to background noises, visual or aural environmental clues and the quality of sound. The physical setting in both the natural or classroom contexts can negatively affect students' ability to process the input.

So far it can be concluded that listening comprehension requires certain processes of decoding what is heard as well as some knowledge to figure out the meaning of the message. Research in the past also explored how these processes influence language learning. Buck (2001) stated that listening comprehension involves very complex cognitive processing, requiring students' knowledge in both linguistic and non-linguistic areas. The former refers to those involving knowledge concerning phonology, lexicon, semantics, syntax, etc, whereas the latter is related to other aspects of knowledge such as students' background knowledge.

Similarly, Brindley (1997) and Hadley (2000) discussed the two forms of knowledge: linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge. However, they related the two types of knowledge to the bottom-up and top-down approaches, which are believed to be activated in different situations. The bottom-up mode of language processing refers to learners' identification of every element of language from the smallest units such as sound to the meaning as a whole. On the other hand, the top-down mode of the listening skill refers to learners' ability to use their internal resources such as background knowledge and global expectations about language to make predictions about the input (Celce-Murcia, 2001).

As described by Brindley (1997) and Hadley (2000), the top-down processing is employed when learners cannot depend on their linguistic knowledge. In this case, the whole context of the input is focused to help listeners comprehend the message. In other words, the non-linguistic input or cognitive familiarity will be relied on when listeners

possess insufficient linguistic knowledge. On the other hand, linguistic knowledge is in use when students choose to use the bottom-up approach, which requires them to pay attention to all details of the language input. It is considered a part of the aural comprehension process in which the "heard" input is analyzed from sounds to words, from words to grammatical relationships, and finally to lexical meanings. Yi'an's (1998) claim of the two approaches paralleled that of Brindley and Hadley. According to Yi'an (1998), when one area of knowledge, either linguistic or non-linguistic, is depended on, the other will be in less use.

However, not all researchers seem to agree with these ideas towards the use of the top-down and the bottom-up approaches. Although it is agreed by researchers and scholars that the bottom-up and top-down approaches are the two modes learners use when decoding verbal messages, researchers' views towards when they are used and who uses them are diverse.

Celce-Murcia (2001) advocated the views of the researchers concerning the use of the two approaches discussed earlier; however, she emphasized more on when and how to teach the students with various levels of language proficiency to use the two approaches. She supported the idea that beginning-level listeners cannot use the bottom-up approach since they lack the bottom-up processing skills. They have not developed enough linguistic knowledge required for the approach. Nevertheless, this deprivation does not mean that the bottom-up process should not be introduced to them. In fact, it should be taught by using selective materials and fine techniques. For the intermediate-level listeners who have acquired some knowledge, they are able to use the bottom-up mode and are ready to be trained in how to use the top-down approach. For the advanced listeners, who may possess much knowledge to support both modes, Celce-Murcia (2001) still emphasized more practice using both approaches to enhance their listening ability. It seems that both are equally important no matter what level of listening learners have.

Richards (1990), cited in Celce-Murcia (2001), reported that the domination of one mode over the other depends on three factors: the purpose for listening, the selection of background knowledge used for a particular task, and the degree of familiarity listeners have towards the topic. Students choose the more appropriate approach when performing different tasks. For example, if the purpose for listening is to casually converse at a cocktail party, the top-down approach is more preferable. On the contrary, if the task is to listen closely to instructions during the first driving lesson, the bottom-up mode is demanded.

Despite various views concerning learners' use of the two approaches, it is certain that they use particular strategies to overcome obstacles in comprehending a verbal input. Among a wide range of learner strategies are cognitive and metacognitive strategies, which are the two strategies most discussed and studied by researchers.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) defined metacognitive strategies as higher order executive skills that involve planning for, monitoring and evaluating a particular learning activity to make communication successful. They include such characteristics as reviewing materials before class, deciding to concentrate on certain aspects of learning tasks, paying attention to specific parts of the language input, trying to manage appropriate conditions that yield effective learning and preparing the linguistic components to be used in advance.

Cognitive strategies include more mental actions such as repeating people's speech, either overtly or silently, using resources like dictionaries, translating from L2 to L1, grouping ideas, taking notes, especially about the gist of an input, deducing and inferencing, recombining small elements of language together, visualizing received information to store in memory, using key words, relating new information to that stored in memory and using prior knowledge.

Cognitive and metacognitive strategies have been claimed to account for one's success in learning a language. Past literature revealed diverse use of learning

strategies among learners of different levels of language performance. One study reported how more advanced learners' wise use of their strategies put them at an advantage over the lower level learners. According to the study, successful language learners knew how to use appropriate strategies while unsuccessful language learners inappropriately used them. The reason for their failure was not from their lack of knowledge of the strategies (Abraham and Vann, 1987). This finding concurred with Anderson's (1989) who studied the relationships between the use of the reading strategy and student performance on a standard ESL test. Success relied more on students' effective use of strategies than their knowledge of the strategies.

A wide range of aspects concerning how learners employ the strategies have been investigated in various research studies. One study on how high and low proficiency English learners use strategies conducted by Mangubhai (1991) revealed differences concerning learners' choice of strategies. Mangubhai reported the high proficiency group's more use of memory strategies than the low proficiency group. The latter used more of the translation strategy and practiced less than the former group.

Another study carried out by Chamot, Küpper and Impink-Hernandez (1988) was quoted in Purpura (1999) as one of the most comprehensive "good language learners" studies. The study was conducted over a period of four semesters. Teachers were able to classify their students into "effective" and "ineffective" Russian and Spanish language learners. They found that effective learners used a wider range of strategies, made better appropriate choice of strategies, seemed more goal-oriented and employed more use of both background and linguistic knowledge. In addition, they monitored their comprehension more than their production. Based on the results of the study, it was apparent that effective learners use cognitive and metacognitive strategies more than ineffective learners.

In more recent research on cognitive and metacognitive strategies, Purpura (1999) found that metacognitive strategies did not have any direct effects on student performance on a reading test, but they positively and strongly influenced the cognitive

processes, especially the memory and retrieval processes, which are the sub-processes of the cognitive processes. The study revealed further that the use of metacognitive strategies alone did not improve student performance on the reading test. However, it exerted an executive function over the cognitive processes. There was also a correlation between the two types of strategies. Students who were able to use metacognitive strategies tended to be capable of using cognitive strategies as well. With regard to students with high and low proficiency, the study showed that almost all of the factorial structure of metacognitive strategies that both groups used were identical, except the parameter of assessing the situation. The study found that the low-ability group used more of the metacognitive strategies than did cognitive strategies. Regarding cognitive strategies, the results showed the low-ability group's lack of automaticity in their use of the English language. All in all, the result of the study reinforced other past research studies that the effective use of strategies was related to better performance and suggested that the high-proficient students were more effective test takers than the other group.

Although the literature and research studies on learning strategies are abundant, most of them focus solely on a single cognitive strategy such as prior knowledge (Alba and Hasher, 1983; Byrnes, 1984; Somporn Wanprakob, 1995) and translation of a text (Cohen and Apeh, 1979, cited in Virtual Assessment Center (VAC), 2004), or a single metacognitive strategy such as note taking (Hale and Courtney, 1994). If looking through past research studies, only a few integrated all processes of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in the study. Incorporating various processes of strategies in one study is worth exploring since it may reveal additional sides of the use of strategies, such as the importance of some strategies over others.

Moreover, the findings of past studies on learner strategies and language performance are so diverse that they seem to vary according to participants and skills. In addition, the fact that both listening and reading skills involve the same learner strategies and sub-strategies is not sufficient to generalize that the relationships with student test performance will be the same. Studies on learners' use of cognitive and

metacognitive strategies, specifically on the listening skill, will be a great contribution to the field since it is the skill that has been explored the least. It is also supported by Kim, Kim and Shin (2001) that no research has been done on the effects of multimedia and test takers' listening strategies on the computer-based test performance.

To fill what has been missing in the past research studies, the focus of this study was on the use of learning strategies for the language skill least in focus. Incorporating more variables such as EIL accents, computer-based tests and different language competency will disclose interesting facts about whether cognitive and metacognitive strategies used by learners under these underlying conditions will deviate from the strategies reported in other pieces of research. In other words, the study will expand our notions towards different aspects of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Specifically, this study aims at answering the following research questions.

1.2 Research Questions

1.2.1 Are there any significant relationships between cognitive and metacognitive strategies and student performance on the English as an International Language Computer-based Listening Test (EIL CBT)?

1.2.2 What is the difference between the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies across high and low-listening-ability groups?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

1.3.1 To investigate the relationships between cognitive and metacognitive strategies and performance of the fourth-year Chulalongkorn University students on the EIL CBT

1.3.2 To compare the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies across high and low-listening-ability groups

1.4 Scope of the Study

1.4.1 The population and the sample groups in this study were limited to Commerce and Accountancy students from Chulalongkorn University who participated in six compulsory English courses, including two Foundation English courses, two English Business Writing courses and two English Oral Communication courses. The students were going to graduate and start their careers. They were aware of the importance of English, particularly the aspects of English that they would probably use in everyday life and at work.

1.4.2 The cognitive and metacognitive strategies in the study were the strategies concluded from the work of Derry and Murphy (1979), Najjar (1998), Oxford (1990), Purpura (1999), Rubin, Quinn and Enos (1998) and Chittaya Suwaphab (1998). The cognitive strategies include three main sub-strategies that are analyzing and reasoning processes, knowledge associating processes and information retrieving processes. The metacognitive strategies that are focused in this study also involve three sub-strategies: planning processes, monitoring processes and evaluation processes.

1.4.3 As for English as an international language, 'accent' was the only aspect of the characteristics that the study included.

1.5 Assumptions of the Study

The participants were assumed to be familiar with the computer; for example, they were able to use the mouse and type on the keyboard without anxiety. Moreover, it was assumed that the participants put effort in doing the EIL CBT, and answered the questionnaires sincerely.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

1.6.1 Due to the limitation concerning the population, generalization cannot be made to other groups of students. Moreover, the participants were recruited on a volunteer basis from fourth-year students of the Faculty of Commerce and Accountancy. Most students were relatively familiar with the use of the computer and had been exposed to several business-oriented English courses whose topics may be related to the topics found in the EIL CBT.

1.6.2 The students' strategies were reported by the students themselves. However, their answers on the strategies used were later validated by the interviews.

1.6.3 Due to the limitation concerning the availability of the computer labs for test administration, it was impossible to deliver the test to nearly 200 participants at one time. However, the tests were carefully carried out to control all extraneous variables that might affect the findings.

1.7 Definitions of Terms

1.7.1 Learning strategies

Learning strategies consist of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The cognitive strategies defined in this study include the use of the following sub-strategies.

1.1 Analyzing and reasoning processes

1.1.1 Inferencing: This strategy refers to the strategy that test takers use when they conclude from the context, where information is not directly presented.

1.1.2 Making generalization: This strategy refers to the strategy that test takers use when they conclude from the context, where the information is obvious or directly stated. This includes generalization and hypothesis formation by using the context, e.g. organization, tones, etc.

1.1.3 Translating: This strategy refers to test takers' translation of what they hear in L2 to their L1.

1.1.4 Previewing: This strategy refers to test takers' use of pictures or answer choices to predict correct answers.

1.2 Knowledge associating processes

1.2.1 Recombining: This strategy refers to test takers' recombination of meaningful phrases, patterns or small chunks of L2 that they know and their making use of certain semantic connections between or among language elements.

1.2.2 Linking with prior knowledge: This refers to the strategy that test takers use to link to their past experience or their background knowledge concerning the topic they hear.

1.2.3 Applying the rules: This strategy refers to test takers' relying on the grammatical rules that they have learned or mastered.

1.3 Information retrieving processes

1.3.1 Repeating: This strategy refers to test takers' repetition or imitation of the input they hear so that they can remember what is said.

1.3.2 Taking notes: This refers to test takers' note taking strategy. They use their notes when they want to retrieve the information.

The metacognitive strategies include three sub-strategies, namely the planning processes, the monitoring processes and the evaluation processes.

2.1 Planning processes

2.1.1 Planning: This strategy refers to the situation when test takers plan or specify what to pay attention to such as numbers, vocabulary, etc.

2.2 Monitoring processes

2.2.1 Assessing situation: This strategy refers to test takers' determination of what approach (bottom-up or top-down) is appropriate to be used.

2.3 Evaluating processes

2.3.1 Evaluating: This strategy refers to test takers' evaluation of their own performance.

1.7.2 Performance on the English as an International Language Computer-based Listening Test (EIL CBT)

Performance on the EIL CBT refers to the scores that test takers obtained from taking the EIL CBT, which is a computer based test that was developed to target both the listening ability and the ability to perform real world tasks. It consists of four parts and the topics cover real life situations paralleling those found on the TOEIC test.

The test consists of four parts which are listening to questions and choosing the best answers, listening to short excerpts and answering questions, listening to short excerpts and taking notes, and listening to longer excerpts and answering questions.

Unlike most standardized tests, which attempts to test the aspect of language that reflects real world use of English, the EIL CBT integrates a small portion of various accents (interlanguage phonology), rather than incorporating solely the accents of the native speakers of English.

1.7.3 High-listening-ability group

The high-listening-ability group refers to the group of students whose scores on the EIL CBT are at or above 1 S.D. of the mean score.

1.7.4 Low-listening-ability group

The low-listening-ability group refers to the group of students whose scores on the EIL CBT are at or below -1 S.D. of the mean score.

1.8 Significance of the Study

Past literature reported both the importance of the listening skill and the problems found in teaching and mastering the skill. It also discussed how cognitive and

metacognitive strategies help enhance language learning and language performance. However, since the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in relation to the listening skill has been the least explored, studies in the area will be a great contribution. This study, therefore, helps confirm past literature on whether the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies is related to better student performance on a computer-based listening test, the area least explored in the context of Thai learners of English. It will also broaden our knowledge concerning the processes of thinking of the proficient and the non-proficient test takers, who participate in the study.

As for teachers, the results of the study will shed light on how teachers could prepare their students to be more efficient and active listeners. If significant relationships are found between the use of strategies and students' listening performance, it will emphasize an important role of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in the listening processes. Also, it will stress the importance of teaching them to students in language classrooms. On the contrary, if no relationships are discovered, it implies that there may be other factors affecting one's listening proficiency apart from the use of strategies. Moreover, the study will illustrate how successful and unsuccessful language learners process the listening input and the strategies they mostly rely on to enhance their comprehension and complete the listening test tasks.

1.9 An Overview of the Study

In this chapter, the background and the statement of the problem have been provided. It discussed the important role of the listening skill in everyday activities. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies that have been regarded as useful strategies to enhance language learning and language performance hold a promising role to help bridge the gap. Chapter 1, then, emphasized why the research in the area of the listening skill and cognitive and metacognitive strategies is needed. Moreover, it presented the research questions, the objectives of the study, the scope of the study, the assumptions of the study, the limitations of the study, the definitions of terms, and the significance of the study.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature in five main areas: listening ability and listening comprehension processes, an overview of learning strategies, assessing listening abilities, issues concerning the integration of tasks in language tests, and computer-based assessments.

Chapter 3 focuses on research methodology. Firstly, the statement of hypotheses is provided in relation to the literature review in Chapter 2. Then, research procedures including the descriptions of the population, method of sampling, research instruments, data collection and data analysis are presented.

Chapter 4 reveals the results of the study that are presented according to the research hypotheses. The data obtained from questionnaires and retrospective interviews are analyzed and presented. Apart from the data obtained to answer the research hypotheses, the results received concerning the attitudes of test takers towards the computer-based test are also given. The second part of Chapter 4 involves a discussion of the results based on the research hypotheses and literature review. Both opposing and supporting directions of other studies are discussed. Insightful information concerning students' listening comprehension processes in relation to their use of strategies is also discussed.

In Chapter 5, a thorough summary of the research study is provided. It summarizes the main points of each chapter and also highlights the contributions this study makes to the field of language teaching and language assessment and evaluation.