

AUDIO CLIPS IN DEVELOPING LISTENING COMPREHENSION SKILLS IN MALAYSIAN PRIMARY ESL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT: Listening skill has been an under-emphasised skill in many English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms until recent decades. To keep up with the global advancement of technology, many studies on listening skills have integrated use of technology. In Malaysia, listening skills are also often neglected due to the highly examination-oriented education system. Since communication and technology competence are important 21st century skills, learners should be exposed to listening skills using no less than multimedia, especially when technology is inaccessible in rural parts of the country. This paper aims to examine the perceptions of teachers and pupils in using audio clips to develop listening comprehension skills in a rural primary school in Sarawak, East Malaysia, where digital facilities and internet connection are lacking in many parts of the state. Focus group interviews were conducted with two teachers and three ESL pupils after six weekly listening activities using audio clips based on the textbooks. Findings indicated that the teachers found audio clips to be useful and convenient, while pupils exhibited more interest and concentration during lessons. All respondents believed that audio clips could encourage the development of listening comprehension skills. Finally, it is recommended that audio clips could be expanded into a listening module that slowly moves towards authentic listening to equip learners with real-world skills and experiences.

KEYWORDS: Listening comprehension skills, audio clips, primary ESL classroom

INTRODUCTION

Listening skills have only begun to gain attention in language learning in the recent decades. Traditionally, it is mistakenly assumed that listening skills can be acquired naturally without formal instructions, just as how children acquire their mother tongues through listening to daily conversations (Miller, 2003). Despite seeming like a receptive and passive skill, studies, however, showed that listening skills should be explicitly taught, especially in second or foreign language classrooms (Lotfi, Maftoon&Birjandi, 2012). Listening is the key for learning to take place as they help one to receive and process input (Hamouda, 2013; Gilakjanni&Sabouri, 2016; Masalimova, Porchesku, &Liakhnovitch, 2016). However, before learners listen to learn, they have to learn to listen. As Rose and Dalton (2016) claimed, one has to learn much to become a skilful listener.

One of the 21st century skills as proposed by the National Education Association in 2012 is communicative competence (Germaine, Richards, Koeller, & Schubert-Irastorza, 2016), in which oral and listening skills are equally emphasised. Although the term 'communication' is often associated with speaking, studies show that people actually spend more time—approximately 40 to 45 percent of their daily communication—in listening compared to speaking, reading and writing (Burley-Allen, 1995; Adler, Rosenfield& Proctor, 2001). According

to Masalimova et al. (2016), developing listening comprehension skills is a prerequisite to communication competence. Apart from communication, technology skills are also a compulsory tool to be at par with the global advancement. In this era of technology explosion, teaching and learning is often infused with the use of Internet, computer-assisted learning and mobile gadgets. However, it is indisputable that despite such evolution to education, there are still certain nooks and crannies in this world where technology use is still a huge challenge in the language classrooms.

A developing third-world country, Malaysia is a nation where rapidly advancing cities with towering skyscrapers coexist with poverty and impeding development. An Aljazeera blog page reported that two-third of the nation still struggle with daily necessities (Scawen, 7 February 2014). Many rural areas, especially in the East Malaysia—the Borneo Island—are struggling with unstable coverage of Internet connections and imperfect telecommunication facilities. Hence, online learning and computer or mobile assisted language learning may sound too far-fetched for some language classrooms.

Besides, due to the public standardised assessments which focus on reading and writing (Samad, Hussin&Sulaiman, 2015), listening and speaking skills are often neglected in the Malaysian ESL classrooms (Hassan &Selamat, 2002), with the former more critical than the latter. To keep up with the global pace, the new Education Blueprint 2013-2025 proposed education transformation to ensure that our next generations are well-equipped with soft skills besides paper qualifications. Communication competence is one of the highlights to increase quality and employability of our graduates (Adnan, Daud, Alias &Razali, 2012), which was reported to be disappointing as employers found them unable to communicate well in English.

Hence, it is crucial to build up our learners' communicative competence while assimilating multimedia in lessons especially areas where technology may be inaccessible. This paper therefore explored listening skills as a vital element in communication skills through the use of audio clips that complement the textbook. This study aims to investigate teachers' perception on the usability of the audio clips in developing learners' listening comprehension skills, as well as learners' perceptions on the use of audio clips in listening lessons in enhancing their listening comprehension skills. Hence, the research questions are as follow:

- (i) What are teachers' perception on the usability of the audio clips in developing learners' listening comprehension skills?
- (ii) What are learners' perceptions on the use of audio clips in listening lessons in developing their listening comprehension skills?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies have shown that audio clips are effective in developing learners' listening comprehension skills. In a study by Ghaderpanahi (2012), 30 undergraduates underwent listening activities using authentic aural materials via audio tapes, where students showed significant improvement in their listening ability. In another study by Mohamadkhani, Farohi&Farokhi (2013), audio files were found to have positive effects in improving listening comprehension of high school students in Iran, besides aiding in the correct pronunciation of words.

In the same line, in a study by Ahmed, Yaqoob&Yacoob (2015) to evaluate importance given to listening skill in English textbooks in Pakistan, it was stated that audio materials can stimulate and facilitate learners to acquire English. Also, Moreno (2015) explored differentiated instruction in developing learners' listening comprehension skills and audio plays a pivotal role in the study as a medium of instruction. Asemota (2015), in his paper of 'Nature, Importance ad Practice of Listening Skill' stated that audio can be used to create active listening activities for learners to develop listening comprehension skills.

AUTHENTIC VERSUS NON-AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

Nevertheless, when scrutinised, many studies conducted to enhance listening skills via audio clips utilised authentic materials. Authentic materials refer to resources which are not specifically produced for language teaching and learning (Bahrani& Tam, 2012), for instance, news report and advertisements on the radio; while non-authentic materials are designed for pedagogical purposes and contain more features of artificiality. Authentic materials play a role in enhancing learners' motivation and learning, as suggested by the above studies, but it appears that authentic materials are more suitable for native learners or learners with a higher proficiency level. According to Guariento& Morley (2001, as cited in Kilickaya, 2004), authentic materials are suitable for learners who are of above average level, as it may cause learners to feel demotivated as they do not have the proficiency to cope with the lexis used in the material. Martinez (2002) asserted that authentic materials may not be suitable for learners with low level language proficiency as they will face difficulty interpreting and identifying the content of the material. Also, cultural factor may also hinder beginner-learners to understand and master the language.

In Malaysia, English is a Second Language (SL) in many parts of the country. However, as mentioned, there are also rural areas especially in Sabah and Sarawak where English is foreign to the local communities. Learners are not exposed to English outside the classroom setting. Hence, their proficiency level is generally average and below and may not be able to cope with authentic audio. Thus, to expose learners to real listening activities in the classrooms, audios developed based on the textbooks, in other words, non-authentic materials, could be a beginning for learners to develop listening skills.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Procedures

This study undertakes the research design of a case study, which utilises qualitative method to collect teachers and pupils' perceptions towards the use of audio clips in listening lessons through semi-structured interviews. The study was conducted in a Chinese National-type primary school or an SJKC (SekolahJenisKebangsaanCina) in Saratok, Sarawak. Saratok is a rural town, located approximately 100 kilometres from the nearest city, Sibu. English is a foreign language (FL) to most learners here, as it is not used in their immediate environment and the only contact hours they have with the language are English lessons in school, hence the subject is a challenge to most learners.

Before the study began, a pilot test on the self-developed audio clip and listening task was carried out among Year 3 pupils on the topic 'My Hero' from the textbook, in order to ensure its face validity. Using feedback from the subject teacher as a guide, including aspects on audio speed and speaker intonation, six audio clips ranging from 2 to 4 minutes and accompanying listening tasks were developed based on the Year 4 SJKC English textbook. Audio were recorded using a mobile phone and task sheets were created using Microsoft Word. Three units in the textbooks were covered and the listening tasks comprised of four types of instructions: listen and circle the correct answers, listen and fill in the gaps, listen and sequence the stories, and listen and write 'True' or 'False'.

Subsequently, all Year 4 pupils consisting of 36 pupils underwent six weekly listening activities using the audio clips and task sheets. In every listening lesson, the two subject teachers pre-taught vocabulary or elicited responses from learners about the topic to prepare them for the listening tasks. They then played the audio using a mobile phone and a speaker while learners completed the listening tasks. The audios were played two to three times, depending on learners' requirement. The teachers then discussed the answers of the tasks as a class or got them to do peer-checking of answers. Interviews were carried out thereafter and the responses of the respondents were recorded, transcribed and analysed according to themes.

Respondents' Profile and Sampling Technique

The respondents for the semi-structured interview were chosen purposively. The two subject teachers were interviewed in pairs in bilingual, English and Mandarin. This was because Mandarin was the main medium of communication in the school and they were quite shy to converse in English. However, the teacher respondents tried to respond in English.

Table 1
Profile of the teacher respondents

<u>Respondent</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Professional Qualification</u>	<u>Teaching Experience</u>
T1	Female	English Studies	24 years
T2	Female	TESL	5 years

Three learners of different proficiency levels were selected to be interviewed. Their proficiency levels were determined by their results in the first-term school examination results. Table 2 gives detailed information of the learner respondents and their proficiency levels.

Table 2
Profile of the learner respondents

<u>Respondent</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Average First-term English Results</u>	<u>Proficiency Level</u>
P1	Male	66% (B)	Average
P2	Female	42% (D)	Weak
P3	Male	19% (E)	Very weak

As mentioned, English is a challenging language for learners in the school. General achievement of the English subject is average and below. In fact, P1 was among the highest achievers in the class. Given the language proficiency of the respondents, the interview was conducted largely in their first language, Mandarin. The purpose of the choice of language was to ensure the interviewees were comfortable and would give honest, unimpeded feedbacks.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Teachers' Perceptions on the Usability of Audio Clips

Useful in capturing learners' attention. Findings from the semi structured interview with the two subject teachers showed that they were very receptive to the use of audio clips in listening activities. The first part of the interview was on the usefulness of the audio clips. Both respondents believed that the audio clips were better at capturing learners' attention than the usual teacher's voice. T1 asserted that pupils were intrigued and curious about the owner of the voice in the clips. It created 'a mysterious sense and suspense' and hence seized their attention. T2 also stated that, "They (learners) become quiet when the audio plays..." She believed that it was the 'sense of newness' and excitement of using multimedia in the classroom. Audio clips seemed to have provided variety to the teaching aid used in the class, as according to T2, "Yeah, (it was) something different from what they usually have." This is in line with McCaughey (2015) who contended that using short audios helps teachers in classroom management as learners settle down more quickly so as not to miss the audio. Edirisingha, Rizzi& Rothwell (2007) also believed that audio can be more a more effective tool than printed materials.

Convenient and easy to use. The second part of the interview explored the perceived ease of use of the audio clips in the mobile phone. T1 said that "(audio clips are) very convenient for us teachers especially if we want to use the same text for different skills." T2 also agreed that it was "more convenient... (We) don't have

to bring so many things to class” in response to T1 recalling of courseware in the form of CDs provided by the Ministry of Education. In her opinion, the CDs were not that useful because they needed to bring a laptop or a CD player into class apart from the speaker. Also, the courseware was enrichment so the content was different from that of the textbooks. T1 confessed, “We don’t use it because they are different (from the textbook)... sometimes (for) a text, children need drilling before they can really understand.” Both teachers asserted as the learners were quite weak, therefore they needed more practice on the same material before they could move on to another. Hence, this indicated that the teachers needed a teaching and learning aid which is a supplementary to the textbooks, but on the condition that it should be easy to use and convenient to the users. As Venkatesh (2000) put forth, perceived ease of use of a technological tool affects the attitude of users towards it.

Challenging to low proficient learners. Nevertheless, when describing their experience in administering the listening activities, the respondents also mentioned that audio clips, even though they did not seem to differ much from teacher’s voice, posed some challenges to the learners, especially those who were weaker.

“They could not catch what the speaker was saying because they said (it was) too fast,” T1 stated. T2 also had similar experience, “In some sessions, I had to pause (the audio)... to give them time to think or write.” Both respondents played the audio two to three times in each listening activity. McCaughey (2015) affirmed that an audio should be replayed a few times to ensure that learners are successful in the tasks. It could also lower learners’ anxiety, which was evident in T1’s class. “They become better (less nervous) when you play it a few times, because they could catch the answers,” she asserted. To address the problem, she pre-taught vocabulary and gave a synopsis of the story before the listening activity began. In fact, tapping on learners’ prior knowledge is important as they would learn to apply top-down listening strategy. Summarising the story during the pre-listening stage is also a strategy supported by Balaban (2016) as activating learners’ schemata is an important step to help learners build new knowledge from existing ones, besides lowering their affective filter.

Overall development of listening comprehension skills. Despite the obstacles, when asked about the overall development of listening skills, both respondents agreed that the audio clips were helpful in achieving the objective in the long run. T2 believed that it was ‘good practice’ for the learners, “It’s like training to listen to the radio... the news,” to which T1 quipped, “Or even for us... when we watch (an) English movie without subtitles.” As Meskill (1996) stated, multimedia supports listening skill development. Although global trends have moved towards e-learning, the integration of multimedia could serve as a springboard for areas short of these opportunities to strive towards that direction so as to lessen the gap between urban and rural.

Learners’ Perceptions on the Use of Audio Clips

Results from the interview with the learner respondents supported the teachers’ views. To answer the second research question pertaining to the learners’ perceptions, the findings were translated into English to the closest meaning possible as the respondents were shy and unconfident to speak in English.

Fun and interesting. When asked about the listening activities, all respondents considered the learning experience fun and interesting. Below are some of their responses:

P3: “(I feel) happy when I see (my) teacher bringing the phone and speaker into the class.”

P1: “It is interesting to hear something different in class.”

P2: “... different from the usual activities.”

The respondents anticipated it because it was different from teacher’s voice. They were more motivated when they heard something other than their teacher’s voice. Motivation of learners is a vital element as it enhances learning (Omrod, 2008).

More concentration and engagement. Besides that, the respondents also asserted that they actually concentrated more when their teachers played the audio. P2 contended that she needed to “listen hard” to make out the words. P1 and P3 agreed by saying that it was their teachers reading aloud to them, she would pause and wait for them if they could not cope, while audios waited for no one. McCaughey (2015) confirmed that short audios can get learners to be silent and give their full attention as they could not afford to miss out on any words.

The discussion led to the respondents’ preferences between teacher’s voice and audio clips. All the respondents concurred that sometimes when they could not cope, they preferred teacher’s voice because they believed that their teacher would pause and repeat or emphasise certain words or phrases for them. It was also due to the very same reason they admitted to concentrating more when listening to the audios compared to teacher’s voice.

Challenging in audio speed. The respondents also confirmed their teachers’ observation that the main hindrance of the listening activities was the speed of the audio. All respondents said that they needed to hear the audio a few times before they could complete the tasks. P3 also confessed to peeping at his friend’s answers when he became lost. He asserted that some activities were a little stressful for him.

Here it is evident that teachers play an important role in the class. Balaban (2016) stated that teachers should be alert enough to reduce learners’ anxiety. Besides, they should provide sufficient scaffolding to help learners succeed in their tasks and build their confidence, especially learners of lower proficiency level. According to McDonald (2010), non-expert listeners actually struggle to decode what they hear, so they rely much on bottom-up listening, recognising sounds and words. Hence, as they are busy making out sounds they hear, they could hardly apply top-down listening which requires higher cognitive abilities. Therefore, listening tasks designed to cater to all learners of different proficiency levels should include both low and high order thinking skills of Bloom’s taxonomy.

The findings above also established the literature that weaker learners may not be able to handle authentic materials when they can hardly cope with non-authentic material. However, past studies indicate that learners, and even teachers, are usually more motivated and progress better when they are given real-life materials compared to make-believe situations (Ghaderpanahi, 2012; Sabet&Mahsefat 2012; Akbari &Razavi, 2015). Hence, learners, especially beginners or those less proficient ones should be equipped with non-authentic listening to prepare them for real-life situations.

Overall development of listening comprehension skills. Overall, all the respondents welcomed the idea of frequent use of audio clips in the language classroom. They also thought that they were getting more familiar with the listening activities now that they had experienced them for six weeks. P1 believed that it was because he had to concentrate in listening to the audio that would make him listen better. This is in line with Rose and Dalton (2016) who stated that one needs to learn much to become a skilful listener.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study indicates positive feedback from teachers and pupils in a rural school towards the use of audio clips as integration of multimedia in English lessons as a small but meaningful step of integrating technology in lessons. Technology skills are indispensable in this 21st century and technology-enhanced language learning is ubiquitous (Marek, 2014). However, for rural settings where technology is still challenging, the smallest effort of integrating multimedia could be significant to these learners, in order to lessen the gap between them and urban learners. Teachers, therefore, play an important role to dynamically expose their learners with active listening and multimedia instead of achievement on paper alone. Fullan (2000) also stated that good teachers are irreplaceable by technology, rather, in this technology explosive era, they should empower themselves even more to be able to apply technology in their pedagogy. Findings of this

study also indicated that the learners could not do without their teacher for guidance when they could not cope with input from multimedia.

This brings us to the prominent role of teachers in the 21st century classrooms. Today, learning could easily occur anywhere, anytime and learners are constructing knowledge from interaction with their environment. Hence, the role of teachers has evolved from the source of input to facilitators. They also have to help build learners' confidence and reduce their anxiety (Gerencheal & Horwitz, 2016) so that learning takes place more effectively.

To reduce learners' anxiety, scaffolding is an important process in teaching and learning of a language skill. This study shows that non-expert learner-listeners need guidance and confidence to complete the listening tasks. Hence, teachers should be ready to bridge the gap between what the learners know and what they will learn by using various techniques such as teaching vocabulary, summarising the text or teaching metacognitive strategies (Balaban, 2016; Read & Barcena, 2016). Scaffolding processes help learners to approach learning tasks with more confidence as they lower their stress.

Furthermore, the study also points towards the issue of authenticity of the listening clips. As discussed above, the benefits of authentic materials in promoting listening comprehension skills are undeniable. Hence, these non-authentic audio clips developed are hoped to prepare learners for real-life listening. Listening activities in the ESL classrooms should also gradually adopt authentic materials (Kirsch, 2008). The development of audio clips supplementary to the textbook is aspired to serve as a stepping stone to familiarise learners with English speeches and thereafter acquiring the disposition of authentic listening, where the key lies in making inferences and not merely understanding (Field, 1998). Further empirical studies may be needed to explore the effectiveness of these textbook-complementing audio clips in developing learners' listening comprehension skills. To keep up with the global pace, whenever and wherever technology use is possible, the audio clips could also be developed into a module and uploaded into a mobile application where learners could download or listen online to complete listening tasks as homework and therefore, learn to be autonomous and take charge of their own learning.

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