How much do learners know about the factors that influence their listening comprehension?

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Abstract

This article discusses factors which influence learner listening comprehension and examines the extent of awareness of these factors among a group of Chinese ESL learners. Data were collected through small group interviews and learner diaries. Twenty factors were identified and these were categorised under five characteristics: text, listener, speaker, task, and environment. Many of the factors identified were related to text and listener characteristics. Five factors were reported by more than two-thirds of the forty language learners who participated in the study. The factors in order of frequency of mention were: vocabulary, prior knowledge, speech rate, type of input and speaker's accent. To find out whether the degree of awareness about factors influencing comprehension was in any way linked to listening ability, two groups of learners were compared. A majority of the high-ability listeners reported twelve factors whereas the low-ability group reported only four. While the high-ability listeners were aware of the effects of text characteristics, they also saw listening as an interactive process in which both the listener and the speaker shared a responsibility for meaning construction. The low-ability listeners’ view of listening comprehension, on the other hand, appeared to be predominantly text-oriented.

Introduction

Factors that influence listening comprehension have been discussed by many authors in the fields of both first and second language listening (see for example, Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Boyle, 1984; Rost, 1990; Samuels, 1984; Watson & Smeltzer, 1984; Wolvin & Coakely, 1996). In second language research alone, many studies have been conducted over the last two decades to determine the effects that specific factors have on the relative success or failure of learner comprehension during listening. An extensive review of this area of research by Rubin (1994) identified five factors examined: text, task, interlocutor, listener and process. Insights on how listening comprehension may be influenced by these external and internal factors are extremely useful because cognitive processes that take place during listening comprehension...
are not normally observable directly. Thus, information on factors that might enhance or hinder these processes can help teachers to better understand their learners’ needs and problems.

The importance of such insights was one reason that motivated the study (Goh, 1998a) on which this article is based. One of my aims was to investigate the knowledge that a group of Chinese ESL learners had about listening comprehension. My purpose was not just to identify factors which influenced the learners’ listening comprehension, but also to find out to what extent the learners themselves were aware of the effect of these factors. In other words, I wanted to uncover the learners’ metacognitive awareness about second language listening. Metacognition, or what learners know about their learning processes, is said to have an effect on the outcome of learning. The literature on learning has convincingly argued and demonstrated that metacognition is an important dimension of thinking which can enhance learning (see, for example, Garner, 1987; Marzono, Hughes, Jones & Idol, 1990; Jones, Presseien, Rankin & Suhor, 1988; Pressley, Harris & Guthrie, 1992; Weinstein, Goetz & Alexander, 1988). In view of this, I also wanted to determine whether the amount of knowledge that my ESL students had about listening was in any way linked to their listening ability.

The theoretical framework I adopted for this study was John Flavell’s metacognitive knowledge, which he defined as “that segment of your (a child’s, an adult’s) stored world knowledge that has to do with people as cognitive creatures and with their diverse cognitive tasks, goals, actions and experiences” Flavell (1979, p. 906). Flavell further distinguished three types of metacognitive knowledge: person, task and strategy. These refer to the specific knowledge that individuals have about themselves as learners, the learning tasks they have to undertake, and the strategies that are most appropriate for accomplishing these tasks. Flavell’s framework of metacognitive knowledge has been successfully applied to language learning by Wenden (1991).

The type of metacognitive knowledge discussed in this article is task knowledge, that is the students’ knowledge about the purpose, the demands and the nature of learning to listening to English. The main study has revealed three types of task knowledge: factors influencing listening comprehension, methods for developing listening ability and the nature of second language

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1 Some early findings have been published in Goh (1997).
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listening. This article will report only the first; that is, factors that the students believed had influenced their listening comprehension. This report is organised into three parts. The first part outlines how the data were collected through verbal reports and subsequently analysed. The second presents and discusses the various factors revealed in the data. Excerpts from the students’ verbal reports are used to illustrate each factor. The third and final part compares the explicit knowledge about factors influencing comprehension of two groups of learners with different listening abilities.

How the data were collected and analysed

Informants

Forty ESL learners participated in my study. They were tertiary-level students from mainland China studying in Singapore. They were enrolled on a six-month intensive English programme that prepared them for undergraduate studies in local universities where English is used as a medium of instruction. A pre-instruction standardised English proficiency test showed many of these students to be extremely weak in their listening comprehension. The test used was the SLEP test (Educational Testing Service, 1991). It measured reading and listening comprehension, and contained 150 multiple-choice questions, 75 for each skill. A parallel form of the pre-instruction test was administered at the end of the six-month programme. These results were subsequently used to distinguish two listening ability groups for the purpose of comparison. The method used for forming these two groups will be further explained in a later part of this article.

Verbal reports

To obtain data on metacognitive knowledge, I elicited verbal reports from two main sources: group interviews and diaries. Nineteen students had volunteered to be interviewed, but two did not show up. The rest of the students met me in three groups of fours and one group of five. At the interview, they responded to several open-ended questions which I had prepared: How do you feel about listening to English? What happens when you hear something unfamiliar? When you listen to English, does your understanding come immediately? What are your problems in listening? I encouraged the learners to talk about specific listening experiences. Whenever someone reported situations in which they had understood what they heard, I would probe further and ask them what they thought had made it possible for them to understand. I used the same type of probes when they
reported problems with comprehension. I asked the students to describe in
detail the problem they had and asked them why they thought these difficulties
arose. The students used mainly English during the interviews even though
they were free to use Putonghua. They were reasonably fluent and could
express themselves clearly. Some students also used Chinese words when
they could not find the English equivalent, or when they wanted to express an
idea quickly. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes and was recorded. A
total of 135 minutes of group interview was recorded. This was later
transcribed and analysed.

The diaries were collected over a period of about two months from 40
students as part of their listening course. The data from listening diaries
consisted of about 28,000 words. The students were told to turn in one entry a
week. They were asked to write specifically about one or more situations in
which they had to listen to English. To direct their writing, they responded to
the following questions: What was the listening event? How much of it did
you understand? What did you do to understand as much of it as possible?
How do you feel about what you did? Are you pleased with the result?

I chose these two methods because they provided the students with plenty
of opportunities to reveal their metacognitive knowledge. They would not be
limited by pre-selected items on Likert-scale questionnaires and neither would
they have to come up with any specific number of responses determined by the
researcher. By asking them to reflect on situations when they had to listen to
English, I hoped to provide a context for them to think about their own
learning. In this way, whatever views they expressed would be based on
actual experience, and not just speculations. I also wanted to find out whether
these students were capable of drawing conclusions about their learning
processes as this could throw some light on their level of metacognitive
awareness.

The data in the group interviews and listening diaries were analysed for
statements revealing the three types of metacognitive knowledge. Some of
these statements were direct comments on the task of learning to listen to
English, while others were less overt but no less informative. These
statements subsequently underwent several stages of coding and recoding.
The reliability of the final coding was checked by an independent coder. For
further details on the coding and recoding procedures, see (Goh, 1998a).
Samples of coded data are presented in Appendices I and II.
On the whole, the students’ oral and written responses revealed a great deal of their understanding of what was involved in learning to listen to English, in particular those factors that influenced their comprehension. These factors are what we will consider next.

Factors which influence learner listening comprehension

An overview

The study identified twenty factors that the students believed had influenced their listening comprehension. These have been further organised into five categories according to their common characteristics. The categories are text, speaker, listener, task and environment. Table 1 shows these five categories and the individual factors identified under each one. It also briefly describes each factor. A more detailed explanation and illustration of these factors will be included later in the discussion.

We can see from table 1 that most of these factors are related to either text or listener characteristics, probably because these factors were more readily accessible to introspection. A possible reason why the students were aware of many textual characteristics was that they frequently engaged in bottom-up or text-driven processing. Thus, they became more sensitive to different features of text that had either hindered or assisted their comprehension. As for the large number of listener factors, it could very well be that many students shared the perception that if anything was going to make listening easier or harder, it would be their own characteristics. They would therefore examine their success or failure in the light of what they could or could not do during listening. Some of these text and listener factors are further discussed below.

Table 1: Students’ task knowledge about factors that influenced their listening comprehension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TEXT</td>
<td>a. Phonological modifications&lt;br&gt;b. Vocabulary&lt;br&gt;c. Speech rate</td>
<td>Features that might make it difficult to divide streams of speech, such as linking, stress. The presence of familiar/unfamiliar content words. This includes English idioms, jargon and academic terms. The perceived speed or slowness at which words are produced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of input</td>
<td>Effects of features related to specific text types, such as lectures, TV/radio news broadcast, stories, face-to-face conversations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sentence length and complexity</td>
<td>Sentence types, such as simple sentences or long complex ones with embedded clauses.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual support</td>
<td>Pictures, handouts, captions, subtitles that support the spoken text.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signposting and organisation</td>
<td>The presence of macro- and micro-discourse markers.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Abstract and non-abstract topics</td>
<td>Abstract topics dealing with concepts compared with those that describe events, people or objects.</td>
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2 **SPEAKER**

| a. Accent | This is related to where a speaker comes from. Many students felt they had particular problems understanding English speakers in Singapore who spoke Singlish\(^2\). |
| b. Competence in speaking | The speaker’s command of English, overall fluency, and their ability to interest listeners or facilitate their comprehension. |

3 **LISTENER**

| a. Interest and purpose | This is related to whether the information is crucial to the listeners or can generate sufficient interest in them to continue listening. |
| b. Prior knowledge and experience | This includes specific knowledge about the topic being talked about. |
| c. Physical and psychological states | Fatigue, nervousness, anxiety, impatience, feeling relaxed and calm. |
| d. Knowledge of context | A general sense of what the spoken input is about. |
| e. Accuracy of pronunciation | Listeners who themselves do not pronounce certain words accurately may have problems recognising these words when the speaker says them correctly. |
| f. Knowledge of grammar | The ability to parse long complex sentences. |
| g. Memory | The ability to retain what is heard or processed. |
| h. Attention and concentration | The ability to direct one’s attention to the task at hand, and not to be distracted or discouraged when understanding is not immediately forthcoming. |

4 **TASK**

| Sufficient time available for processing | Time available between processing one part and the next or before responding. |

5 **ENVIRONMENT**

| Physical conditions | The presence of noise, the acoustics in a room, or the loudness of input. |

\(^2\) A colloquial (basilectal) form of English spoken in Singapore.
The five most commonly cited factors

Of the twenty factors shown in table 1, five were reported by at least two-thirds of the forty students involved in the study. Figure 1 shows these five factors and the number of students who reported them. Each of these factors is discussed next & excerpts from verbal reports are included so that the reader can know the context in which these perceptions were revealed. The names to which the excerpts have been attributed are not the real names of the students in the study.

Figure 1 Five most common factors that influence the students’ listening comprehension

![Bar Chart](image)

i. Vocabulary

80% of the students considered vocabulary an important factor in their listening comprehension. Below are some examples showing this:

1. “Maybe these songs don’t have many new words to me so I could understand.” (Chen Jie)

2. “There were a lot of new words in those stories which was another big block for me to understand well.” (Qianli)
Some students specifically reported the effects that unfamiliar vocabulary items had on their comprehension. Wenling, for example, said that he could get only the gist of the message and had missed out on important details:

3. “I listened to BBC. It was international news. I could only catch the main ideas because of the new words, especially some countries or region names.” (Wenling)

Xueli, on the other hand, said her listening was affected because she had to think about the meaning of unfamiliar words at the same time:

4. “I see another Oscar winning movie --- “The Silence of the Lambs”. To tell the truth, this is not an easy movie to understand. … there were usually some meaning behind the word spoken out and I have to think while listening.” (Xueli)

He Ling reported that her listening was “interrupted” by new words. This suggests that she could have been fixated on these words, causing her to miss out on other things and not understand the overall message well:

5. “Some sentences with new words also interrupt my listening, which affect the result of my comprehension… New words are still the greatest obstruction on my listening path.” (He Ling)

Many students also expressed the belief that their listening ability would improve when their knowledge of words increase:

6. “I am confident that with the vocabulary increasing, my listening skill will develop a lot.” (Zhangyong)

7. “Listened to a famous ballad “Right Here Waiting” and “Carrie”. The second song is much harder than the first one because of the singer’s accent and my lack of vocabulary. I’ll try to increase my vocabulary to make up for this disadvantage.” (Liheng)

The fact that so many students reported that vocabulary affected their comprehension shows it was a dominant perception among the students. This view was also found in Boyle’s (1984) study. It seems, therefore, for many learners, knowing the meaning of words in the text is crucial for their comprehension. Their perceptions of their own listening ability are often directly affected by how well they think they can understand content words in
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a text. Studies by Buck (1990) & Kelly (1991) have also suggested that vocabulary was a major factor in language learners’ listening comprehension.

ii. Prior knowledge

Prior knowledge has been found to play a key role in the students’ comprehension processes and strategy use (Goh, 1998b). The influence of prior knowledge was perceived by 80% of the students as a major factor in their listening comprehension. Here is an excerpt illustrating this:

8. “In a short time, it can talk about from news to special topics by the experts. Many of these lectures are close to our life, so when I listen to it, I feel I can concentrate on it and also understand it better because of the existing idea about that.” (Li Xia)

Some students also reported how their comprehension suffered due to the absence of particular types of prior knowledge:

9. “I could understand all of the talk except some parts of the relationship between Singapore and the colony. Maybe, from my view, it is because I was not very familiar with this period of history and had no idea of Singapore…” (Yang Mei)

10. “I think culture is the key element in language. Sometimes I can catch the whole sentence. But I can’t understand the true meaning of the words. Because I haven’t the same culture as the speaker, I couldn’t give the accurate response to it.” (Limei)

11. “To understand news well, I think it needs many social and political knowledge.” (Hailong)

12. “There was an interview with two actresses in the opera “Phantom”. As I had no idea about the opera, I could not understand what they were talking about. The knowledge I have on the topic can always help me understand better.” (Weiguang)

The students in the above examples identified at least one type of knowledge that was necessary for that particular situation they were in. Yang Mei (9) reported the need for relevant historical knowledge about Singapore. Limei (10) talked about the need to know the culture of the speakers in order to appreciate the true meaning conveyed in the words and to make responses that
were culturally appropriate. Hailong (11) noted the importance of having relevant knowledge in social and political issues when listening to news. Weiguang (12) accepted that he could not understand the interview because he did not know much about the musical.

Research in both first and second language comprehension has shown that human beings frequently make use of prior knowledge when trying to understand information (Carrell, 1983; Weissenreider, 1987; Anderson & Lynch, 1988; O’Malley, Chamot & Küpper, 1989; Long, 1989, 1990; Lund, 1991; Chiang & Dunkel, 1992; Schmidt-Rinehart, 1994). As the verbal reports have just revealed, the students were very much aware of the crucial role of prior knowledge in assisting their listening. Their belief in the influence of prior knowledge is likely to have been the reason for their use of several top-down comprehension strategies identified in the main study (See Goh, 1998a & 1998b).

iii. Speech rate

78% of the students believed that speech rate greatly influenced their comprehension. When some students reflected on their success during specific listening events, many invariably attributed it either entirely or partially to speech that they perceived as not fast. Here are three such observations:

13. “I interviewed some local students for my report. I could catch what they said because the speed wasn’t very quick.” (Gao Li)

14. “I think so long as the people speak in their normal speed, I won’t have much difficulty to understand them.” (Zhangyong)

By the same token, the students often blamed rapid speech rate speaker’s speech for their failure to comprehend:

15. “Though I put my heart into listening, I couldn’t grasp them when some words were said quickly.” (He Ling)

16. “I heard a talk from the librarian about how to do research work on the computer in the library. This time I could not keep up with her because the speed.” (Ma Feng)
Griffiths (1991) suggested that different languages have different “normal” rates, thus it is possible what was ‘normal’ rate for a competent speaker of English was perceived as fast by the students who spoke Chinese as their mother tongue. However, the problem could be more complex than this. For the Chinese students, the perception of speed could have been due to the difference in the nature of spoken English and spoken Chinese. The Chinese language (Putonghua or Mandarin), which all the students spoke, is widely considered by linguists to be a syllable-timed language (Platt, Webber & Ho, 1984). The words are given more or less equal stress. English, on the other hand, is considered a stress-timed language (ibid.). Given the L1 background of the students, they might not have been used to hearing speech in which some syllables were given more stress than others. They might even have expected to hear every word, including words the speakers had deliberately not emphasised. Furthermore, spoken English contains features like weak forms, elisions, link-ups and contractions, which could have further compounded the students’ difficulties. It is important to emphasise that the speech rate mentioned was entirely the students’ perception of how fast or slow the speakers were speaking because no apparatus were used to measure the rates.

It is also possible that on some occasions, the students concentrated so much of their efforts in getting information from the text that they had neglected to fill the gaps in their comprehension with other types of information. The sense of incompleteness in what they heard, could have in turn led them to believe that they only managed to catch a few words because the speech was fast. In other words, the students’ perception of apparent fast speech could therefore have resulted from the presence of suprasegmental features coupled with their own expectations of what they should hear, rather than the actual speech rate itself.

More significantly, perhaps, is the issue of automatisation of the students’ listening processes. As we have seen earlier, many students considered unfamiliar vocabulary a major obstacle in their comprehension. Some students reported that they often stopped to think about the meaning of unfamiliar words and this had directly undermined the efficiency of their processing. It is very likely that because of the limited capacity in their working memory, the students were not able to cope with all the input at once. Consequently, they were unable to process everything satisfactorily. Therefore, the students’ perception of speed could have been due to a reduction in channel capacity, which had been taken up mainly by low-level processing of sounds and individual words. If lower level processes such as
recognition of words or parsing were automatised, as is the case with competent speakers, more channel capacity would have been freed up for higher-level processing procedures. Automatisation of lower-level processes might, therefore, eliminate or reduce the perception of fast speech.

iv. Type of input

70% of the students reported that type of input was an important factor in determining their level of comprehension. Most of the students found conversations easier to understand than other types of input. One reason given was they were able to make use of other types of information from the speaker (e.g. facial expressions) to assist comprehension. Another reason was that they could always ask the speaker to repeat or clarify. Limei & Weifang demonstrate this knowledge:

17. “When I have a chat with my Singaporean friend, I could understand her. I could guess the meaning from facial language. But when I listened in the telephone, I couldn’t get any information to help me catch the words.” (Limei)

18. “When I didn’t understand one word or another, I tried to guess and if it was necessary, I asked the speaker to make it clear. The advantage to listen in the speech is that I can stop and question the speaker. The direct face-to-face communication may be better to test the listening skills.” (Weifang)

The students’ perception that conversations were the easiest type of text to comprehend is consistent with Shohamy & Inbar’s (1991) findings. They reported that language learners found dialogues easiest to understand, while short talks were moderately difficult and news was the hardest. Although dialogues are not the same as conversations, they possess many similar characteristics. For example, both tend to contain more repetitions and hesitations, which some studies have shown to be helpful to language learners (Chaudron, 1983; Dunkel, 1988). It might be possible, therefore, that the students’ comprehension had been facilitated in this way, although they might not always have been conscious of the presence or the functions of these features. Cardoso’s (1996) study also reported that learners found face-to-face listening activities easiest. She did not give a reason for this observation, but we could infer that the learners were helped, not only by features like hesitations and repetitions, but also visual clues, such as facial expressions and gestures.
Factors that influence listening comprehension

Many of the students in my study also noted that English spoken over TV was easier to understand than radio broadcasts. Their perceptions about the benefits of watching TV and video are also consistent with the findings in a number of studies (for example, Mueller, 1980; Secules, Herron & Tomasello, 1992) as well as experts’ opinions on the matter (for example, Rubin, 1995). Here are two excerpts from the verbal reports comparing watching TV with listening to the radio:

19. “With the aid of the screen I still could understand the intention of the video. I’m not quite satisfied with the result because if it was not a video, but the radio, perhaps I could catch very little.” (Yang Yong)

20. “I think I can understand movies or news shown on TV better than I listen to news on radio. …I can see what is happening on screen.” (Zhengwei)

Anderson & Lynch (1988) highlighted the elements within each type of input that could directly affect comprehensibility. These included the type of language used, the context in which listening occurred and the purpose of listening. They also noted the level of difficulty of the same input could vary according to the listeners’ purpose in listening. Wolff (1989) reported that his learners frequently tried to identify the type of text they were listening to before proceeding to process it. He suggested that this was because learners often made use of knowledge about the structure of text types to assist processing. He also argued that text-type identification was a processing device which was, to a large extent, concept-driven or top-down because it provided “the comprehender with a general plan of the text” (ibid:140). The Chinese students’ awareness of the effect text types was therefore useful because it could guide them in the application of appropriate comprehension strategies.

v. Speaker’s accent

68% of the students reported that their comprehension was affected by the speaker’s accent. The word “accent” here refers to the variety of spoken English, that is, whether it was British, American or others. The students also used the word to include features of speech that they noticed as being different from the type of “standard” English they were familiar with. For instance, Limei noticed the effects different accents had on her comprehension when she was listening to a radio phone-in programme:
21. “But sometimes strong accent confused me. ... When I listen to FM 98.7 I could understand the DJ, but I am confused by the caller.” (Limei)

Some students had a preferred variety and found others difficult to understand:

22. “When I listened to British English, I felt more comfortable...” (Weifang)

Others commented specifically about the way the colloquial variety of English spoken in Singapore affected their comprehension:

23. “In Funan Centre, the assistant at the free gift counter said a lot of words. The funny thing was, except for the first word “This” I could not understand anything. I was embarrassed. Singlish is too difficult to understand.” (Hongxia)

Accent as an important factor in language learners’ listening comprehension has also been reported by Boyle, 1984; Tauroza & Luk, 1997. For the students in my study, although accent was considered a key factor, some of them believed unfamiliar accents only created temporary setbacks if listeners themselves took an active part in the communication. Xinmei was one of those who held this view:

24. “I think in listening to English, the problem of accent is only temporary. We can overcome it quickly. The most important thing is that the speaker must speak clearly and once again, as listeners, we should try to be able to catch the main ideas of long sentences or long talk.” (Xinmei)

Other factors

In addition to the above five factors, which were mentioned by more than two-thirds of the students, several other factors were revealed in the verbal reports of at least one-third of them. One such factor was the listener’s interest and purpose for listening:

25. “Despite a bit accent, I could understand him very well because I was very interested in the foreigner’s attitude towards China.” (Weifang)
26. “Last Saturday, after having enjoyed an English discussion on TV for more than twenty minutes, I suddenly realised that I had been watching with almost complete understanding of every sentence and that I had not been forcing myself to concentrate as before. It was as if I was watching a Chinese programme. It was incredibly wonderful. Later, as I reflected upon the experience I assumed that it was because I had been caught by the topic that was being discussed. So next time, I will try to be an active listener instead of a passive one.” (Aibing)

Another factor quite commonly mentioned was the listener’s physical and psychological state. This included fatigue, nervousness and anxiety:

27. “I listened to the BBC at about 0.00 - 0.30 a.m. … Later on, I was a bit sleepy and couldn’t concentrate on it very much. I was not quite pleased with the result because I thought I could have understood it better if I had chosen another period of time when I was conscious.” (Xinmei)

28. “I listened to it just like a child listening to an interesting story. There was no pressure, so I needn’t be nervous. Maybe this is the reason why I can hear clearly about it.” (Yonggao)

The students also commented that their comprehension could be greatly influenced by whether or not they knew what the context of the input was:

29. “The word ‘innocence’ is usually associated with courts and law … but it’s just that there’s no context, I just cannot understand this sentence.” (Aibing)

30. “The music DJ speaks English in an American accent and talked at a relatively high speed. But since what she talked about is most about music, so it seems quite easy to understand what she says.” (Wang Min)

31. “If I guess the topic that they’re talking about, I can understand most of the words. If I do wrong to guess the topic, I’ll not understand even one sentence.” (Limei)

Although these students did not specify the way context could help their comprehension, we can infer from their comments that knowing the context
might allow them to apply comprehension strategies, such as inferencing. Aibing (28) wanted to use the context to interpret a sentence, while Wang Min (29) appeared to have used the context of a music programme to achieve comprehension. Limei’s remark (30) suggests that she used contexts to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words.

Some students also believed that their ability to concentrate had a direct influence on comprehension:

32. “I also think if you concentrate on what you are listening to, you will understand it better.” (Xueli)

33. “When I concentrated my energy on his lecture, I can understand most of it. But I was too busy copying, so I can’t catch sometimes.” (Yanli)

Visual support was another factor some students believed could help their comprehension:

34. “This time I could not keep up with her because the speed and some academic words, especially some words used in computer language. However, the OHP helped me to follow.” (Zhiguang)

35. “The speakers spoke a little too quickly, but because there were pictures on the screen, I still could understand quite a lot.” (Yang Yong)

Earlier, we saw that the majority of the students believed a speaker’s accent could influence their comprehension. Another speaker characteristic that the students highlighted was the speaker’s competence or how skilful the speaker is at speaking. In the following excerpts, two students describe some speaker-related shortcomings which they had an effect on their comprehension:

36. “Sometimes I think a lot of speakers try to show their speaking skills and so they do not say something directly, but to lead you round and round, just do not tell you the direct thing, it’s also difficult for us to understand.” (Yuzhou)

37. “I also often listen to English songs. Sometime on radio, sometimes on walkman. If the singer pronounces clearly, I may understand more.” (Yang Yang)
The students demonstrated a great deal of knowledge about factors which influenced their listening comprehension. Twenty factors were revealed in the data, but some factors were mentioned more frequently than others. These have been categorised under five broad characteristics: text, speaker, listener, task and environment. However, most of the factors mentioned were either text and listener characteristics. This may be indicative of certain underlying beliefs the students had about the process of comprehension. Of the twenty factors, five were identified by two-thirds or more of the students, while six were mentioned by at least one-third of them. The factors identified here have many similarities with those highlighted in the literature mentioned at the start of this article.

Comparing what learners of different listening abilities know

To find out whether the level of metacognitive awareness about factors were linked to listening ability, I compared the reports of two groups of learners. Each group consisted of eight students selected according to their results in a post-instruction standardised proficiency test. The students in the high-ability group had achieved listening scores in the top 30% of all the students enrolled in the intensive English programme. The low-ability group consisted of eight students whose listening scores in the same test were in the bottom 30%3. The type and number of factors each student reported were first tallied individually. Next, the total for all eight students in each group was added up. All those factors that were mentioned by more than half of the students in each ability group (that is, five or more) were compared. The comparison showed that the high ability listeners demonstrated richer task knowledge about second language listening. They mentioned twelve of the twenty factors identified whereas the low-ability group mentioned just four. The results are presented in table 2. Factors that are mentioned by more than half of the students in each group are indicated by a tick (✓).

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3 I used the scores in the listening test to distinguish the two ability groups. The average raw score for the high-ability group was 65 while that for the low-ability group was 49. There was also a noticeable difference in the students’ scores for the entire SLEP test. Students in the high ability group had a range of scores that was equivalent to TOEFL scores of 550 - 600, while those in the low ability group had a range of scores equivalent to TOEFL 440 - 500.
Table 2 Factors reported by a majority of each listening ability group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>High-ability</th>
<th>Low-ability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Vocabulary</td>
<td>Text</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Speech rate</td>
<td>Text</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Type of input</td>
<td>Text</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Prior knowledge</td>
<td>Listener</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Accents</td>
<td>Speaker</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Interest and purpose for listening</td>
<td>Listener</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Knowledge of context</td>
<td>Listener</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Speaker’s competence</td>
<td>Speaker</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Visual support</td>
<td>Text</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Ability to concentrate</td>
<td>Listener</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Listener’s physical and psychological state</td>
<td>Listener</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Physical conditions (noise, sound quality)</td>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As table 2 shows, four factors reported were common to both groups. Interestingly, vocabulary was seen to have an effect regardless of listening ability. All sixteen students reported that vocabulary was a major factor. The two groups also identified two other text characteristics - speech rate and type of input - as playing an important role in their comprehension. In addition to these three text characteristics, both high and low ability listeners also recognised the value of their prior knowledge in assisting comprehension. This perception was borne out by the high frequency of two top-down strategies - inferencing and elaboration - among both groups of listeners (see x, 1998b).

What appeared to be absent from the low-ability group’s metacognitive knowledge was an understanding of the role of other factors. We can see this when we consider the four factors the group had identified. Three of these were text characteristics, with the remaining one being a listener characteristic. High ability listeners, on the other hand, were aware of how the speaker and the environment could affect their comprehension. Most low ability listeners were silent on these two other characteristics. The high-ability listeners, therefore, demonstrated a more balanced and accurate view of comprehension.

From the large number of factors that the high-ability listeners reported, we may deduce that they perceived listening comprehension as a product of
interaction among the text, the listener, the speaker and the environment. In spite of this, however, when they failed to comprehend something, the high ability listeners might have a tendency to see themselves as the problem. We can infer this from the relatively high number of listener characteristics among the list of factors they suggested. This would lend support to the observation by Lynch (1996, P. 91) that some language learners tended to be ‘listener-blamers’. On a more positive note, however, we can also interpret the presence of many listener characteristic factors as the high ability listeners’ skill at making use of internal resources to assist their comprehension.

Low-ability listeners, on the hand, seemed to perceive comprehension as mainly influenced by the text and to a certain extent by themselves. While the high-ability listeners saw listening as an interactive process in which both the listener and the speaker shared a responsibility for constructing meaning, the low-ability listeners’ view of comprehension appeared to be predominantly text-oriented. Their assumption seemed to be that texts which contained few new words and which were spoken at a moderate speed would be easier to understand. Nevertheless, one might also perhaps argue that the low-ability listeners were forced by the difficulties they faced, such as problems with word recognition, into such a partial view of listening.

The two ability groups showed a most notable difference in their knowledge about factors that influence listening comprehension. The high-ability listeners identified more factors, and showed a more realistic and more accurate view about listening comprehension. Whereas low-ability listeners saw textual factors, such as vocabulary, speech rate and type of input as mainly responsible for how accessible a listening text was going to be, high-ability listeners were aware of the potential effects of other factors, such as the speaker and the environment. This contrast in metacognitive knowledge about listening may therefore throw some light on the cognitive characteristics that differentiate these two groups of learners.

Conclusion

The ESL students in this study have shown a great deal of explicit knowledge about factors that influenced their listening comprehension. However, there was a clear difference among learners with different listening abilities. A comparison of two groups of learners showed the high listening ability learners reported three times as many factors than the low ability listeners. This high degree of metacognitive awareness could have partly
contributed to the development of the listening competence of the group of more successful listeners since many researchers in the field of educational psychology have shown the effects of metacognition on learning success. Learners who are metacognitively aware are better able to control and manage their learning in terms of understanding and storing new information as well as finding the best ways to practise and reinforce what they have learnt. More research is definitely needed in the field of second language listening to further explore the relationship between metacognitive knowledge and listening success. Nevertheless, based on the strength of research findings in the field of educational psychology, it would not be presumptuous to propose that activities for increasing language learners’ metacognitive knowledge about learning to listen should form an integral part of any listening curriculum. Language learners who know about how their listening is influenced by internal and external factors will be better placed to take the necessary measures to enhance and assist their comprehension.

References


Appendix I

Extracts from a student’s listening diary

1 May
Today, I listened to the news broadcast on 90.5 FM about the Prime Minister’s May Day message. I could understand about 70%. Since I recorded it, I listened to it again and again and found some places that I didn’t catch or misunderstood at the first time. An important word “fragility” was repeated several times in this short piece of news, but, I didn’t know it before (1b). After referring to the dictionary, I got a better understanding. Also, when some words were linked together (1a) and broadcasted very fast (1c), I couldn’t grasp them. My roommates and I decided to see “Forrest Gump” at Yishun Cinema. “Forrest Gump” is really a good movie that is worth the Oscar Prize, and all of us were absorbed in it. The American English in Forrest Gump was not difficult to understand and I caught 70% of the whole movie. I think it was because the main speaker in this movie, the hero, Forrest Gump is not a smart man and the actor just managed to speak in a dull way --- slowly and influently (1e). The pictures on the screen also helped me understand the dialogues in the movie (1f).

10 May
Since in today’s oral class, we practiced a conversation about negotiation, I chose a lesson titled “negotiating” in “English for Career Advancement” series as listening material. It was a negotiation conducted by the representatives of two companies about the completion date and the price of a project. It was quite long but very interesting. I could understand more than 90%, because there was no new word for me which made it much easier (1b). I tried to divide the long conversation to several phases of the process and got an outline in my mind. After having an overall expression, even if there were some small unclear places, I didn’t think they were crucial. There was another problem. I found that although the words were all not difficult, the meaning in the context may be different from what we had learned (3d). For example, “quotation” in this business situation didn’t mean “the passage that is quoted”. It meant “the quoting of current prices and bids for securities and goods”.

20 May
This morning, I listened to a lecture arranged by MOE. The topic is “Singapore, A Multi-racial Country”. It lasted for about two hours. I were quite interested in it and could understand 80% of it. There are several factors that me understand it better.

1. This lecture is well structured and the signpost and transitional sentences were properly used (1g) which made me have an idea about what she had said and what she would soon talk about.

2. The lecturer showed to the audience videos and film-strips from time to time (1f). I could find the answers of some problem I raised during listening from visual aids.

3. We could get handouts in time after each section (1f).
4. The lecturer always asked us some questions after each section. She used this way to refresh our memory. In a word, I was a bit satisfied with the result, but I thought I could do better.

Appendix II

An excerpt from a small group interview

Q: In this interview I want to find out very general things about the way you listen to English, like the way you feel about listening to English, or your problems. Perhaps we could talk freely...

S1: I think it, if it is difficult for me to understand the contents. I think it is mostly because of vocabulary. And also sometimes, the dialect. Some English speakers have the dialect, for example Scottish. And if they cannot pronounce well, or make some syllables.

S2: I think the vocabulary is most important because if some words I’m very familiar with, even if it is pronounced not standard, I can understand too.

S3: Yeah, I listen to news report and I find the vocabulary is not so serious a problem because I find another problem is have we know something about the word, such as name of the place, or the name of the country. Sometimes you nearly could not find the things that happened.

Q: That means you’re not familiar with the name.

S3: Yes, some places. Such as where have is a fire, where have a serious traffic jam. But in China, there were some reports from China, and I always catch the place.

S4: Another problem is we’re not used to the way the native speakers pronounce. Like some words, some words together, they link together, and even these words are familiar to us, but we can’t understand what they say.

S3: Just like today’s paper, sometimes the words are very fast and when we look at the transcript then we find the words are familiar to us, not new words.

S1: I think maybe the reason is we learn the words individually and we didn’t guess the whole meaning. If we listen to a not so familiar kind of content, we can only catch the words we can understand, we cannot get the whole thing.

S3: That means some idioms and phrases is another problem.

S2: I also think if you concentrate on what you are listening to, you will understand it better.

Q: How do you concentrate?

S3: A quiet place.

S2: With a clear brain.

S3: Voice volume higher.

(Note: The codes used in this extract and the ones in Appendix I reflect the items as they appear in Table 1 in the article. In the original report of this study, a different coding system was used.)