

First, Second and Foreign Language Listening : Similarities and Differences

Parote Bennui^{}*

Abstract

This paper provides a comparison and contrast of first, second and foreign language listening through four factors: speech perception, interpretation of spoken texts, a set of stereotypical knowledge, and listening strategies. Apparently, similarities between L1 listening and L2/FL listening are found in a small point of the two factors. Under a set of stereotypical knowledge, at the early age of acquiring listening, L1 and L2/FL listeners have insufficient linguistic knowledge to interact with adult speakers of the target language. Moreover, some listening strategies used by L1 listeners are also employed by L2/FL listeners such as recognizing words as well as hearing the words and meaning of sentences. On the other hand, differences among these listeners arise into a wide range of all factors. First, L2/FL listeners perceive only the speech sound of the target language while L1 listeners understand the meaning of the speech sound due to possession of categorical perception and perceptive constancy during their infancy. Furthermore, when interpreting spoken texts, L2/FL listeners expend much effort regarding linguistic, paralinguistic and extra-linguistic messages but L1 listeners have developed their top-down and bottom-up levels of listening comprehension. Besides, a set of

^{*}An English lecturer at Western Languages Department, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Thaksin University



stereotypical knowledge belongs to L1 listeners in the infant period; however, it will emerge in L2/FL listeners if they become 'intake' via 'comprehension input'. In addition, different types of listening strategies must be trained to L2/FL listeners; nonetheless, they are automatically and spontaneously used by L1 listeners. Overall, L2/FL listeners have a great number of differences from L1 listeners due to linguistic constraints. However, such a difference reflects the attention L2/FL listeners have to pay for enhancing their listening comprehension and competence, not for discouraging their motivation due to being non-native listeners.

Introduction

With the occurrence of low performance of listening to spoken messages of the target language, many second and foreign language listeners may blame their being non-native listeners as a cause of listening problems, and think that it is difficult, if at all possible, for them to reach the competency of second and foreign language listening. In fact, if they understand the relationship of listening among first, second, and foreign languages, they will have a better way to rethink about their own listening background in order to solve their listening problems. Hence, this paper is intended to provide an insightful account into the concept of first, second and foreign language listening in aspects of similarities and differences so that learners of second and foreign language listening skills will realize their listening ability compared to first language listeners. This comparison will be discussed by examining four factors: *speech perception, interpretation of spoken texts, a set of stereotypical knowledge, and listening strategies.*

Prior to the comparison, the term 'first, second and foreign language listening' needs to be described for this paper to be clearly understood.



In using the target language which a certain language learner attempts to acquire or use, this term is applicable which can be divided into three sub-terms: first language (L1) listening, second language (L2) listening, and foreign language (FL) listening. These terms are different. L1 listening refers to the listening ability of native language speakers. Meanwhile, L2 listening involves the listening ability in the target language of second language speakers, and FL listening concerns the ability in listening of the target language of foreign language speakers. Using English as the target language, these terms can become "native English listening, English as a Second Language (ESL) listening, and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) listening". Hence, native English listening involves the highest hierarchy of listening proficiency in various functions by users of English such as British, American, Canadian, Australian and New Zealander listeners. Meanwhile, ESL listening is regarded with the extent of the listening ability in both intra-national and international contexts of English, especially listeners who have more experiences and opportunities in hearing and interpreting spoken texts such as Singaporeans, Indians and Filipinos. However, EFL listening falls into the degree of the ability in listening in only an international context of English, particularly listeners who have limited chances in response to spoken texts such as Japanese, Koreans and Thais. In this paper, however, L2 and FL listening shares many characteristics but very few differences due to the listening ability of non-native speakers. Therefore, this term is always referred to as "L2/FL listening". Only native listening has its unique characteristics.

A sufficient description of those terms above may enrich an insight into the comparison and contrast among L1, L2 and FL listening types through the following four factors.

Speech Perception

With respect to perceiving speech, native listeners seem to show more differences than similarities compared to second and foreign language listeners. In fact, native listeners' speech perception starts at the early development of listening or at the infant level, especially regarding two main characteristics: categorical perception and perceptual constancy. First of all, 'categorical perception' refers to the ability of native listeners to discriminate speech sound differences from their first language in a number of different phonetic dimensions, and to develop 'continuous perception' that concerns the capacity to hear continuous speech as combination of sound sequences. Last, 'perceptual constancy' is related to the ability of native infant listeners to tolerate the type of acoustic variability that is included in changes in rates of speech or differences in speakers' voice. This ability is to relate 'variable input' with 'sound differences' to changes in meaning (Rost, 2002). These features seem not to occur in second and foreign language listeners when perceiving speech sounds of the target language.

It seems unfair to compare native listeners and L2 or FL listeners by considering the first year of listening development of the target language. This comparison is not clear cut. It is very difficult that L2/FL listeners can perceive speech sounds of the target language during their infancy, by concerning the two features mentioned above; otherwise, they are bilinguals who have been exposed to the first and target languages through their caretakers or learning environments. If so, the comparison and contrast by speech perception among native, L2 and FL adult listeners can be quite obvious.



In general, native listeners focus more on the meaning of spoken messages, no matter the rate of speed, than the linguistic elements of the spoken messages. However, they sometimes focus on phonological elements of the spoken messages in some problematic cases, e.g., in a noisy background or when conversing with a speaker with strong or unfamiliar accents. Importantly, they do not perceive speech phoneme by phoneme or word by word as foreign language listeners do. Instead, they use their subconscious knowledge of the phonological regularities of L1 as well as lexicon, syntactic and semantic properties of the L1 to compensate for the shortcomings of the acoustic signals. Becoming competent listeners, they exploit all the information such as the linguistic components of the speech and some listening strategies to help them to listen successfully and effectively (Anderson & Lynch, 1988). That is to say, native listeners perceive speech sounds via the simultaneous and spontaneous use of information from different sources: from linguistic elements of the spoken messages and their global knowledge in unison.

On the other hand, second and foreign language listeners perceive speech sounds of the target language in different ways than native listeners. L2 listeners use higher-level information, e.g., their expectations about meaning to supplement the degree of opacity of the phonological information rather than solely relying on identifying sound by sound or word by word. However, foreign language listeners understand speech sounds by discriminating FL phonemes with minimal pairs and identifying sounds and words solely step by step (Anderson & Lynch, 1988).

Overall L2 and FL listeners also possess the categorical perception and perceptual constancy when they perceive utterances of their native



language at their infancy. However, they do not have these features when acquiring the target language. Moreover, they are not mature to employ their subconscious knowledge of phonological elements of the target language to understand spoken texts as native listeners are able. This is because they are inter-language listeners. These reflect on a large gap of the listening ability between native and L2/FL listeners.

Interpretation of Spoken Texts

When interpreting spoken texts, native listeners never try to hear all the information in spoken texts and they do not need to hear fully spoken messages. Their proficiency in listening comprehension is similar to the ability to fill in the gap and to create an understanding that meets one's listening purpose (Peterson, 2001). In other words, native listeners understand spoken messages by linking some information they have heard and interpreting or using their own knowledge.

This is different from the way second and foreign language listeners interpret spoken texts. They strive to understand the full mechanics of the spoken texts due to insufficient linguistic competence. This is because L2 and FL listeners have developed their top-down and bottom-up levels of listening comprehension differently from L1 listeners. In this respect, Peterson (2001) claims that native listeners have adequate listening proficiency on top-down level, e.g., their ability in expecting and understanding the context, topic as well as the nature of a spoken text and of the world and on bottom-up level, e.g., their ability in decoding the sounds, words, phrases and sentences of spoken messages.

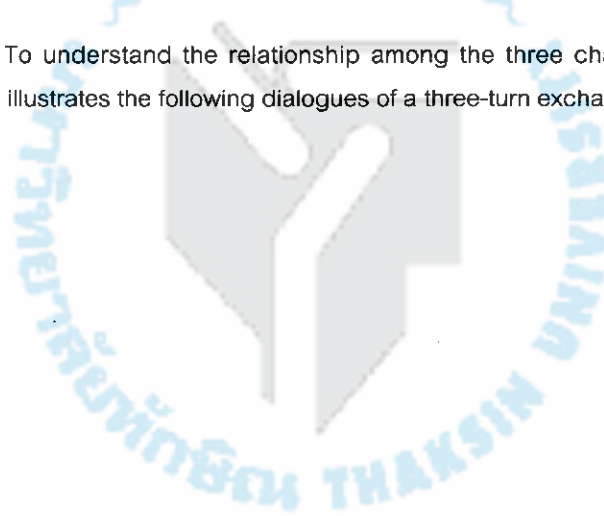


However, L2 and FL listeners are slower in bottom-up processing skills. They cannot readily segment speech streams into word units to tell where one word begins and another ends. Furthermore, they perceive the stress patterns of word differently than native listeners. Besides, both L2 and FL listeners are not yet to be fluent in phonological rules. In addition, they are less familiar with rules for word formation, inflection or word order.

Morley (2001) suggests that second and foreign language listeners can interpret spoken texts in both two-way and one-way oral communication. L2 listeners learn listening through messages conveyed in three ways as follows:

- (i) **Linguistic messages** which involve the ability to analyze grammatical structure and interpret the meaning of words, sounds, phrases and sentences.
- (ii) **Paralinguistic messages** which concern the ability to interpret the vocal features, e.g. intonation, prosody, stress, pitch and discourse patterns which transmit the speaker's attitude.
- (iii) **Extra-linguistic messages** which are regarded as the ability to interpret the meaning of body language, e.g. body postures, body gestures, facial expression and eye contact, etc. which is conveyed by the speaker.

To understand the relationship among the three channels, Harris (2003) illustrates the following dialogues of a three-turn exchange.





Situation: A teenage girl is standing at the door of her parents' house waving goodbye to an adolescent boy, her boyfriend who is sitting on his motor scooter at the bottom of the drive late at night.

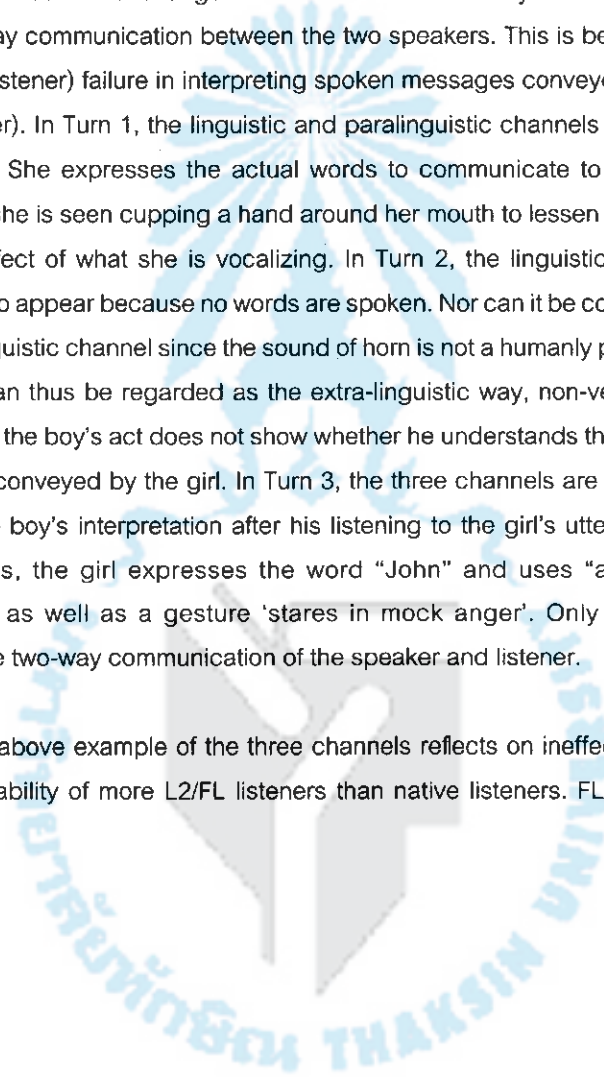
Turn 1: Girl (in a loud whisper) "Give me a ring on Thursday at 6."

Turn 2: Boy (no answer but sounds the horn twice, smiles, and puts the scooter into gear).

Turn 3: Girl "John!" (stares in mock anger, waves and goes in).

This three-turn exchange seems to be more one-way communication than two-way communication between the two speakers. This is because of the boy's (listener) failure in interpreting spoken messages conveyed by the girl (speaker). In Turn 1, the linguistic and paralinguistic channels are used by the girl. She expresses the actual words to communicate to the boy. Moreover, she is seen cupping a hand around her mouth to lessen the noise carrying effect of what she is vocalizing. In Turn 2, the linguistic channel seems not to appear because no words are spoken. Nor can it be considered the paralinguistic channel since the sound of horn is not a humanly produced sound. It can thus be regarded as the extra-linguistic way, non-verbal act. This means the boy's act does not show whether he understands the spoken messages conveyed by the girl. In Turn 3, the three channels are apparent through the boy's interpretation after his listening to the girl's utterance. In other words, the girl expresses the word "John" and uses "a rise-fall intonation" as well as a gesture 'stares in mock anger'. Only this turn displays the two-way communication of the speaker and listener.

The above example of the three channels reflects on ineffectiveness of interpretability of more L2/FL listeners than native listeners. FL listeners



perceive listening by relying on only linguistic and paralinguistic information because the visual cues of extra-linguistic information might be missing. That is to say, there is no physical information conveyed by the speaker if L2 or FL listeners are listening via one-way oral communication approach.

Totally L2/FL listeners face many linguistic problems when interpreting spoken messages expressed by L1 speakers due to lack of one from the three channels of two-way communication when conversing in the target language; they may misinterpret grammatical, lexical and phonological structures as well as non-verbal language patterns of spoken texts. However, native listeners may not encounter or have a few chances to such a problem since they possess full bottom-up and top-down skills in listening.

A Set of Stereotypical Knowledge

The third factor, a set of stereotypical knowledge of the target language has been acquired by native listeners from infancy. Such knowledge consists of seven components: speaker, listener, place, time, genre, topic and co-text (Brown & Yule, 1999). They are described as follows:

- (i) **Speaker:** Native listeners experience the knowledge of what speakers have said. The speaker factor includes kinds of speaker in different contexts. In fact, native listeners can even judge the speakers' attitudes and intention in speaking.



- (ii) **Listener:** Native listeners know how to use formal and informal titles to address the speaker on special occasions in relation to the situation and the speakers' role.
- (iii) **Place:** Native listeners are experienced in producing different styles of language when listening or talking to certain speakers in formal or informal places through the norm of appropriateness of language. Moreover, they know how to use expressions in relation to the location of the speaker.
- (iv) **Time:** Native listeners are experienced in using particular expressions of time when speaking to speakers.
- (v) **Genre:** Native listeners can anticipate the language use or the events of language in particular texts in different contexts from their experiences.
- (vi) **Topic:** Native listeners can choose specific vocabulary items according to specific topics when talking to speakers.
- (vii) **Co-text:** While listening to a speaker, a native listener can anticipate the context or situation about the background of what the speaker is talking about.

Although such a set of stereotypical knowledge is more often not absent in second and foreign language listeners, there are still two main features of native listening acquisition shared by L2 and FL listeners. First of all, young L2 and FL children have a silent period. They are not expected to produce adult-like language in response to what adult speakers address. In addition, after they have begun to attempt linguistic production, they clearly understand more than they can say (Anderson & Lynch, 1988). In other words, like native listeners at the early stage of acquiring listening, second and foreign language listeners have inadequate linguistic knowledge to interact with adult speakers. Furthermore, having tried to produce linguistic

items of the target language, they can better comprehend the speaker's speaking than they can speak themselves. Indeed, at the early stage of their learning, they feel that having to speak the target language is a burden.

'Comprehension input' is a vital factor required for L2 and FL listeners to develop listening comprehension skills during the stage of inter-language development. It includes the listeners' linguistic elements (lexis, morphology and syntax) and their current knowledge. It will become 'intake' when the listeners' linguistic information is assimilated and used to promote further L2/FL development. Through this process, the listeners are able to understand speech sounds of the target language (L2 acquisition: the role of listening, n.d.).

However, it seems uneasy for 'input' in the L2/FL to become 'intake'. Only a small subset of 'input' ever becomes 'intake' that has a permanent effect on L2/FL listeners' listening acquisition. When 'input' becomes 'intake', the listener 'restructures' his or her internal knowledge of the language, and this change results in a permanent development in L2/FL listeners.

In order for 'input' to become 'intake', L2/FL listeners need to address the issue of cognitive capacity for processing information. If this capacity increases, the L2/FL listening acquisition will remain stagnant. Although the listener may understand more of the L2/FL through strategic compensation such as inferring meanings from situational cues, his or her ability to process information from linguistic cues in real time remains the same (Rost, 2002).

There also appears to be other aspects of the importance of comprehension input for L2/FL listening acquisition. First, L2/FL listeners understand the meaning and structure of spoken messages in order to master the form and usage of speech patterns. Further development of L2 abilities depends on learners being exposed to language input which contains structures a bit beyond their competence level. Last, they are able to produce speech of the target language after building up sufficient competence in input (Morley, 1984).

What is potential comprehensible input for L2/FL listeners is much different from that of L1 listeners. L2 / FL listeners' memory span for the target language is shorter than for native language input. Hence, they face difficulty in understanding complicated spoken texts because these texts require their combination of parsed segments during comprehension by placing an additional burden on short-term memory which may be loaded with un-encoded elements of the target language (O' Melley et al., 1995).

To gain listening comprehension, native listeners can employ the system of stereotypical knowledge that has been set up in their cognitive process. In contrast, L2/FL listening comprehension needs to pass the stage changing from 'input' to 'intake'. Indeed, this stage takes much time for the continuous development of linguistic elements of spoken texts and cognitive capacity in the target language.

Listening Strategies

To attain effective listening comprehension, both L1 and L2/FL listeners are necessary to apply strategies to interpret spoken texts. There are different strategies used by L2/FL listeners. Brown & Yule (1999) suggest six types of the strategies L1 listeners employ as follows:



- (i) **Features of context:** Native listeners understand certain situations before anyone speaks.
- (ii) **Time:** They know when they are going to join the conversation which has been going on.
- (iii) **The incoming cues:** They can use real-time cues to determine the speakers and purposes in the conversation.
- (iv) **Types of discourse:** They can identify a discourse containing a particular type of language used by the speakers in the conversation.
- (v) **Grice's maxims of the cooperative conversation:** They are aware of quality, quantity, relevance and manner to assume what speakers of spoken texts say.
- (vi) **Selection:** They do not expect to remember everything they hear, but they will select from important points they hear in order to develop a coherent mental model for understanding.

Those listening strategies, however, are rarely used by second and foreign language listeners. Indeed, these non-native listeners always employ some strategies such as recognizing words, hearing the words and meaning of sentences, and using their linguistic knowledge to guess the meaning of speech (Anderson & Lynch, 1988).

Other listening strategies used by second and foreign language learners are described. Vandergrift (1999) suggests three types of listening strategies widely employed by ESL and EFL learners as follows:

- (i) **Meta-cognitive strategies** include thinking about the learning process, e.g. planning, monitoring and evaluating listening tasks.

- (ii) **Cognitive strategies** concern manipulating the material to be learnt and applying a specific technique to listening tasks.
- (iii) **Socio-affective strategies** involve cooperating with classmates, questioning the teacher for clarification and applying specific techniques to lower the anxiety level.

Those types of listening strategies have already been emerged in native learners, but have to be explicitly practiced by second and foreign language learners. In this way, Field (1998) suggests some methods of training listening strategies for ESL/EFL teachers as follows:

- (i) Write as many words as possible from the speech you and your learners hear, and choose certain words in relation to certain speech.
- (ii) Share your guesses with your learners on the meaning of spoken messages by using background knowledge, the text topic, speech events and the speaker.
- (iii) Check your guesses when the selection of the text is replayed.
- (iv) Check your guesses against the next selection of the text.

In addition, there are many other strategies teachers can use to teach listening in L2/FL classroom. In this way, Rost (2002) suggests a variety of listening strategies that can be applied for instructional activities as follows: (i) grouping-associating-elaborating, (ii) creating mental linkages, (iii) using imaginary semantic mapping, (iv) representing sounds in memory, (v) repeating, (vi) analyzing expressions, (vii) taking notes and summarizing, (viii) using progressive relaxation, deep breathing and meditation, (ix) listening to your body, and (x) using physical response or sensation.



Those sequent methods will provide ESL/EFL learners with insights into how to achieve listening tasks effectively.

Listening strategies used by native listeners seem more complicated for L2/FL listeners, so many strategies and instructional techniques in listening that are more appropriate have gradually been created by many scholars for L2/FL listeners. To examine if those strategies for non-native listeners are efficient, teachers must have a trial in their classroom.

Conclusion

As a whole, it is found that L2 and FL listeners have lower listening ability in the target language than L1 listeners due to different factors regarding the perception of listening. L2 and FL listeners have limited linguistic and global knowledge of the target language, so they spend too much time to perceiving speech sounds only. Moreover, L2 and FL listeners employ rote memory as well as linguistic, paralinguistic and extra-linguistic messages to interpret the spoken text while L1 listeners interpret it concept by concept. Furthermore, L2 and FL childhood listeners have less sufficient linguistic knowledge to communicate with adult speakers than L1 listeners do. Besides, different types of listening strategies seem to be automatically put to use by L1 listeners. Meanwhile, for L2 and FL listeners, these strategies need to be explicitly taught. In addition, there appears to be more perspectives of differences between L1 and L2/FL listeners than of similarities. However, this does not result in difficulty in enhancing listening comprehension among L2 and FL listeners. Their listening proficiency can be higher if they have been trained through an appropriate method. Therefore, this theoretical account on how first, second and foreign language listeners acquire spoken messages of the target language can be applied by

teachers and researchers in the ESL/EFL context for solving students' listening problems. For example, when planning a lesson and designing materials for listening activities, teachers should consider this theoretical concept in order to have better understanding of students' listening problems for further solution. Likewise, researchers of teaching and learning of listening skills should perceive this concept as a main literature review before designing instruments for, e.g., experimental research in order to measure the effectiveness of students' listening competence or to investigate particular factors affecting their listening performance, and to evaluate teachers' teaching method by a particular innovative method for listening. All in all, this concept will be practically useful if it is proved by other academicians to determine whether the four criteria used for comparing first, second and foreign language listeners in this paper can be an enduring concept of listening skills.

References

- Anderson, A. & Lynch, T. (1988). Listening. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, G. & Yule, G. (1999). Teaching the spoken language (12th ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Field, J. (1998). Skills and strategies: Towards a new methodology for listening. ELT Journal. 52 (2), 110-118.
- Harris, T. (2003). Listening with your eyes: The importance of speech related gestures in the language classroom. Foreign language annals. 36 (2), 180-187.
- L2 acquisition: The role of listening. (n.d.). Retrieved April 20, 2008 from <http://www.latcomm.com/articles/l2listeningacquisition.html>.
- Morley, J. (1984). Listening and language learning ESL: Developing self-study activities for listening comprehension. Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.



- Morley, J. (2001). Aural comprehension instruction: Principles and practices. In Marianne Celce-Murcia (Ed.), Teaching English as a second or foreign language (3rd ed.) (pp.69-85). Boston, MA: Heinle&Heinle.
- O'Melley, J.M., Chamot, A.U., & Kupper, L. (1995). Listening comprehension strategies in second language acquisition. In H. Douglas Brown & Susan Gonzo. (Eds.), Readings on second language acquisition (pp. 138-160). New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Peterson, P.W. (2001). Skills and strategies of proficient listening. In Marianne Celce-Murcia. (Ed.), Teaching English as a second or foreign language (3rd ed.) (pp.87-100). Boston, MA: Heinle&Heinle.
- Rost, M. (2002). Teaching and researching listening. London: Pearson Education.
- Vandergrift, L. (1999). Facilitating second language listening comprehension: Acquiring successful strategies. ELT Journal. 53 (3), 168-176.

