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English Listening Comprehension Difficulties of High and Low Proficiency Learners

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Abstract

Drawing on Anderson's three-phase model (1995), this study aimed to investigate the listening comprehension difficulties of first-year students enrolling at a southern university. Thirty participants were randomly selected from 1,750 students taking fundamental English courses; sixteen of them were classified as high proficiency listeners (HPLs) and 14 were classified as low proficiency listeners (LPLs). Data were collected from the participants who were required to individually listen to the aural input, completed the listening task, and took part in immediate stimulated recall to reveal his/her actual listening problems while engaging in the listening task. Major findings discovered two problems encountered by LPLs. The problems they had with perception was catching only certain words, and parsing was missing incoming information due to fixating on particular words. At utilization, the problem both HPLs and LPLs had at this level was confusing about key ideas in the messages. Reflected by their task scores, utilization was found the most problematic for LPLs. It is recommended that future studies investigate other variables that are likely to cause listening comprehension problems, such as various text types (lectures, conversations, advertisements) and delay recall tasks such as providing short answers or summarizing; these might reflect cognitive process and thus illustrate the depth of listening problems that listeners possess.

Keywords: Listening Comprehension Difficulties, L2 Listening Comprehension Process, Thai EFL Learners, High Proficiency Listeners, Low Proficiency Listeners

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ปัญหาในการฟังภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อความเข้าใจของผู้เรียนที่มีความสามารถทางภาษาสูงและผู้เรียนที่ด้อยความสามารถทางภาษา

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้ใช้กรอบแนวคิด Three-phase model ของ Anderson (1995) เพื่อเป็นแนวทางในการศึกษาปัญหาด้านการฟังภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 1 ของมหาวิทยาลัยแห่งหนึ่งในภาคใต้ โดยกลุ่มตัวอย่างของงานวิจัยนี้ประกอบไปด้วยนักศึกษาจำนวน 30 คน ซึ่งได้มาจากการสุ่มนักศึกษาจำนวน 1,750 คนที่ลงเรียนรายวิชาภาษาอังกฤษพื้นฐานและแบ่งออกเป็นผู้ที่มีความสามารถในการฟังสูง 16 คน และผู้ที่ด้อยความสามารถในการฟัง 14 คน การเก็บข้อมูลเก็บเป็นรายบุคคล โดยให้แต่ละคนฟังบทฟัง ทำชิ้นงานเพื่อตรวจสอบความเข้าใจและให้สัมภาษณ์การระลึกข้อมูลหลังการฟังทันที (Immediate stimulated recall) เพื่อสะท้อนปัญหาขณะฟังบทฟัง ผลการวิจัยพบว่ากลุ่มตัวอย่างที่ด้อยความสามารถในการฟังมีปัญหาในการฟัง 2 ระดับ ปัญหาระดับเสียง (Perception) คือ สามารถฟังภาษาอังกฤษออกเป็นบางคำเท่านั้น ปัญหาระดับคำ (Parsing) คือฟังข้อความที่ตามมาไม่รู้เรื่องเพราะจดจ่อกับการฟังแต่ละคำ ปัญหาระดับการตีความ (Utilization) นั้นเป็นปัญหาร่วมของกลุ่มตัวอย่างทั้งสอง ปัญหาที่พบคือมีความสับสนในการจับประเด็นสำคัญ ในขณะเดียวกัน คะแนนที่ได้จากการทำชิ้นงานสะท้อนว่ากลุ่มตัวอย่างที่ด้อยความสามารถในการฟังมีปัญหาระดับการตีความมากที่สุด ข้อแนะนำสำหรับงานวิจัยในอนาคตคือการศึกษาตัวแปรอื่น ๆ ที่อาจส่งผลต่อการฟังโดยให้ฟังบทฟังหลากหลายประเภท (Text types) เช่น การฟังบรรยาย การสนทนา และการฟังโฆษณา และทำชิ้นงานที่ต้องใช้ความสามารถในการรำลึกข้อมูล (Delay recall tasks) เช่นการตอบคำถามสั้น ๆ การสรุปความ ซึ่งสามารถสะท้อนกระบวนการคิดที่สื่อให้เห็นปัญหาการฟังในเชิงลึกได้

คำสำคัญ: ปัญหาในการฟังเพื่อความเข้าใจ กระบวนการฟังภาษาต่างประเทศ ผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษชาวไทย ผู้ที่มีความสามารถในการฟังสูง ผู้ที่ด้อยสามารถในการฟัง

Introduction

Listening is fundamental to language acquisition because it provides meaningful linguistic input for language learners to acquire other language skills, especially speaking (Feyton, 1991; Oxford, 1993). It is vital for learners to acquire listening skills so that they can understand and interact to their interlocutors without any language problems. (Rost, 2002; Anderson & Lynch, 2003; Vandergrift, 2007). Among the four language skills, listening is regarded as the most difficult skill to acquire and master (Chang & Read, 2006; Graham, 2006; Goh, 1999) because it involves a high degree of active mental processing that occurs recursively (Rost, 2002). To language learners, especially the unskilled, listening may sound like a passive activity in which they simply allow sounds to go through their ears. In fact, forming a mental representation of spoken texts is a complex process which demands learners' knowledge including phonetic, phonological, prosodic, lexical, syntactic, semantic as well as pragmatic (Lynch, 1998). What makes listening comprehension even more difficult is the transient nature of spoken texts as learners do not have sufficient time to process the sound streams they have heard and to link them with new ones (Sweller, Ayres & Kalyuga, 2011).

Over the years, a large body of literature has been conducted to investigate L2 learners' perception of their listening problems, using questionnaires as a data collection instrument. The problems the learners have encountered have centered around unfamiliar words, unfamiliar accents, difficult grammatical structures, too long spoken texts, and fast speed, speaker's accent, concentration and anxiety (Graham, 2006; Stæhr, 2008; Anandapong, 2011; Sriprom, 2011; Zhang & Zhang, 2011; Wattajarukiat, 2012; Chang, Wu & Pang, 2013; Chen, 2013; Tran & Duong, 2020). In addition, research that looked into language users' listening has also been carried out. For example, Julamonthol (2015) found that Thai workers in an international automotive company struggled with English slangs and idioms, speaker's speed of delivery, and poor vocabulary. Similar problems have been reported by passenger service officers working for the State Railway of Thailand (Tamtani, Tipayasuparat, & Chansmuch, 2019). Findings from these studies suggest that English listening is problematic to both language learners and users.

Despite the importance of English listening, teaching listening has been neglected in English language classrooms in many countries (Nunan, 1997). Even if listening is included in the curriculum, English teachers tend to test learners' listening ability rather than teaching listening comprehension (Osada, 2004). In Thailand, although it has been stipulated that communicative language teaching be practiced in English classrooms since primary education level, Thai English teachers still have been under the influence of grammar-based instruction (Foley, 2003). In addition, secondary English teachers are not comfortable with teaching listening to students (Noom-ura, 2013). Of equal importance, it is clearly seen that the communication environment in Thailand does not offer many opportunities to use English in a natural setting to the majority of Thai students (Sanpatchayapong, 2017).

At Prince of Songkla University (PSU), Hat Yai campus, an annual intake of first year students is approximately 4,200. As a general rule, PSU students are required to take 2 fundamental English courses out of 4 courses depending on their proficiency judged by O-NET scores. In other words, if their O-NET score is below 30, they have to take 890-001 (Essential English) as an audit course before being eligible to take the 2 fundamental courses. Student with the scores between 31- 50 can take 890-002 (Everyday English), while those who receive the scores between 51-70 will start at 890-003 (English on the go). If they obtain the scores above 71, they can start their first English course with 890-004 (English in the Digital World), followed by 890-005 (Academic English).

It is evident from examination results that a considerable number of students suffer listening comprehension test when they take the first compulsory English course (Everyday English) i.e. obtaining below 50 % of the listening test score (37.7% in the academic year 2013, 35% in 2014, and 50% in 2015). Such figures reflect quite a serious problem the students have regarding English listening. If listening comprehension problems still remains, they have to struggle when applying for a job because a large number of top companies often recruit new workers with a satisfactory English test score, preferably TOEIC test which contains a listening test. More importantly, being a citizen in a digital globalized society in the 21 century means that a person should be competent in both English listening and speaking (Suwannasit, 2018).

Consequently, teachers of listening should be well-informed as to what difficulties students face and under what circumstances they struggle with while listening so that teachers can design appropriate teaching materials and classroom activities for their students (Cotterall, 1999). Previous studies on listening comprehension problems have been explored quite extensively; however, they investigate students' perception in general. Only recently, researchers in listening area have examined students' difficulties from cognitive perspective using questionnaires (Tran & Duong, 2020). Instead of finding students' unobservable perception, some researchers have paid attention to actual listening problems students encounter while listening and collected verbal data through stimulated recall interviews (Goh, 2000). In addition, several listening text types have been included in previous studies such as lectures, conversations, and stories (Park, 2004; Zhang & Zhang, 2011; Al-Nouh & Abdul-Kareem, 2017), but the monologue containing everyday life topics are still under researched.

As revealed by the examination scores that PSU students with high O-NET scores have had little problems in English listening, we need to investigate actual problems that high and low proficiency students have. The research findings will be beneficial for teachers who teach low proficiency students. Moreover, the findings of the present study can be added in the listening literature especially in cognitive process area because students from different educational backgrounds might have different problems in English listening. Thus, the main objective of this study is to investigate the current situation at PSU, Hat Yai campus to specifically find out

English listening problems they have faced while engaging in a listening task.

Research questions

What listening comprehension difficulties do high and low proficiency listeners face while performing a listening task? Do they face the same or different problems? Which levels of cognitive process are problematic to them?

Research Framework

Listening comprehension: A cognitive process

Listening is a complex process involving various dimensions such as perception, cognition, and memory. To Vandergrift (2002), listening comprehension is an interactive process in which listeners form a mental representation of what they have heard using various types of knowledge ranging from speech sound, words, syntax and context. To do so, they must play an active role while engaging in listening activities.

Anderson's three-phase model (1995) has been proposed in order to describe L1 comprehension, and researchers such as Vandergrift (2007) Goh (2000) and Tran and Duong (2020). Goh (2000) have found that the model is also applicable to L2 since listening comprehension process employed by L1 listeners is found to be fundamentally similar to that by L2 listeners. The three phases consist of perception, parsing and utilization. **Perception**, operating at bottom-up processing, refers to the recognition of sound that listeners listen from phonemes to meaningful utterances such as words. The information is retained in the working–memory for meaningful processing before being replaced by incoming information. For example, listeners try to recognize the phonemes they hear. **Parsing,** the second stage also operating at the bottom-up level, involves the segmentation of the perceived sound streams which are turned into meaningful unit by matching the information in listeners' short-term memory with their long-term memory. Meaning is the fundamental clue at this stage; for example, listeners listen to the sound 'fla**ʊə**(r)' and match it with their existing knowledge as 'flower' or 'flour'. The last process functioning at the top-down level is **utilization.** It involves building a mental representation of the information retained during the perception and parsing stages. At utilization stage, listeners link the information to the existing knowledge in their long-term memory; for instance, they can understand the intended meaning of a speaker. Comprehension concurrently and recursively occur at all three stages. To illustrate, when a listener watches a video and hears 'pass me the fla**ʊə**(r)'. At parsing stage, a combination of phonemes 'fla**ʊə**(r)' can be formed either as 'flower' or 'flour'. Then he sees a girl handing her mother a small bag. From the context and the existing knowledge, in utilization stage, he has that flowers are not put in bags, he understands instantly that the word 'fla**ʊə**(r)' he has heard is 'flour'.

Listening comprehension difficulties

Previous studies on listening comprehension problems can be classified into two main groups: those investigating L2 listeners' perception towards listening in general, and those using tests/tasks to elicit listening problems. Various problems have been found.

Firstly, vocabulary seems to be the common listening comprehension problem of university students. Hasan (2000), for instance, discovered that Arabic students found severe problems with vocabulary and grammatical structure. They also felt that long spoken texts as well as texts with conversational style were difficult to understand.

Two correlational studies looking at the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and listening comprehension were conducted. Bonk (2000) investigated the correlation between lexical knowledge and listening comprehension ability of Japanese students majoring in English and found a correlation between correlation between dictation score and comprehension levels. In 2008, Stæhr examined the correlation between vocabulary breadth and depth and listening comprehension of 115 advanced EFL first-year university students in Denmark. The results showed a strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and listening comprehension, suggesting that advanced listeners might need to know 5000 -word families to successfully comprehend spoken input.

In 2013, Chen investigated listening problems and changes in patterns of strategies use among EFL Taiwanese students taking English listening practice course. Three major problems frequently reported by the participants were vocabulary, speed of text delivery, failing to understand the next part when thinking about meaning.

Apart from vocabulary problems, global and local listening comprehension is also of researchers' interest. In 2004, Park examined whether linguistic knowledge, background knowledge and question types contributed to English listening and reading comprehension of Korean university students studying English conversation. The results revealed that the participants obtained higher scores for global or inferential questions than local or factual questions in the listening test. It was also found that background knowledge significantly contributed to listening comprehension than reading comprehension. The interaction between linguistic knowledge and background knowledge resulted in significant listening comprehension, but not in reading comprehension. Becker, in 2016, discovered that ESL university students taking academic English programs perceived that questions measuring local comprehension skills were easiest for all groups, followed by global questions requiring propositional inferencing skills, and questions aiming for pragmatics inferences.

Other factors impeding listening comprehension have also been identified. For instance, Zhang and Zhang (2011) had EFL Chinese students listen to three listening passages and respond to a questionnaire. The results found four listening comprehension factors; meaning, attention and memory, words and sounds. The first factor (meaning) included being unable to comprehend intended messages, key ideas, and words that had more than one meaning. The second factor (attention and memory) concerned forgetting messages quickly, neglecting next parts when thinking about meaning of previous messages, and failing to chunk stream of speech. The third factor (words) subsumed being unable to recognize words, and the fourth factor (sounds) included failing to discriminate sound due to fast speech rates, accents and assimilation. In 2013, Chang, Wu and Pang collected data from Taiwanese students with low-level listening ability. It was found that 73% of the

participants felt that English listening was difficult. Six factors hindering their listening comprehension were text, input channel and surroundings, relevance, listener, speaker, and task respectively. Five out six were external (text, input channel and surroundings, relevance, speaker, and task).

In 2017, Al-Nouh and Abdul-Kareem investigated students' perception towards the difficulties they faced while listening to academic lectures. The questionnaire respondents were 365 female students enrolled in an education program at the college of Basic Education in Kuwait. The results revealed that students had problems with vocabulary knowledge, speech rate, and inability of process information at once.

In Thailand, four studies investigating listening problems of university students from different disciplines were found. Chonprakay (2009) examined English listening problems of engineering students at a university in Bangkok. Questionnaires were distributed to 118 students. The results showed that the students had problems at phonemic level. They also had difficulties grasping main ideas, finding specific details, and making inferences.

In 2011, Anandapong investigated listening comprehension problems among 30 fourth-year business students from a university in Bangkok. The participants were asked to complete a questionnaire, do the IELTS listening test, and participate in interviews. The results revealed that slang and idioms expressions, unfamiliar vocabulary, discourse markers were problematic for them.

Sriprom (2011) distributed a questionnaire to 165 university students studying ICT. The questionnaire consisted of four sections: problems related to listening text, speaker, listener and physical setting. The study found that slang and idiom expressions, unfamiliar vocabulary, grammatical structure, unfamiliar situation, and interpretation were identified as their listening difficulties. In addition, the speed of the message, reduced form of language use, discourse markers (speaker), lack of listening strategies and skills, poor English knowledge and classroom condition.

Wattajarukiat (2012) surveyed the listening difficulties of 146 undergraduate English major students from different universities in southern Thailand. Participants were divided into high and low proficiency groups based on scores from an adapted IELTS practice test. The findings revealed that both groups of students encountered similar listening comprehension problems i.e. failing to grasp main ideas, having poor linguistic knowledge, and failing to understand lectures. High English proficiency students, however, less frequently encountered such problems.

There are two studies investigating listening problems from the point of view of English language users. Julamonthol (2015) examined the listening comprehension problems of 132 employees working for an international automotive company in Thailand. The results of the questionnaire analysis demonstrated that the respondents had difficulties with slang and idioms, speed of speech delivery, vocabulary, and noise from outside. In 2019, Tamtani et al. (2019) studied English listening problems of passenger service officers at the State Railway of Thailand working in all provincial offices. The majority of the questionnaire respondents had problems with speed of speech delivery and unfamiliar words. They also had problems dealing with travel information.

In an attempt to investigate Thai university students' listening comprehension problems, Cubalit (2016) had Business Administration students listen to two fifteen-minute video clips and responded to a questionnaire requiring them to reflect on their listening problems in three areas: the listening input, the speakers, and listeners themselves. Concerning the listening input, the participants reported that the most difficult problems were unfamiliar vocabulary and complex grammatical structure. As for problems caused by speakers, the highest percentage of the participants struggled with their fast speech rates, accents, discourse markers, reduced form of speech, and speakers' body language. Four problems regarding listeners themselves included limited time for listening, inadequate listening strategies, lack of background knowledge, and fixating on details.

Grounded on Anderson's three-phase model, two recent studies have been undertaken to investigate Asian students' listening comprehension problems (Tran & Duong, 2020; Goh, 2000). It was discovered by Goh (2000) that ESL/EFL university learners faced 10 problems at all three phases and that less–skilled students' problems were centered around perception and parsing stages. Difficulties at perception level were problems with recognizing words, ignoring incoming utterances while paying attention to the meaning of previous information, segmenting sound streams, and paying attention on every single word. Problems at parsing stage included failing to maintain the information in their short-term memory to form a mental representation from words they heard and being unable to understand the beginning of the passage. For utilization stage, they had problems with understanding the intended meaning of propositions, and with grasping the key ideas in the message.

In 2020, Tran and Duong investigated listening comprehension problems perceived by Vietnamese high school students and EFL teachers. Both teachers and students agreed on the problems that the students faced. Difficulties at perception were failing to recognize familiar words, to maintain concentration, and coping with fast speech rates). Major problems found at parsing included being unable to chunk long utterances, not knowing word meaning, and having insufficient ability to automatically decode meaning of incoming sound streams. The major problem at utilization was being unable to grasp intended messages despite knowing word meaning.

Methodology

1. Research design: This paper was part of the project undertaken to investigate the participants' listening problems and strategy use. Data were collected with 312 participants using a questionnaire and 30 participants taking part in immediate stimulated recall interviews. Only data concerned listening comprehension problems obtained from immediate stimulated recalls were reported in this paper.

2. Participants: Out of the population of 4,200 of the first year students in the academic year 2018, there were 1,750 students (1300 students from 890-002 and 450 students from 890-004. Based on Krecie and Morgan (1970) sampling, only 315 students participated in the main study where data were collected from a questionnaire. Using proportional technique, the participants consisted

of 208 LPLs and 107 HPLs respectively. However, to guard against data loss from data cleaning process in order to achieve the reliability of data, 20% of participants were used. As a result, there were 212 LPLs and 109 HPLs, totaling 321 students. For the participants who took part in the stimulated recalls, usually around 5-10 participants take part in verbal protocol. Berne (2004) suggested a large number of participants so as to obtain rich qualitative data. As a result, 16 were randomly selected from the HPLs group and 14 from the LPLs group, totaling 30. To ensure that the students in the two groups were different in terms of their proficiency, Independent-samples Mann-Whitney U test was performed due to the difference in sample size. The comparison of the mean scores of listening comprehension task showed that the mean task scores between the two groups (HPLs = 6.77, and LPLs =3.23) were significantly different ($P<0.05$).

Out of 16 HPLs, there were 6 males and 10 females; 6 from the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Science, **6 from the Faculty of Liberal Arts, 2** from the Faculty of Management Science, 1 from the Faculty of Law, and the other 1 from the Faculty of Thai Traditional Medicine.

As for the 14 LPLs, there were 2 males and 12 females; 4 from the Faculty of Science, 4 from the Faculty of Nursing, 3 from the Faculty of Natural Resources, and the other 3 from the Faculty of Management Science.

3. Instruments: Two types of instruments were employed: listening comprehension task and immediate stimulated recalls.

3.1. Listening comprehension task: The purpose of using the task was to obtain the students' listening performance to give insights into stimulated recall data. The listening input was chosen because it resembled the text type to which university students are exposed. Moreover, the text type chosen was different from previous studies that asked participants to listen to lectures, conversations, and stories (Al-Nouh & Abdul-Kareem, 2017). The participants were required to listen to an oral input in a form of monologue to complete a gap-filling task containing thirteen gaps: seven gaps were about listening for specific details and the remaining six gaps focused on drawing inferences. The input on "How to get healthy" was taken from a commercial course book "Speak out 2" (Clare & Wilson, 2015). The monologue was supposedly given by a female health expert who talked about how one can be healthy and later provided a case of a man (Martin aged 60) who had health problems. She suggested how his health could be improved. The listening passage contained 173 words and was 1.09-minute long, an appropriate speech rate for non-native listeners (Zhao, 1997).

Only one listening task was used in this study because the nature of the listening text represented the theme of the current course book. Although it is true that various tasks should be employed to cover a wide range of listening tasks (Buck, 2001), it is quite demanding for the participants to both complete the listening as well as to take part in the stimulated recall interview. Once the participants were overwhelmed with the daunting task (Vandergrift and Goh, 2012), their willingness to participate would deteriorate which will in turn result in the quality of data they were about to provide.

3.2. Immediate stimulated recall protocols: Stimulated recall protocols were a retrospective verbal report in which the participants were interviewed to verbalize their thoughts or mental activities immediately after finishing task. Because the participants' mental acts were still in their working memories, the information provided was richer when compared to that obtained from the questionnaire (Bowles, 2010). It was conducted after the participants completed the task because the participants' thoughts were not interfered by the protocols. Unlike concurrent think-aloud protocols, stimulated recalls did not require any participant training because video clips recorded while they were performing the task were used as stimuli to assist them recall their thoughts and provide credible and reliable accounts on the matters in response to the interview questions (Bowles, 2010).

Prior to data collection, to ensure the reliability and construct validity of the listening task and stimulated recall protocol, both instruments were given to two EFL experts who have had about 10 years of experience in teaching, assessing, and 2 years in conducting research in English listening. A few questions on the task and the stimulated recall were revised accordingly. Subsequently, the listening task was piloted with 45 first year students with similar English proficiency. Also, stimulated recall protocol was tried out with 4 first year students to find out whether the interview questions to be used during the stimulated recalls would elicit the information as required and whether the time spent would be appropriate. A few interview questions were reworded as a result.

3.3. Data collection procedures. Firstly, the researcher contacted individual participants to invite them to take part in the stimulated recall and to ask for their availability in advance. They were also informed about the purpose of the current research and the steps they had to follow. They then gave consent to take part and to be video-recorded (using a researcher's smartphone) while performing the task. Secondly, on the day the data collection took place, the researcher arranged the interview in a private office without any interference from outside and spent a few minutes to ask for the participant's biodata and to make him feel at ease. Next, the researcher gave the participant a task sheet and informed him that he had a full control over the listening to pause or replay the audio. After that, the participant started doing the task and the researcher took notes throughout the entire process. Once finished, the participant was presented with the video clip and answered the interview questions, for instance, "*How do you understand the listening passage?*", "*Please watch the video clip and tell me why you paused/replayed the listening over and over again*", "*Why is this part difficult for you?*" or "*What's on your mind while listening to this particular part?*". Each interview session recall lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and was audio-recorded to produce verbatim transcription.

3.4. Data analysis: To answer all research questions, all the participants' answers on the task sheets were marked as right or wrong. The answers were used to distinguish low and high proficiency participants and to be a point of reference and comparison with the interview data from stimulated recalls.

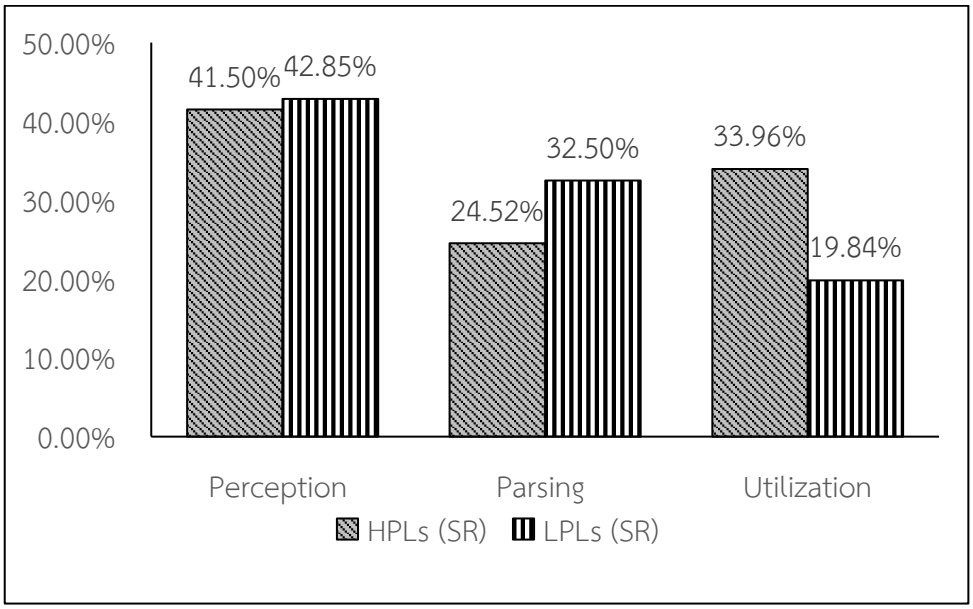
The recalls were first transcribed verbatim and analyzed using key words associated with each phase of Anderson's three phase model. For instance, "*could not catch the words*", "*didn't hear the words*", or "*accents were difficult*" reflected problems at perception level. Examples of key words related to parsing were "*don't know the meaning of most words*", "*couldn't make meaning out of it*", or "*guessed the meaning*". Problems at utilization can be detected by words such as "*I'm confused*" or "*not sure if it* (the listening) *was about*". Inter-coder reliability was established by comparing the problem coding results of three coders (two researchers and an invited rater who was familiar with analyzing verbal data) who analyzed 25% (7 out of 30) of the transcriptions (Mackay & Gass, 2005). This coding process yielded an inter-coder reliability percentage of 82%. Through discussion and re-analysis, disagreements over 12% were resolved. Once clear with the taxonomy, only two researchers coded the remaining 23 transcriptions independently. The inter-coder reliability was increased to 95%. Disagreements over 5% were resolved through discussions.

Research Findings

The first research question aimed to investigate listening comprehension difficulties HPLS and LPLs faced while performing a listening task. To answer this question, all the participants' transcriptions of the two groups were first analysed for problems, categorized into perception, parsing, and utilization, and calculated for percentages. Then, the transcriptions under HPLS and LPLs were sorted out into three problems and calculated for percentages. Figure 1 presents the percentages of participants who reported their listening comprehension problems.

Figure 1

Participants' listening comprehension problems



Overall, Figure 1 reveals that below half of them faced problems while performing the listening comprehension task. Almost the same percentage of HPLs (41.50%) and LPLs (42.85%) reported that task items at perception level were difficult. HPLs, however, reported that they faced more problems at utilization than parsing level (33.96% and 24.52% respectively). On the contrary, 32.50% of LPLs said that they had more difficulties responding to items at parsing level while only 19.84% faced problems at utilization level.

To answer the research question on whether HPLs and LPLs faced the same or different problems, a further scrutiny on stimulated recall data as to how both groups of participants processed the listening task illustrates 10 problems at perception, 6 at parsing, and 4 at utilization level with the frequencies range from 1 to 13. To save spaces, only the problems reported by more than half of the participants in one or both groups will be presented, resulting in seven problems, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Specific problems classified by levels of cognitive processing

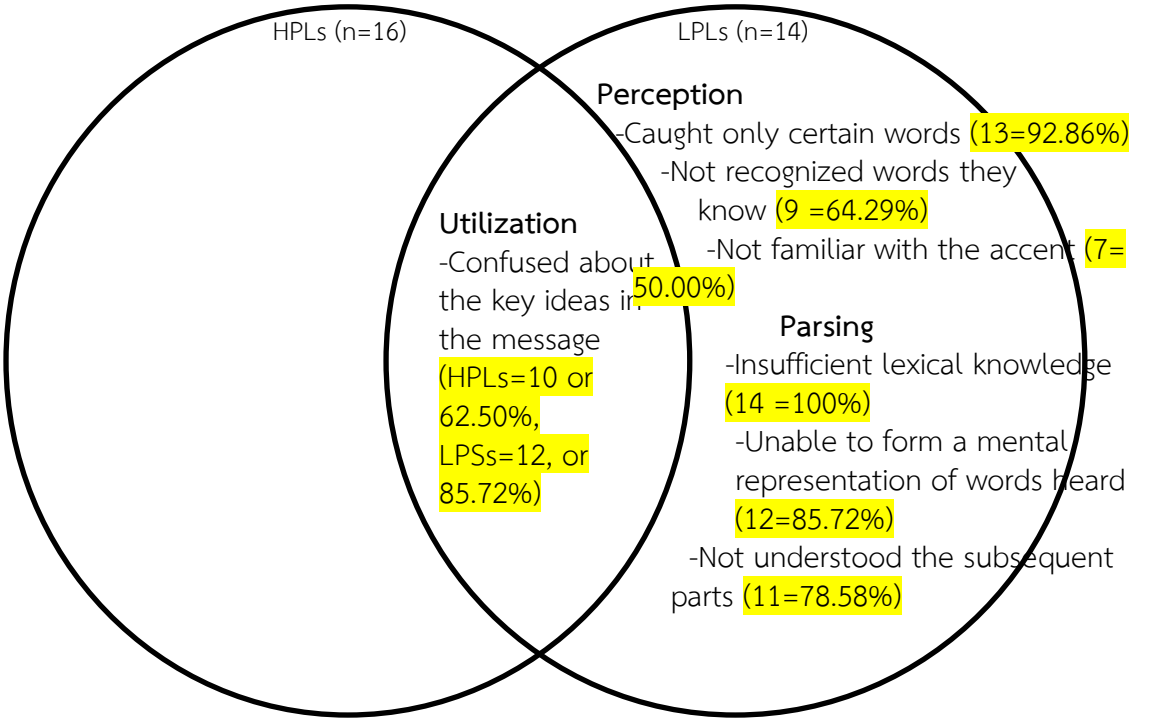


Figure 2 unfolds seven specific problems at each cognitive processing level reported by HPLs and LPLs: three at perception, three at parsing, and one at utilization. Apparently, only LPLs experienced difficulties at all three cognitive processing levels while their counterparts faced problems only at utilization level. To illustrate, 13 (92.86%) LPLs faced problems at the lowest cognitive processing level

(perception). Tang said "*No clues whatsoever. I tried to catch the words I know, but I couldn't*". Another evidence was from Sasi "*Well, I had to stop to recognize words, and noted down only the one I'm sure of*". Being unable to recognize words they know was found problematic by 9 (64.29%) of them. Sasha mentioned "*I didn't hear words about eating although it was about eating*". Accents were also found foreign to 7 (50.00%) LPLs, as evidenced by Earn's remark: "*The accent sounded unfamiliar. It was like … when I studied with my Thai teachers, they spoke with different accents*". Similar opinion was also found in Tanya who shared "Difficult? Accent is difficult for me because the way I pronounce is different form the way the speaker in the audio pronounces. So, when, I listened, I have no idea".

At parsing level, all of LPLs (14 = 100%) reported on having insufficient lexical knowledge. An, for instance, shared that: "*I have poor vocabulary knowledge. I think that the most serious problem I have …while listening is vocabulary. If you don't know word meaning, you can't make sense of the listening text…I think".* Tang offered a similar reason: "*I'm still…confused by the listening text…. I don't quite understand it. I don't know the meaning of most words. I think I got about 50%-60% of it, but when you (the researcher) clarified it with me, I was all wrong".* Most of them (12 = 85.72%) were unable to form a mental representation of what was heard. Odd shared that "*I got what the speaker said but couldn't make meaning out of it".* The other problematic area at parsing level was failing to understand the subsequent part, which was reported by 11 (78.58%) of them. To support this, May said "*I think I'm ok with the task. I could make sense of it. But towards the end of the listening text, I gave up. I had to guess. I really had no idea".* Another obvious evidence was given by Odd who reported "*I was trying to catch the first few sentences of the text…like the speaker tried to give the main idea…so that I had something to begin with. Like this text…the beginning I don't understand…so the following part I can't continue*".

At the level where highest cognitive processing is required-utilization, the common problem experienced by both groups was "confused about the key ideas in the message" with much higher percentages of LPLs (85.72%) than HPLs (62.50%). Klein, one of HPLs, shared that "*Well, eventually is it about the lifestyle that one should adopt or about the lifestyle of a particular person? I'm confused, so I had to listen again"* while Fah shared that "*I don't know….I have a feeling that I still don't understand the text. I can't find the important message*."

Bah from LPLs group showed her confusion that "*Not sure if it was about "he should" or "we should" plus "it makes they make strong. Their or they".* Han also greed that figuring out the key message was difficult for him, as reflected in part of his answer "*I think I understand the text. But from what you* (the interviewer) *told me, my understanding was totally different*".

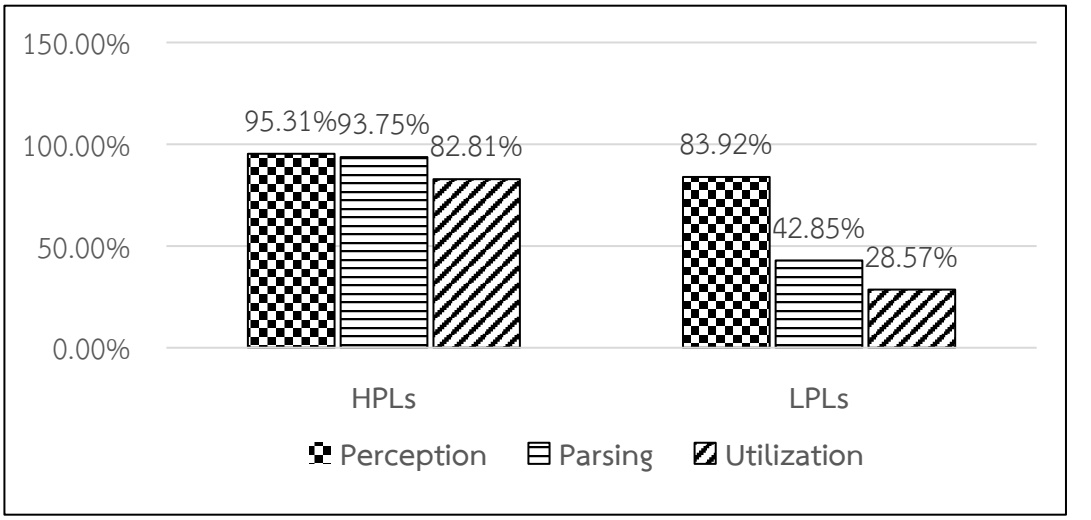
As shown above, both HPLs and LPLs encountered with one problem at utilization. To find the answer the research question on the level of cognitive process that were problematic to both groups of the participants, the task scores of each level were calculated

for percentages. The results shown in Figure 3 indicate the opposite.

Generally, the emerging pattern in Figure 3 clearly demonstrates that the more sophisticated the task demand was, the lower percentage of scores both groups of the participants obtained. However, the high percentage of the scores of all three levels indicated that HPLs did not encounter much listening comprehension difficulties. On the contrary, despite repeated listening, LPLs still faced problems at parsing level (42.85%) and much serious problems at utilization (only 28.57% obtained).

Figure 3

Comparison of HPLs and LPLs' task scores



In sum, the results obtained from stimulated recalls revealed that LPLs struggled with the task at all three cognitive processing levels while HPLs found questions at utilization level problematic. As reflected by the task score, HPLs faced no comprehension problems at all whereas their counterparts faced severe problems at utilization.

Discussion

Possible reasons of poor listening comprehension: Linguistic proficiency and interaction between input and task factors

The findings of this study suggest that low proficiency listeners struggled with problems at perception, parsing and utilization. In particular, difficulties related to perception are unfamiliar accents and vocabulary which in turn lead to problems at parsing (unable to form mental representation and understand subsequent messages). The problem both HPLs and LPLs encountered at utilization level was confusing about key ideas in the message. The problems of the participants in this study are consistent with those of Goh (2000) and Tran and Duong (2020).

By and large, it can be argued that poor language proficiency, listening text, speaker and task factors could have caused problems to the participants, particularly LPLs while attempting the listening task.

According to Chang, Wu and Pang (2013), six factors were negatively affected listeners' comprehension performance including one learner factor (anxiety and fatigue) and five external factors (text, input channel, surroundings, relevance, speaker, and task). Findings of the current study found three problematic areas i.e. text types, speakers and tasks.

Poor language proficiency could have posed listening comprehension problems to the participants as it has been found in previous literature (Tran & Duong, 2020; Chao, 2013; Chen, 2013; Zhang & Zhang, 2011; Stæhr, 2008; Goh, 2000; Hasan, 2000) that listeners with limited proficiency, especially vocabulary, do not have sufficient linguistic resources to reconstruct meaning from oral input.

We used Vocabulary Profiler analysis on the Compleat Lexical Tutor website (Cobb, n.d.) to analyse the level of vocabulary difficulty of the spoken input used in this study. It was found that the text was 175 words long and contained 93.75% K1 words or the first one-thousand common words), 3.41% K2 words (combination, health, healthy, meat, weight, cooking), 1.14% AWL words (affect, cycling), and 1.70% Off-List words (lifestyle, TV, diet). This indicates a low level of difficulty present in the spoken input, and yet LPLs still struggled with vocabulary no matter how many times they listened to problematic words. This finding is in accordance with the study undertaken by Brown, Waring, and Donkaewbua (2008) which found that even when poor listeners heard a particular word 15 to 20 times from listening-only mode, they obtained only 2% (0.56) of the 28 target words learned over the course of three months, compared with 15% from reading-only mode, and 16% from reading-while-listening mode. The findings of the current study confirmed that poor vocabulary knowledge is still problematic among Thai learners (Anandapong, 2011; Sriprom, 2011; Wattajarukiat, 2012; Julamonthol, 2015; Tamtani et al. 2019).

Let us now turn to text type and task factors which might have posed comprehension problems at utilization to both HPLs and LPLs. A few possible reasons can be offered. The specific problem that both groups of the participants shared was that they were "*Confused about the key ideas in the message*". On reviewing immediate stimulated recall data, it was discovered that text type and task factor could account for such problems; each will be discussed in turn.

The text type provided in this study was in a form of a scripted monologue. Many researchers have discovered that the nature of scripted monologues such as connected speech, accents, transient information are difficult for non-native listeners (Tran & Duong, 2020; Chang, Wu & Pang, 2013; Zhang & Zhang, 2011; Goh, 2000; Bonk, 2000). Moreover, when scripted monologues are usually grammatically complex and less redundant. They also contain fewer or no pauses and fillers—the characteristics that benefited listeners because they have added time for information processing.

The input content could also negatively affect the research participants' comprehension ability. Although topic familiarity and common vocabulary were chosen to ease their listening comprehension, the organization of the input content was found confusing to both groups of participants. They had to listen to the spoken input many times to solve the problems;

however, only HPLs could. To illustrate, the passage is on how to be healthy. The first half of the passage was quite straightforward, using common keywords such as exercise, enough sleep and lifestyle. Among these, the words that posed the problem are "right diet". To most participants, their knowledge of this word is limited to one meaning, which is "eating less food in order to lose weight". However, the participants still could use their background knowledge to construct textual meaning around "eating". The confusion started in the second half when each suggestion was elaborated through a case of someone with health problems.

The elaboration loaded with information provided in continuous lecture style coupled with the transient nature of the oral input did not allow time for them to form a mental representation. Without such conversational elements as pauses, repetition, asking for confirmation, the participants were facing problems of cognitive overload, resulting in not knowing whether the passage was about suggestions to the general public or to a particular person (Martin). In fact, the researchers had taken the notion of cognitive overload into account when designing the task. According to Chang, Wu and Pang (2013) and Hasan (2000), visual support can aid listening comprehension. Consequently, to avoid cognitive overload and to facilitate learners' understanding, we provided them questions to preview before listening, and questions accompanied by a picture of a group of people jogging. Next to the picture is the instruction which clearly tells them what to do; it even provides the main idea of the passage and to help activate their background knowledge. That is "*Read the notes on the health of three people. Listen to a health expert saying how one of the three can improve their health"*.

However, what happened was that most LPLs ignored the instructions; they started tackling the task by simultaneously listening to the oral input and reading the questions. They did so in order to match the words they heard with the words they saw on the task sheet. With poor linguistic knowledge to rely on, they could not process the incoming sound stream fast enough and consequently were unable to form a mental representation of the spoken input and as a result being unable to grasp main idea of the input. This finding is in accordance with the studies carried out by Wattajarukiat (2012) and Chonprakay (2009). It can be also argued that LPLs were not properly equipped with listening comprehension strategies (Goh, 2000; Cubalit, 2016; Tran & Duong, 2020).

For task factors, the task consisted of two parts. The first part contained one global comprehension question in which the participants had to draw an inference from information provided in three choices. The second part, a gap-filling task, consisted of 12 items arranged in mixed order between word level and global level. Among these, eight of them required the participants to fill in the gaps with specific details, and the other four gaps required them to use world knowledge to infer and summarize the information. Obviously, it was the task type that was unfamiliar to LPLs. In addition, previous literature such as Park's (2004) discovered that listeners with poor linguistic knowledge tended to operate at top-down processing to comprehend continuous speech by relying on world knowledge and topic

familiarity to facilitate their comprehension. Being familiar with the topic, LPLs used their world knowledge based partially on the oral input and mainly on their imagination to reconstruct the textual meaning. This finding is consistent with Joyce (2019) who found that low proficiency listeners either build erroneous meaning from their background knowledge or ignored it completely. Previous studies have found that learners performed multiple-choice tasks better than other task types, especially the delay recall task or summarization (Chang, Wu, & Pang, 2013; Jensen & Hensen, 1995). In contrast, HPLs could cognitively cope with making inferences and summarizing, as stated by one student that "*I had tutoring sessions with a foreign teacher before, so I got used to it. And this type of questions is not taught in normal English class. We are taught to do simple gap-filling. You put the word you have heard. That's it.*"

Implications

This study investigated first year university students' problems while engaging in a listening task. The findings revealed that low proficiency listeners struggled with problems at perception, parsing and utilization. In particular, difficulties related to perception are unfamiliar vocabulary, and the problems at parsing level were being unable to understand subsequent messages. Finally, the problem that both high and low proficiency listeners encountered at utilization level was confusing about key ideas in the message.

As clearly seen from the findings, the problems faced by the participants were outside their control. Some pedagogical implications can be recommended. Firstly, students' vocabulary repertoire should be enlarged as much as possible through various activities. For instance, teachers may pre-teach unfamiliar vocabulary before listening activity, and check their understanding after listening or encourage them to use clues from given contexts to discover the meaning of unfamiliar words. Nowadays, online vocabulary exercises are ubiquitous. Internet can be used as a useful educational platform for in-class and out-of-class learning.

Listening activities that draw on high-cognitive processing should be included in class. Listening class time should also be devoted to teaching students to make use of their background knowledge, make inferences, and provide a summary of listening input. For beginners or incompetent students, reading while listening activities will more likely to be beneficial for them than listening only. In other words, students will be more motivated to listen if they can read listening scripts while listening so that they can match the sounds they with the scripts they see.

Apart from learning to listen as suggested above, learning how to listen has been proven crucial for listening effectively. Listening comprehension strategies such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating should be introduced in class, especially to incompetent listeners. More importantly, they should not be introduced once and for all, but rather practiced regularly in listening class.

Areas of Future Research

In spite of the aforementioned contributions, there remain a few limitations of the study. First, only one spoken text and therefore one text type was used to elicit the participants' listening comprehension problems.

The findings would be more useful if more than one text and one text type had been employed to cover more variables such as speaker's accent, monologue as against conversation, lecture as advertisements, and familiar as against unfamiliar topics. Finally, task types demanding different level of cognitive process are well worth comparing. It is, therefore, highly recommended that these issues be further investigated in future studies in order to assist students to learn how to listen more effectively

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