

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

With globalization and the rapid expansion of information technologies has come an explosion in the demand for English worldwide. This has led to greater diversification in the contexts and situations in which it is learned and used as well as in the nature of the language itself. It has also provided many more opportunities for learners to use the language for authentic communication. English no longer belongs to Britain or to the United States. It is an increasingly diverse and diversified resource for global communication for people all around the world. (Nunan, 1999, p. 1)

For people from many countries namely Brazil, Japan, Korea, South America, Libya and China, English is neither used widely for communication nor as the medium of instruction. However, with the acceleration of globalization and the growth of technology, trade and commerce, English is fast gaining a place in the lives of many people in the countries mentioned earlier. As a result of these trends, many people from countries where English is not spoken widely are willing to venture to foreign countries to pursue the study of English through foreign language courses offered by various educational institutions.

Private educational institutions in Malaysia are increasingly offering English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses as people from around the globe are beginning to recognise this country as a regional centre of education. Many institutions especially

private colleges have been taking measures to promote Malaysian education overseas in line with the Education Ministry's policy to establish Malaysia as a regional hub for academic excellence (New Straits Times, Dec. 29, 1998). According to the Immigration Department's statistics, the number of foreign students in the country, increased significantly from 5,635 in 1986 to 9,075 in 1997. Up to October 1998, there were 11,733 foreign students pursuing higher studies in the country (Business Times, Dec. 24, 1998). Foreign students from non-English speaking countries who study in Malaysia, often have to enrol for English language courses before continuing their studies at tertiary level. The English Language Centre, in which this study is located, is an example of a private educational institution which caters to the English language needs of these students.

In order for institutions such as this to provide quality English language teaching, we need to understand the key elements of teaching English as a Foreign Language to non-native speakers. As such a review of literature on these fundamental elements of EFL is essential. Nasr (1969) proposes that the basic elements for an EFL course are pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar and when teaching a foreign language, these elements can be taught through the development of four main skills namely listening, reading, speaking and writing.

Until recently listening comprehension attracted the least attention of the four skills and suffered neglect in most foreign language programmes (Paulston and Bruder 1976, Rivers 1981, Krashen, Terrell, Ehrman and Herzog 1984). Researchers believe that this neglect may have stemmed from the fact that listening was considered a passive skill and the belief that merely exposing the student to that spoken language was adequate instruction in listening comprehension. For example, Lim (1979) reports,

"Listening is usually taken for granted as a skill that need not be taught because it appears that it is a decoding process similar to that of reading." (p.1) Chien and Li (1998) state that since listening cannot be observed and people can listen in their mother-tongue with little effort, most of us take listening for granted.

Richards (1983) and Rubin (1995) however, feel that the listening skill is very much an active process because it involves selecting and interpreting information from auditory and visual clues. Hernon & Seay (1991) feel that stressing the listening skill is important in today's proficiency-oriented classrooms as students are increasingly expected to interact and communicate with native and near-native speakers. Rivers (1981) too perceives the listening skill as very crucial because through the normal course of a day, listening is used twice as much as speaking and four to five times as reading and writing. As such, Morley (1990) state,

Advocates of comprehension suggest that foreign language learners should begin with an extended period of listening prior to oral work in the classroom. In the last two decades, the listening skill has been accorded the attention that it deserves, thanks to theorists who have resparked the notion that the listening skill is fundamental in the learning of English (pp. 317-337).

The Study

As a teacher of English as a Foreign Language, I believe that developing good listening skills is important for non-native learners of English and thus, I decided to help my students in an intermediate level class to develop their listening skills. The classroom vignette below from one of my listening lessons reveals typical features of a teaching-learning situation when foreign learners have to deal with audio-texts.

A deep voice breaks the silence in the classroom. "The American family has changed a great deal in the last twenty years", he says. His good command of English and his American accent gives no doubt that he is a native speaker of the English language. There is an interruption. A student requests that the volume of the cassette player be turned down as the loud voice is hurting his ears. The volume is adjusted. Some students are seen scribbling occasionally as they listen. Some seem to be deep in concentration but have stopped writing. A few seem to be staring into space with inscrutable expressions. The male voice ends his speech with a "Thank You". I ask my students how they found the audio-text. They sigh. Many of them seem exasperated.

(Personal journal entries, 3/12/99)

The responses I received from my students were disturbing. I realised that merely providing listening activities as part of an English course would not make students effective listeners. The learning experience had to be scaffolded and students must be taught appropriate techniques so that they could comprehend audio-texts effectively. This is necessary as information drawn from the audio-texts often form the basis for speaking and writing tasks which follow.

Statement of the Problem

This study focuses on an EFL intermediate level class of twelve students in a private International English language Centre. Early in my teaching of this EFL intermediate Level 105 class, I was able to conclude that my students faced great difficulty in comprehending listening tasks and in taking down notes or information as required in the tasks given. Hence, I attempt to discover the nature of the problems these students faced in comprehending audio-texts and also in taking down the relevant

information from these texts. These problems will be examined in terms of the following elements: the teaching activities, the learning activities and the materials used. I will also explore the effects of the teaching-learning strategies employed to help students develop their listening comprehension and note-taking skills.

Research Questions

This piece of action research was driven by the need to diagnose the problems that students of English as a Foreign Language face in developing better listening skills. As a teacher, I felt that it was essential to scaffold the learning experiences through various strategies so that a satisfactory level of development could be attained. This study therefore, probed the following questions :

- a) What are the problems EFL students encounter in comprehending audio-texts?
- b) Why do EFL students face difficulty in taking down notes or information from audio-texts?
- c) What are the effective teaching-learning strategies which will help students' develop listening comprehension and note-taking skills?

Significance of the Study

In line with the development of Malaysia as an international centre for private higher education, the then Education Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, stated that several measures had been taken to draw more foreign students to our country. These measures included education promotion missions and simplifying immigration procedures. As a result of this, the number of foreign students in Malaysia increased from 5,635 in 1996 to 11,733 in 1998. The minister expressed his wish to continue with efforts to draw more foreign students to further their studies in Malaysia so that

there would be thirty thousand foreign students in the country in two years time. (New Straits Times, Feb. 11, 1999). With the increasing number of foreign students in the country, the importance of teaching English as a Foreign Language is unquestionable.

Seventy two percent of foreign students are studying in private institutions of higher learning and a majority of the rest are at International Islamic University. (New Straits Times, Feb. 11, 1999). The medium of instruction of the courses offered in these institutions is English. Many of these foreign students who face difficulty in coping with English as the medium of instruction pursue English as a Foreign Language course first to improve their proficiency of this language. This being the case, this study provides insights relevant to developments resulting from the increasing significance of English as a Foreign Language in the Malaysian education scene.

In learning English, effective listening comprehension skills in English is critical if learners want to do well in tertiary level courses taught through the medium of English. A main mode of content delivery is through the use of lectures and seminars. The listening skill has to be focused on and deliberate measures have to be taken to teach it effectively in an EFL classroom. This study highlights this important skill which needs deliberate attention in every EFL classroom. The basis for sequencing the teaching of language skills suggests that listening be taught before speaking, speaking be taught before reading and reading be taught before writing (Nasr, 1969). Since all these skills are interrelated, effective language learning involves the teaching of all four skills. Although this study focuses only on one of these skills, it nevertheless sets a platform for future research on the other skills as well.

This study will also be of significance to this private International English Language Centre as it reveals the problems foreign language students face in the

listening component of the language programme. By highlighting the factors which contribute to problems in developing the listening skills, this study will enable teachers to take the necessary measures to better facilitate the teaching-learning process in the listening class. It also explains why there is a high rate of failure in the listening component of such programmes.