

STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH SONGS

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Abstract:

This paper reports the result of a study which aims to argue the previous studies which report that listening through song can help the students to improve the listening comprehension. Listening is one of four integrated skills of learning English which become the most difficult skill for the students. This paper investigates the students' difficulties in doing listening activity by using song. The students here represent the students of Junior High school, especially private school in remote area. The problems which are mostly and commonly faced by the students while listening are explained further in this paper. As the result, the researcher analyzes the problems may impede the students' to do the exercises well. Moreover, this paper also gives suggestion which may help the teacher to overcome the students' problem.

Key words:

Listening comprehension, listening difficulties, learning style, and listening strategies.

1. Background of the study

Although English has been spread out and known by people all over the world, some people who live in remote area like Ngoro District do not understand English. They, indeed, do not really care about English, since they never use English in their daily life. Such condition influences the children who study in this junior high school. They have less curiosity and motivation in learning English.

Among four skills of English learning, listening is the most interesting and difficult skill for the students. Listening activity can be interested for the students when the teacher is using the interesting strategy and media in the class, such as, listening to the song and watching movie. However, what makes the students afraid of is the comprehending task of the listening. Conaway (1982:132) found that poor listening skills were the main factors in college failure than the other factors, such as poor reading skills or low academic aptitude. Oxford (1993) in his research found that

listening is the most fundamental skill to develop the other three skills, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

What the students need to comprehend what they listen to are intensive attention and vocabulary bank. The teacher must be able to understand the listening strategies their students adopt in order to help them to improve their English proficiency.

The students often have low score in completion task in listening activity using song. The score of listening comprehension are always under passing grade. Various factors may be responsible for the present situation which this study has tried to point out. The English teachers are helpless in this regard as they have to cover a lot of syllabus within a very short period of time.

The problem of shortage of the qualified English teachers is also there to adverse the situation. In this research, this paper has discussed all these factors and their effects on the listening comprehension task and the strategies to overcome the problems:

1. what are the difficulties do the students face while listening to the song? and 2. What are learning strategies used to help the students' listening comprehension?

2. Review of Literature

a. Listening Comprehension

In this section, this study briefly presents the theoretical perspective about listening comprehension. Listening is vital skill which can be fundamental to speaking. Rost (1994: 141-142) cited in (Richard and Renandya, 2002:239) points out that listening is vital skill in language classroom because it can provide input learning for the learner. When the input of the learner is good, it can affect the other skills.

Listening comprehension means the activity listening and understanding at the same time. Wilson (2008:9) investigated that human's listening is different with animals' listening. Animals just listen to the sound around them, without identifying the expression, stressing, sentence, and etc. human listening is not only hearing sounds, but he learn from what they hear and understand it.

As I stated before, that listening is the most difficult skill among the other English skills. Wilson (2008:12) categorize the difficulty of listening comprehension into four categories, characteristics of the message, the delivery, the listener and the environment. The difficulties of catching the message of what we hear common happen, when we get words which we never heard before. Being non-directly participant will lead the hearer get problem to deliver what we hear. These two characteristics are the vital factors which commonly impede the students to comprehend listening information.

For the characteristic of the listener himself, mostly, he gets problem with concentration to what he listens to and less motivation to listen. Wilson (2008:14) divided the listener into three categories, very young learner (under seven years old), young learner, mid to late teen learner, and adult learner.

They all have different ability and purpose in listening something. Students in mid to late teens categories are different considerably in need with the adult students. They have short attention, fewer cognitive ability, and difficult to concentration on what they hear.

b. The students' difficulties

The characteristic of environment is including the air of the class, the noise background, and defective of the media which can affect the clarity of the recoding. Besides, the memory of the students can impede the listening comprehending. Sometimes the students are not able to a tune on the listening, when they catch one word, then they catch another word, the first word is accidently vanish. This is also hammering the students to confusion.

Oenjoyo (2009) investigated in his study that listening need three process to go. First is Processing Sound, which includes vocabularies, sentence, intonation, and stressing. Second is Processing Meaning, which is about the syntax. And the last is processing knowledge and context. In this process, understanding what the listener hears is processed.

The song, which is used as a material for listening, should be fit to purpose and suitable with the level of the students. As Wilson (2008:25) points out that criteria which make the listening text is good for classes are believability, relevance to the listener, new information and appropriateness in terms of language level. From this, Wilson also divides the criteria of good listening text based on two factors, content and delivery. The content of a good listening text should be interesting, entertaining, consisting of speech act, culture structure and suitable with the language level. While delivery factors are including the length of the recording, the quality of recording, the speed of the speakers and the accent of the speaker. All those factors should be fixed and suitable with the students' level.

What does make the listening using song succeed to be implied in the classroom? the research in this topic has been done for so many times in previous study by other researchers, and all of them are success to imply song as an interesting and entertaining materials for listening. What did they do? First, the objects of their research were from potential area to teach English. It means that the object environment supports them to accept English easily as the foreign language they learnt. Second, all of them were using three steps of teaching, pre-listening, whilst listening, and post listening. in pre-listening activities, Oenjoyo (2009) and Zakaria (2011) tried to give brainstorming and dig the students knowledge about the song and the purpose of listening. In whilst listening, they did the main activities, playing the Oenjoyo song for three times, and in Post-listening, they assessed the students' comprehension. These steps can be done perfectly since the objects of the study were mature and adult enough to receive these treats.

What kind of song did they use in the class? Most of them were using Pop song, because the rhythm is not too fast and not too slow. It is good, because Pop song is more suitable with the main focus and purpose of listening activity, identifying missing word and describing the song.

Students meet some problems in listening activities. The problem most commonly encountered by the students is the way English words are pronounced. Students can find difficulties to comprehend words which have similar sounds and they will get wrong comprehension in spelling either. Another problem deals with pronunciation is stressing. Different stress has different meaning (Rixon, 1986:38).

Second problem of listening is lack of control of a speaker's speech speed. Many students feel that one of the greatest difficulties they have to deal with during listening exercise in comparison with reading

exercise is the lack of possibility how to control the speed of the speaker's speech. They believe that during listening they may miss some important information. Some of them may busy with the certain word they heard in the first part and miss the word and the important information from the second part or they can stop listening as they are not able to select the correct information so quickly (Underwood, 1989).

The third problem is the limitation of the recording played by the teacher and the limitation of vocabulary stock by the students. Since the teacher just play the record in limited time, it makes the students have difficult to catch the information. In fact, the listeners who do not know all vocabulary used by the speaker, they usually start thinking about the meaning and as the result of that they also miss the following information (Underwood, 1989).

The next problem is the students' failure to concentrate to the speaker. There are many factors influencing the learners' concentration, the selection of the topic, the length of the listening exercise plays, the quality of the recording, and the situation outside. Besides, the students' learning habits may also be a problem in listening activities. Underwood (1989) claims teachers may think that their students must understand everything in their lesson so that is why they pronounce words carefully and repeat everything over and over again. But, because of this approach students may become worried if they do not understand every word or phrase and only when they accept the fact that they do not understand everything they are prepared to work with *partial understanding*.

c. Learning style

Not all of the problems above can be overcome well. Not only the learners and the materials should be prepared well but learning style and learning strategy also take high concern in influencing the students' success to listening effectively. First, for the listener, they

need to have background knowledge of the song, such as the vocabulary which might unfamiliar for them. They need to practice to pronounce it correctly as the singer pronounces it. Help students develop the skills of listening with anticipation, listening for specific information, listening for gist, interpretation and inference, listening for intended meaning, listening for attitude, etc., by providing varied tasks and exercises at different levels with different focuses.

Learning styles and strategies influence and determine the objectives in teaching and learning. The styles and strategies also influence students' perception and subsequent recalling of information and also determine the way how people react. For teachers it is vitally important to aware of different learning styles especially when planning and organizing the language lesson. Being aware of these differences enables teachers to take them into account and respect them during their lessons.

Learning style refers to the ability to accumulate and use knowledge in a specific manner. Some experts agree to divide the learning style into three categories; they are visual style, audio style and kinesthetic style. Each individual may possess single style or possess a combination of different learning style (Montgomery and Groat, 1998). Beyond these three general categories of learning style, many theories and approaches toward human potential have been developed. One of them is a theory of multiple intelligence which is associated by Howard Gardner, Ph.D. in his theory Gardner has classified the human potential of learning style into eight dimensions; verbal-linguistics intelligence, Logical – mathematic intelligence, spatial – visual intelligence, Bodily – kinesthetic intelligence, musical intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence and naturalistic intelligence (Richard and Renandiyah, 2002).

Another division of learning styles is according to different approaches. Flowerdew (2005) describe these learning styles:

- **Deep approach-** These students consider all information worth learning.
- **Surface approach-** these learners prefer to learn only enough information to finish their tasks.
- **Strategic approach-** Students who prefer strategic approach focus only on passing their tests.
- **Holistic (field-independent) approach-** Learners who need overall picture and focus on general information belong to this group.
- **Field-dependant approach-** these learners want to learn gradually, step by step learning.
- **Converger-** These students developed their ways of learning and they follow them.
- **Diverger-** These learners are creative and prefer less formal way of learning.
- **Concrete approach-** these learners want their own learning experience to be a part of the learning process.
- **Abstract approach-** These students prefer abstract theories.
- **Reflective approach-** Those students who like to consider their learning progress belong into this group.
- **Active approach-** These learners like to experiment in the learning process.
- **Solitary approach-** These students prefer learning by themselves.
- **Social approach-** These learners love face to face interaction

As there are so many various of learning style, the teacher should be aware to fact that learning styles overlap with the theories above as the theory not only covers basic students' abilities and skills but also the whole area of learners' thinking.

d. Learning Strategies

Flowerdew (2005) points out that learning strategy is a specific mental procedure for gathering, processing, associating, categorizing, rehearsing, and retrieving information or patterned skills. Learning strategies are defined as “specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques -- such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task -- used by students to enhance their own learning” (Flowerdew, 2005). When the learner consciously chooses strategies that fit his or her learning style and the L2 task at hand, these strategies become a useful toolkit for active, conscious, and purposeful self regulation of learning. Learning strategies can be classified into six groups: cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective, and social. In his book, Flowerdew focuses the learning strategy in three main points;

- **Metacognitive strategies.** Metacognitive strategies can be described as strategies that are used by the learners to organize, monitor and evaluate their learning process.
- **Cognitive strategies.** Cognitive strategies are the ways that the students use to acquire the language.
- **Socioaffective strategies.** Socioaffective strategies are the processes in which students employ others to improve their learning.

Flowerdew (2005) also suggests various techniques that may be appropriate for learners at different levels of proficiency. Ommagio (1993) indicates that techniques for a Novice/intermediate levels include extralinguistic support, such as pictures, graphic materials, or physical activity to help students whose listening skills are relatively weak (pre-listening activities, listening for the gist, comprehension checks, etc.). At the higher levels of proficiency, tasks require

fuller comprehension of the text, including more detail and an understanding of nuances (dictation, completing target language summary, note-taking/outlining, inferential listening, etc.)

The sequencing of listening tasks into pre-listening, while-listening, post-listening sections has been a mainstay in the teaching of listening comprehension. Holden (2004, p.260) states that if listening tasks are designed in such a way as to strongly encourage learners to make consistent use of particular strategies at appropriate points in the listening process in order to comprehend the material, and this approach is used systematically, learners would in the end stand a far greater chance of improving their listening ability.

3. Analysis

Listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, his grammar and his vocabulary, and grasping his meaning. An able listener is capable of doing these four things simultaneously.

The background of the students of Junior high school in remote area is unfamiliar at all with English. Even more, the songs they listen to everyday mostly are Dangdut and Indonesian songs. So, their listening is not familiar to listen to English song. Once they try to sing English song, they just pronounce it as they hear and they even do not care if it is wrong or right.

The problems commonly happen to the students while they are listening are lack of vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling. The vocabularies mastery of the students are still limited, more over it is too far to compare with the kindergarten students in the town. In addition, spelling ABC is also difficult for them. It is because they hardly listen to English conversation or song or even read English book. First, they thought that English

is not important, that their parents and their environment influence them to think so. Then, they tend to put English lesson aside from their important list to learn. Because of that, the students often act indifferently while the teacher is explaining or drilling vocabularies.

Some various ways have been done by the teacher to help the students improve their English, especially in listening, but these students are different, just like carving the stone, in which the teacher may be able to reach their goal slowly and in long time. As I experienced in my class, the students still hard to get good score in listening to English song, although they have been taught the vocabularies of the song and drilled how to pronounce them well before they start doing listening activities. But, when the teacher plays the song, and the students are ready to complete the song, they still cannot write the answer correctly. Even the teacher plays the song for more than three times, but the students just get the same result, no improvement at all. Those all are proof that the students' difficulties in listening is how to write the word correctly.

The other fact may happen to the students, foreign language learners who live in remote area, when they are doing listening activity is they ask the teacher to sing the song. It means that they feel that the listening will be easier if they hear it from their own teacher not from the cassette. From that description it shows that the students get difficulties in hearing native's pronunciation because they rarely and even hardly hear the foreign speaker. Thus, they prefer listening to their teacher because the teacher's pronunciation is familiar for them.

The last problem commonly happen is failure to concentrate to the song because of some reasons. First, the song is new for them, so they may be excited but they also feel confused at the same time. They feel confused because they do not understand what to sing. Second, the students may enjoy the music, not

the lyrics. Therefore, while the students are having listening activities they are dozed off by the music, and as the result, they lost their focus to complete the lyric. Another thing which can disturb the students' focus on listening is the noise from the outside class. The last reason is the audio of the listening is not clear enough sometime for the students.

To solve those problems above, it is not enough if the teacher only use three phase methods - pre activity, whilst activity, and post activity – within a day or a meeting. Before the teacher decides what method the teacher should use to help the students improve their listening ability, at least able to finish their task, the teacher should be able to recognize the students' learning style generally. Looking up the students' background it seems that the students learning style is kind of surface approach, where the students' goal of learning is to accomplish their task and pass the passing grade. The students are not interested in learning more and understand more about the song. They prefer enjoying the music and finishing the task, or even just enjoying the music without doing any task.

Another learning style of these students can be categorized in visual learning, in which they will be more interested in watching the video clip to understand the song than just listening to the audio. Besides, kinesthetic learning is also suitable for these students, since they are more accustomed to move or to do activities physically than to read or to do activities mentally, which need thinking. From Gardner's theory, we may involve the students' learning style in intrapersonal intelligence and kinesthetic intelligence, because most of the students would rather have good social relationship than individualist. So, forming group work, at least pair work, may help the students to finish the listening task and get good mark.

After identifying the students' learning style, the teacher can design the learning strategy which can be accepted and enjoyable

for the students. There are two strategies which can be done by the teacher to overcome the problem. First, to accustom the students to English song, the teacher may play the song in the beginning of the lesson or before the lesson is started. It is aimed to arouse the students' interest toward the song. When the students start to like and enjoy the song, the feeling of curiosity to know the lyric enable them to sing the song will occur. Thus, the students will be able to be more focus in doing listening activity, completion the song lyric in this case. Second, like what other previous researchers have done, pre-listening, whilst-listening and post-listening is still ideal to be a chosen method. However, if a normal class usually spends those three phases in a meeting, in this case, the teacher cannot finish the phases within a meeting.

In pre-listening activities, the students are led to speak words related to the theme of the song. After that, the teacher may add some vocabularies used in the song. The students are drilled to pronounce the words correctly. In this phase, game may also be used to help the students able to spell the words correctly. The game may be various, created by the teacher. The main goal of the game is to make every student memorizes the spelling of vocabularies taught and enable them to rewrite the vocabularies correctly. This game may spend long time, even a meeting.

Before going to whilst-listening, just like usual, the teacher should play the song before learning activities. After that, the teacher tells the students that the activity will be about that song. Before the students get the task, the teacher asks them to listen to the song once and try to get a word from song. This is done to ensure the students that they are ready to do listening task. After that, the students will get a piece of paper of the song's lyric which is incomplete. The students must complete the missing lyric with correct spelling. The teacher will play the song for three times, but every single time the song has

been played, the teacher should give feedback to the students to check if they still have difficulties in this activity. If the students still find difficulties in finishing the task after three times playing the song, the teacher may make deal to play the song again.

In the last listening activity, the students discuss together to check their work and get the score. The last activity is singing together. It is good to make the students interested in English song and it is expected as the beginning for the students to be interested in English.

4. Conclusion

Some teachers think that listening is the easiest skill to teach, whereas most students think it is the most difficult to improve. This contradiction tells us that there are some things about teaching listening that need to be explored. Perhaps those who say it is "the easiest to teach" mean that it does not require much painstaking lesson preparation and all they need to do is play the tapes and test the students' comprehension. But is there nothing more to teaching listening than testing? We must find out all we can about how listening can be improved and what activities are useful to this end and then use this knowledge and these activities in our own classrooms.

Clearly, there is a great deal more to be known about real-time listening comprehension problem. Further research is needed to examine the causes of ineffective low-level processing. In this paper we have discussed about some of the difficulties commonly faced by the low-level language proficiency, such as limited vocabulary, the difficulty to spell the word correctly, recognizing the native's pronunciation, and to keep the students' focus on listening task. Identifying the learning style is needed to know what strategy the teacher do to help the students not only to improve their listening comprehension but also become more efficient

at directing their own learning as development as foreign language learner.

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