Listening to German Native and Non-Native Speakers: An Evaluation of Students’ Comprehension

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\textbf{Abstract}

Acquiring the German language in a non-native environment is a challenge to the students in UKM because the surroundings do not promote a conducive atmosphere for the students to communicate in the language. The students rely solely on their time in class to practice the four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. One of the most problematic skills to acquire is listening as the students are exposed to native German speakers only from the listening CD accompanying the textbook ‘Studio D’. The previous research conducted by the instructor revealed that the students have difficulties in listening to native German speakers. However, the instructor could not determine whether articulation and accent of a native speaker, content difficulty or effect of background noise was the main factor leading to the problem. Thus, this research aims to evaluate the ability of the students to understand the dialogues spoken by native and non-native German speakers. For this research, authentic recordings of native and non-native speakers speaking were used as listening material. Students were divided into two groups: the first group listened to dialogues by native speakers and the second group listened to the same dialogue by non-native speakers. The students were then asked to answer multiple-choice and open task questions corresponding to the dialogues. It was found that the students who listened to the dialogues by non-native speakers performed slightly better. This suggests that the students’ comprehension does not rely solely on native or non-native speakers but there are other contributing factors like contents and type of questions.

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1. Introduction

The main aim of acquiring a language, which is, to communicate, is hindered without the skill of listening. Listening occupies a big portion of the time we spend communicating in a particular language. A study conducted by Rankin (1926) stated that listening occupies almost 50% of all communication. Listening skill also accommodates input that can be very important for second language acquisition in general and for the progress in speaking skill.

It is impossible to separate listening and speaking as these two skills are main communicating skills. There are three reasons given by Rost (1994) in expressing the importance of listening in improving speaking skill. Firstly, understanding is achieved through interaction between speaker and listener. Therefore, spoken language provides an interacting tool to the learner. Secondly, understanding the language as the native speaker actually uses it, is a demanding task for the learners. Thirdly, through listening exercises, the language teachers are able to introduce learners to new forms of vocabulary, grammar, and new interaction patterns in the language.

Comparing listening to writing, one realizes that in a writing task, learners have ample time to gather and organize their thoughts, outline and enhance the story line, present them rationally, and finally, check for editing and content insertions. However, there is a distinct difference between speech and writing. Speech is not usually linear and it is characterized by redundancies, repetitions, hesitations and ungrammatical forms. This makes listening and comprehension challenging and especially difficult for non-native speakers.

Substantial research has been carried out in reading and writing skills. However, research in listening and speaking skills is still lacking. According to Vandergrift (2007), listening is hard work and deserves more analysis and support.

Teaching listening skill in UKM is found to be demanding as the students are only exposed to the language during lessons in class. It is a great challenge to the language instructor to teach the students all the required language skills i.e. writing, listening, reading and speaking within a limited class time. On the students’ side, the surroundings outside of classroom do not promote the usage (listening and speaking) of the language learnt. They only communicate in German language within the walls of their classroom by interacting with the language instructor, classmates and listening to the accompanying CD of the textbook. Analysing the listening test results of the students, it is apparent that the students have problems listening to native German speakers. However, the factors leading to the problems could not be determined. Therefore, this research aims to evaluate the ability of the students to understand the dialogues spoken by native and non-native German speakers. Through the evaluation, factors contributing to the problem is hoped to be diagnosed.

2. Definition of native speaker

Referring to Cambridge Online dictionary (http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/native-speaker), native speaker is defined as someone who has spoken a particular language since they were a baby, rather than having learned it as a child or adult.

Davies, A. (2009) describes a native speaker as someone who learns to speak in his native language. From this definition, a person who did not learn a language in childhood cannot be regarded as a native speaker of the language. Languages learnt later in lives can therefore never be native languages. Lee (2005) compiled the distinct features of a native speaker. According to Lee, a native speaker is someone who acquired the language in early childhood and maintains the use of the language. The individual has intuitive knowledge of the language and is able to produce fluent, spontaneous discourse. He has to be communicatively competent and be able to communicate within different social settings. He identifies with or is identified by a language community and lastly a native speaker does not have a foreign accent. Lee also added another feature in defining the meaning of native speaker. Besides learning the language since childhood, a person is said to be a native speaker if he sustains the use of the language.

Adhering to the definitions given by Davies and Lee, most of foreign language learners could not be categorized as native speakers. However, foreign language users who champions the foreign language almost
native-like is said to be near native. Medgyes (1999) used the term ‘pseudo-native’ to categorize someone who is close to but nevertheless not the native speaker of English. According to Medgyes (1999), ‘pseudo-native’ speakers can be identified by their strange pronunciation. They have a lower level of idiomaticity than average and lack in conceptual knowledge. In addition, they depend on the repetitions and routine language and their awareness on cultural and contextual norm is limited. Lastly, pseudo-native speakers are less coherent and consistent in judging their own production and other people’s language.

3. German course at UKM

There are many foreign languages taught in UKM, and German is one of the many. It is offered to the students as an elective subject. Each lesson is conducted twice a week, for two hours. The course is divided into 4 levels: Basic German I, Basic German II, Intermediate German I and Intermediate German II. The German course taught in UKM is in line with the European Standard and adheres to the proficiency scale provided by the Council of Europe (2010), whereby for level A1, as a basic user, the students should be able to:

“Understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information of familiar matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.”

(http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Portfolio/?M=/main_pages/levels.html)

For listening skill, the students in A1 should be able to recognize familiar words and very basic phrases concerning him/her self, family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly (Rost, 2011). At the end of each semester, the students have to sit for a listening, speaking and written test. These tests serve as an indicator of their proficiency level in German language.

3.1. The students

German is offered to all students of UKM; therefore the students taking German have different backgrounds. They come from various faculties and are of different races. Their mother tongue is either Malay language or Mandarin. However, all of them are proficient in English. German is learnt as an elective foreign language in UKM.

3.2. The language instructor

There are two instructors teaching German in UKM, Frau Hassan and Frau Abdul. Both are Malaysians and of Malay origin. German is their third language after their mother tongue, Malay language and English. They were introduced to the German language in 1996, where they had 7 months of language course in Cologne, Germany. They received their tertiary education in Germany in Engineering. Frau Hassan spent 9 years and Frau Abdul 11 years living and studying in Germany. These two instructors are fluent German speakers and can be classified as ‘pseudo-native’ according to the definition given by Medgyes (1994). Although they graduated as engineers, they have been going to seminars and teacher training courses offered and conducted by Goethe Institute, Kuala Lumpur.

4. The Study

The main goal of this study is to investigate students’ comprehension to native and non-native German speakers. In this section, the procedure and material used in the study will be explained in detail.
4.1. Speakers

The native speakers were 3 German adults (2 men and 1 woman). They are currently living and working in Germany. They have read the dialogues and announcements given to them and recorded their voices using the free software Audacity 1.3 Beta. They have been asked to speak in a normal speaking rate. The non-native speakers were 4 Malay Malaysians (2 women and 2 men). German is for all of them, a third language after Malay language and English. The women are the German language instructors at UKM. They learned German in Germany and have lived and studied in Germany. However, the 2 men were students of GMI, who have successfully passed the examination in German as foreign language, the TestDaF examination. Although they have never lived in Germany, they are well trained in their pronunciation. It is important to note that all speakers, native and non-native, have normal hearing and none of them have exhibited speech disorders.

4.2. Material

The listening exercise comprised of three sections. The students were required to answer questions after listening to the stimuli. In the first section, the students completed an open task (Rost, 2011) by filling in the blanks pertaining to a dialogue they have listened to. The words were not given. The students had to write down the details of a person like name, age, country of origin etc. The dialogue is between an Indian man who has been living in Germany for quite a long time with a receptionist at a language institute. He is inquiring about an Italian language course. Six multiple-choice questions were in the second section whereby each dialogue was followed by one question. In the first two sections, the dialogues were repeated once. Section three had four true/false questions. The students listened to an announcement and answered subsequent question. The announcements were not repeated. Of course, the same dialogues and announcements were used for both groups. All announcements and dialogues were read at a normal speaking rate and recorded using the free Audacity 1.3 Beta software. It was then converted into a .wav file. The materials are said to be ‘clean’ because there were no background noise like the sound of train, sound of people rustling in a supermarket etc., which could lead to distraction in the listening process.

4.3. Listeners

Thirty two UKM students taking the basic German language course participated for this listening task, 16 men and 16 women; their average age was 22. Besides that, all of them are proficient in English, whereby they have all passed the Malaysia University Entrance Test (MUET) with at least band 4. In addition, 19 of them are of Chinese origin, and thus their mother tongue is Mandarin, the rest (13) are Malays and Malay language is their mother tongue. These students were randomly divided into two groups. One group listened to the non-native speakers and another listened to the native speakers.

4.4. Procedure

The exercise was carried out in one of the many well equipped language laboratories in UKM. Before the exercise, the participants were first briefed on the objective of the exercise. The participants were told that the marks for the listening exercise will have no effect on their final grades; however they were expected to complete their tasks in a serious manner. Each student was provided with a headphone to facilitate the listening exercise process to provide minimum interference and to ensure the best listening quality throughout the exercise. The participants were given enough time to read the questions before each section commenced and also given ample time to answer the questions. After they had completed the listening exercise, a demographic information form was distributed. They were also asked to note whether a native or non-native had read the dialogues and announcements throughout the exercise. As a token of appreciation a little gift was given to each participant.
After the results of this exercise were obtained and qualitative analysis of the results was carried out, the researcher had to interview selected students to support the findings in qualitative analysis.

5. Findings

Analysing the overall listening exercise results, the group of students who listened to non-native German speakers were found to have a higher average (85%) compared to those who listened to native German speakers (76%). Table 1 depicts the average score segregated in the different sections.

Table 1. Average score in each section

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage of average score in section 1 (fill in the blanks)</th>
<th>Section 2 (multi choice)</th>
<th>Section 3 (True/False)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A (listened to native speakers)</td>
<td>66.8%</td>
<td>90.6%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (listened to non-native speakers)</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>92.7%</td>
<td>73.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 1, for section two and three, the difference in the mean score between group A and B is minimum (±2%). However, comparing the mean score between these two sections, section two has a much higher mean (90.6% for group A, 92.7% for group B), whereas for section three, group A’s mean score is 75% and group B is 73.4%. The announcements in section 3 were not repeated while the dialogues in section 2 were repeated once. This could be the contributing factor to the poor performance in section 3. According to the response given by the German language instructor, in the previous listening exams, the true/false questions have always been problematic to the students due to the fact that the announcement was not repeated and the incorporation of background noise. The usual mean score in the exams for this section was 47%. In this exercise, the mean score has increased significantly because the background noise was omitted. It is crystal clear that for section one, the average percentage scored by group A (66.8%) is significantly lower than the percentage scored by group B (85%). Therefore, it is interesting to analyse this particular section thoroughly.

In this section, students were asked to complete a registration form for a language course after listening to a dialogue. No words list was given. The dialogue was repeated once. This exercise tested the students on various contents such as days, names of countries and languages, numbers and alphabets in German. As depicted in Fig. 1, the score for students in group B (who listened to non-native German) were better compared to students in group A in most of the contents. However, all students in both groups answered correctly for language course and course day. It is also apparent from Fig. 1, that the students in group A have difficulties in comprehending numbers and alphabets compared to those in group B. Another distinct finding in Fig. 1, students in both groups scored relatively low in ‘mother tongue’, whereas in ‘language course’, all students managed to get the correct answer, although both ‘mother tongue’ and ‘language course’ revolve around language. From the semi-structured interview conducted with the students who failed to answer correctly, all of them admitted that they could not relate the word ‘Indisch’ to a language, because the German syllabus emphasized on European countries, languages and culture, whereas the word ‘Italienisch’, is very familiar to them.
6. Conclusion

This paper has explored the level of students’ comprehension in German language spoken by native and non-native German speakers. Although the surrounding in Malaysia does not promote the application of German language especially in listening and speaking, this research indicated that the students’ ability in comprehending German language is at a satisfactory level.

Generally, the students could understand a non-native speaker better than a native speaker. Nevertheless, the difference was not remarkable. In questions with given choice of answers like multiple-choice and true/false questions, there was no significant difference in students’ comprehension. However, the students understood the non-native speakers better in open task questions, like filling in blanks. As shown in Figure 2, there were certain components in the exercise where the students’ score were prominently higher when listening to non-native speakers such as in numbers, alphabets and name of countries. There were also components where both groups of students had the same score such as in days and European language. The students scored relatively low in the Asian language component because the students were unfamiliar with the Asian language and countries context.
In conclusion, the students’ ability to understand German language does not only depend on the aspect of native or non-native speakers. Other contributing factors like type of questions and content also play significant roles in determining the ability of the students’ comprehension in listening.

References

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