Listening and Reading Comprehension Ability Among Junior College EFL Students in Taiwan

Abstract

Listening and reading comprehension abilities among EFL students were investigated. It was hypothesized that the subjects' reading would be significantly higher than their listening comprehension ability.

Several variables regarding the subjects' exposure to and practice with English were also tested to determine their effects on listening and reading comprehension. The results showed that there was indeed a significant difference between listening and reading comprehension, although the effects of the variables tested were much less clear. Several implications are given for educators and suggestions are given for further research.

Studying a foreign language can be a difficult and discouraging experience. It can be even more discouraging if you are in a foreign language environment and find yourself not being able to understand and communicate with native speakers, although you have studied the language for several years. Perhaps this describes your experience: after ten years of studying English in Taiwan (perhaps even majoring in English in college), you go to the U.S. for graduate studies only to discover (at your dismay) that you understand very little, if any, spoken English.

Many of my Chinese friends who have taken the TOEFL exam have told me that the listening section was by far the most difficult. However, listening ability is an important skill to develop when we consider that nearly half (45%) of the time adults spend in communication activities is devoted to listening and only 16% to reading (Spearritt, 1962). It should also be pointed out that at the elementary level, the main purpose of reading is to introduce basic grammar patterns and vocabulary (Paulston & Bruder, 1976). However, the aim of listening comprehension should be to be able to understand native speakers speaking at a normal rate and in uncontrolled or unstructured situations (Chastain, 1971).

Some studies have been done comparing students' listening and...
reading comprehension, Feyten (1991) examined listening ability among students in a summer intensive language program at the University of Tennessee in 1987. The results of this study showed positive relationships between listening ability and foreign language acquisition, overall foreign language proficiency, foreign language listening comprehension skills, and oral proficiency skills. The author argues that listening ability can be improved through listening training. Kelly (1991), however, argues that lexical ignorance is the main problem in listening comprehension at more advanced levels and that developing one's lexical knowledge is more important than listening training.

In a study of beginning and intermediate German students, Lund (1991) found that in terms of the quantity of recall, readers performed better than listeners. Listeners, however, showed more creativity, suggesting a greater dependence on top-down processing by which listeners construct meaning that is based on schema. The most important conclusion drawn from this study was that reading and listening, although commonly grouped together as the two "passive" modes of communication, are quite distinct and require different techniques of instruction. This is also an important conclusion in the present study.

With this as a background, I did a study comparing the differences between listening and reading comprehension abilities among EFL students in Taiwan to find out just how much of a gap there is between these two communicative modes. It was hypothesized that the students' reading comprehension abilities would be significantly higher than their listening comprehension abilities. Several variables were also tested to determine their effects on listening and reading comprehension. These included time spent in English-speaking countries, the amount of time spent studying English in Taiwan, speaking to native English speakers, and listening to English television and radio programs, as well as students' self evaluations of their English listening and reading comprehension abilities. It was also hypothesized that higher scores on each of these variables would result in better listening and reading comprehension.

Method

Subjects

Seventy-five junior college students served as the subjects. The majority of them (92%) were female. All of the subjects were selected from two junior colleges in southern Taiwan and ranged from 15 to 19 years old.

Materials

was used twice, one reading each. The subjects were told that the order didn't matter.

Subjects

in order to administer self-report personal, personal of each reading to an English speaker. The same exam was used, and the test was given in English.

Scoring

The independent rater scored the reading comprehension and listening comprehension tests on a 5-point scale.
ability among students. The students' lexical creativity, however, was not measured using the test described in the paper. Instead, the students were asked to fill out a personal information questionnaire in order to test the hypotheses noted earlier (see Appendix C).

Subjects were also asked to fill out a personal information questionnaire in order to test the hypotheses noted earlier (see Appendix C).

**Materials**

A sample listening test taken from Listening to TOEFL (1989) was used for testing the subjects. This multiple-choice test was given twice, once for testing listening comprehension and once for testing reading comprehension (see Appendices A and B). Some researchers argue that combining listening and reading activities in the same test doesn't allow us to test listening comprehension only. Following Rivers and Temperley (1978), this argument is rejected on the grounds that:

(a) oral questions cannot be absorbed during the process of listening to other material. (Psychological studies show that we filter out competing oral stimuli when the material to which we are listening demands careful attention.) [and]  
(b) oral questions given before or after the listening material add a further aural exercise to the one being evaluated. Students may have understood the exercise, but not the questions on it. (p. 82)

Subjects were also asked to fill out a personal information questionnaire in order to test the hypotheses noted earlier (see Appendix C).

**Design and Procedure**

Both the listening and reading comprehension tests were administered at the same time of testing. First, subjects completed the personal information questionnaire. For the listening test, I, a native speaker of American English, read each statement and the subjects needed to mark the answer having the closest meaning. Each of the ten statements was read twice and a 10-second period of silence followed each reading. Immediately after the listening test, subjects were given the reading test. The statements and multiple-choice answers were exactly the same except that the answer choices were slightly rearranged. Subjects were given ten minutes to complete the reading test, but they were not allowed to use a dictionary or any other aids for either the listening or reading test.

**Scoring**

The number of correct answers which the subjects produced was recorded based on ten possible correct answers for each of the two tests. The indices of time spent talking with native English speakers and time spent listening to English television and radio programs were categorized on a 5-point scale as never, seldom, sometimes, often, and always (see...
Appendix C) and scored by assigning these categories a one, two, three, four, or five, respectively. Similarly, the indices of the subjects' self-evaluations of their listening and reading comprehension ability were categorized as poor, below average, average, good, and excellent and scored by assigning a one, two, three, four, or five, respectively. The numbers were assigned simply for computational purposes.

**Results**

As hypothesized, it was found that overall the subjects performed better on the reading test than they did on the listening test. The majority of subjects (80%) performed better on the reading test, while 13.3% showed no difference between the two tests and only 6.7% performed better on the listening test. Overall, subjects answered correctly 2.3 more questions on the reading test than they did on the listening test.

Only one of the subjects had been in an English-speaking country and it was only for a period of one month. Therefore, the hypothesis that subjects spending more time in English-speaking countries would also have higher listening comprehension could not be adequately evaluated in the present study. The amount of time that subjects have studied English had little influence on their listening scores except for those subjects who have studied for more than four years (see Table 1). This latter group of subjects answered nearly half of the questions correctly.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Between Years of English Study and Listening and Reading Comprehension Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years of English Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. LS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. RS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** In this and following tables, LS refers to listening score and RS refers to reading score.
Overall, however, subjects only answered 37% of the listening test questions correctly. Subjects who have studied for more than four years also had the highest scores on the reading test. One explanation could be that those subjects who have studied more than four years might have had some of their training in special language institutes where they would be much more likely to have exposure to and practice with native English speakers.

The time that the subjects spent in conversation with native English speakers showed a positive, although weak, correlation to the subjects' listening and reading scores. Although subjects who never conversed with native speakers did just as well on the listening test as those who often did, the overall trend showed that subjects who often or sometimes conversed with native speakers did better on the listening test than those who only seldom or never did (see Table 2).

Table 2
Relationship Between Frequency of Conversing with Native English Speakers and Listening and Reading Comprehension Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time spent in conversation</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>Tot. Avg.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subjects</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. LS</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. RS</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net change</td>
<td>+2.0</td>
<td>+2.6</td>
<td>+1.1</td>
<td>+3.1</td>
<td>+2.0</td>
<td>+2.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. In Tables 2 & 3, 5=always; 4=often; 3=sometimes; 2=seldom; and 1=never.

This gives support for the argument that spending more time conversing with native English speakers can help improve listening comprehension.

As hypothesized, subjects who spent the most time listening to English television and radio programs also received higher overall scores on the listening test (see Table 3). For the other four categories, however, the results are more unpredictable. Such variation in listening
Table 3
Relationship Between Time Spent Listening to Radio and Television and Listening and Reading Comprehension Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time spent listening to radio and TV</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>Tot. Avg.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subjects</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. LS</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. RS</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net change</td>
<td>+1.3</td>
<td>+3.0</td>
<td>+2.3</td>
<td>+1.9</td>
<td>+2.5</td>
<td>+2.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

scores could be the result of the quality/quantity differentiation. Spending 15 minutes listening to the radio with strong concentration on language patterns and vocabulary would most likely be more beneficial than having the radio turned on for 50 minutes as “background” input while participating in activities which demand much of your attention. More studies focusing on the listening environment should be conducted to determine what effects this has on one’s comprehension ability. As would be expected and as can be seen in Table 3, the amount of time spent listening to television or radio seems to have little effect on reading comprehension ability.

Generally speaking, the subjects’ self-evaluations of their listening and reading comprehension abilities reflected their test scores. More surprising, however, were the low ratings the subjects gave themselves. The majority of the subjects (76%) rated their listening ability as “below average” or “poor,” while over half of the subjects (52%) rated their reading ability as only “average” (see Tables 4 & 5).
Table 4
Relationship Between Subjects' Self-evaluations of Their Listening Ability and Listening and Reading Comprehension Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self evaluations</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>Tot. Avg.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subjects</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. LS</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. RS</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net change</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>+3.0</td>
<td>+1.8</td>
<td>+2.6</td>
<td>+2.2</td>
<td>+2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. In Tables 4 & 5, 5=excellent; 4=good; 3=average; 2=below average; and 1=poor.

None of the subjects rated their listening or reading ability as "excellent," and only two of the subjects (one for each of these two variables) rated their listening or reading ability as "good." This indicates a low level of self confidence among the subjects whether their individual scores on the two tests were reflective of their self-evaluations or not. In any case, these results show that subjects don't have a problem with over-confidence in their abilities (the only subject with a "good" self-evaluation rating received a lower overall score on the listening test than subjects who gave themselves lower ratings).

Table 5
Relationship Between Subjects' Self-evaluations of Their Reading Ability and Listening and Reading Comprehension Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-evaluations</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>Tot. Avg.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subjects</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. LS</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. RS</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net change</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>+1.0</td>
<td>+2.5</td>
<td>+2.0</td>
<td>+2.2</td>
<td>+1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 413 *
Discussion

The data presented here clearly show that there is a strong tendency for EFL students in Taiwan to perform better on reading than on listening comprehension. There is also weak but slightly positive support for the variables which were tested, although the correlations are much less clear. More studies should be done in order to determine the validity and reliability of these variables in relation to English listening and reading comprehension ability.

An additional study should focus on the relationships of these variables to listening and reading comprehension ability for students whose medium of instruction is the target (second or foreign) language. Since EFL students in Taiwan nearly always perform significantly better on reading than on listening comprehension (as indicated by this study), one implication for educators is that students should have more exposure to spoken English in contextually meaningful settings. This is perhaps even more important in the community than in the classroom itself. However, since there are relatively few native English speakers in Taiwan with whom EFL students can converse, the next best thing for practicing listening comprehension is to have students listen to more audio tapes and English television and radio programs at an appropriate level of difficulty.

Furthermore, the results of this study refute the argument that reading is simply speech written down on paper. If this were the case, theoretically speaking, we would expect there to be very little difference between students' listening and reading comprehension abilities. However, this study has shown that there is a significant difference between these modes of communication, thus lending support to Lund's (1991) study and his conclusion that reading and listening need to be taught using different teaching techniques.

Perhaps the most important implication of this study for educators is the need to encourage students more and help them to see themselves as good language learners (or at least having that potential). This study, more than anything else, showed very clearly that EFL students in Taiwan have very low self-evaluations of their foreign language skills. Changing such attitudes, however, just may be the greatest challenge for the English teacher in Taiwan.
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may be the


Appendix A
Listening Test
(from Listening to TOEFL, pgs. 46-47)

Directions: For each question, you will hear one statement. Choose the answer which you feel has the most similar meaning to the statement you hear.

1. (a) Would you rather rent a place higher up?
   (b) Tell me where the rent money is.
   (c) I hear you have many places for rent.
   (d) Don't you think the rent here is high?

2. (a) Would you rather rent a place higher up?
   (b) He didn't test the equipment.
   (c) It's equipped with many features.
   (d) The equipment shouldn't be used.

3. (a) Jane and her twin don't look alike.
   (b) Jane looks after her younger brother.
   (c) The twins are Jane's.
   (d) The twins aren't a bother to care for.

4. (a) Yesterday the newsletter was delivered.
   (b) I was mentioned in yesterday's newsletter.
   (c) I wanted a subscription to the newsletter.
   (d) The newsletter has a rival publication.

5. (a) Alan usually goes to sleep late.
   (b) Alan probably went to the rehearsal.
   (c) Alan must have slept too long.
   (d) Alan's rehearsal must have been canceled.

6. (a) What were the results of the debate?
   (b) Why did you enter the debate?
   (c) Which place were you coming from?
   (d) Were any of the debaters left out?

7. (a) The professor was able to understand only part of the lecture.
   (b) Nobody could understand the lecturer but the professor.
   (c) The guest lecturer was the only professor there.
   (d) The guests understood most of the professor's lecture.
Appendix A (cont.)

8. (a) Rick showed extremely poor manners.
(b) I think Rick should have accepted our invitation.
(c) It was polite of Rick to join our conversation.
(d) Rick listened while we spoke to them.

9. (a) They performed a test.
(b) They tried the beverage.
(c) They ate the vegetables.
(d) They pasted on the letter “t”.

10. (a) The class wanted the instructor to give another exam.
(b) The instructor left the classroom during the exam.
(c) The instructor made the students mark the exams.
(d) The students chose the date of the exam.
Appendix B
Reading Test
(from Listening to TOEFL, pgs. 46-47)

Directions: For each sentence, choose the sentence which has the closest meaning.

1. The rent here is rather high, wouldn't you say?
   (a) Don't you think the rent here is high?
   (b) I hear you have many places for rent.
   (c) Tell me where the rent money is.
   (d) Would you rather rent a place higher up?

2. Don't use that equipment.
   (a) It's equipped with many features.
   (b) He didn't test the equipment.
   (c) The equipment shouldn't be used.
   (d) That's the one to use.

3. I don't think Jane looks like her brother, although she says that they're twins.
   (a) The twins are Jane's.
   (b) Jane and her twin don't look alike.
   (c) The twins aren't a bother to care for.
   (d) Jane looks after her younger brother.

4. The newsletter arrived yesterday.
   (a) The newsletter has a rival publication.
   (b) I wanted a subscription to the newsletter.
   (c) I was mentioned in yesterday's newsletter.
   (d) Yesterday the newsletter was delivered.

5. Alan isn't at the rehearsal, so he probably overslept.
   (a) Alan's rehearsal must have been canceled.
   (b) Alan must have slept too long.
   (c) Alan usually goes to sleep late.
   (d) Alan probably went to the rehearsal.

6. What was the outcome of the debate you were in?
   (a) Which place were you coming from?
   (b) What were the results of the debate?
   (c) Were any of the debaters left out?
   (d) Why did you enter the debate?
7. The only person who understood the guest lecturer was the professor.
   (a) The guests understood most of the professor's lecture.
   (b) The guest lecturer was the only professor there.
   (c) Nobody could understand the lecturer but the professor.
   (d) The professor was able to understand only part of the lecture.

8. It was very impolite of Rick to interrupt our conversation.
   (a) Rick listened while we spoke to them.
   (b) It was polite of Rick to join our conversation.
   (c) I think Rick should have accepted our invitation.
   (d) Rick showed extremely poor manners.

9. They tasted the tea.
   (a) They tried the beverage.
   (b) They pasted on the letter "t".
   (c) They performed a test.
   (d) They ate the vegetables.

10. The instructor let the class decide when to have the exam.
    (a) The instructor made the students mark the exams.
    (b) The students chose the date of the exam.
    (c) The instructor left the classroom during the exam.
    (d) The class wanted the instructor to give another exam.
Appendix C
Personal Information Questionnaire

In order to better analyze the results, please complete the following information:

1. Age _____
2. Male____ Female ____
3. The total length of time that you've studied English:
   Months ____ Years ____
4. The amount of time that you've been in an English-speaking country:
   None _____ Months ____ Years ____
5. The amount of time that you talk with native English speakers in Taiwan:
   ____ Never
   ____ Seldom (1 or 2 times a year)
   ____ Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)
   ____ Often (1 or 2 times a week)
   ____ Always (almost everyday)
6. The amount of time that you listen to English programs on the radio or TV:
   ____ Never
   ____ Seldom (1 or 2 times a year)
   ____ Sometimes (1 or 2 times a month)
   ____ Often (1 or 2 times a week)
   ____ Always (almost everyday)
7. I feel that my English listening comprehension ability is:
   ____ Excellent
   ____ Good
   ____ Average
   ____ Below average
   ____ Poor
Appendix C (cont.)

8. I feel that my English reading comprehension ability is:
   ___ Excellent
   ___ Good
   ___ Average
   ___ Below average
   ___ Poor

 século: [ms on the radio]

speakers in [peaking country]: [421]