

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Background and Motivation

In our normal daily life, listening is the most frequently used among the four language skills (Oxford, 1993; Rivers, 1981; Weaver 1972, cited from Celce-Murcia, 2001). In overall communication, we devote 45% of the total time to listening, 30% to speaking, 16% to reading, and 9% to writing (Duke, 1971; Feyten, 1991, cited from Oxford, 1993). For language learners, listening is one of the major sources of linguistic information, and also the basic mechanism through which the rules of language are internalized (Brown, 2001). In language pedagogy, listening may take on an even more crucial role, for it is a vehicle for language teachers to teach elements of a language (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). In addition, listening typically develops earlier and often has an important influence on the development of the other three skills (Oxford, 1993).

Essential as listening is to language communication and learning, it has long been treated “like a neglected stepchild” (Oxford, 1992, p. 205), remaining as the most neglected and the least understood dimension in language theory and practice until relatively recent times (Brown, 2001; Celce-Murcia, 2001; Osada, 2004). The ability to listen used to be taken for granted in much of the language teaching field (Nida, 1953; Palmer 1917, cited from Celce-Murcia, 2001). As Morley notes, “Perhaps an assumption that listening is a reflex, a little like breathing — listening seldom receives overt teaching attention in one’s native language — has masked the importance and complexity of listening with understanding in a nonnative language” (1972, p. vii, cited from Celce-Murcia, 2001). It was believed that listening comprehension, developing naturally through language learning processes, simply

takes care of itself without any special instruction (Call, 1985, cited from Osada, 2004; Krashen, 1985).

As noted above, easy though listening comprehension may sound, by no means is it not “an arduous task”, especially for ESL and EFL learners (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005, p. 27). It is in fact a complex skill involving perceiving, attending to, assigning meaning to, and interacting with aural stimuli (Brown, 2001; Buck, 2001; Celce-Murcia, 2001; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Oxford, 1993). However, due to the washback impacts of the Basic Competency Test (BCT) and Joint College Entrance Exam (JCEE), listening is a skill still considered not worthy of attention on its own. As a consequence, high school English teachers in Taiwan tend to trivialize listening proficiency development and focus predominantly on reading and writing instructions (Yen, 1987, cited from Lee, 2006).

Listening acting as a less important contributor to vocabulary learning and teaching is another strong evidence for the fact that listening in Taiwan’s EFL high school instruction is often ignored or only superficially treated. Written language, traditionally, is a more valued activity for language learning. As Krashen stated, “reading is good for you. The research supports a stronger conclusion, however, reading is the only way, the only way we become good readers, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar, and the only way we become good spellers” (1993, p. 23). Oral input, compared to written input, receives far less attention and empirical support for its role in facilitating L2 vocabulary growth (Ellis, 1999; McCarthy & Carter, 1997; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999b), even though it is generally recognized that incidental vocabulary learning occurs when learners attempt to process meaningful and contextualized language input, be it spoken or written, for meaning comprehension (Day et al., 1991; Ellis, 1994; Ellis, 1999; Gass, 1999; Huckin & Goady, 1999; Hulstijn, 2000; Krashen, 1989; Nation,

2001; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999a; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999b; Schmitt, 2000; Sternberg, 1987). However, incidental learning of new vocabulary items from oral input has been documented to be statistically significant, yet not much, found primarily in the studies where L1 or L2 learners listened to stories read aloud (Brett et al., 1996; Eller et al., 1988; Elley, 1989; Fondas, 1992; Labonty, 1988; Robbins & Ehri, 1994; Senechal et al., 1995; Ulanoff & Pucci, 1999) and research works where ESL learners listened to academic lectures (Smidt & Hegelheimer, 2004; Vidal, 2003). The present study attempts to further examine and strive for deserved attention for the role of aural input in lexical knowledge enhancement.

1.2 Purpose of the Present Study

The purpose of the present study is to explore how the similarities and differences between listening and reading would impact the vocabulary learning outcomes. The two language skills share quite similar comprehension processes, *bottom-up*, *top-down*, and *interactive* processing (Brown, 1998; Brown, 2001; Buck, 2001; Flowerdew, & Miller, 2005; Omaggio, 1993; Oxford, 1993; Richards & Schmidt, 2002), while differing in text structure (Buck, 2001) and input processing in time (Nunan, 1989; Lund, 1991).

In addition to the similarities and differences between the two language modality, there exist some other factors that can potentially influence the incidental acquisition of vocabulary. Ellis (1999) put forward a number of factors hypothesized to be likely to influence learners' success in learning L2 vocabulary incidentally. The factors are grouped into four categories: (1) *intrinsic word properties*: pronounceability, part of speech, distinctiveness of word form, length of word, correlation between form and meaning, imageability, polysemy(2) *input factors*: frequency, saliency through focus, availability of contextual cues, input complexity(3) *interactional factors*: more input,

elaborated input (4) learner factors: existing L2 knowledge, background knowledge, procedural knowledge, immediate phonological memory, the learner's L1. It should be noted that the factors here are not assumed to exert equal influence over spoken and written input, with some affecting one more and the other less. Thus, by considering these factors, the present study may not only help shed more light on the different learning outcomes and possible difficulties resulting from listening and reading, but also provide pedagogical implications for how to make and when to choose either input source as a more optimal approach to enhance learners' lexical knowledge in a given teaching context.

1.3 Key Terms in the Study

Incidental vocabulary learning. Incidental vocabulary learning refers to vocabulary learning activities where lexical acquisition takes place as a by-product, not the target, of cognitive activities, such listening and reading, where learners focus their attention on comprehending meaning while picking up new word knowledge or competencies without any conscious intention of doing so.

Vocabulary knowledge scale. Vocabulary Knowledge Scale, designed by Paribakht and Wesche (1996a), was used for assessing the participants' vocabulary knowledge and growth in the present study. This instrument uses a 5-point scale combining self-report and performance items to elicit self-rated and demonstrated knowledge of specific words in written form. Responses can range from total unfamiliarity, through recognition of the word and some ideas of its meaning, to the ability to use the word semantically and grammatically accurately in a sentence.