INTRODUCING STREAMS OF ENGLISH SOUNDS IN TEACHING LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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Abstract: Streams of speech-sounds in listening comprehension have been problematic to most beginning level EFL learners that could lead to the impediment in listening comprehension. In real life sounds of language are normally uttered in flow where speech-sounds are always combined with one another making the linguistically weak-form sounds get squashed by the strong ones where beginning EFL learners would not be able to recognize the original sound uttered in isolation. The study aimed at investigating whether recognition of streams of sounds can help an EFL learner overcome her listening comprehension problems by exposing her to streams of sounds produced in natural speed by native speakers in sentences on a given topic. Results of the study show that practicing streams of speech-sounds recognition could help overcome her listening comprehension problem and make her aware that sounds pronounced in isolation are different from those produced in real speech. Concentration on phonemic distinction in addition to detailed phonetic features even at the beginning level is necessary in trying to provide the EFL learner with exposure to natural English sounds. This can be dome through the teacher's help or through their own efforts, in which comprehensible input does work to help her attain sufficient listening proficiency.

Keywords: *streams of speech-sounds, listening comprehension*

INTRODUCTION

The general intention of EFL learners learning English is, of course, to attain the sufficient level of language proficiency by which they can use such a proficiency to establish communication with others. Krashen (1985) proposes what is known as the input hypothesis, which refers to how learners acquire the second language, that is, how second language acquisition takes place, which is concerned with *acquisition*, instead of *learning*. This hypothesis proposes that learners improve and make progress when they receive second language *input* that is one step beyond their current stage of linguistic competence.

In practice, if learners are at a stage 'i', then acquisition takes place when they are exposed to *comprehensible input* that falls within level 'i + 1'. 'Comprehensible input' is the target language input that learners would not be able to produce but can still understand. It goes beyond the choice of words and involves presentation of context, explanation, rewording of unclear parts, the use of visual cues and meaning negotiation. The meaning successfully conveyed constitutes the learning experience. Listening and reading can become the powerful input for EFL learners, as noted Bland and Krashen (2014), for example hearing stories and doing a great deal of self-selected reading followed by reading for EFL learners' own interest.

In the Indonesian EFL context, English begins to be introduced at the lower secondary school when students are about 13 years old (the 2013 Indonesia's National Curriculum). As a foreign language, English is introduced through writing with the teacher reading scripts in classroom presentation to students. Students see written English words, phrases, or sentences before they hear the speech-sounds as produced naturally by native speakers. With their first language, Indonesian, a well-spelled language, students would tend to assume that English words are pronounced the way they are written and are finally trapped into mispronunciation of words and phrases.

For the present study, a beginning level student was found to have been struggling with a short listening comprehension introduced to her, particularly with streams of sounds. She was not able to hear combinations of sounds, neither at the phonemic nor at the phonetic level, the latter of which deals dominantly with pronunciation. In the second year of her lower secondary school, there is no problem anymore for her with phonetically individual sounds distinguishing meanings which are normally shown by phonemic contrast as in *bad–bed.* This is because similar sounds are always presented, first, in isolation, and then in context, where meanings are conveyed through pairs of examples, in which words are presented and sounds are embedded.

At the phonemic level, which refers to specific ability to focus on and manipulate individual sounds called phonemes, she failed to grasp how individual sounds in words are manipulated when they are presented in a phrasal or clausal context, so that, while she was able to identify the sounds pronounced word by word, she failed to identify those pronounced in combination.

Taylor (1981) describes that EFL learners have to pass through five stages of listening comprehension development:

Stage 1: Streams of sounds (zero comprehension of content)
Stage 2: Isolated word recognition within the streams (minimal comprehension of general content)
Stage 3: Phrase/formula recognition (marginal comprehension of what is heard)
Stage 4: Clause/sentence recognition (minimally functional comprehension of content)
Stage 5: Extended speech recognition (general comprehension of unedited speech)

In the first step, EFL learners have to deal with the stream of sounds in which comprehension becomes meaningless whenever they cannot recognize individual words in English. This includes recognizing the English intonational patterns in phrases and sentences to identify basic patterns such as "Is this your book?" versus "This is your book?" spoken in natural conversation. Pitch variations in English, the social setting of the conversation, and the emotional component of the action do influence pitch. In stage 1 it is also important for learners to recognize English vocabulary and grammar in addition to gaining some awareness of the non-verbal behavior of spoken English.

A stream of sounds is tightly related to phonemic awareness, which is the foundation of spelling and word recognition (reading rockets.com). Even in English as the first language learners need to draw an association between how words are spelled and how they are written in their initial step of learning to read. In the EFL context, phonemic features are illustrated as follows:

1. some others – some mothers
2. ice cream – I scream

At the phonemic level, as shown by different spellings, both utterances in (1) and (2) are clearly distinctive. But at the phonetic level, when both utterances are pronounced without context, they sound exactly the same. So, [sʌmʌðərz] in the first pair can be written as *some others* or *some mothers*. Similarly, [aiskri:m] in the second pair can be written as *ice cream* or *I scream.* Of course, language users can always tell the difference through the context in which such an utterance is being used in discourse context.

Cauldwell (2013) illustrates streams of sounds through non-prominent syllables and prominent syllables in which non-prominent syllables (those received less stress from the speaker at the time of speaking) should be prioritized in the listening classroom. What this means is that these non-prominent syllables cannot be heard easily by non-native speakers, while native speakers can easily hear them without any problems. Prioritizing them in the classroom means introducing and exposing EFL learners to recognize those syllables.

Accordingly, the aim of this research is to introduce to the research subject streams of speech-sounds as produced naturally by native speakers of English so as to help improve her listening comprehension skill.

METHOD

The research subject for this research is a secondary school student in her second grade. Some kind of pre-test was given to her to find out her listening skill. When she was required to listen to a recorded text read by English native speakers, she could not pick up the language at all. She reported that she heard it as if all the sounds were meaningless—in spite of the fact that she was familiar with most words in the recorded text. What needed to be conducted then was to train her to listen to combination of speech-sounds in discourse context.

Then some training was given to her within the duration of two weeks. Within each week, the training was given three times; each training session lasted for 45 minutes. During the first week, within the first three sessions of the training, she was given listening exercises that made her familiar with how English phrases and sentences are spoken by native speakers in normal speed. (See the text given as Appendix 1 as a sample of a passage given for practice exercises.)

During the second week, she was given more listening exercises using texts with the similar level of difficulty. In the last or 6th session, a post-test was given to her (see Appendix 2) to find out whether or not she already became familiar with streams of speech-sounds, and hence improved her listening skill.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

During the first week, she was trained to be familiar with streams of English sounds starting with simple phrases such as *good afternoon* and *good evening*, pronounced [gʊdʌ:ftnu:n] and [gʊdi:vənɪŋ], respectively. Notice that the word-final sound [d] in *good* is combined with the vowel at the beginning of *afternoon* and *evening*. This phonetic fact was pointed out so that the research subject became aware of speech-sounds combined in such phrases.

Moving up from phrases to sentences, the following sentence *Last week I suddenly became really sick and I was feeling a great deal of pain in my side* turned out to be problematic for her. This was because the utterance *last week I suddenly* was pronounced [la:stwi:ka:i sʌ:dənli], where the subject *I* [ai] in a normal speech was combined with the final [k] in *last week.* Similarly, the utterance *and I* was pronounced [ənda:i], where [d] and [ai] are naturally combined. Also, *feeling a great deal of pain* was pronounced [fi:liŋə greit di:ləv pein], where *feeling a* is pronounced in combination [fi:liŋə], and where [l] in *deal* was combined with *of* [ɒv]. Notice also that, when *of* occurs in isolation, it is pronounced [ɒv]; but when it occurs in combination, being a structure word, it is pronounced [əv].

Within the first three sessions, the training made the research subjects become more and more familiar with speech-sounds combination. For example, when she listened to the sub-clause *while my dad filled out all necessary paper work*, she was able to figure out that [fɪlda:ut] was the combined pronunciation of *filled out*. As she showed good progress in her listening skill of figuring out speech-sounds in combination, more practice exercises were given to her.

In the last session, she was given a post-test (see Appendix 2: Notes on Post-test). Now that she already became familiar with the nature of how speech-sounds are naturally combined in normal speech, she did well in the post-test. Instead of getting puzzled by speech-sounds combination, she was able to concentrate on the "contents" of the questions raised by the

researchers. Since she had difficulty expressing herself orally in English, she was asked to answer the questions in Indonesian, to show that she really understood the questions.

From the research findings presented above, we, both researchers, can proceed with the discussion. The findings show that familiarity training on streams of speech support previous research on the influence of lexical knowledge on perception of smaller units of speech using TRACE model, which was founded by McCelland and Elman (1986). This model concerns the principles of interactive activation. The model helps bridge the gap between dominant and less dominant sounds in speech perception. It is based on the principles of interactive activation as the system's working memory, where learners use such memory to store information when learning the language. TRACE I deals with short segments of real speech, while TRACE II simulates empirical findings on the perception of phonemes and words and on the interactions of phoneme and word perception. The model shows how knowledge of phonological constraints is accommodated in specific lexical items; and it is used to influence the processing of novel, non-word utterances.

Listening helps the learner to develop her language proficiency in compliance with the Krashen i+1 input hypothesis (1985), where a subconscious process of acquiring the second language is more dominant than formal classroom learning, which would take laborious effort to reach a sufficient level of language proficiency. Comprehensible input in the target language includes choice of words, presentation of context, explanation, rewording of unclear parts, the use of visual cues, and meaning negotiation. The meaning "successfully conveyed" constitutes the learning experience. Familiarity with streams of sounds bridges the gap between form and meaning, in which the learner can easily move up to meaning, the natural acquisition of her EFL, once form has been accomplished.

The prominence of phonemic features in English Language Teaching (ELT) should not be neglected in addition to phonetic features. When dealing with sounds that do not exist in learners' L1 (in which the teacher focuses on pronunciation of individual words), they might as well focus on how words should be pronounced in phrasal or sentential context. Constant classroom practices of phonemic features can be implemented in the form of feedback based on EFL learners' prominent errors produced in speech. It is important for EFL teachers to be aware that English sounds produced in normal speech undergo a shift from their original individual features due to streams of sounds with specific intonational patterns. So they need to bring this distinction to their teaching practices, with the purpose of making their students aware of L1 and L2 differences in rhythmic patterns and their influence on phonemic features.

Through the introduction of streams of sounds, EFL learners would have an idea that when individual words are uttered in phrasal or clausal context, sounds would shift from their original pronunciation. Without any training, they would be unable to recognize the differences between words pronounced in isolation and words pronounced in combination in streams of speech. Small words or structure words like *can, and, or, but* shift from their original sounds when they are pronounced in larger context. Small words become weak forms (Roach 2009) when they occur in context: *can* may be pronounced [kən] or [kn̩], and *and* may be pronounced [ənd], [ən], or even [n̩]. (Notice that the dot under [n̩] indicates that it is a syllabic nasal. That is, the nasal [n̩] serves as the nucleus of a syllable.)

Simple explanation on how small words get squashed in the context is definitely necessary to overcome learners' confusion related to the nature of English, which according to Nespor, Shuklar, Mehler: (2016) is a stressed-time language. It is different from Indonesian, which is a syllable-time language. Learning problems arise when Indonesian EFL learners presume that

English and Indonesian are the same, expecting that every word (including structure words) is pronounced the same way—in isolation and in larger context.

CONCLUSIONS

In the beginning, the EFL learner who served as the research subject found it difficult to understand English native speakers' utterances due to their natural production of speech-sounds. Giving her training by exposing her to natural speech-sounds in English did help her to catch individual words produced naturally in phrases and sentences. The intensive training and regular practice helped her to move up to a higher stage of listening comprehension. As she managed to overcome her difficulties in the early stage of listening comprehension, she was able to focus fully on listening to streams of speech for comprehension.

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Appendix 1 Hospital (Listening Transcript)

Last week I suddenly became really sick and I was feeling a great deal of pain in my side. So my father rushed me to the emergency room at the nearest hospital. And there wasn't any sign that I was getting better. We didn't feel that we needed to call any ambulance because we lived so close to the hospital.

When we arrived my dad helped me into the emergency room. I was quickly admitted to the hospital; a nurse took my vital signs blood pressure, temperature, and pulse while my dad filled out all necessary paper work. Then I was prepared for emergency surgery. The surgery didn't last that long, but I felt sore afterwards. I was released the following day from the hospital and I was back on my feet in a couple of days. No one likes to visit the hospital and I am glad we have them.

Having good insurance is also extremely important because medical costs are so expensive. This is particularly true with international students travelling abroad.

Appendix 2 Notes on the Post-test

In the post test, we did not show the research subject transcript of the text but went through the difficult vocabulary items she might not be familiar with. We asked her one vocabulary item; and if she was not familiar with it, we got her to write it down without thinking about its spelling and explained the meaning of the word. She also had to give an example of how to use the word in English or in Indonesian to make her aware that a word is always used in context, not in isolation.

Having finished with all the vocabulary items in the list, we went with inferring questions in Indonesian, for example: *if you have a serious illness, what would you do? You go to hospital, and then…. Would you see a doctor? Apart from seeing a doctor, what would you have in hospital? Laboratory check, etc.* This was intended to open up her general knowledge or schemata about medical treatments in a hospital. The same thing applies in the text of '*Learning English'.* Schemata questions related to learning English at school were brainstormed, such as: *Do you learn English at school? How many periods a week do you learn it? Do you learn grammar? Listening? Speaking? Reading and writing? How would you learn listening, please explain to me?* This made her aware that the text would run in sequence as it is in real life.

In the post-test, we asked her questions for our control of her comprehension. We got her to retell the story in her first language, *Bahasa Indonesia*, to check how much she understood what she had listened to before.