

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale of the Study

A great number of non-English speakers as well as native English speakers use English as an important medium of international communication in every part of the world. English is no longer the language used solely in English speaking countries; rather it is internationally used. As the English language has become an essential factor in strengthening trade and travel in many countries, the necessity of knowing and using this communication medium is increasing. Besides, English is widely used in communication through modern technology and media communication devices such as mobile telephones, electronic mail and the Internet. Undoubtedly, people around the world need English as the main medium of their communication via such devices.

As a consequence of its importance as an international language as mentioned above, it is necessary for Thai people to be able to use English effectively. The government is aware that the English language is an important part of Thai education. According to the 2003 Basic Education Curriculum, Thai students in primary, secondary and university levels are required to study English as a compulsory subject following the 2001 National Curriculum Reformation. The course of study which was implemented in 2001 puts emphasis on the development of students' fundamental and practical communication skills such as listening and speaking. This is a natural progression in the age in which there will definitely be much more opportunity than now to use English in order to communicate with people all over the world. Without a doubt, the ability to communicate in English in real life situations will remain essential, and students are expected to be able to communicate in the English language. The purpose of learning English is, thus, to communicate in English efficiently in the real world.

For this reason, listening is an important skill for the person who is learning English because in verbal communication we can not communicate with each other without listening to speakers' utterances and understanding them. In addition, everyone wants to listen to what English speakers are saying at a natural speed and to understand it. Everyone wishes to enjoy English films, television programs, and music as well as understanding the gist of announcements. To meet these demands, learners need to be equipped with listening skills. Beyond this, there are three main reasons to advocate the importance of listening skills.

First, listening is the first skill a child acquires. The idea that a child receives listening as the first skill comes from the observation of how children acquire the mother tongue (Underwood, 1989). She observed that babies spend many months listening to people around them before they utter a word and take a great deal of time trying to make sense out of the sounds they hear. In other words, a child receives a large amount of input through listening before developing speaking, writing and reading skills. These skills are developed later as they grow up. Similarly, Postovsky (1976), Asher (1972), and Buck (2001) suggested that a new language learner should learn listening at the initial stage of language learning in the same manner as a child learns a mother language because learning listening skill in the beginning is the natural process of human in acquiring a new language.

Second, listening takes a more important role than other skills in overall communication. Rivers (1981) stated that listening comprehension is of primary importance in communication because communication will not take place unless people understand the language to which they are exposed. Further, Wilt (1950) suggested that we always spend a longer time listening during communication than speaking, reading and writing. To support the claim, Wilt provided information that when people communicate they spend 45 percent of the time in listening, 30 percent in speaking, 16 percent in reading, and 9 percent in writing. Rankin (1928) also noted that people spend 70 percent of their time in communication and three-fourths of this time is spent on listening and speaking.

Third, listening can enhance speaking skill. Postovsky (1976) posited that the key to increase speaking ability is to develop proficiency in listening comprehension. He further suggested that speaking skill would be developed automatically when

learners improve their listening skill. Moreover, in the study of Syananondh (1991), the result showed that the level of students' speaking ability is positively correlated with the level of their listening comprehension ability. From his study, it could be said that students who are better speakers are associated with a higher level of listening comprehension ability, whereas students with low listening ability are generally poor speakers. Therefore, it is necessary to develop listening skill in the initial stage of learning in order to become a good speaker.

With the three main reasons presented above, it is reasonable to say that listening is an important skill a second language learner needs to improve. This skill, however, has rarely been a priority in second language teaching. Burley-Allen (1982), Morley (1991), and Abelleira (1987) stated that the teaching time of listening skill in the language classroom is less than the time allocated for other skills because listening skill is not the main teaching focus in the practice of most English teachers, probably due to the presupposition that this skill can be developed naturally.

The Thai educational system is an example of those which pays less attention to the skill of listening. With regard to English courses for first-year university students in Thailand, Sakda (2000) found that students have only one hour per week for practicing listening skill. Besides, Boonyakarn and Syananondh (1991) found that Thai students enrolled in private universities and colleges in Thailand spend only 21-30% of the time on listening when compared with other language skills. Additionally, Thai students who study English as a foreign language seem to have relatively low English listening achievement. Debyasuvarn (1981, cited in Broughton, 1997) believed that only 10 percent of students in the Thai educational system are proficient in English to the extent that they can communicate satisfactorily. Moreover, Syananondh (1983, cited in Syananondh, 1991), investigating factors of pronunciation and learning strategies affecting English listening comprehension of Thai-speaking graduate students in the United States argued that despite their many years of English learning and exposing to natural verbal communication in English speaking countries, Thai students could hardly understand native speakers. The findings of Thongphrom (1994) and Lertlai (1995) also suggested that the listening ability of Thai students was at a very low level. Thongphrom (1994), for example, investigated the English listening communicative competence of Mathayomsuksa six students (grade 12) in the

second educational zone in Bangkok and found that their English listening communicative competence was below the level normally designated as low. Also, Lertlai (1995) who carried out a study with Mathayomsuksa three students, studying in the English language program of Sadao Khanchai Kamphalanon Anuson School, pointed out that the students' competence in English listening for communication was at a very low level. These findings indicated that Thai students had problems with listening skills. The problems in listening skill occurred in many levels of Thai students. Thai university students are not an exception (Sakda, 2000). The facts strongly interested the researcher to find an effective method of teaching and testing listening in order to improve university students' listening comprehension ability.

One widely-used practice to enhance the learners' listening skill is questioning. In regard to teaching listening skills, a teacher often gives students questions to practice the skill of listening. Ur (1984) and Byrne (1986) maintained that the question - answer approach is one of the most frequently used ways of giving language practice in the classroom. Similarly, in testing listening skills, very often a teacher gives students questions in order to test their listening ability. Buck (2001) gave an opinion that the use of comprehension questions is a common method in assessing listening skill. Further, teachers often use different kinds of questions, such as multiple choice and short-answer questions for different purposes.

In practice, questions are placed at different stages of listening activities. The questions might be given to students before listening to the listening text – *the pre-listening question technique* or after listening to the listening text – *the post-listening question technique*. To use the former or the latter normally depends on the teachers' decision. Both approaches of posing questions in teaching and testing listening skill have been constructively commented on.

Several advantages of using preview questions in listening comprehension practice have been proposed by ESL scholars. Boonyakarn and Syananondh (1991), and Lingzhu (2003) advocated that *the pre-listening question technique* enables students to listen selectively. By reading the questions prior to listening to the text, questions can serve as useful guides for students to filter out unimportant information and focus on significant information. In addition, students are provided with an opportunity to build up their own expectations about the incoming information. In so

doing, they can activate their prior knowledge. Moreover, Lingzhu (2003) pointed out that students are motivated to listen and find answers to questions given to them prior to each listening task. She added that questions should be given before listening because in the real world listeners always know the topic or some information before listening. Besides, Thompson (1995) stated that pre-listening questions help listeners to eliminate ambiguous interpretations of the messages and help listeners to have a purpose for listening in mind.

Despite the above mentioned strengths, Underwood (1989) and Weir (1993) suggested using questions after students have finished listening. Underwood noted that *the post-listening question technique* encourages listeners to understand the global meaning of the listening text. This is because after receiving the questions, listeners would not specify which part of the text they should pay more attention to and which part they should not. Instead, they would concentrate on all parts of the listening text. Similarly, Weir (1993) mentioned that using this method, listeners would understand the overall meaning of the text before reading the questions and demonstrate their listening ability through responding to the questions.

With regards to the advantages of the pre-listening question and the post-listening question techniques stated above, it could be concluded that each technique is a useful way to enhance students' listening ability. To restate, the pre-listening question technique encourages students to listen to the important data for answering the questions, to anticipate what they are going to hear, to activate their prior knowledge, and to motivate their attention. On the other hand, the post-listening question technique helps students to understand the overall meaning of the text, and to motivate them concentrate on all parts of the listening text.

Accordingly, those two techniques represent favorable ways in the classroom practice to enhance students' listening ability. However, not much research on the effects of the use of these two techniques on listening is available. Only Buck (1990) and Sherman (1997) were found having the interest in the effects of question positions in listening skill. As for Thailand, the database on Thai Dissertations has shown no studies conducted on this area of interest. Although some studies in Thailand have focused on the effects of question positions in reading comprehension, it is difficult to say how far the observed effects are paralleled in listening comprehension. Thus,

English teachers might wonder which method represents the best way to increase students' listening ability in responding to questions. Thus, the researcher, one among those, is interested in investigating the effects of the pre-listening question and the post-listening question techniques on English listening comprehension in order to provide useful information for English teachers in using each method appropriately. Together with the main purpose, having an assumption that attitude could be a factor affecting their ability to do listening tests, the researcher would like to find out the attitudes of the students towards each technique.

1.2 Purposes of the Study

This study investigated the use of *the pre-listening question technique* and *the post-listening question technique* in listening comprehension tests to find out the effects of each technique on students' ability in answering questions and what feeling students have towards each question position. The results obtained are expected to be used as a beneficial guideline for English teachers to use questions in teaching listening appropriately. In particular, this research is aimed at investigating the extent to which *the pre-listening question technique* and *the post-listening question technique* may affect listening comprehension of the third year English major students of Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus. The purposes of this study were put in details as follow.

1. To compare the listening comprehension ability enhanced by *the pre-listening question and the post-listening question techniques* of all subjects.
2. To compare the listening comprehension ability enhanced by *the pre-listening question and the post-listening question techniques* of the good listeners and of the poor listeners.
3. To compare any enhancement of the subjects' ability to respond to local questions and global questions enhanced by *the pre-listening question and the post-listening question techniques*.
4. To investigate the subjects' attitudes towards *the pre-listening question and the post-listening question techniques*.

1.3 Research Questions

To achieve the objectives, the following research questions were posed and answered.

1. To what extent do *the pre-listening question and the post-listening question techniques* affect the listening comprehension of all subjects?

2. To what extent do *the pre-listening question and the post-listening question techniques* affect the listening comprehension of the good listeners and of the poor listeners?

3. How do *the pre-listening question and the post-listening question techniques* enhance the subjects' ability to respond to both local and global questions?

4. What are the subjects' attitudes towards *the pre-listening question and the post-listening question techniques*?

1.4 Scope of the Study and Limitations

This study investigated the effects of question positions (*the pre-listening question and the post-listening question techniques*) on the listening comprehension and the attitudes towards *the pre-listening question and the post-listening question techniques* of the third year undergraduate English major students of the academic year 2006 at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus. The emphasis was on the effects of question positions in enhancing the students' listening comprehension. This study, however, might have some limitations based on the subjects and instruments as noted below:

1. This study investigated a specific group of subjects: the third year English major students of the academic year 2006 at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus. The subjects in this study were a small group of 58 subjects enrolled in the research study, so the result of the study should be taken as tentative rather than conclusive.

2. The types of listening texts and the listening question levels were limited. The four listening texts used in this study were types of authentic texts, namely an interview, a hotel reservation, and two narratives. Besides, in this study only local and

global questions were used to establish the effects of the pre-listening question and the post-listening question techniques on students' listening ability.

1.5 Definition of Terms

Eight key terms used in this study are defined below:

1. **Pre-listening question** is a technique in which learners are allowed to read the test questions of the listening texts before the listening process.

2. **Post-listening question** is a technique in which learners are allowed to read the test questions just after the listening process.

3. **Listening comprehension** means the degree of understanding indicated by scores received from the listening tests. These scores directly indicate subjects' listening ability.

4. **Comparable Groups** mean the two groups of the subjects which are of the same listening ability.

5. **High groups** mean the two sub-groups of subjects which are from the top 27 percent high listening proficiency students of each of the comparable groups.

6. **Low groups** mean the two sub-groups of subjects which are from the bottom 27 percent low listening proficiency students of each of the comparable groups.

7. **Local question** is type of question which requires subjects to locate specific details or information already given in the listening text.

8. **Global question** is the type of question which requires subjects to synthesize or infer information based on what was given in the listening text.