

IMPROVING STUDENTS' LISTENING-RESPONSE SKILL

Muhammad Rifqi
Dian Nuswantoro University

Abstract: Responding to questions is an important skill to develop. Sometimes students cannot give suitable responses to some specific questions. In order to be able to give suitable response to a question students have to understand what a given question expects. Failing to anticipate what the question asks will lead the students to give unsuitable response. Giving feedback to the students in anticipating what a question asks is believed to be able to improve their abilities to respond to the questions appropriately.

I conducted classroom research on the teacher's feedback to improve the students' question-response skill in my listening class in EFL setting. Sixty-nine participants were the fourth-semester students taking Listening IV in 2005. They were asked to listen to and answer the recorded oral questions taken from a standardized model test. The test results were evaluated and the researcher gave feedback to the students by giving the key and discussing the case specific to each question item. After giving teacher's feedback, the participants were asked to listen and respond to a number of questions and the result, again, were evaluated. This cycles were iterated for 3 times. The teacher's feedback comprises sound recognition, guessing the word's or phrase's meaning, and grammar.

The research findings showed significant improvement on the students' question-response skill indicated by the increased mean score especially after implementing the third cycle.

Keywords: feedback, action research, cycles, sound recognition, meaning, grammar

Sometimes it is difficult for some students to give suitable responses to some questions. This is because they fail to understand such questions as well as the talks or the conversations that were initially heard before they are being asked. The students' difficulties may vary from sound recognition, vocabulary/word meaning, grammar, etc. As defined by Howard and Dakin in Yagang (2005) listening is "the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This covers understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, his grammar and vocabulary, and grasping his meaning." The skillful listener is capable of doing these four things simultaneously. Furthermore, listening is:

more than hearing; comprehending spoken language involves process-oriented thinking skills. Because listening involves the use of language

and thought, the ability to listen effectively develops as students' language abilities develop and mature (www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/mla/speak.html).

Vandergrift in Porcaro (2003:5) states that listening comprehension is “a complex, active process” and Nunan and Miller (in Porcaro, 2003:5) also argues that it should be integrated with the development of other language skills. In line to this, Harmer in Willy Renandya and Zhang Wen Fang (2003:13) suggests that “students need to be exposed to the English language if they want to learn it, and one of the best ways of doing this is through listening.” In Indonesian context, it is difficult to expose the students with English. The students will immediately leave their English outside the classroom. The lack of exposure to English affects the students’ progress in listening skill. In addition, Krashen (in Renandya and Zang, 2000: 12) points out that “[e]xtensive exposure to language that is comprehensible, either through reading or listening, helps the learning process, which in turns enhances the student’s general proficiency in the target language.

As pointed out in www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/mla/speak.html, the Curriculum Development Board outlines several characteristics of an effective listener among others are he is able to prepare to react or respond to what the speaker says, make connections between their prior knowledge and the information presented by the speaker.

Yagang (2005) argues that teaching listening to students is not just playing tape recorder and asking/answering questions. The listening materials that may be used in listening class cover short talks, short conversation, lectures, news items, speech, poetry reading, short story and other authentic materials. These will give a broad experience for learners to be introduced to various types of oral communication.

In my study, in order to give experience to students to cope with a standardized test, they were asked to answer the questions taken from a ready-made standardized TOEIC test. This type of standardized test is aimed at testing one’s English proficiency. This test covers listening and reading comprehension. The former consists of analyzing pictures, analyzing answer choices, analyzing question types and analyzing language functions. The latter consists of analyzing vocabulary and analyzing grammar (Lougheed, 2000:15). Since this study only concerns with students’ question-response skills in listening test the following discussion will focus more on listening.

In this chosen test the question types comprise yes-no and question-word questions. The questions and answer options were both presented orally by the native speaker through recorded tape. After listening to the question, the students were asked to choose among the three answer choices provided. In order to be able to give the correct answer the students should be aware of several things, such as sound recognition, word/phrase meaning, grammar, language function, etc.

ACTION RESEARCH

Teachers are expected to be sensitive to every phenomenon and to identify every problem arises in their class. They should try to seek for the solution to the

problems they face to improve the class performance. Action research is one way of improving instruction quality. Millrood (2003) defines action research as an “intervention in the teaching-learning process with the hypothesis of a general improvement and putting certain theories and/or strategies to trial.” In line with this Richard, Platt & Platt as quoted by Snell (2002:29) give more detail definition as:

Teacher-initiated classroom research which seeks to increase the teacher’s understanding of classroom teaching and learning and to bring about improvements in classroom practices. Action research typically involves small-scale investigative projects in the teacher’s own classroom.

In fact, teachers are expected to be reflective to their own classroom and keep on trying to improve their classroom performance. In doing so, they should follow the stages in action research that include problem identification, a plan to bring about the expected change, action on the plan, and observation on the effect of the action applied in the classroom. These stages are repeated in 3 cycles.

Figure 1: The Process of Conducting Action Research [adapted from Somekh in McBride {2003)].



CLASS DESCRIPTION

The population in this research consisted of 126 students taking Listening IV in the fourth-semester of English Department, Language Faculty, Universitas Dian Nuswantoro, Semarang in 2005. The sample was taken randomly from the population using simple random sampling. Of the 126 persons involved in Listening IV classes (4 parallel classes of S1 level and 3 parallel classes of D3 level), 69 were taken as the sample, especially those who had complete marks for the whole cycles.

The Listening IV course is aimed at introducing students to the various existing standardized English tests such as TOEFL, TOEIC, IELTS etc., especially the material related to listening. After taking this course the students are expected to be familiar with such standardized tests, especially listening section, and be able to anticipate the types of questions and to give the correct answers

when they take the standardized tests. This is based on the rationale that the recent trend in educational and business work field require the job seekers to have certain score level in English proficiency usually measured by TOEIC or TOEFL scores.

PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

Following the steps in this action research, I conducted the following: firstly, the students were asked to answer a number of oral questions taken from TOEIC preparation book especially those which were in the Question-Response section. At the end of this test, the answer key was given to the students and they were asked to check their own answers/responses. After checking the students' answer with the answer key, it was found that the score average for the classes was low. What I expected when I gave them such test was they could apply the whole knowledge they obtained from the previous series of the courses i.e. Listening 1, 2, and 3. Knowing that the test results were low, I asked students to give their opinion on the test. Some of them said that the speech was so fast that they could not recognize the sound. Some said that they missed the word meaning. Some failed to identify the sentence structure and some others could not identify the language function so they did not know how to react or to give responses to the questions in the test. These are the problems I identified from my Listening classes.

PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

I started to discuss all the questions given in the first test together with the whole class. Once I discussed every single question I asked the class what the suitable answer/ response to the question was. When there was a student who answered correctly I asked him/her to explain the clues hoping that he/she could help the other students to identify the real problem each question had. Accordingly I conformed his/her answer/response and explained such problem they did not realize. I did the same thing until the last question item.

HYPOTHESIS

Observing the student's failure to respond correctly to the questions from the given test, I believed that if they were aware of the specific problem in each question they could give the suitable response to the given question. In other words, the teacher's feedback to help the students to identify problems specific to each question would be very beneficial for them to help increase their response skill.

The data analysis technique used in this study was statistical analysis using Paired Sample T Test formula. This formula worked by comparing the score from cycle to cycle. The mean scores tendencies from cycle to cycle showed the effects of the given treatment/ action. This means that if the mean scores increase, the given action is considered effective and vice versa.

INTERVENTION

Following the hypothesis, giving feedback was set up regarding to the identified problems such as sound discrimination/ recognition, guessing the word's/phrase's meaning, sentence structure, language function, raising student's

awareness of distracter, etc. The above problems were identified while discussing each question with the students. They were shown and explained why the response of each question was as it was and were asked to be aware of some possibilities of making the wrong response to such question. The whole class scores obtained from the first test were recorded. In this stage the first cycle was simultaneously started. After being given feedback, the second test of the same type of questions was given to the students and the results were evaluated and recorded.

The second cycle began by giving teacher's feedback related to the mistakes made by the students in responding to the questions in the second test as it was done in the first cycle. Again, the students were evaluated using the same type of listening test and the results were recorded. The same treatment was applied in the third cycle.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

There were 4 tests given to the students during the three cycles of this action research and 4 sets of scores were recorded consisting of 1 set of scores of preliminary test and the other 3 of each cycle. The results of the test are shown in Appendix 1.

From the statistical analysis the mean scores are shown in table 1. The mean score for the first test was 69.2. In the second test, the mean score increased by 0.8 points into 70.0 and it decreased by 0.3 points into 69.7 in the third test. In the fourth test 7.8 points increased into 77.5. These mean scores then were analyzed by comparing the mean scores of T_1 (first test) and T_2 (second test), T_2 (second test) and T_3 (third test), T_3 (third test) and T_4 (fourth test). Based on the statistical analysis using Paired Sample T-Test, it was found that the significance level of the comparison of T_1 and T_2 mean scores was at 70.5%. Because the significance level was at 70.5% and it was higher than 5% it was considered insignificant. This means that the increased-mean scores of T_1 and T_2 from 69.2 into 70.0 was not significant.

Table 1: mean scores of $T_1 - T_4$

Tests	N*	Mean Score
T_1	69	69.2
T_2	69	70.0
T_3	69	69.7
T_4	69	77.5

N = the number of subjects

In the same way, the mean scores of T_2 and T_3 were analyzed. Table 1 shows that the mean score of T_2 was lower 0.3 points than that of T_3 . The analysis shows that the significance was at 82.6%. Since the significance was higher than 5%, it was considered not significant. This means that the decrease of the mean scores of T_2 and T_3 was not significant.

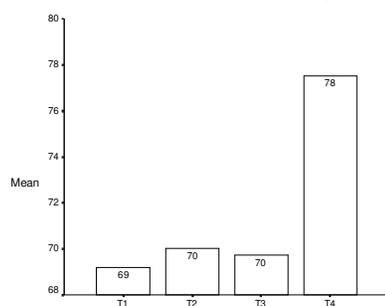
The mean score of T_4 (77.5) increased by 7.8 points compared to the mean score of T_3 (69.7). By analyzing these mean scores using Paired Sample T-Test it was found that the significance level was at 0%. Since its significance level

was less than 5% it was considered significant. This means that the increased mean score from 69.7 (T₃) to 75.5 (T₄) was very significant.

The above analyses showed that the teacher interventions by giving feedback in the first two cycles had not shown any significant effect on the students' scores. In the third cycle of the research, however, the intervention (teacher's feedback) apparently resulted increase of students' scores. This means that teacher's feedback must be given more frequently.

The development of mean scores from T₁ to T₄ is shown in chart 1.

Chart 1: Mean scores of T₁ – T₄



OVERVIEW ON THE TEACHER'S FEEDBACK GIVEN DURING THE RESEARCH

As mentioned formerly, the teacher's feedback in this research comprises sound recognition, word's/phrase's meaning, grammar, language function, etc.

Sound Recognition/ Discrimination

This is the very basic factor that will influence a listener to understand what a speaker says. The failure to recognize suitable sound(s) will influence the listener's comprehension on the speaker's utterances. From the observation during the research, the students' problems related to the sound recognition covered homophone and some linguistic features such as elision, assimilation. Shelton (2004) who also identified these problems in his English class agrees that they can cause a great deal of comprehension problems. The majority of the distracters in the provided options in each question were made based on the most similar sounds (homograph or homonym).

The students should always be reminded in order to be able to anticipate such problems. The example of this problem that may occur is shown as follows.

Example 1:

Good evening. **How** are you? [Bold is added]

(A) It's time for bed.

(B) Fine, thank you.

(C) I'm not Mr. Good.

(Lougheed, 2000:598)

(Note: Both the question sentence and choices were presented orally)

The sentence is a type of greeting. And it is followed by a question asking someone's condition. The correct answer is option (B). In this example, the question word is 'how' which is officially pronounced /haY/. The students,

however, may listen to it as /hu:/ which is spelled 'who'. If this happens the students will give the wrong response by choosing option (C) since they think that the question word is 'who'.

Word/Phrase Meaning

In relation to the word/phrase meaning, one technique that is usually applied is by guessing the meaning through its sentence context. Sometimes we can guess the word/phrase meaning from the surrounding (before and after) sentences. Since all of questions were presented in single sentences, it is difficult to guess the meaning by applying such technique. There were only few questions containing the difficult words because the words/ phrases used are relatively familiar to the students. If such problems occurred, I tried to explain the words/phrases by giving illustration to help the students understand their meaning.

Example 2: Who made the **reservation**? [Bold is added]

(Lougheed, 2000:613)

To explain the meaning of the word 'reservation', I said that it is an activity that someone usually does before purchasing a certain service from another one or a company for example you have to make a reservation if you want to eat in a very popular restaurant or when someone need accommodation in a hotel, motel or guest house. Sometimes I also stimulated them by asking further question related to the difficult words/phrases

Grammar

Grammar is really important in catching the meaning of a sentence. It covers a wide range of grammatical items. One of the grammatical items that frequently occurred during the research was tenses. The students were reminded to be careful with tenses in choosing the suitable response to a certain question if there was a tense clue in the sentence. In the sentence "Where were you last week?" (Lougheed, 2000:598) the tense is in past, therefore the suitable response should also be in past tense or the word indicating past action. Thus, the right answer for the above question is "I was on vacation." rather than "This weekend I m at home." The first option is the right response since it has the same tense.

Language Function

Knowing the language function of a sentence also plays an important role. It is possible for the students to give unsuitable response if they cannot identify the language function implied within a sentence. The sentence "Why don't you come over tonight?" (Lougheed, 2000:612) is not just an *asking for information* but rather an *invitation*. Thus, the right response for this sentence is "Thank you. I'd like to."

RECOMMENDATION

To help the students succeed in improving their response skill in listening, the teacher's feedback is proven to be effective. The feedback comprises some valuable aspects that help students to be the effective listeners such as the ability to react and to respond to what the speaker says. The continuous feedback on the

matters that usually occur in a standardized test can improve the students' awareness of the problems. This will also give the background knowledge to the students so that they can identify the problems themselves and give the correct response later.

Because English is a foreign language for the students in Indonesian setting, the dominant problems concern with the students' weakness in listening to the correct sounds. In addition, most of the students considered that the speech is so fast that they can not catch and understand the utterance.

It is recommended that teachers of listening classes to conduct research on how to improve the students' ability to recognize English sounds at normal/fast speed so that they will be able to understand a relatively normal speed of speech.

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Appendix 1: Data Tabulation of Listening IV

Subj. No.	T1	T2	T3	T4
1	77	90	73	98
2	73	57	60	72
3	87	80	80	88
4	87	90	73	82
5	43	47	43	38
6	23	67	67	75
7	87	93	83	97
8	57	53	77	73
9	67	77	77	70
10	90	97	83	98
11	87	83	73	87
12	87	100	83	98
13	87	83	83	90
14	83	70	73	70
15	87	70	80	88
16	70	37	63	87
17	93	93	87	100
18	93	77	57	75
19	63	53	63	68
20	90	60	73	77
21	70	57	60	77
22	87	77	77	93
23	30	33	30	37
24	77	47	63	68
25	90	100	90	92
26	53	53	47	47
27	63	77	57	80
28	70	80	80	85
29	70	83	83	88
30	80	67	70	78
31	87	80	63	88
32	60	57	63	55
33	50	60	60	65
34	47	67	63	65
35	50	50	50	73

Subj. No.	T1	T2	T3	T4
36	60	70	83	75
37	80	87	67	92
38	70	70	73	87
39	47	83	77	77
40	40	57	57	43
41	93	87	77	90
42	67	50	67	88
43	93	93	90	98
44	43	63	70	72
45	97	80	80	90
46	97	100	93	100
47	88	97	83	97
48	58	80	80	98
49	19	87	80	83
50	77	70	80	83
51	65	40	63	70
52	54	77	63	72
53	27	50	73	35
54	50	77	67	75
55	42	37	40	63
56	92	87	70	88
57	73	47	60	78
58	81	77	80	92
59	54	90	77	80
60	35	50	60	57
61	58	57	57	58
62	88	97	80	98
63	65	60	67	67
64	90	60	70	72
65	62	50	63	75
66	66	53	63	63
67	69	57	50	45
68	62	57	67	80
69	97	70	77	87

Notes: T : Test

Subj. No. : Subject Number