

ABSTRACT

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English as a foreign language in Indonesia has been learned since elementary level. The students are introduced to English due to the language has become the bridge to the widespread knowledge from English itself until other scope of knowledge. In order to master English as second or foreign language, there are four basic language skills should be mastered by the learners, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Listening has become an important skill should be mastered by the students because through listening, the students are able to master other language skills i.e. speaking. That's why, listening skill is also called as the foundation for other skills. One of the problems faced by the students is they have less knowledge on situations and pre-existent of the world, so that they have no sense to any text. As the result of it, they fail to catch the meaning of the text and they cannot comprehend the text.

To solve the problem above, the teacher may apply some strategies in ELT, and one of them is top-down strategy. The concept of top-down strategy is the teacher stimulates the students by discussing general context of the text, talking about factual detail, and analyzing linguistic form of the text. The key point to apply top-down strategy is by activating students' schemata. When human beings are stimulated by particular words, discourse patterns, or contexts, such schematic knowledge is activated and they are able to recognize what be seen or heard because it fits into patterns which are already known.

The application of top-down strategy has some advantages. First, the students are guided to comprehend the material from the general context to the linguistic analysis. Second, by activating students' schemata or background knowledge, the teaching learning process will run well because the students have the same perception on the topic being learned. Third, this method is easy to be applied

Keywords: listening skill, top-down strategy

I. INTRODUCTION

God creates human being in nations and tribes. Each nations and tribes has their own languages. People frequently get difficulties to communicate their ideas or thought to other people which has different first language. To solve the problem, there should be one language as an unifier language. English is used as an unifier language throughout the nations in the world or it can be said that English is an international language. Harmer (2001: 1) states that although English is not the language with the largest number of native or 'first' language speakers, it has become a lingua franca. A lingua franca can be defined as a language widely adopted for communication between two speakers whose native language are different from each other's and where one or both speakers are using it as a 'second' language. In Indonesia, English has been introduced to the students since an early level of education. That's why, learning English is an important thing so that Indonesian students will be able to follow the world's development in almost all aspect of life.

To learn English as a second or as a foreign language, there are some basic skills should be considered by the learners. In learning English especially, there are four language basic skills should be mastered by the learners, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. According to Wills (2004: 3), among those four language basic skills, listening is the one which should be mastered by the L2 learners because it is the fundamental language

skill. Butt (2010: 310) says that every language has a common and a natural sequence for the development of the language skills. Similarly English language has the natural sequence of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening skill is ranked first of all the four folds. This highlights the importance of listening skill in the life of human beings. Linse (2005: 25) states that listening is skill as a foundation for other skills. Besides that, there are also other points should be mastered by the L2 learners. Some of them are vocabulary, grammar, and phonology. In learning English as a foreign language, students often face difficulties to master listening skill. The writer thinks that it is because the sound system of English is different with Indonesian sound system. In English, words are read as words but in Indonesian, words are read as a number of letters. So, Indonesian students who learn English as a second language frequently get difficulties in understanding the words said by the native speaker.

Teaching listening is frequently said as the most difficult task for ESL teachers. This is because successful listening skill is acquired over time and with lots of practice. It is frustrating for students because there are no rules as in grammar teaching. Speaking and writing also have very specific exercises that can lead to improved skills. This is not to say that there are not ways of improving listening skills, however they are difficult to quantify (Harmer, 2001: 156). Besides that, the teachers also must increase the students' knowledge on English itself, English culture and general knowledge to support teaching learning process. When a teacher had decided to use an appropriate material to teach listening class, the next problem is how to deliver it using an appropriate method. Actually, there are several methods which are known well such as Audio Lingual Method, Presentation-Practice-Production, The Communicative Approach, Task-based Learning, and many more. Each of those strategies has their own strength and weaknesses to teach listening. Here, the writer will discuss on the usage of top-down as a strategy to improve the students' listening skill.

II. DISCUSSION

A. The nature of the listening skill

Hornby (1995: 687) states that listening is derived from the word listen which means to make an effort to hear somebody or something. Howatt and Dakin in Wills (2004: 2) define that listening as the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This process involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, the speaker's grammar and vocabulary, and comprehension of meaning.

Oxford (1993: 206) defines that listening is a complex, problem solving skill and it is more than just perception of the sounds. Listening includes comprehension of meaning bearing words, phrases, clauses, sentences and connected discourse.

Ma Lihua (2002: 68) points out that listening comprehension is a complex psychological process of listeners' understanding language by sense of hearing. It is an interactive process of language knowledge and psychological activities. However, this process is not simply decoding the message; it also involves the combining of the decoding of the message process with its reconstruction as meaning.

Since listening is, according to Shouyuan (2003: 74), the most important component in the five aspects of overall English competence he suggests as listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation, it deserves particular attention. As being known by people that from a very beginning of human's life, when human being is still in infant periods, the first sense known and used was ear. Learning from the voice heard is the first step. Then, listening is the next step that is going to be the modal on how to speak by imitating the voice heard. Thus, they learn to be a listener. For the L2 learners,

this sequence of steps become important remembering that English is as a foreign language. By the training and practice of listening continuously, later, L2 learners will come to the 'comprehension'.

B. Several problems faced by L2 learners

Students often get difficulties coping with spoken language. In listening class, the students are frequently feeling frustrated to learn listening because there are no rules as in grammar teaching. Below are some problems which are generally faced by the students in listening class.

The first problem concerns with vocabulary. Students' limited vocabulary of English is the most common problem faced by the students. For the beginner level, the students can sometimes hear the words said by the native speaker clearly, but they do not understand the meaning of the word in their native language. For the next level, the students frequently know the meaning of the words in their native language, but they don't know the situation or the circumstances in which the words are used.

The second problem is the speed of the native speakers. The students feel that the speed of the utterances said by the native speaker is too fast. Because of the problem, they cannot catch the message of the utterance being said. Ur (2000: 111) says that students cannot understand fast, natural speech. The students frequently ask the teacher to slow down the speed, but if it is done by the teacher, it means that he is not helping them to learn to cope with everyday speech.

The third is grammar. According to Lynch (1994: 69), one of the factors caused the learners get difficulties in mastering listening skill is grammar. When the learners' knowledge of grammar is limited, they become passive listeners.

The fourth is shared schemata. Harmer (2001: 200) says that shared schemata make spoken and written communication efficient. Without the right kind of pre-existing knowledge, comprehension becomes more difficult. That is the problem for some foreign learners because they have different shared knowledge or cultural reference and discourse patterning in their own language and culture from that in the English variety they are dealing with. Underwood (1989: 17) in Harmer (2001: 203) states that when students who are engaged in listening encounter unknown lexis it can be like a dropped barrier causing them to stop and think about the meaning of a word and thus making them miss the next part of the speech.

The fifth is the students' thought that they have to understand every words. Ur (2000: 111) says that the common perception of the students is they think that they have to understand every word said by native speakers to comprehend the message in it. It means the students believe that everything said consists of important information. If they do that, it is being worried that they will miss the whole chunks of speech of the speaker. The effort to understand everything often results in ineffective comprehension. The students are must not to know the whole words said by the speaker, they just need to find the key words to catch the message to comprehend the message.

The sixth is the students have a mental block. This is the largest inhibitors for students to master listening skill. The students find themselves do not understand what is being said. At this point, they might lose their self-confidence and they convince themselves not able to understand spoken English well.

Beside the problems above, there are also several problems which are frequently arises in teaching learning process. Butt (2010: 313) says that the students' problems concern with accent, dialect, pronunciation, listening disabilities, and grammar application. Other problems in which the students frequently face are

delivered by Case (2008). He finds that the students' problem in listening are related to the effort to find the meaning of the previous words, the students do not know the key words, problems with different accents, getting tired, and the noise.

C. Top-down strategy

From the previous discussion, it implies that the students need a kind of 'tool' which not only helps them to solve their problem and to cope related to listening skill, but also to develop their L2 being learned. The tool is also known as strategy. There are a lot of strategies to teach listening class. The application of these strategies has one goal that is to make the students understand the utterances said by the native speakers and finally, they can catch the message of the utterances. Indirectly, the students' skill in listening will get increased in line with the application of those strategies. Here, the writer will discuss one of the strategies which are interesting and easy to be applied in listening class. It is named as top-down strategy.

The concept of top-down strategy focus the learners on macro-features of the text such as the writer's or speaker's purpose, the topic of the message, the overall structure of the text and so on (Nunan, 1991: 4). Nunan (1991: 17) sees this strategy have more concerns on the meaning or the message of the sentences and then goes down to the discussion of its linguistic features. This technique starts from the understanding as starting from the listener's background knowledge of the non-linguistic context and of working down towards the individual sounds. Listeners will actively interpret what they hear in terms of their understanding of the situation and the world in general. Cook (1989: 69) in Harmer (2001: 199) says that in order to make sense of any text, teachers need to have pre-existent knowledge of the world. Such knowledge is often referred to as schema (plural: schemata). When human beings are stimulated by particular words, discourse patterns, or contexts, such schematic knowledge is activated and they are able to recognize what be seen or heard because it fits into patterns which are already known.

Richards (2008: 7) points out that top-down processing refers to the use of background knowledge in understanding the meaning of a message. The background knowledge required for top-down processing may be previous knowledge about the topic of discourse, situational or contextual knowledge, or knowledge in the form of "schemata" or "scripts" or plans about the overall structure of events and the relationships between them.

Richard (2008: 8) adds that much of people's knowledge of the world consists of knowledge about specific situations, the people one might expect to encounter in such situations, what their goals and purposes are, and how they typically accomplish them. Likewise, people have knowledge of thousands of topics and concepts, their associated meanings, and links to other topics and concepts. In applying this prior knowledge about things, concepts, people, and events to a particular utterance, comprehension can often proceed from the top down. The actual discourse heard is used to confirm expectations and to fill out details. If the listener is unable to make use of top-down processing, an utterance or discourse may be incomprehensible.

Bacon (1992: 75) writes that this type of strategy is thought to be at a higher cognitive level in the sense that it deals with more 'abstract' clues. Thus, listeners using top-down strategy relate what they hear to what they already know which is known as 'schemata knowledge'. This includes previous background knowledge, knowledge of the world and knowledge of discourse. Having such knowledge, listeners can keep up

with the listening text because they formulate some ‘expectations’ as well as ‘predictions’ before and while listening.

According to Bacon (1992: 80), a successful or effective listeners use more top-down strategies compared with less successful or ineffective learners. Ineffective listeners are at a disadvantage because they fail to elaborate on what they hear, they are not able make the connections between what they hear and their own personal experiences. Logically, the listeners can use their previous knowledge as long as they are familiar with the text, but with an unfamiliar one they can make good use of some textual clues.

D. The application of top-down strategy in listening class

In applying top-down strategy, the teacher should pay attention on the students’ background knowledge. In top-down processing, aural comprehension hinges on listeners’ abilities to activate their knowledge-based schemata, such as cultural constructs, topic familiarity, discourse clues, and pragmatic conventions (Hinkel, 2006: 117). The teachers can help students understand what they are hearing if those teachers activate their students’ prior knowledge, teach them (or remind them of) the words that are useful for the listening task, and tell them the purpose of their listening (Brown, 2006: 6).

In top-down processing, listener gets general views of the listening passage by, in some way, absorbing the overall picture (Harmer, 2001: 201). This is greatly helped if the listener’s schemata allow them to have appropriate expectations of what they are going to come across. In the application of teaching listening using top-down strategy, teachers should pay attention on the steps in conducting teaching learning process. According to Field (2008: 15), in conducting teaching listening using top-down strategy, the three steps must be fulfilled by the teachers. They are listening in general context, finding factual detail, and linguistics analysis. Those three steps also can be called as ‘narrowing in’ steps. The three steps can be drawn below:

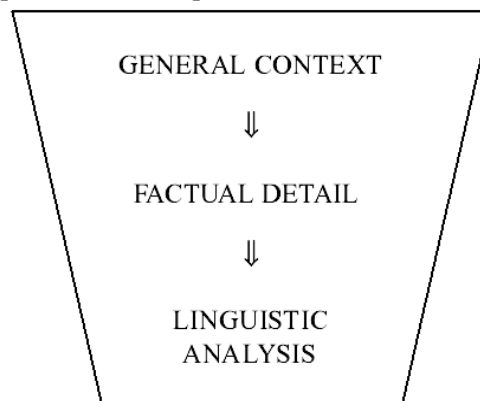


Figure 1: Three steps of top-down strategy (Field, 2008: 16)

The picture above explained that the lesson starts with general notions and focuses on more detail as the learner becomes increasingly familiar with the text. On these ground, teachers continue to favor a first hearing which enables learners to establish a general idea of what is going on. In point of fact, it serves an important function for the weaker listeners in the class. They may have understood very little the first time round, but the answer given by their peers provide them with a few pegs upon which to hang ideas when they listen again.

Indeed, any rehearing of the recorded material assists all members of the class to extend their understanding of it. A case can be made not just for keeping the extensive/intensive tradition but also for employing multiple replays throughout the listening lesson. The original thinking was that replaying the recording allowed attention to be given to the forms of language, but it is now recognized that repeated listening enables the learner to build increasingly on the information that is extracted. A first hearing of a foreign-language passage may produce a partial understanding, which can be deepened only by subsequent exposure and by increasingly demanding questions on the part of the teacher.

There are exercises which can develop the ability of learners' top-down processing. They are as follows:

1. Use key words to construct the schema of a discourse
2. Infer the setting for a text
3. Infer the role of the participants and their goals
4. Infer causes or effects
5. Infer unstated details of a situation
6. Anticipate questions related to the topic or situation

Field adds that the activities which can develop the learners' top-down listening skills are as follows:

1. Students generate a set of questions they expect to hear about a topic, then listen to see if they are answered.
2. Students generate a list of things they already know about a topic and things they would like to learn more about, then listen and compare.
3. Students read one speaker's part in a conversation, predict the other speaker's part, then listen and compare.
4. Students read a list of key points to be covered in a talk, then listen to see which ones are mentioned.
5. Students listen to part of a story, complete the story ending, then listen and compare endings.
6. Students read news headlines, guess what happened, then listen to the full news items and compare.

E. The advantages of using top-down strategy to teach listening class

There are some advantages in using top-down strategy in teaching listening class. First, the students are guided to comprehend the material from the general things to the linguistic analysis or it can be said as the teaching learning process starts from an easy task to the difficult one. Second, by activating students' schemata or background knowledge, the teaching learning process will run well because the students have the same perception on the topic being learned. Third, this method is easy to be applied.

III. CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion as the writer conveys above, he can draw some conclusions. They are as follows:

1. Listening skill is a skill in which the listener makes an effort to hear somebody or something and he is trying to catch the message being said by the speaker.
2. Listening skill requires some knowledge related each other such as grammar, vocabulary, accent, and comprehension of meaning.
3. In learning English as a second language, there are some problems generally faced by the learners. They are students' limited vocabulary, the speed of the speaker, grammar

knowledge, and students' background knowledge. Besides that, the other common problems faced by the learners are concern to accent, dialect, and pronunciation.

4. Top-down strategy focuses the learners on macro features of the text. This technique starts from the general context of the text (non-linguistic) and goes down towards the individual sounds. The listeners will actively interpret what they hear in terms of their understanding of the situation and the world in general
5. In applying top-down strategy, the teacher should follow the three basic steps. They are discussing general context of the text, then talking about factual detail, and finally analyzing linguistic form of the text.
6. Some benefits can be taken from the application of top-down strategy. Those benefits are the students are guided to comprehend the material from the general context to the linguistic analysis, it is easier for the teacher to handle the class by activating students shared schemata, and it is easy to be applied.
7. The key of success in applying top-down strategy is the activation of students' schemata or background knowledge. When the students have the same perception on certain situation, it is easier for the teacher to make the students comprehend the text.

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