

OPTIMIZING LISTENING SKILLS TO IMPROVE THE TOEFL SCORE OF STAIN PEKALONGAN STUDENTS

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Abstract: The fact that the students have problems in the three micro-skills of listening namely recognizing the English stress patterns, the reduced forms of words, and words boundaries and that the teachers never teach the students how to listen have made them get low TOEFL scores on listening section. This research aims at: (1) finding out whether optimizing listening skills can improve the students' TOEFL scores on listening; and (2) describing the class situation during the teaching of toefl listening by optimizing listening skills. This action research is conducted in two cycles each of which is divided into planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. There are two kinds of data. The qualitative data taken from observation, interview, and questionnaire are analyzed by using Constant Comparative Method. The quantitative data taken from the pre-test in the pre-research, post-test in cycle 1, and post-test in cycle 2 are analyzed by using descriptive statistics. The subjects of the research are the STAIN Pekalongan students taking English 3 class, the TOEFL Preparation Class, in the Academic Year 2014/2015. The result of the research shows that: (1) teaching toefl listening section by optimizing listening skills is able to overcome the students' problems in the three micro-skills of listening and consequently improve the students' TOEFL scores on listening. Their average scores improve from 101 in the pre-test to 118 in the post-test of cycle 1 and 129 in the post-test of cycle 2; (2) The class situation is attractive and the students are actively involved in the various activities done during the teaching and learning process. In line with the success of optimizing listening skills in teaching TOEFL listening, it is suggested that teachers should examine their students' listening problems so as to be able to teach them what they need in listening to English.

Key words: *TOEFL, listening, optimizing listening skills*

INTRODUCTION

The policy that every student graduated from STAIN Pekalongan has to have a certificate of TOEFL preparation has encouraged UPB, the language center, to manage TOEFL preparation tests. The scores of TOEFL preparation the students have achieved so far are around 300 up to 400. Surprisingly, most students got their lowest scores in listening comprehension section. The result of the TOEFL pre-test conducted on Wednesday, 27th of August 2014 was not quite different. There were 20 students in the class who had done the pre-test. The scores of the pre-test they had got were below 400 except for three students. All the twenty students got their lowest score in listening comprehension section.

This low score in listening has encouraged the researcher to try to find out the students' listening problems. First, the researcher tried to analyze which types of problems in the TOEFL listening questions that were wrongly answered by the students. The questions in listening comprehension section consist of some types of problems such as details, idiomatic expressions, suggestions, assumptions, predictions (Sharpe, 2000: 47). The result is surprising because all students experienced difficulty in each type of problem. The researcher then tried to interview some students about their listening difficulties on Saturday, 30th of August 2014. It was found out that the students could not catch the words uttered by the English native through the audio tape and they assumed that it was because the English native had uttered the English too fast and unclearly. The questionnaires distributed to the twenty students on Wednesday, 3rd of September 2014 also found out the same thing.

The researcher believes that there should be some reasons for the students' problem of not being able to listen to the English utterances played through a tape. Mandelsohn (1994: 19) states that listening is the ability to understand spoken language of native speakers. Richards stated that applied linguists borrowed the theoretical models of comprehension from the field of cognitive psychology which results in the distinction between bottom-up processing and top-down processing (Richards, 2003). Richards (1983: 219-239) also lists several listening skills that students need to equip when they are listening to conversations and lectures. Meanwhile, Richards in Brown (2004) lists the microskills and macroskills implied in the performance of listening comprehension which has proven useful in the

domain of specifying learning objectives as well as assessment objectives. Other pre-tests were then conducted to find out which listening skills the students have already acquired and which skills they have not. The result of the pre-test showed that they have no significant problems with top-down listening skills but with bottom-up ones. They are problems in recognizing the English stress patterns, recognizing reduced forms of words, and distinguishing word boundaries.

To find out the causes of the problems, the researcher conducted an observation on a class which was considered similar to the class to be investigated in this research. The result showed that the process of teaching and learning in the TOEFL listening classes was answering the questions by listening to a tape played and paused by the teachers. In this case, the teachers were not teaching listening, but they were testing listening. Sheerin stated that listening comprehension lessons are all too often a series of listening tests in which tapes are played, comprehension exercises are attempted by the learners, and feedback is given in the form of the 'right' answer. In lessons such as this, listening is not being taught but tested (1987: 126). Thus, it is obvious that the listening problems the students encountered were caused by their classes which never taught them the listening skills.

The objectives of the research are: (1) to know whether optimizing listening skills can improve the students' TOEFL scores on listening comprehension section and (2) to describe the class situation during the teaching of TOEFL listening comprehension section by optimizing listening skills.

The listening skills in which the students, in this research, encountered problems are the three micro-skills in bottom-up listening skills. Natural speech in all languages is rhythmic, meaning that it tends to have a regular beat. However, it may be rhythmic in different ways depending on the language. Halliday (1994: 293) states that there are two kinds of rhythm, namely syllable timing rhythm and stress timing rhythm. Moeliono (2003:84) states that the rhythm of Bahasa Indonesia is indeed different from the rhythm of English. Carter and Nunan (2001: 7) states that listening is a complex process that allows us to understand spoken language. Brown and Hilferty (1986) use the term "reduced forms" to refer to collectively to the process of contraction, elision, and assimilation which

belong to the characteristics of informal spoken English. Brown (2006) states that there is a process that describes how neighbouring phonemes are connected in speech. The process is called juncture or transition.

The researcher believes that teaching listening by optimizing the listening skills which that the students need can solve the students' problems in listening. There are some reasons for this belief: (1) The role of the teacher is teaching not just helping the students to play and replay the tape. The teacher really teaches the students how to listen; (2) The teaching process focuses on the students' problems in listening comprehension. Explaining things in which the students have no problems at all will not only waste the time but also make the students bored; (3) The students get a clear picture of the problems they have encountered during listening. In other words, the students gain the linguistic knowledge which have caused their listening problems. This linguistic knowledge lead to a comprehensive understanding about the students' listening problem. Therefore, the students can anytime refer to this linguistic knowledge when they encounter the same problem in their listening; (4) The students will be optimistic about their ability to overcome any listening problems encountered. This is because they have known that their listening problems are caused by the linguistic features of spoken language and not by their lack of ability to listen to spoken English. Based on the above reasons for optimizing listening skills in teaching TOEFL listening classes, it is hoped that students can overcome their listening problems and achieve good score on TOEFL listening comprehension section as well.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted at STAIN Pekalongan from August 2014 up to January 2015. The subjects were the twenty students taking English 3 class, the TOEFL preparation class in the academic year 2014/2015. The research approach used is classroom action research. The procedure for conducting this classroom action research is presented in two sections, namely pre-research and implementation of the research. In pre-research, the researcher conducted pre-tests, interviewed the students and some teachers, and distributed questionnaires to the students. These activities were carried out to collect the data and information about the students' problem, the indicators of the problem, the situation of the classroom, the cause of the

problem, and the appropriate solution for the problem. These data and information were used as the initial reflection before implementing the classroom action research. The implementation of this classroom action research was conducted in two cycles each which is divided into planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. There are two kinds of data. The qualitative data taken from observation, interview, and questionnaire are analyzed by using Constant Comparative Method. There are four steps that have to be followed in this method. They are comparing events applicable to each category, integrating categories and their properties, delimiting theory, and writing theory. The quantitative data taken from the pre-test in the pre-research, post-test in cycle 1, and post-test in cycle 2 are analyzed by using descriptive statistics to find out the difference of scores before and after each cycle. The students are considered having made the improvement on listening when the mean of the students' scores after the teaching and learning process in each cycle is higher than that of the students' scores before.

RESEARCH RESULT

Research Findings

The students' listening skills before the research implementation are different from those after the research implementation. Before the research implementation, the students fail to catch the words to which they are listening because of some listening problems. The students cannot recognize the stress patterns of the words and identify which words are stressed and which are not; the students cannot recognize the reduced forms of words and how the words are reduced; the students cannot recognize words boundaries to identify where word begins and ends. The result of the activities carried out in the first cycle of the research showed that in the first meeting, the students were able to classify which words belong to content words and which belong to structure words. The students also understood the different pronunciations of the two words. In the second meeting, the students understood that the weak pronunciation of the structure words had resulted in the reduced forms of words. The students were also able to guess the full forms of the words reduced. In the third meeting, the students understood that those words sounded like stream of sounds, so the students needed to find the words boundaries. The

students understood the three micro-skills of listening comprehensively in the fourth meeting. The result of the second cycle implementation showed that in the first meeting, the students were able to recognize the different pronunciation of content words and that of structure words. The students started to feel that the contrast pronunciation of the two words had helped them to listen better. In the second meeting, the students realized that English natives reduced the forms of words very often. The students also recognized that content words were never reduced and that the structure words which come before and after the content words were reduced. The students began to be able to write both the full forms of the words reduced and the reduced forms of the full words. In the third meeting, the students started to understand that they did not need to force their ears to listen clearly to every word in the conversation and talk just to find out the words boundaries. The students had already understood that the words boundaries were closely related to the meaning in context. The students did not need to try to make one words boundaries and change it into another words boundaries so as to find the appropriate words boundaries. The students realized that when they knew the meaning in context, they would automatically get the appropriate words boundaries. In the fourth meeting, the students realized that they needed to practice the three micro-skills in listening very often in order that their ears became familiar with the English stress pattern, the reduced forms of words, and the words boundaries. This improvement can be seen clearly in the average scores of the three micro-skills that improve significantly. The average score in English stress pattern improve from 30,5 in the pre-test to 49 in the test of cycle 1 and 69 in the post-test in cycle 2. Those in words reductions improve from 23 in the pre-test to 66 and 74,5 in the post-tests. Those in words boundaries also improve from 25 to 56,5 and 70,5 in the post-tests.

The research implementation in cycle 1 and cycle 2 had resulted in the improvement of the students' TOEFL listening scores. The improvement of the students' TOEFL listening scores could be seen by comparing the scores that the students had got in three TOEFL listening tests namely the pre-test, the post-test of cycle 1, and the post-test of cycle 2.

Table 1 The comparison of the scores in pre-test, post-test in cycle 1 and cycle 2

| Scores | Pre-test | Post-test Cycle 1 | Post- test Cycle 2 |
|--------------------|----------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| The highest scores | 140 | 153 | 163 |
| The lowest scores | 87 | 97 | 100 |
| The average scores | 101 | 118 | 129 |

Table 1 showed that the highest score improved from 140 in pre-test to 153 in post-test of cycle 1 and 163 in post-test of cycle 2. The lowest score improved from 87 in pre-test to 97 in post-test of cycle 1 and 100 in post-test of cycle 2. Meanwhile, the average score improved from 101 in pre-test to 118 in post-test of cycle 1 and 129 in post-test of cycle 2. Table 1 also showed that the improvement of the listening scores occurred two times. The first one was the improvement between the scores in the pre-test and those in the post-test of cycle 1. The highest score improved from 140 to 153, the lowest score improved from 87 to 97, and the average score improved from 101 to 118. The second improvement was between the scores in the post-test of cycle 1 and those in the post-test of cycle 2. The highest score improved from 153 to 163, the lowest score improved from 97 to 100, and the average score improved from 118 to 129.

Besides the improvement in the TOEFL listening score, the researcher also found out the improvement in the class situation. Before the research implementation, the listening class was boring. The teacher spent the 90-minute meeting just for being the operator of the tape. The teacher played, paused, re-wound, and stopped the tape again and again until the students could answer all the TOEFL listening questions correctly. The teacher was not really teaching listening and the students were not really learning to listen to English. The students just listened and answered the multiple choice questions in the TOEFL listening test. In the first cycle implementation, the class was interesting. The teacher tried to overcome the students' problems in the three micro-skills of listening. The teacher

optimized those micro-skills during the process of listening and answering the multiple choice questions of the TOEFL listening test in the classroom. Instead of just listen and answer, the students did some activities concerning with the English stress pattern, the reduced forms of words, and the words boundaries. The students enjoyed the class because the activities they were doing in the classroom were considered new for them. The students finished all the activities enthusiastically. However, the class was noisy when the students were not sure of their own answers. The students tried to look at the answers of their friends. In the second cycle implementation, the class became more interesting than that in the first cycle implementation. The students did some other activities concerning with the English stress pattern, the reduced forms of words, and the words boundaries. The class was more enjoyable than that in the first cycle because the students did the activities not only individually but also in groups. The students did not try to look at the answers of their friends but they tried to discuss the answers with their friends. The students were actively involved in the teaching and learning process in the classroom.

Discussion and Justification

Teaching listening by optimizing the students' micro-skills of listening was able to improve the students' TOEFL scores. The students' problems in the three micro-skills of listening had caused them to have low scores in the listening section of the TOEFL tests. Therefore, those three micro-skills were optimized to overcome their listening problems. Nunan in Richard (2002: 240) stated that language teaching needs to develop learners' awareness of the processes underlying their own learning so that they will eventually be able to take great responsibility for the learning. He also added that students will not only become better listeners but also more effective language learners because they are given opportunities to focus on and reflect upon the processes underlying their own learning. Thus, teaching listening by focusing on optimizing the students' problems in the three micro-skills of listening was effective because the students were guided to be aware of their problems in listening and consequently they were conscious of the processes underlying the learning they were involved in.

The elaboration from the teacher about the differences between English and Indonesian made the students realized that listening to English

was different from listening to Indonesian. They realized that their ears had been used for years to listen to Indonesian which is spoken clearly and that they had to start not to expect their ears to listen to every syllable of the English words very clearly. The students also realized that their problems in listening were caused by the English stress pattern, the reduced forms of English words, and the English words boundaries. The teacher managed the students do all the activities designed to optimize their three micro-skills.

The students succeeded in optimizing the first micro-skill of listening by both classifying the words into content and structure and recognizing the different ways of pronouncing the content and structure words. The students' practices on listening to the strong pronunciation of the content words and the weak pronunciation of the structure words had made the students' ears familiar with the English stress pattern.

The students were able to optimize the second micro-skill of listening by underlying the fully written words in the transcript which were reduced in the pronunciation. This exercise had made the students' ears familiar to listen to the reduced forms of words. In addition, the teacher also instructed the students to guess both the full forms of the words reduced and the reduced forms of the full words. These exercises had overcome the students' problem in recognizing the reduced forms of words.

The students' problem on recognizing the words boundaries could be overcome by listening to the tape and filling the blanks each of which had to be filled with two or three words. This exercise made the students had to find out the boundaries of the two or three words to be filled in by considering the meaning in context. The students were also instructed to listen and mark the words boundaries by putting slashes on some words in the transcript of a talk which were written with no spaces. In addition to that, the students were instructed to listen to a talk and write the talk with the help of a transcript containing some words which were written not only with no spaces but also in the form of how the words were pronounced. This exercise had optimized the students' skill in recognizing the words boundaries.

Thus, teaching listening by optimizing the three micro-skills of listening was able to overcome the students' listening problems and

consequently improve the students' scores on the listening section of the TOEFL tests.

The situation of the TOEFL listening class was much better when the class was taught by optimizing the micro-skills of listening than when it was taught by listening and answering the TOEFL listening questions. The students were not bored because there were various activities that they had to do in the classroom. The easy-to-do activities designed to optimize the micro-skills of listening both increased the students' self confidence and made the students motivated to take part in the class activities. The activity of checking the work in small groups made the students convenient in the classroom.

The activities done in the classroom were various. The students were not asked to listen and answer the multiple choice questions only, but they were asked to do various activities. Nunan (1991: 228) said that there never was and probably never will a method for all, and the focus in recent years has been on the development of classroom task and activities which are consonant with what we know about second language acquisition, and which are also in keeping with the dynamics of the classroom itself. The various activities were listening to write words, classifying the words into content and structure words, listening to fill in the blanks, listening to underline the words reduced, guessing the full forms of the words reduced, listening to put slashes as the words boundaries markers, listening to complete the transcript, and changing the words boundaries to find appropriate meaning. Those various activities made the class attractive for the students. The students were not bored in the classroom. This class situation was good for the learning process of the students.

The reasons for the good class situation for the students' learning process were not only because of the various activities but also because of the easy-to-do activities in the classroom. Most of the activities done in the classroom were not difficult for the students to do. The activity of writing the words that the students could hear from the tape showed that the students were not forced to be able to listen to all the words. The activity of guessing the full forms of the words reduced also showed that the students were not forced to answer the full forms of the words correctly. The activity of changing the words boundaries to find the appropriate meaning showed that the students were allowed to correct their work again and again until

they got the appropriate words boundaries based on the meaning in context. These easy-to-do activities increased the students' self confidence. Brown in Richards (2002: 13) stated that the eventual success that learners attain in a task is partially a factor of their belief that they indeed are fully capable of accomplishing the task. These easy-to-do activities also made the students motivated to be actively involved in the activities during the teaching and learning process. Morrison et al (2001: 50) stated that learner's motivation is a very important and determinant aspect that will affect students' behavior in the learning activity. Therefore, the more the students involved in the activities, the class situation became more alive.

The activity of checking the work in small groups brought positive effect to learning. Davis (1999: 2) stated that students working in small groups tend to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer than when the same content is presented in other instructional formats. He also added that small group work can be an important supplement to lectures, helping students master concepts and apply them to situations calling for complex applications of critical thinking skills. Besides that, small group discussion also brought positive effect to the students' self confidence. Some students who were shy to ask a question to their teacher during the teaching and learning process would not be shy to ask a question to their peers in small groups. Also, those who were unaccustomed to sharing their work in a big class would be more convenient to share their work in small groups. In other words, checking the result of the students' work in small groups made the class situation convenient for the students.

Thus, teaching the listening class by optimizing the micro-skills of listening was able to make the class situation attractive, alive, and convenient for the students. This class situation was obviously good for not only the teaching process but also the learning process of the students.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The action research carried out to twenty students taking the toefl preparation class in STAIN Pekalongan was successful. The researcher was able to overcome the students' problems in listening by designing lesson plans to optimize the students' micro-skills of listening. The researcher, acted as the teacher, was also able to implement the lesson plans in the teaching and learning process in the classroom. The teacher managed to

make the students aware of the English stress pattern, the reduced forms of words, and the words boundaries while they were listening to English. The students realized that they had to make their ears familiar with the English stress pattern, the reduced forms of words, and the words boundaries so as to be able to listen to English easily. The two cycles in this action research successfully improved the students' skills in listening. This success could be seen by comparing the students' scores in the pre-test, and those in the post-test of cycle 1 and cycle 2. The improvement of the students' scores in the listening section of the three toefl tests proved the success of optimizing the micro-skills of listening in the teaching of listening.

This action research was not only able to improve the students' scores but also the class situation during the teaching and learning process. The class was not boring but alive. The teacher did not just play, pause, and stop the tape. The students did not just listen and answer the toefl listening questions. The teacher and the students were actively involved in the various activities to optimize the students' micro-skills of listening in the classroom. The attractive activities made the students enthusiastic in doing all the exercises as instructed. The good atmosphere of the class enabled the students to keep on practicing to listen. These positive changes in the classroom showed that the action research succeeded in improving the class situation.

Therefore, it is suggested that English teachers should know what problems their students have in listening and creatively design the lesson plans based on the students' listening problems.

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