

Academic Listening Difficulties: Experiences of East Asian International Students

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Abstract – *Sitting in taught classes requires listening to academic lectures and presentations most of the time. This makes listening integral to the overall learning experience of students. This research explored East Asian students' experiences in relation to academic listening while studying in a higher education institution in Baguio City, Philippines. It aimed to describe the international students' academic listening difficulties, identify the factors giving rise to these difficulties, and present possible means through which these difficulties may be constructively addressed. Seven international students participated as informants in the study: two Chinese and five Koreans who have already taken their classes in Philippine history. Employing the qualitative research approach, the study utilized interviews to gather data. The findings show that all seven informants had English classes in high school back home but they did not use the language at the same extent when outside of school. Relative to this, the informants, irrespective of nationality, reported similar listening difficulties which are largely attributed to their limited English communication skills. In spite of this, it is worth noting that they remained passive in finding ways to ease their situation; on their end, silence is a preferred mode of reaction when faced with a difficult listening situation. Finally, the study identified three main factors that caused the informants' listening difficulties: their limited vocabulary being of non-English speaking backgrounds, the newness of and their unfamiliarity with the subject matter studied, and the social status and English accent of the teachers.*

Keywords – *Academic Listening, Baguio City, International Students, Non-English Speaking Background, Schema*

INTRODUCTION

Listening is an integral part of cross-cultural interactions such as those which take place in a classroom with international students. Since listening is an activity that is aimed at comprehension, one must be equipped with the skill of understanding aural signals

coming from presentations or class lectures. According to Rahimirad and Moini [1], the ability to listen is one “among the most important factors in academic success”.

Academic Listening in English. Academic lectures are a common mode of lesson delivery in Philippine universities. Since English is one of the country's two national languages (the other one is Filipino), it is not uncommon that academic lectures are delivered using English as the medium of communication. International students enrolled in classes utilizing English-medium lectures, therefore, should possess good academic listening ability in order to succeed in the learning process. This is especially true if the international students do not come from English-speaking nations, like the participants in this study.

Language competence, then, is a determinant of successful academic listening for international students enrolled in English-medium schools. In the study of Robertson, Line, Jones, and Thomas [2], it was revealed that language competence is at the center of international students' difficulties in their academics. Like what one Asian student expressed in the study of Sawir [3] in Australia, “the most difficult skill is listening”.

Effects of Cultural Difference and Background Knowledge on Listening. Listening difficulties can be caused by cultural differences between the host country (where lecturer is from) and the international students' country of origin such that the pedagogic culture where the latter was raised, as a result, affects his way of engaging class lectures and presentations. Yang [4] explains that “it is inevitable that the cultural difference has impact on language comprehension” during listening. Inasmuch as language is a product of culture and culture is perpetuated by language [4], it can be inferred that “listening involves both linguistic and nonlinguistic knowledge” [5].

Similarly, the international student's possession of background knowledge, or schema, of a topic under study enables him to augment his ability to listen and comprehend successfully. Schema is generally understood as background knowledge which serves as

the foundation of a student's ability to succeed in listening and reading comprehension. As a mental construct, it is argued that schema [4] "allows for the organization of information in long-term memory" hence enabling students to recall or retrieve information during listening sessions to help in comprehension. Yang [4] lists these three types of schema: (1) linguistic schema, also known as language schema or linguistic knowledge; (2) formal schema (textual schema); and (3) content schema which pertains to background knowledge of culture.

Globalization and the influx of East Asian international students. Rapid globalization in the last two decades has paved the way for the emergence of growing multicultural urban populations in Asia today. Alongside the fluidity in cultural diffusion between and among countries, national borders have become less solid as a result of the advancements in trade, communications technology, and the cross-border movement of people, goods, and services. Resultantly, countries experiencing rapid growth, like the Philippines, and cities that are able to accommodate metropolitan movements, like Baguio City, are quickly becoming melting pots of various ethnicities and nationalities, and of cultures.

With an already multicultural local student population, Philippine higher education institutions (HEIs) hosting international students have become more adept to the new racial and ethnic reality in their campuses. The influx of foreigners taking up university studies have contributed to increased internationalization among leading HEIs and heightened multicultural education that meets the needs of both local and international students. Jay [6] defines multiculturalism in education as "an approach to 'culturally relevant pedagogy' that takes into account the cultural diversity in the classroom, the conditions of the student, and the differences in their background knowledge and learning styles".

The East Asian nations of South Korea and China, in the Academic Year 2002-2003, were two of the top five sources of international students in the Philippines according to Goqingco & Lowe [7]. In 2009, the Center for International Trade Expositions and Missions (CITEM) [8] already records that half of the foreign students hosted by Philippine educational institutions come from East Asia. In the same year, Hicap [9] reports that "the Philippines is now a haven as far as learning the English language is concerned". By 2012, McGeown [10] writes, majority of foreign language learners in the Philippines are East Asians, particularly from Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and China.

The presence of East Asian international students does not just open up new opportunities for cross-cultural learning experiences; it also spawns fresh thinking points in the interface of prevailing academic practices in the host HEIs and the academic culture from which the international students originated.

East Asians, Shi [11] avers, are heavily influenced by their Confucian heritage and so they are generally regarded as passive, obedient learners. This inactive disposition is exacerbated by their listening and speaking difficulties because of poor English skills and the use of a single language in their home countries [12].

The teachers and the international students henceforth face dilemmas generated by the profound dissonances in academic expectations and cultural practices. This becomes noteworthy, Kingston & Forland explain [13], after the "contradictions and problems that arise when cultures based on differing philosophies meet within a higher education environment".

Many of the problems experienced by international students relating to university studies, Valera asserts, "begin to surface when they start attending their classes already" [12]. East Asian students usually wrestle with language difficulties in relation to academic works that require aural-oral knack and their most common classroom predicament is their lack of sufficient communicative ability in the English language [12], [13], [14]. These language difficulties include listening (i.e. academic listening) which is a major language barrier for East Asian international students [12], [14].

Hence, this research was conceptualized to look into the academic listening difficulties of East Asian international students in a taught class in English. This research is important to both the East Asian international students and to the Philippine academic community as a whole because it provides a glimpse of the participating informants' academic listening situation when inside a class where English is the medium of instruction.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study purported to look into the academic listening difficulties experienced by East Asian international students who took Philippine history courses in one of the universities in Baguio, a city in northern Philippines.

It specifically aimed to describe the international students' English language background, describe their academic listening difficulties, identify the factors contributing to these difficulties, and suggest possible ways to constructively address these difficulties.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Employing the qualitative approach, this study utilized the phenomenological design to explore the experiences of the participants relative to academic listening. This enabled the researcher to draw out the lived experiences of the participants when they sat in taught classes in Philippine history in their university. The stories they have relayed served as a rich data source from which themes presented in this article were surfaced.

A total of seven (7) East Asian international students participated in this study – two (2) Chinese and five (5) Koreans – all of whom have taken Philippine history while enrolled in one university in Baguio City, northern Philippines. These students were chosen through purposeful selection [15]. Maxwell [16] describes purposeful selection as a strategy of deliberately selecting persons to provide the needed information that cannot be gathered from other sources.

In order to facilitate contact with prospective participants, the snowballing technique, also known as referral method, was used whereby the first participant led the researcher to another individual who fits to the informant selection criteria.

The seven participants were selected on the basis that they are: (1) enrolled in a tertiary academic program in a higher education institution in Baguio City; (2) they are from a country in East Asia; and (3) that they have taken courses in Philippine history. The researcher took interest in the third criterion because the subject is a taught class requiring students to sit through the term and that its content is mostly delivered through lecture which requires academic listening on the part of the students. Also, Philippine history is a general education course, common across all tertiary programs, which introduces the international students to their host country and vice versa.

The purpose of the study was first discussed to the informants before their agreement to participate was asked; this ensured that their participation was voluntary and based on prior informed consent. They were also assured that their identities will be protected and that all information they shared will remain confidential.

The researcher used an interview guide to direct the conversations with the international students. However, in the course of the interviews, they were allowed to express themselves freely so as to elicit a more comprehensive experience narrative.

The data gathering procedure was conducted with the comfort of the participants as primary consideration. All interviews were done in places chosen by the participants and at schedules that were mutually agreed upon by them

and the researcher.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Listening is an active process which entails hard work on the part of the listener in order to engage an academic presentation. Among students, this is a reality they face because they often sit in classes listening to the lectures delivered by their professors. According to Huang [14], academic listening is crucial if a student's academic success were to be the goal. As such, effort on the part of the students is expected to be exerted to enable them to pull through the rigors of sitting in a lecture session.

However, understanding academic listening among East Asian international students also necessitates looking into their academic exposures prior to taking up university studies. Hence, what follows is a presentation and discussion of the English language background of the international students.

English Language Background of the East Asian International Students

The Chinese Students. As was drawn from the interviews, the Chinese students finished pre-university studies in their home country. In their experience, they used English only when studying the English subject in school where the language of instruction in the subject is Mandarin. This is consistent with the Chinese education policy that, since 1956, Mandarin is the medium of instruction in schools across China [17]. This scenario provides a glimpse of how limited the use of English is in the students' pre-university studies, even if Zhang [18] posits that English has become the dominant foreign language in China since 1978.

If in the school (a microcosm of society), where language learning is encouraged, they already have a very limited exposure to the English language, it would not be unusual anymore if they have little or no English exposure at all in their homes and communities. As the informants reported in the interviews, they do not use English when interacting with others in the community except in occasional instances where simple English greetings such as "hi" and "hello" are used.

The Korean Students. The Korean students have a similar situation with the Chinese when it comes to English instruction in their schools. They revealed during the interviews that they studied English grammar and usage in school but the delivery of the lessons was done in Hangeul, Korea's national language.

However, the Korean divergence appears when the use of English outside the school is considered. The Koreans have a significantly expanded use of the language in their interactions with their friends as they

are not confined to simple greetings. Statements that elicit longer answers are used, hence phrases such as “How are you?” and “What are you doing?” are common. This somehow reflects *yeongeo yeolpung* (“English fever”) which Shim & Park [19] describe as a strong desire to gain proficiency in English.

Non-English Speaking Background (NESB). The foregoing situations provide a clear understanding of the English language schema of the informants prior to their university studies in Baguio City. Even if their countries have included English as a subject matter in their high school curriculum, the scarce use of the foreign language in daily conversations clearly puts the students in non-English speaking backgrounds. NESB students, consistent with Pithers & Lim [20], are those born in a non-English speaking nation who migrates to an English-speaking country.

Listening Difficulties of the East Asian International Students

The previous discussion pictures the situation of the international students in terms of English language exposure and usage. Their language schema, being NESBs, has adversely affected their capacity to hurdle the challenges that await them in an academic institution where English is the medium of instruction.

In the course of data analysis, the researcher came up with a classification of academic listening difficulties which reflect the experiences of the informants. These classifications are: (a) vocabulary-related difficulty; (b) subject-matter-related difficulty; and (c) culture-related difficulty.

Vocabulary-related difficulty. Both Chinese and Korean informants reported experiencing listening difficulties during discussions in their Philippine history classes which are delivered in English. The data revealed that this situation is exacerbated when the teacher uses words they are not familiar with in delivering the lesson. This exposes their limited English vocabulary which effectively cripples their ability to comprehend lectures and cope with the rigors of learning in the university. This is in line with the effect of linguistic schema in academic listening and is consistent with what Bloomberg, et al. [21] identified as factors affecting the listening skills of learners; these factors include, inter alia, the amount of prior exposure to the language and vocabulary size. Also, in a study by Navaratnam & Mountney [22], two of the reasons causing the learning difficulties of NESB students are limited vocabulary and the terminologies used by teachers.

In order to catch up during lectures, two of the Korean informants said that they use their electronic dictionaries

to check the meanings of the words uttered by the teacher. As the use of dictionaries as aid in the learning process cannot be underestimated, Sarigul [23] forwards that they are an extremely useful learning resource. Ronald & Ozawa [24] also aver that pocket electronic dictionaries can be a powerful language learning tool for students. However, they reported that most of the time, the speed of the lecture does not allow them to acquire an understanding of the new words. Hence, they ask their seatmates about the spelling of the word and their corresponding meaning.

The other five Korean informants averred that they do not use their dictionaries all the time in class while none of the two Chinese students use their dictionaries at all. In most cases, they just rely on their ability to understand the context and the meanings of the words conveyed by the teacher. This, accordingly, will enable them to concentrate on listening to the lecture. The downside of this, however, is that their concentration on the lecture does not remove the impediment to their comprehension which is their limited vocabulary. This coping mechanism also does not guarantee that the understanding they develop through contextualization is accurate.

Subject-matter-related difficulty. Aside from the difficulty caused by their limited vocabulary, the East Asian international students’ dilemma heightens when they enroll subjects they have no prior knowledge of. One of these is Philippine history, a mandated course in Philippine universities, which they have to take. Being international students, their content schema in Philippine culture and history is wanting as it is their first time to learn about the subject matter. This adds to the challenge of academic listening because, as Bloomberg, et al. [21] explain, background knowledge about the topic can positively influence learners’ listening skill. Fang [25] also explains that, in relation to content schema, listening comprehension is “an active process in which individuals concentrate on selected aspects of aural input, form meaning from passages, and associate what they hear with existing knowledge”. Hence, successful academic listening is also affected by the student’s background knowledge of the subject matter under study.

Both the Chinese and Korean informants reported that names of places and people are the most difficult parts of academic listening in and learning about Philippine history. Due to the reason that they are used to normally two-syllable or three-syllable names of persons back home, learning about longer Spanish, English, and Filipino names at the same time as the class progresses is quite overwhelming for them. This is also true to the

names of places they have to familiarize themselves with in the course of taking their history class.

When the names are spoken by the teacher, the informants cannot easily construct the spellings in their mind and therefore cannot write them down for note-taking. As revealed in the interviews, this is due to their unfamiliarity with the spelling of the names. On top of this, their common complaint vis-à-vis the names is that it is “very difficult to memorize” them.

The informants also disclosed that they were less motivated to listen because they entertained the thought that Philippine history is not part of their goal of coming to study in Baguio City. They viewed the course as irrelevant as they were only interested in acquiring specialized knowledge in the programs they have enrolled in. They maintain the vision of finishing their academic programs and return home right afterwards; hence, the relative non-importance of studying the host country’s history also contributes to their listening difficulty.

Culture-mediated difficulty. In the Confucian education tradition, teachers are held in high esteem by students and parents, and society in general. According to Kim [26], this is deeply entrenched in the “Confucian pedagogic cultures” of East Asia covering China, South Korea, and Japan. In China, Tan [27] argues, the Confucian worldview shaped the general belief that a teacher-dominated pedagogy is tantamount to a good quality of education and, as a result, students must manifest respect for their teachers. For their part, Fwu & Wang [28] also posit that the Chinese culture has contributed to the relatively high social status of teachers in Taiwan. In the same manner, Symeonidis [29] reports that teaching enjoys a high status in South Korea and other countries in the Far East.

All seven participants in this study came from the Confucian culture of pedagogy, exposing the significant effect of cultural difference on their academic listening difficulties. Hence, their timid disposition towards their teachers, despite their difficulties in academic listening, is understood as coming from a culture where teachers are seen as pillars of the learning process. Nonetheless, this scenario proves to be detrimental to them inasmuch as it repels them from asking clarifications from their teachers about previously-discussed topics they have not completely understood or about matters being covered in a lecture which they cannot grasp.

Because of the duty to show respect which is shown in their profound shyness towards the teacher, the informants frequently choose to keep still even amidst experiencing listening difficulties. This reflects their Confucian upbringing where the relationship between

the teacher and the student indicates the higher social status of the former over the latter.

Another reason of staying silent which the informants revealed is that at times, their teacher does not accommodate their queries; the teacher instead directs them to read and develop deeper understanding by scouring through the material used. The resulting exasperation heightens their listening difficulty as it gives them the impression that it is not always permissible to raise questions during lectures.

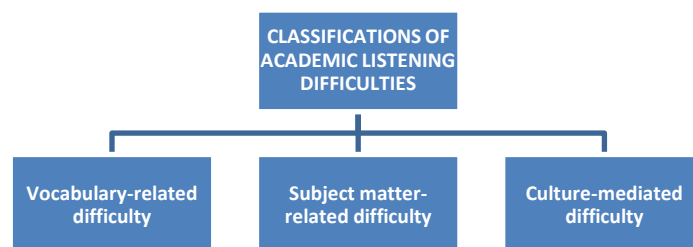


Figure 1. Classifications of the informants’ academic listening difficulties

The Challenge of Adjusting to a New Academic Environment. Listening to a lecture which is delivered in a foreign language makes one feel uncomfortable and uneasy because of the language barrier. This barrier, Pithers & Lim [20] forward, adds to the culture shock of migrant students. The informants, being all NESB students, have experienced discomforts while attending their Philippine history classes. They were of the view that their teachers have a different way of speaking in English and they have different ways of speaking the language. This reflects their difficulty in listening to speakers of Philippine English who have an accent which is different from the English as spoken by East Asians.

In addition, the informants reported that the speed of the teacher’s lesson delivery is also impeding their ability to listen effectively and understand the lesson being presented. Sometimes, their attention gets lost middle of the class lecture when the teacher speaks in Tagalog. This experience of the informants has also been presented in the research findings of Valera [12] wherein teachers use Tagalog, in conjunction with English, when they present their lessons in class. On a positive note, however, the informants understand that teachers sometimes use Tagalog to let the Filipino students have a deeper grasp of the lesson under discussion.

These show that the international students have difficulty adjusting to the normal classroom situation in the university setting. Not just because of listening difficulty, but also because of their limited English vocabulary and the Confucian background they possess.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The East Asian international students come from nations that see English as a foreign language rather than a second language. As a result of their scarce use of English in their home countries, and their monolingual educational background, they are considered as students of non-English speaking backgrounds while studying in their university. Being NESBs, their linguistic schema in English which is wanting in terms of vocabulary size has significantly impeded their academic listening ability; their difficulty in academic listening is compounded by the newness of the subject matter of Philippine history and their lack of prior knowledge of the course content.

Coming from “Confucian pedagogic cultures” also creates a disposition of deference to teachers, manifested by maintaining silence amidst their inability to capture lecture content effectively. This behavior, stemming from cultural difference, somehow negatively affects their academic listening ability.

In view of these conclusions, the researcher suggests that the following steps be considered when handling Philippine history classes, or any class for that matter, which have East Asian students enrolled: (1) instructors should expressly tell international students the need for studying Philippine history in order to increase their enthusiasm in learning the subject and dispel their view that the course does not have much relevance to them being non-Filipinos; (2) East Asian international students should be required to bring dictionaries to class so as to enable them to learn word meaning and expand their vocabulary on-the-spot, thereby providing easement to their listening difficulty being NESBs; (3) when possible, lesson summaries, hand-out of lesson outlines, or printed copies of PowerPoint presentations should be given to the students to aid them in comprehending and reviewing the lessons; and, (4) teachers should lessen the memorizing names of places and persons in order to help the East Asian international students refocus their attention on understanding issues and events in their proper context.

Considering that this is a qualitative study, its limitation is that its findings are not generalizable to the general population of East Asians who are studying in the Philippines or elsewhere in the English speaking world. It is therefore further suggested that a larger sample be surveyed to reach a generalizable quantitative data. A look into the perceptions of Filipino students and faculty members regarding the difficulties of international students is also recommended in order to explore the views held by locals.

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