

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I. Rationale of the Study

Listening takes up as much as fifty per cent of our everyday communication time compared to other language skills (Goh, 2002). It is listening that is a main channel of classroom instruction and the most used language skill at work and at home. Over the last decade, listening comprehension skills have begun to receive a lot more attention in language teaching classrooms. Research has highlighted the significant role that listening plays in language acquisition (Brindley, 1998).

Although it is generally recognized that listening plays a significant role in language learning and many of the tasks used for teaching listening are ample, assessment of listening ability is found very limited in testing literature. Vandergrift (2003) states that listening comprehension remains a “young field” that merits greater research attention. It is also mentioned by Goh (2002) that listening comprehension ought to be researched in its own right.

People agree that listening is an important skill; however, it is probably the most difficult one to assess. In listening comprehension tests, listening ability is measured through performance on different tasks. Common formats are multiple choice, short answer, dictation, summary, gap filling, true-false, and drawing. It seems that the test formats used in listening comprehension tests are considered to be an important element in the test construct as they are tools test writers use to assess listening comprehension ability of test takers. Therefore, the choice of the appropriate listening test formats ensures the right construct of listening comprehension tests. After all, there are a few studies to support using different response formats in listening comprehension tests.

A language test taker's performance is a function of two constant variables: his or her language ability and the test method (Yi'an, 1998). Some researchers have found that different response formats may make different processing demands on test takers' performance in listening tests (Nissan et al., 1996). Brindley and Slatyer (2002) mentioned that most of the research to date in listening tests has been on multiple choice items while the effects of other commonly used formats such as short answer or information transfer tasks remain largely unexplored. It is therefore, very

crucial to examine whether varying the test format in a listening test results in any differences in test performance of test takers. There is a research report which showed that a multiple choice task is easier than an open-ended or cloze task in an ESL situation in Australia (Brindley and Slatyer, 2002). However, in such an EFL test-taking situation as in Thailand, it remains unexplored that test takers will find the most commonly used test format that is multiple choice, easier than other forms of test response format, especially when the task demands are high in human memory capacity as in a test of listening comprehension.

Besides the test takers' language ability and test methods, a test taker's performance in a listening comprehension test is seen to be a function of another variable - the nature of the input or listening stimuli. Although numerous studies have measured the effect of different variables on listening comprehension, among these are task difficulty (Brindley and Slatyer, 2002), using context and content visuals (Ginther, 2002), a multiple choice task type (Yi'an, 1998), question preview (Sherman, 1997), note-taking (Hale and Courtney, 1994), texts and question types (Shohamy and Inbar, 1991) and accent (Anderson-Hsieh and Koehler, 1988); very little research has rigorously measured the effects of accent varieties of English. The fact is that accent is generally believed to be one of the main features that has an impact on one's ability to understand spoken language, consequently, this belief needs more empirical support in whether it really has a significant effect on test performance of EFL listeners (Major et al., 2005).

It is accepted that a growing number of people who use English to communicate allows English to act as a language of wider communication for a variety of purposes. The majority of English users occur in the contexts where it serves as a lingua franca, far removed from its native speakers' norms and identities (Seidlhofer, 2001; McKay, 2003). Fundamental issues to do with global spread and use of English have become an important focus on research in language studies, and yet the practices of most listening comprehension tests seem to remain untouched by this development. The fact that most listening tests rest on assumptions that were developed and tested with reference to the learning of English in the Inner Circle countries, with little input from the learning of English outside, has reflected in the use of only native speakers' accent varieties as listening stimuli in the tests; whereas, in reality, the great majority of the world's English users are nonnative users who learn and use English outside the Inner Circle circumstance. For instance, Thai users

of English are likely to encounter the accents of nonnative users other than those of native speakers of English. Morrison and White (2005) added that institutions often overlook the resources available in their environment, focusing learner attention on Englishes provided by member of the Inner Circle. Global listeners must also be reminded of the validity of varieties of English. Increasing exposure to English varieties is one step. It is, therefore, crucial to know the effects that different accent varieties have on listening comprehension. This kind of research is relevant to designing various listening comprehension tests, for the reason that these tests should reflect the accent varieties of English that the test takers will be exposed to in working situations and their social environment. If listening comprehension tests are limited to native speakers of English, they are not representatives of the range of listening situations Thai students will encounter in the country.

Furthermore, in the present era where English plays the role of the global language, varieties of English are spoken in different parts of the world. In our everyday lives, we may encounter many people from different places. It is speech that captures our attention most when it is exceptional in some ways. One feature we may notice is a difference in accent or dialect. If the meaning of listening comprehension test construct focuses on only native speaker models, the degree of listening test authenticity might not be very high because the construct does not reflect the reality that there are a lot more nonnative users of English than the native users, and in many circumstances in which English is used as a medium of communication without the presence of native speakers. The ability to understand these varieties of English accents should be added to listening comprehension skills and the construct of listening comprehension tests. Jenkins (2006) argues that the spread of English as an International Language (EIL) requires a substantial overhaul of English language testing and tests for students of EIL should change both immediately and in the longer term. As McKay (2003:19) stated “*today English is being studied and used more and more as an international language in which learners acquire English as an additional language of wider communication. Given this shift in the nature of English, it is time to recognize the multilingual context of English use and to put aside a native speaker model of research and pedagogy*”, this present study, consequently, corresponds with the statement and contributes to English as an International Language (EIL) research. Worldwide, proposals are currently being made to move beyond the native speaker as the model in language

teaching and testing since in the context of EIL native speakers are only a part of the much larger group of speakers of the language (Llurda, 2004). According to Kim (2006), native speakers of English are a minority because there are far more nonnative speakers in the world.

At the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce (UTCC), a Listening Comprehension Course has been offered to English major students for more than twenty years since 1980 (UTCC, 2006). For a long time, the course has provided ample listening samples that are from the native speaker model. Until recently, the course content has tried to incorporate a few samples of varieties of English as part of listening lessons. The main reason is to provide students more chance to listen to different accents of native and nonnative speakers since the students are more familiar with particular accents such as the Thai accent or the general American accent. However, the amount of English varieties samples included in the lessons is still very little when compared to those from native speakers' voice samples. On top of that, at the end of the course, the students are given the final examination of listening comprehension that comes with voice stimuli of native speakers only.

Additionally, in the Listening Comprehension course, the students are also asked to perform in a variety of listening test tasks in classroom. Common task formats employed in UTCC listening comprehension classrooms are giving answers to multiple choice questions, short answer questions and some other formats such as true-false and gap filling. The students have been exposed to a variety of test formats; nevertheless, at the end of the semester, the students' listening comprehension ability is evaluated in their final examination solely on multiple choice questions.

Even though, in an authentic language situations, the students have to perform a variety of response formats other than multiple choice to prove their listening comprehension and the outside-classroom language situation exposes the students to other different English varieties other than native varieties, the listening comprehension test used for the final examination at UTCC does not reflect the importance of using varieties of English and other forms of comprehension test formats. This influential use of native varieties and the use of only multiple choice format in the final examination makes other international varieties of English and other test formats used in classroom inferior and unimportant.

The fact that during the course at UTCC, the students have been exposed to different test formats and in authentic language situations outside the classroom the

students have been exposed to varieties of English has led to the questions of construct validity of a listening comprehension test constructed for the students' final examination. Moreover, the suggestion made by Brindley (1998) that in a listening comprehension test, multiple choice questions make processing demands on test takers as they have to read and retain choices in working memory while paying attention to the aural input, together with the claim that native speakers are a minority (Kim, 2006; Pennycook, 2001; Kachru, 1997) have formed the quest for a research study. Therefore, the present study is conducted in order to obtain the empirical evidence of the effects of using nonnative speakers' varieties as the listening test stimuli and also using different test formats other than the multiple choice in the listening comprehension test.

Although Munro and Derwing (1999) found out in their study concerning foreign accent and comprehensibility that even heavily accented speech is sometimes perfectly intelligible and comprehensible, it is widely known that attitudes towards different varieties influence comprehension. Major et al. (2005) stated that positive attitudes aid comprehension, while negative attitudes interfere with comprehension. It seems that stereotypes regarding nonnative accented speech exist as perceptual constructs in the mind of both native and nonnative speakers of English, and these attitudes may have strong influences on listening comprehension. Further, Hiraga (2005) reported that only a few works within language attitude studies have been presented since the end of the 1970s and most of these published since the 1980s used data gathered from previous studies. It was also noted by Jarvella et al. (2001) that there were not many attempts that have been made to examine reactions to varieties of English of nonnative speakers. As a result, the study to investigate EFL listeners' attitudes towards varieties of English is beneficial and worthwhile to conduct with the intention to fill in the lack of further study in the field of language attitudes towards English varieties. Given this, the present study also includes the study of test takers' attitudes on accent varieties of English.

Listening comprehension is a complex construct, comprising a range of processes and responses on the part of the listener. In a listening comprehension test, a test taker's performance is seen to be a function of three variables: his or her language ability, the test methods, and the nature of listening input. Further, listeners' attitudes are also proved to contribute to the nature of comprehension. Research indicates that listening comprehension is supported when a listener has no negative

attitudes towards a particular variety of English (Major et al., 2005). The implication of the present study would be best for choosing appropriate listening test formats and appropriate English varieties as listening test input to accommodate UTCC students and EFL test takers in a similar situation in order to minimize bias and raise fairness among test takers who possess different ability and belief. Most of all, the use of the results would contribute to the validity of the test construct which is the heart of all kinds of assessment works.

II. Objectives of the Study

In an effort to investigate a realistic and valid construct of listening comprehension tests, this study, therefore, investigated the two variables that are seen to have effects on a test taker's performance in a listening comprehension test - the nature of task and the nature of input. The primary purpose of this study is to examine the effects of varieties of English (nature of input variables) on the two methods of test formats (nature of task variables). The listeners' attitudes and preferences are also investigated to portray Thai students' preferences and attitudes towards using varieties of English in a test of listening comprehension.

There are four principal purposes relating to the study:

1. To compare the effects of the different listening test formats on test takers' listening comprehension ability, and to investigate its effect size.
2. To compare the effects of varieties of English accents on the test takers' listening comprehension ability, and to investigate its effect size.
3. To compare the interaction effect between using varieties of English accents and different listening test formats, and to investigate its effect size.
4. To investigate the subjects' attitudes towards varieties of English accents and their preferences towards using accent varieties as the input in listening comprehension tests.

III. Research Questions

This study is designed to provide preliminary answers to the following questions:

1. Do different test formats have a significant effect on the test takers' listening comprehension ability? And if they do, how much is the effect

- size?
2. Do English accent varieties used in listening input have a significant effect on test takers' listening comprehension ability? And if they do, how much is the effect size?
 3. Is there a significant interaction effect between different listening test formats and accent varieties of English? And if there is, how much is the effect size?
 4. What are the test takers' attitudes towards accent varieties of English and their preferences towards using accent varieties as listening comprehension verbal input?

IV. Statement of Hypotheses

The first three quantitative questions lead to three hypotheses as:

Hypothesis 1: There is a significant difference in the average scores obtained from the multiple choice format and the short answer format.

$$(H_1: \mu_{MC} \neq \mu_{SA}, \alpha = 0.05)$$

Hypothesis 2: There is a significant difference in the average scores obtained from the test using English native speakers' model as listening stimuli and the test using other accent varieties of English as listening stimuli.

$$(H_1: \mu_{NS} \neq \mu_{NNS}, \alpha = 0.05)$$

Hypothesis 3: There is a significant interaction effect between the test formats and the accent varieties of English on average listening comprehension scores.

$$(H_1: \mu_{MC\ NS} \neq \mu_{MC\ NNS} \neq \mu_{SA\ NS} \neq \mu_{SA\ NNS} \text{ at least one pair, } \alpha = 0.05)$$

MC: Multiple Choice Format

SA: Short Answer Format

NS: Native Speaker Accent Varieties of English

NNS: Nonnative Speaker Accent Varieties of English

V. Scope of the Study

This study is an experimental research study that aims to find the effects of test formats and varieties of English on the test takers' listening comprehension ability. It was conducted at the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, Thailand. The experiment took place in the Listening Comprehension Course offered to second-year English major students. It concentrated on an achievement test for the listening comprehension course; therefore, teaching styles and techniques of teachers were not controlled in this present study. The scope of the study is as follows:

1. The population of the present study was the second-year undergraduate students of University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce. They were the English for Business Communication-major students who enrolled in the Listening Comprehension course in the 2005 academic year. The course is an English-major requirement for second year students.
2. There were two independent variables in this study—test formats and English varieties. The dependent variable was the subjects' scores on the listening comprehension tests.
3. The test format variable had two levels: the multiple choice format and the short answer format. These two formats were common tasks to which the students had been exposed in the Listening Comprehension course. The English accent varieties variable had two levels: the native varieties of English and the nonnative varieties of English.
4. The English accent varieties of native speakers were British, American and Australia. The accent varieties of nonnative speakers were Japanese, Malaysian, Singaporean, and Chinese. These English varieties were chosen according to the statistics from two sources: (1) the numbers of the international tourist arrivals to Thailand reported by the Immigration Bureau, Police Department (TAT, 2006); and (2) the amount of foreign investment reported by Board of Investment (BOI, 2006). The figures are illustrated in the test construction section.

VI. Limitations of the Study

1. This present study made use of different voices representing seven English accents. Although the number of speakers, age, gender, and speech frequency

could be controlled, the style of speaking and the nature of the speakers' voice were beyond the researcher's management. In the present study context, it was practically impossible to find speakers who were equally convincing in several English accent varieties. This means that variables like voice quality could be controlled only minimally. It is possible that some voice samples might sound more or less pleasant to listeners because of speakers' natural voice or style. This might cause an effect on comprehension or attitudes of listeners. However, the limitation was minimized by using more than one voice sample for each variety of English.

2. The native speakers and nonnative speakers' voices were not randomly selected. They were chosen according to the criteria set concerning age, education level, and speaking fluency. Their other different background might cause the difference in speaking English.
3. The present study employs the dialogue and the comprehension questions used in the classroom exercises and textbooks prepared for the lessons. Although the dialogues and questions selected were validated by asking the opinions of the teachers and students who participated in the course, they were chosen to be included in the test without strict control of the difficulty level. The difference in test takers' scores might arise from this uncontrolled factor.
4. The matched-pair technique was used to assign the samples into groups in order to control the equivalence in the ability of the groups. The samples were assigned into groups according to their listening scores. In the case that there were no equivalent scores to be matched, the researcher picked the samples that had the closest scores. Therefore, the samples were not randomly assigned into groups.

VII. Assumptions of the Study

1. This study assumes that the test takers put their best effort on working in the listening comprehension test because the test was given to them as a part of the course and administered by their own teacher.
2. It is assumed that the participants gave valid data on interview questions concerning their attitudes towards English varieties and their preferences for varieties used in the listening comprehension test.

3. It is assumed that other factors such as age or gender do not differently affect the listening comprehension scores since the subjects are in the same year of study and share similar academic background.

VIII. Definitions of Terms

1. Listening Comprehension Test

“The listening comprehension test” refers to a teacher-made listening comprehension test to test the students’ ability to understand spoken language. The construct of the test is based on the concept of ‘enabling skills’ mentioned by Goh in 2002. These enabling skills are the ability to listen for details, to listen for gist, to draw inferences, to listen selectively and to make predictions. Comprehension questions used in the test vary in difficulty and are categorized into three types as verbatim, synthetic and analytic questions. The listening comprehension test is an achievement test; therefore the texts used in designing the test script were selected from the Listening Comprehension course content. There are 40 items – 20 for each response format. The test structure is divided into 2 parts according to the format type which are multiple choice and short answer part. The test is designed to be completed within 35 minutes.

2. Listening Comprehension Ability

“Listening comprehension ability” refers to the scores from the listening comprehension test of both native speakers’ version and nonnative speakers’ version. The ability is operationalized as the subjects’ test scores on both test versions.

3. Test Takers

“Test takers” are the students who enrolled in the Listening Comprehension course in the School of Humanities at the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce in the academic year of 2005. A test taker refers to a student who undertakes the listening comprehension test designed for this study.

4. Test Formats

“Test formats” refer to response formats. It is operationalized as what a test taker is required to do when taking the listening comprehension test. The term format is used to refer to a type of test items involving complex performance in the test of listening comprehension. Formats, here, mean characteristics of the expected response which are multiple choice and short answer.

5. Accent Varieties of English

“Accent varieties of English” refers to English variation of sounds spoken in different parts of the world by the people who are and who are not native speakers. Native English speakers include those speakers who are from the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Australia. On the other hand, nonnative speakers of English, in this present study, are restricted to those speakers from Asia that have been reported to be the most frequent visitors to Thailand and those who have been investing the most in the country. In Asia, these nonnative English speakers are from Malaysia, China, Japan, and Singapore.

6. Native Speakers of English

A native speaker of English is a person who speaks English as his or her first language, and who was born and learned to speak English in the United Kingdom, the United States of America or Australia.

7. Nonnative Speakers of English

A nonnative speaker of English is a person who does not speak English as his or her first language, and who was born and learned to speak English in Malaysia, China, Japan, or Singapore.

8. Attitude

“Attitude” refers to the opinions and feelings that the test takers have about different accent varieties of English. Attitudes of the test takers were investigated by using the semantic differential scales including two trait dimensions proposed by Hiraga (2005). The two attitude dimensions are “solidarity” and “status”.

9. **Solidarity**

“Solidarity” is characterized as being attributed to a person who is similar to the listeners and is marked by frequent interaction, self-disclosure and intimacy. It is feeling that the informants think about speech and is evaluated through the use of five adjective words which are ‘sociable’, ‘sincere’, ‘comforting’, ‘friendly’, and ‘reliable’

10. **Status**

“Status” refers to social position considered in relation to other people in Thai society. It is operationalized as feelings that people think about speech which can be marked as having ‘high’ or ‘low’ status in a particular situation. The status dimension is evaluated through the use of five adjective words which are ‘educated’, ‘intelligent’, ‘wealthy’, ‘successful’, and ‘elegant’.

IX. Significance of the Study

This study contributes to two aspects in language testing: the use of English accent varieties as the listening test input and the variation of test formats in a listening comprehension test.

The findings of the present study are significantly different and they are useful in the following aspects:

1. Test writers and teachers of the Listening Comprehension course at the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce and other universities that offer similar courses can use the findings as a guideline to include accent varieties of English in listening comprehension tests. They should be able to incorporate these English varieties with more confidence so that it will help increase validity and reliability of tests. Further, they could maximize the effect of using varieties of English when designing classroom listening activities as well.
2. Test writers of listening comprehension tests will be provided with empirical evidence that test takers perform differently with different test formats in listening comprehension tests. The results will raise awareness of these test developers when writing listening tests, and could result in

their better choice of valid test formats. The results would therefore contribute to the validity of the construct of listening comprehension tests.

X. Overview

Chapter one provides the rationale of the study. It includes the objectives of the study, research questions, hypotheses, scope of the study, limitations of the study, assumptions of the study, definitions of terms and significance of the study.

Chapter two presents the review of related literature on listening comprehension test construction and validation. It includes factors affecting test takers' performance focusing on test formats and English accent varieties variables. Studies on attitudes towards English varieties end the chapter.

Chapter three concentrates on the research methodology. The population and participants are presented with the sampling method employed. The procedures used in constructing the research instruments as well as the validation process are described. In the last section of the chapter, data collection and analysis are discussed.

Chapter four reveals the findings of the study which are presented according to the hypotheses stated. It also presents the findings from the interview session with the participants.

Chapter five provides the research summary and summary of the findings. Discussions of the findings based on the questions and hypotheses set follow. Recommendations for research consumers and future studies are provided in the last part.