

Difficulty Levels of Questions in Listening Exercises

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ABSTRACT

The important of having good listening ability will succeed the students for achieving their English. Listening comprehension is the process of understanding speech in a first or second language. The study of listening comprehension in second language learning focuses on the role of individual linguistic units (e.g., phonemes, words, grammatical structures) as well as the role of the listener's expectations, the situation and context, background knowledge and topic" (Richards and Schmidt, 2002, p. 313). The major teachers' problem when teaching listening is they have difficulty to design questions of listening. The objective of this paper is to discuss the difficulty levels of questions in listening exercises and to overcome the teachers' difficulties in designing questions. The writer compares the questions with the cognitive level of Bloom's Taxonomy, namely: *remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating* (Bloom's Revised Taxonomy by Anderson, 2001:8). To limit this paper, the writer only discusses the difficulty levels of questions in listening exercises based on the cognitive level of Bloom's Taxonomy. Hopefully, the outcome of this paper will help teachers to design questions in listening exercises.

Keywords: *difficulty levels, questions, listening*

INTRODUCTION

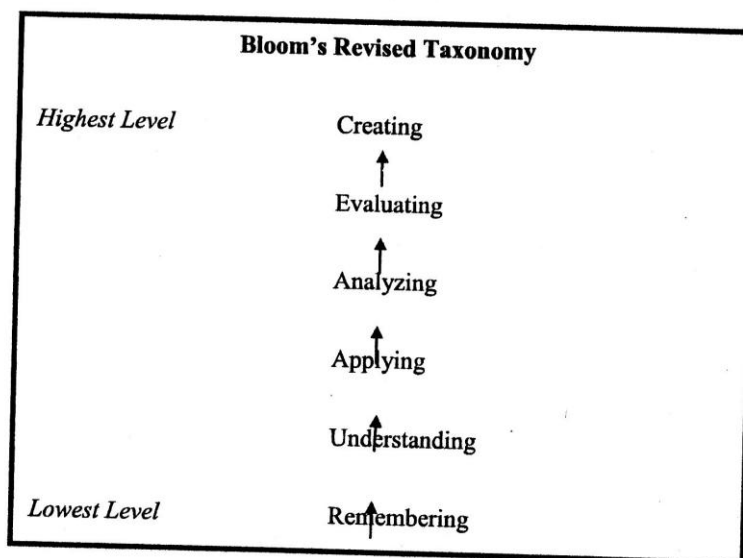
Listening is the first skill of English that is learnt by the students. It is very important to have good ability in listening. Brett (1995) states that listening is a key second language skill, it is vital for language acquisition, and its development is of prime concern to language teachers. In line with Brett, the writer agrees that students who have great ability in listening will make them easier to study English. Every skill of English supports each other in developing the acquisition of students in learning language. It goes without saying that listening has important role for the students who learn English.

Listening is the active process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken or non verbal messages. It involves the ability to retain information as well as to react emphatically and or appreciatively to spoken or non verbal message (ILA: 1995). The process of retaining information will determine how well the students may get the completed message. So, the teachers should create good environment for the students to study for the purpose that the students will be actively receive the message. Further, the students' ability in constructing the meaning from the message will succeed them to give a response in the conversation. Zhang (2006) says that in the process of comprehension, listeners use both bottom-up and top-down processes to comprehend. Top down process refers to using schemata to derive meaning from interpreting the message. It refers to the attribution of meaning, drawn from one's knowledge to language input. It requires the prediction of meaning by using context clues and combining them with background

knowledge. While bottom-up process refers to deriving the meaning of the text based on the incoming language data, from sounds, words, grammatical relationship, to meaning. To check the students' comprehension in listening, the teacher may provide lots of exercises. The ability of teachers in designing some questions in exercises will influence the result of the study. In other word, it is very important to provide questions that really measure what should be measured based on the objective of the study. Bloom's revised taxonomy can be used as the point for the consideration to create or design the difficulty level of the questions. Questions which have been designed will ask the students to do some activities based on the level of difficulty, such as *remembering*. At this stage, the question is designed to check the students memory whether they can remember the message from the conversation in listening exercises. Then, the teacher may design the form of questions based on what they need to measure.

CONTENT

At this stage, the writer tries to discuss the difficulty level of question in listening. There are some stages that students need to do to response the questions. The writer uses Bloom's revised taxonomy to classify the difficulty level of questions in listening based on what stage the students reach to give response. According to Anderson (2001:8), Bloom's Revised Taxonomy is classified into six levels, namely: (1) remembering, (2) understanding, (3) applying, (4) analyzing, (5) evaluating, and (6) creating. The following is the picture.



(Bloom's Revised Taxonomy by Anderson, 2001:8)

A *Remembering* involves retrieving relevant knowledge from long term memory. At this level, the students are able to recognize, identify, recall, and retrieve learned information, for instance, "What is 'the current issue?'" and "Who are the interviewer and interviewee in the conversation?". The second level is an *understanding*. It involves constructing meaning from instructional messages including oral, written, and graphic communication. In this level, the activities are interpreting, exemplifying, classifying, summarizing, inferring, comparing, and explaining. For examples, "Can you write in your own word?" and "What is the main idea of the story?". The third level is an *applying*. It involves using procedures to perform exercises or solve problem. It occurs when the students use the information in a context different from the one in which it is learned. In other words, this level refers to using information in another familiar situation, for instances, executing, carrying out, implementing, and using. The followings are the examples: "Which factors would you change if you were a leader?" and "From the information given, can you develop a set of instructions to develop the story?". The fourth level is an *analyzing*. It deals with breaking information into parts to explore understandings and relationships, such as: differentiating, organizing, attributing, deconstructing, structuring, outlining, distinguishing, focusing, selecting, and finding. For the examples, "Which solutions are needed to solve this problem?" and "How many packages should be there?". Fifth is an *evaluating*. This level relates to justifying a decision such as checking, coordinating, detecting, monitoring, testing, critiquing, and judging. The students make decision based on in-depth reflection, criticism and assessment, for instance: "Is there a better solution to this problem?" and "How effective is this program?". The last level is a *creating*. It is the highest level of cognitions. It involves generating new ideas, products, or ways of viewing things. Moreover, it deals with generating, hypothesizing, planning, designing, producing, and constructing. For the examples, "can you create a proposal which would develop this company well?", and "How many ways can you make to solve this problem?". Those are the examples of questions based on the stages of activities done by the students. Next, the writer provides some questions in listening.

The following are the listening exercise types in listening class:

1. Pronunciation

Instruction: Hearing the difference between /e/ æ /AND /ʌ /. Listen to the following words. Circle the words you hear.

- | | | | | | |
|----------|-------|--------|-----------|--------|--------|
| 1. send | sand | sunned | 7.hem | ham | hum |
| 2. leg | lag | lug | 8.pen | pan | pun |
| 3. trek | track | truck | 9.kept | capped | cupped |
| 4. flesh | flash | flush | 10.mess | mass | |
| | muss | | | | |
| 5. dead | dad | dud | 11.beg | bag | bug |
| 6. mesh | mash | mush | 12.better | batter | butter |

(taken from Blass, L and Pamela Hartmann:2007)

From the instruction above, the writer may say that the students have to differentiate the sounds between /e/ æ /AND /ʌ / which is obtained from some words provided in each number. This exercise asks the students to listen to the words carefully from the audio. They will have difficulty when they fail to identify what words really spoken by the speaker are. At this stage, the students should pay full attention to listen to the audio, and

immediately they have to decide what the word is. Actually, pronouncing word is the basic exercise of listening. This exercise examines how well the students can remember the information which they retrieve from the audio, in this case identifying the words as the representative of the audio. When writer refers to Bloom's Revised Taxonomy by considering the students activity, the writer can conclude that the difficulty level of this question in listening belongs to *remembering* stage as the first stage of Bloom's Revised Taxonomy.

2. Choosing corrected word from the option

Instruction: Listen to the commercial. Choose the correct words.

Ed : Are you (a) worried (b) concerned about having enough money? Are you worried about (a) making ends meet (b) paying your bills? Well, (a) don't worry anymore (b) worry no more!

Customer 1 : I used to (a) watch (b) take care of every penny. But now (a) I'm worth (b) I have assets of four million dollars, and it's all (a) due to (b) thanks to Steven Crow!

Customer 2 : I used to get (a) heartaches (b) headaches from worrying about money. I had a lot of credit card (a) bills (b) debt, and my mortgage (a) bills (b) payments were killing me. Then I got Steven Crowe's (a) programs (b) videos, and learned how to (a) earn (b) make real money.

Ed : "Real money." That's the name of this 3- (a) CD (b) Video set by Steven Crowe. Let Steven (a) show (b) teach you how to become (a) personally (b) financially independent buying and selling real estate.

Steven : Hi! I'm Steven Crowe. I used to (a) worry (b) be worried about money, too. I felt like a (a) hero (b) victim of the system. But then I found a way to make the (a) system (b) market work – for me.

Ed : What's the (a) idea (b) trick, Steven?

Steven : There's no trick, Ed. It's (a) easy (b) simple, once you (a) understand (b) comprehend how real estate really works. All you need to know is how to (a) acquire (b) buy low and sell high. And that's (a) exactly (b) precisely what my videos (a) instruct (b) teach you to do.

Ed : And you can (a) get (b) become really rich?

Steven : Just (a) ask (b) listen to some people who have 'Real Money'.

Customer 1 : After I got the "Real Money" videos, I bought my first (a) house (b) business, following Steven's simple (a) ideas (b) rules. Six months later I sold it and bought two more houses. A year after that, I had (a) plenty of (b) enough money to (a) quit my job (b) start my business. Now I have more money than I'll ever need, and it's such a (a) great (b) wonderful feeling.

Steven : I want you to have that feeling, too. And you (a) can (b) will.

Ed : Call now to order "Real Money." (a) 1-800-289-7325 (b) 1-800-298-7235. That's 1-800- BUY-REAL. Only three (a) amounts (b) payments of (a) 19.95 (b) 29.95 each, plus shipping and handling. All major credit cards welcome. Get it today, for a worry-free tomorrow! Results may vary.

(taken from Harsch, K and Kate Wolfe Quintero: 2001)

The instruction of this exercise asks the students to choose the correct words by giving a check or a circle sign in letter (a) or in letter (b). The following exercise needs the students

to pay full attention while listening to the audio because the speed of the speaker is very fast. The rapidity and the accuracy to catch the audio will lead them to select the right option as written in the text. So, this exercise examines the students to recall the information which they get and save in the short term memory. The students are supposed to decide immediately what the right answer is. At this stage, students have experience to reach the first level stage of Bloom's Revised Taxonomy which is called a *remembering*.

3. Marking each sentence T (true) or F (false)

Instruction: Listen to the excerpt. Mark each sentence T (true) or F (false)

- _____ 1. Helen Keller lost her sight and hearing in an accident.
- _____ 2. As a child, Keller was angry and frustrated by her inability to understand others and express herself.
- _____ 3. The speaker lost her eyesight when she was a baby.
- _____ 4. Like Keller, she was angry and frustrated about her inability to understand and communicate with others.

(taken from Ferree, T and kim Sanabria: 2004)

The third exercise asks the students to give a mark true (T) or false (F). To do the following exercise the students must be able to catch the major point of information from the speaker. When the students can get lots of information as the content of the passage of the audio, they will be easily to decide whether the statement written in the exercise is true or false. In addition, the ability of the students to understand the meaning of the passage will help them to recall what they have retrieve the information from the audio. In other words, this exercise examines how well the students can understand the content message of the passage in audio as the information which is used as a consideration when deciding whether the statements written in the exercises are true or false. From this illustration, the writer may say that this exercise tests the students' cognitive level in a second stage of Bloom's Revised Taxonomy which is called an understanding.

4. Fill in the blanks.

Instruction: Listen their conversation and fill in the blank.

Junko : I'm tired.

Richard : Yeah, I'm tired, too.

Junko : We have one more chapter for Impact Topics. I can't (1)

Richard : Yeah ___ I have (2) Let the students choose the topic

Junko : What do you mean, let the students choose?

Richard : You know, the student can (3)about anything they want.

Junko : I don't know. That's our job. And that's their (4) job. We have to give the students the topic.

Richard : I don't agree. The students know what they like.

Junko : Well, of course they do. But they aren't teachers. They're students. Students (5)

Richard : Hmmm ... maybe. But sometimes I think students can (6) each other.

Junko : What do you mean?

Richard : Well, in this chapter, we can give students power and control. They can (7)what they want to talk about!

- Junko : Come on, Richard. That won't work. Students (8) Control their own education.
 Richard : But I think they should have some power, some control. In this chapter, they can (9)the topic.
 Junko : Well, I really think that's our job. It's our book. We can't give it to students to do.
 Richard : Oh, come on, Junko, let's try it. It (10)
 Junko : OK, let's _ let's try it.
 Richard : Great! More power to students!

(taken from R.D, Richard and Junko Yamanaka: 2003)

The exercise above asks the students to fill in the blank to complete the passage. The students have to pay full attention to catch the phrases of a word for completing the passage. The ability of the students in identifying the missing phrases or word will give good contribution for completing the passage. The mastery of the structure in English will be used as the consideration for deciding the class word of the missing phrases or a word by considering the tense form of the sentence in a passage. At this exercise, the students are tested to recall their memory. In other word, the writer may say that this exercise tests the students' cognitive level at the first stage of Bloom's Revised Taxonomy which is called remembering.

5. Completing sentence

Listen to the conversation. Circle the word or phrase that best completes each sentence.

- | | | |
|---------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| 1. a. scared | b. glad | c. irritable |
| 2. a. sleep-induced | b. sleep-deprived | c. sleep-in |
| 3. a. accumulates | b. accelerates | c. accentuates |
| 4. a. shy | b. miserable | c. monstrous |
| 5. a. drooping | b. twisting | c. turning |
| 6. a. smoking | b. singing | c. snoring |
| 7. a. aggressive | b. alert | c. amused |
| 8. a. out of sync | b. out of sight | c. out of tune |
| 9. a. suspend | b. suspect | c. sustain |
| 10. a. do alone | b. do again | c. do without |

(taken from Ferree, T and kim Sanabria: 2004)

There are two things which the students do in this exercise. Firstly, the students have to pay full attention to the audio for catching the content of the message spoken by the speaker. The statements of each number of the message are uncompleted. Secondly, the students have to know the meaning of the words provided as the option in each number to be used for completing the statements. To do the following exercise the students must be able to decide what exact word from the option which will be appropriate to be applied for completing the uncompleted statement. It goes without saying that this exercise tests the students' cognitive level at the third stage of Bloom's Revised Taxonomy which is called applying.

6. Correcting word

Instruction: Listen to the conversation. Correct the mistakes.

Interviewer : Good afternoon. Mr Rodriguez?

Daniel : Yes, I'm Daniel Rodriguez.

Interviewer : How are you today?

Daniel : Fine, thanks.

Interviewer : I understand you want to get a job here at the restaurant.

Daniel : Yes, I do.

Interviewer : Well, tell me a little about yourself. First, what languages do you know?

Daniel : I can speak French, and of course Spanish. And a little Japanese.

Interviewer : Can you work at the front desk? Use a computer? Send letters, e-mail and so on?

Daniel : Sure, I can use a computer. I can do all that.

Interviewer : Okay. Let's see. There are many other jobs here at the hotel, so I need to find out what else you can do. Can you dive? We have a swimming pool here.

Daniel : Yes, I can swim.

Interviewer : We have 14 restaurants. And one coffee shop. Can you wait on tables?

Daniel : Yeah, I worked as a waiter at a restaurant last year.

Interviewer : Can you cook?

Daniel : Um, no, I can't cook.

Interviewer : Are you strong? Can you carry heavy bags?

Daniel : I think so.

Interviewer : How about weekends? That's our easiest time. Can you work on weekend?

Daniel : I can work Sundays, but not Saturdays.

Interviewer : Hmm. I see. Now the most difficult question is: Do you like working with people? At a hotel, you work with people all day.

Daniel : Yeah, I can work with a lot of people. I come from a small family.

Interviewer : Well, Daniel. Thank you for coming in today. I'll give you a call in a few days.

Daniel : Thank you. Good night!

Interviewer : Good-bye.

(taken from Kislinger, E: 2002)

At this exercise, the students have experience to identify and replace some words or phrases. They have to observe every word while listening to the audio. When they find some additional words which should not be written in the passage, they have to delete to match the audio and the transcript of the passage. In addition, they also have to identify the wrong word or phrases which are written in the passage. Next, the students must find words or phrases as substitution of the incorrect words and phrases. For doing the following exercise, the students must listen to the audio attentively to catch what appropriate words or phrases spoken from the audio which should be *applied* at the passage as the main activity at this exercise. The ability to catch and to comprehend the meaning the words or phrases from the audio will help the students to finish the exercise. The words or phrases which are applied in the passage must make a sense to build the meaning of the text of the passage. At the end, by considering the form activity of the exercise, the writer takes conclusion that this exercise tests the students' cognitive level at the third stage of Bloom's Revised Taxonomy which is called applying.

7. Sums up the conversation

Listen to each dialogue. Circle the sentence that best sums up each conversation.

1. a. Barb thinks Nat shouldn't complain.
b. Barb thinks Nat should be perceptive.
2. a. Jane should act with respect toward her grandfather.
b. Jane should try to understand her grandfather.
3. a. Ken thinks Eric has to accept disappointment
b. Ken thinks Eric should be angry.
4. a. Jan will not be hurt and angry about Kay's promotion
b. Jan will not talk to Kay.
5. a. Mary Ann is a happy and excited person.
b. Mary Ann thinks she is important.
6. a. Gwen wanted to discuss the advice.
b. Gwen had a negative reaction to the advice.

(taken from Ferree, T and Kim Sanabria: 2004)

There are two tasks that the students should do at the same time at this exercise. The first is the students must comprehend the sentence meaning of the statements provided in the option. Every number of the question has two sentences as the summary of the conversation. The ability to catch the sentence meaning which are written in the option will help them to do this exercise. The second is the students must pay full attention to listen to the audio. While listening to the audio, the students may take a note to catch some important point as the content of the conversation. The students can use their note to understand the content of the conversation. The ability in *understanding* the content of the conversation will help the students to decide what the right sentence which is available written in the option as the summary for the conversation. At the end, referring to the form of this exercise, the writer may say that this exercise tests the students' cognitive level at the second stage of Bloom's Revised Taxonomy which is called understanding.

CONCLUSION

Finally, the writer may conclude that the form of exercise will determine the difficulty level of question in listening exercise by considering to what stage the students may reach in students' cognitive level of Bloom's Revised Taxonomy for doing the exercise.

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