Exploring Listening Comprehension Difficulties Observed Among Korean High School Students

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This study reports the listening difficulties encountered by Korean learners of English while engaged in transactional listening. Twenty learners listened to four texts, providing both think-aloud and retrospective data. They experienced a total of eleven types of listening difficulties and twelve causes of the difficulties. The predominant difficulties took place at the perceptual stage. This was especially noted by the less proficient learners and with more difficult texts. The more proficient learners, because of their greater linguistic proficiency, were better able to progress to a higher level of processing, regardless of the difficulty of the texts. The less proficient learners could advance to a higher level of processing when listening to easier texts. Based on the findings, the priority, in English classrooms, should be placed on improving the learners´basic decoding skills. For this, input within the grasp of the learners´comprehension, in the form of extended discourse spoken in natural oral English, should be introduced and pre-listening sessions should be implemented.

Key words : SL/FL listening comprehension, SL/FL listening difficulties

I. Background of the study

There is a consensus among second language(SL)/foreign language(FL) professionals (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Brown, 1986; Brynes, 1984; Mendelsohn, 1994, 1995; Morley, 1991; Richards, 1983; Sheerin, 1987) that a teaching approach to listening, rather than a testing approach to

listening, produces better results in English classrooms and that the teaching approach should contain diagnostic and remedial components. Diagnostic procedures have been defined as: 'to recognize particular patterns of behavior in listening' in Brown (1986: 286), 'identify learners' weakness as listeners ´ in Field (1998: 11), 'analysis of all the potential sources of difficulty' in Anderson and Lynch (1988: 68), and 'error analysis' in Sheerin (1987: 126). Remedial procedures have been defined as: 'to provide exercises for the student which will promote superior patterns of behaviors' in Brown (1986: 286), 'redressing learners' weakness as listeners ´ in Field(1998: 11), 'grading of learners ´ experiences of complexity' and 'the provision of helpful exercises' in Anderson and Lynch (1988: 68), and 'adequate preparation', 'adequate support', and 'appropriate listening tasks' in Sheerin (1987: 126). According to these professionals, the diagnostic procedures include the analysis of the learners ´ listening difficulty and potential sources of the difficulty. Identification of the learners ´ use of strategy to overcome the difficulty may be added to this. The remedial procedures such as the type of input to be presented, grading of the input, tasks, listening exercises, strategy training, etc. should be based on the information emerging from the diagnostic analysis of the learners ´ listening behaviors. This current study investigates the listening difficulties of Korean learners of English and the potential causes of their difficulties and intends to place English teachers in a better position to diagnose the learners ´ listening behaviors and remedy their weakness as listeners. One can easily anticipate the different behaviors between more proficient learners and less proficient ones as well as the different demands made by texts with different levels of difficulty. The information needed for remedial procedures will, hopefully, emerge from the findings of this investigation.

II. Literature review

Despite significant classroom applications, there has been little research on the listening difficulties that SL/FL learners experience in real-life listening situations or in learning to listen in English in the classrooms. No studies that I know of have quantified the listening difficulties that SL/FL learners encounter in these cases. Of the five main lines of research on SL listening summarized by Dunkel (1991: 434), the following two have some bearing on the listening difficulties that learners experience while listening: 1) research on the components (sub-skills) of listening involved in SL listening and 2) research on the factors inside and outside the head that

enhance or inhibit the comprehension of input in the SL.

The first line of research is concerned with setting up taxonomies which subsume the micro-skills that SL/FL learners, as successful listeners, need to develop. On the basis of literature on listening processes in both first language and SL/FL and their classroom experiences, SL/FL professionals (e.g., Lund, 1990; Richards, 1983; Rost, 1990) have constructed taxonomies of micro-skills that underlie successful listening. The taxonomies of the sub-skills are designed so that each sub-skill builds upon the preceding ones. Once the listeners ´ proficiency level is identified, a sub-skill suitable for the listeners can be selected and practised. In relation to the present study, this analytical approach does not provide direct insights into listening difficulties. The taxonomies imply an order of learning. If sub-skills are developed in a linear sequence, the listening difficulties that learners at different levels will experience can be easily predicted. This easy predictability is highly unlikely. Sub-skills are equated with the abilities required of a skilled listener, therefore, they are something that can be implemented during the remedial actions, after the learners are diagnosed as not having acquired the skills. This is where sub-skills are differentiated from listening difficulties.

The second line of research investigates the internal and external factors that distract or support listening. Studies on factors influencing listening can be summarized as follows: 1) those that list factors gained either from a survey (e.g., Boyle, 1984) or from the existing literature (e.g., Celce-Murcia, 1995; Lynch, 1998; Mendelsohn, 1994; Samuels, 1987; Underwood, 1989; Ur, 1984) and 2) those that empirically investigate one particular factor (see Rubin, 1994 for a comprehensive report of those studies). This line of research cannot serve as a reliable tool for diagnosing learners ´ listening difficulties. Researchers focusing on all the factors involved in listening base their arguments on SL/FL learners ´ metacognitive knowledge about their listening difficulties. Research focusing on a single factor cannot yield accurate information, since successful listening is a product of processing the aural input at various levels at the same time. In addition, it is uncertain whether all the factors that enhance or decrease listening have been identified and if they have indeed been identified, whether they will convert to listening difficulties in a real-time listening situation. The factors are probable causes of the learners ´ listening difficulties rather than the difficulties themselves.

On top of these two lines of research, we can add empirical studies that present lists of listening problems. To the best of my knowledge, they are all from large-scale doctoral research (e.g., DeFilippis, 1980; Goh, 1998; Laviosa, 1991), though their main focus is not on identifying learners ´ listening difficulties. 'Speed', 'pronunciation/accent of speaker', and 'memory/recall

factor' in DeFilippis, 'word heard incorrectly' in Laviosa and 'concentrate too hard or unable to concentrate' and 'quickly forget what is heard' in Goh are equivalent to such factors influencing listening as 'speech rate', 'properties of oral English', 'memory', and 'attention'. The lack of overlap between problem categories in the lists and factors influencing listening may be due to differences in data collection methods and the subjects´ characteristics. More importantly, the factors may be different from actual listening difficulties. To conclude, none of these lists appear to serve as an ideal framework within which the listening difficulties that Korean secondary learners of English experience can satisfactorily be described. DeFilippis´ or Goh's are not suitable since they were set up based on the subjects´ matacognitive knowledge about what makes their listening difficult as opposed to the data from the subjects´ real-time listening situation. Laviosa's is not suitable either, since it was set up based on the data gathered from the subjects whose FL proficiency was near native-like as opposed to a very limited command of English by Korean secondary learners.

III. Research questions and hypotheses

The purpose of the present study is to obtain information about the listening difficulties experienced by Korean learners of English and how they are different depending on listening proficiency and text difficulty. This study is guided by the following two questions:

1) *What listening difficulties do Korean high school learners of English experience while they listen to oral texts?*

2) *Are there differences between Korean high school learners of English with different levels of listening proficiency in any type of listening difficulties experienced while they listen to aural texts of different levels of difficulty?*

Research question 2 is concerned with the main effects of listening proficiency and text difficulty on the frequency of individual listening difficulty types. From it, therefore, the following two null hypotheses could be derived:

$H_0$1) *There is no difference between learners with different levels of listening proficiency in the frequency of any type of listening difficulty.*

$H_0$2) *There is no difference between texts of different levels of difficulty in the frequency of any type of listening difficulty.*

IV. Methodology

1. Subjects

Twenty high school students in Korea (seventeen females and three males at year eleven) participated in this study. At the time of the research, they had been studying English for approximately 4.5 years. They had four hours of English classes, where reading and grammar were the main areas of focus, two hours of conversation classes, where tasks in pairs or in groups were carried out, and two hours of intensive listening classes, where the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) tapes were transcribed. They were divided into two groups (ten per each group), based on their performances on the seventy-five item listening section of the standardized Secondary Level English Proficiency (SLEP) test. Those whose overall scores ranged from 58 to 67 out of 75 items (a group average of 62.0) made up the more proficient group, while those whose overall scores ranged from 44 to 50 were placed in the less proficient group (a group average of 47.9).

2. Listening materials

Subjects listened to four texts with two levels of difficulty (two per each level). The text difficulty was judged first by ten learners in the pilot study and then confirmed by a class of fifty students. They were:

More difficult texts	Less difficult texts
'Fear of spiders' (Source: Listening 1 (Duff & Becket, 1991)) 'Selma's self-introduction' (Source: www.englishlistening.com)	'False beliefs about animals' (Source: Korean High School English Textbook) 'First car drive alone' (Source: www.englishlistening.com)

'Fear of spiders' targeted pre-intermediate level students. It was a conversation between two people, possibly a female expert on spiders and a male interviewer. The interviewer asked short, leading questions on people's fear of spiders and the interviewee gave relatively long responses to them, crammed with expert knowledge about spiders. It was delivered in American English at a

rate of 229 syllables per minute (SPM)(382 syllables/1 ′40 ″). 'Selma's self-introduction' was recorded from an English listening practice site on the internet. This recording was selected from one of many passages for beginners. It was about a retired housewife talking about herself, her part-time job, her family and the community within which she lived. This selection, also, was recorded in American English at a rate of 188 SPM (307 syllables/1 ′38 ″). 'False beliefs about animals' was taken from one of the high school English textbooks which had been used in the previous sixth national curriculum in Korea and was, therefore, unavailable to the subjects. This tape was believed to be suitable for the subjects as there was not much difference between it and the tapes used in the current national curriculum - a slow reading of a written passage in the textbook. The recording was about commonly-held but incorrect ideas that people, in general, have about various animals. It was spoken in American English by a male speaker with a low voice, at a rate of 204 SPM (533 syllables/2 ′37 ″). 'First car drive alone' was from the same internet site as 'Selma's self-introduction'. The passage was designed for listeners at the intermediate level. This passage, among the four, was considered the most natural, with lots of false starts, hesitations, repetitions and paralinguistic features. It was a narration by a girl who happened to lose her mother's car in a fire on the first day of driving on her own. The rate of the speech was 165 SPM (435 syllables/2 ′38 ″).

3. Procedures

The subjects were asked to think-aloud, since it is impossible to have direct access to their listening processes. The reasons for listening, the titles, or the topics were not given prior to listening. The subjects were just asked to listen to as many details as possible. Immediately following the verbal-report session, they reflected on the processing difficulties that they had experienced while listening. In order to give a clearer idea about their listening difficulties encountered during the think-aloud session, they were handed a transcript of the recordings they had just listened to. This procedure provided them with a chance to process the same texts (recordings) in both the spoken and written modes.

In order to answer research question 1, the protocols produced by the subjects were qualitatively analysed. All forty tapes (twenty for think-aloud and twenty for retrospective reports) were transcribed verbatim, resulting in twenty sets of protocols containing original texts, both the think-aloud and retrospective reports on them, and the investigator's occasional prompts. The investigator read the protocols thoroughly several times before identifying and coding the listening

difficulties. They were detected either in the think-aloud or retrospective reports only, or, first in the think-aloud reports and then confirmed in the retrospective reports. First, four protocols were chosen, two from each listening proficiency level: high and low. Then all the cases where the subjects experienced comprehension difficulties were identified and described in detail. Finally, those similar in nature were grouped together. The basic principle applied in this identification procedure was that the investigator should identify and give suitable names to every listening comprehension breakdown detected, regardless of the subjects´ awareness of its presence.

Prior to testing the two hypotheses derived from research question 2, all the listening difficulties encountered by the subjects in two types of text were identified and quantified. These were based on the classification of the listening difficulties gained from research question 1.

V. Findings

1. Classification of difficulties in listening comprehension

A total of twenty-three types of listening difficulties were identified. Some of these seemed to be really more causes of difficulties than types of difficulties. The twenty-three categories, therefore, were further broken down into two groups: eleven types of difficulties and twelve causes of the difficulties.

Before the listening difficulty taxonomy was completed, another element was added to it – the classification of all the difficulty types/causes into three different levels of listening comprehension: perceptual, parsing, and utilization, in accordance with Anderson's (1995) three components of listening comprehension. This was in order to get an overall picture of the subjects´ listening difficulties. The present study preferred Anderson's model for the following reasons. First, Anderson's three components of listening comprehension nicely captured the twenty-three difficulty types/causes. Second, evidence was available that both SL and FL listeners passed through Anderson's three phases of comprehension processes while listening (Bacon 1992; O'Malley, et al., 1989). Third, the eleven problem types identified in Goh's study (1998) were also accommodated within this model. Lastly, the model has been continuously adopted in SL/FL listening comprehension research, e.g., Brown (1995: 61). By placing all the difficulty types/causes into the model, the definition of a listening difficulty could be clarified as the listeners´ failure to

fulfil what they were supposed to do in the course of reaching comprehension at each of the three stages of listening.

A. Classification of the types of difficulty in listening comprehension

Four difficulty types were found at the first perceptual stage of listening, related to the subjects´ failure to segment flowing speech sounds. They are: 1) *non-recognition of a single known word*[1]), 2) *non-recognition of a single unknown word*, 3) *non-recognition of sequences of words*, and 4) *mishearing*. The mishearing category bestrides the boundary between the perceptual and the parsing stages in that the subjects at least isolated a meaningful unit from the input, though sometimes as a non-word. Their failure to assign proper meanings and grammatical roles to what had been coded in the parsing phase was considered as: 5) *non-grasp of a single known word*, 6) *non-grasp of a single unknown word*, 7) *non-grasp of sequences of words*, and 8) *confusion of meaning between words with similar pronunciation*. Their failure to relate what they had mentally represented to their prior knowledge was identified as: 9) *non-resolution of reference*, 10) *non-identification of the sentence meaning*, and 11) *non-identification of the text topic*.

The distinction between 'known' and 'unknown' in the listening difficulty types 1, 2, 5, and 6 is debatable, since no consensus had been reached on how much knowledge about a certain word needs to be acquired before it is claimed to be known. It cannot be denied that the subjects applied different criteria when they had to judge whether or not a certain word was known. Some who had failed to recognize a word and thought it as unknown might have realized, from the transcript of the recordings given before their retrospection, that they knew it in its written form and, as a result, reported it as a known word. Suffice to say that the categorization of a word either as known or unknown was based on the subjects´ own judgment or the evidence of the surrounding report.

B. Classification of the causes of difficulty in listening comprehension

Most of the difficulty causes were stage-specific, that is, they triggered difficulties within the same stage of listening. Four of the difficulty causes were associated with difficulties at the perceptual stage: 1) *speed of input*, 2) *attention lapses*, 3) *failure to chunk input into a manageable size*, and 4) *failure to identify sentence boundary*. Three of them caused difficulties at

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1) Listening difficulty types/causes in the present study are indicated in italics.

the parsing stage: 5) *ambiguous words and near homonyms*, 6) *memory lapses*, and 7) *arbitrary interpretation.* The remaining five were stage-independent: 8) *fixation*, 9) *speaker variation*, and 10) *strategy-related problems* - which caused difficulties at the perceptual and parsing stages, 11) *lack of world knowledge* - which was a cause of listening difficulty at the parsing and utilization stages and 12) *earlier problem* - which occurred at all three stages of listening.

For the categories and definitions of listening difficulty types and causes, see Table 1.

〈Table 1〉 Types and causes of listening difficulties

Stages of listening	Listening difficulty types/causes, Definitions, Representative examples[2]
Perceptual	1) *non-recognition of a single known word:* Failure to distinguish a known word from a continuous stream of speech. *My first day of driving on my own with my brand new* **driver's** *license is going to be a day//* (TA---"On my own", I don't know what it means. Doing it with her friend, her friend sitting next to her is teaching her <how to drive>. "License", <u>I haven't got the word that preceded it</u>, so I have to relisten.)
	2) *non-recognition of a single unknown word:* Failure to recognize a word if information about it is not represented in the memory. *They can see both in the daytime and at night. Experiments show us that they can see even when the sun is shining in their eyes.* (TA---They can see both in the daytime and at night. I'm not sure about the word, but it can show that they can see. RE---<u>I don't know the word "experiment"</u>.)

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2) Keys applicable to the representative examples:
- Italics are original text the subjects listened to.
- Bold face indicates a point under discussion.
- '//' indicates the point at which the subjects stopped the tape for reporting.
- Brackets below the original text contain the subjects´ verbal reports translated from Korean by the investigator.
- 'TA' marks the subjects´ think-aloud report.
- 'RE' marks the subjects´ retrospective report.
- " " contains the subjects´ original English.
- <   > contains the investigator's additions to make the subjects´ reports comprehensible.
- Underlines indicate listening difficulties under discussion.
- <LATER> indicates the subjects' reports on the same difficulty at a later stage.

	3) *non-recognition of sequences of words:* Failure to extract any identifiable sound unit from an extended speech stream except to recognize that they were hearing speech sounds or picking up bits and pieces from here and there. *The crocodile with its short legs and clumsy looking body is a familiar sight to most of us.* (TA---"Leg"? I've heard nothing.)
	4) *mishearing:* Errors in the subjects' output as opposed to in its equivalent input. *Have you ever heard of the saying as blind **as a bat**?* (TA---"Blind is a back?" What do you think? "Blind is a back?")
Parsing	5) *non-grasp of a single known word:* Failure to determine its meaning after successfully selecting a lexical item suited to the sound information of a word. *The car leasing business is an unusually new business. You can lease a car for two or three years and at the end of that time you can either buy it or you can trade it in for a new car.* (TA---<She> is talking about some new work. Something she mentioned earlier, "car...business", what is it? RE---I didn't catch "car leasing" and interpreted it as <people> renting a car for two years and repurchasing it or that sort of thing. I know the word "trade" but I couldn't retrieve its meaning.)
	6) *non-grasp of a single unknown word:* Failure to determine the meaning of a word successfully accessed since the word is unknown. *You can lease a car for two or three years and at the end of that time, you can either buy it or you can//* (TA---"Lease"? What does "lease" mean? I have to relisten.)
	7) *non-grasp of sequences of words:* Failure to assign proper meanings to words/part(s) of a sentence(s) recognized. *The clubhouse consists of a building with a number of rooms where we **take** classes and **courses**.* (TA---"Take course"? What does that mean?)
	8) *confusion of meaning between words with similar pronunciation:* Failure to distinguish input word from another with a similar pronunciation. *All they can do is give you a small **bite**, but it's not poisonous.* (TA---So, "small bite", "bite" means to sting something and a bait as well. What is such a small thing? Uh, <something> in a small chunk⋯ Is it like a small chip?)
Utilization	9) *non-resolution of reference:* Failure to identify the referential cohesion between two different expressions referring to the same objects/events/persons/concepts. It is divided into two sub-categories: 1) pronominal reference and 2) lexical reference. *But obviously some people aren't afraid of spiders, because in America, if you look in the pet shops you can see tarantulas for sale. So obviously some people think that they are nice friendly little **creatures** and they really like them.*

	(TA---"Very nice creatures?" Well, <u>some people think of snakes or, some people think of <snakes> as <very nice creatures></u>? Well, <they> keep them, umm… as pets, as creatures to get along with or that sort of thing. Anyway they sell them. They sell them in shops, probably not for eating as we do. They sell them as pets in America or that sort of thing.)
	10) *non-identification of the sentence meaning:* Failure to identify the meaning of a sentence intended by the speaker, after reaching its literal interpretation. *When and all of a sudden, I realized that the place was completely empty except for the two of us, my hairdresser and I.* (TA---Ah, there, in the place, there were only two people. Nobody is in the hairdresser's? Except for the hairdresser and the woman? <u>No customers. <The hairdresser> cannot cut hair too well?</u>)
	11) *non-identification of the text topic:* Failure to identify the general theme of a paragraph/text despite having successfully understood at the sentence level. *(After listening to Selma's remarks about her job in 'Selma's self-introduction') You can lease a car for two or three years and at the end of that time, you can either buy it or you can trade it in for a new car. Many people seem to like this idea and it has really caught on. I'm also a homemaker. I have a husband, I have two married daughters and two grandchildren.* (TA---Um, she suddenly changed her topic from her work to her family. She is a homemaker. "Homemaker", she did say that. <She>'s got a husband and daughters and she's emphasizing that she's leading an ordinary life. <u>Is it her sales strategy</u>?)
Perceptual	12) *speed of input:* Failure to keep up with the delivery speed of the input. This led to *non-recognition of sequences of words.* *Our community is near a large college town, which is really a wonderful thing to have nearby. It has an art museum and we are also able to avail ourselves of the classes given at the university.* (TA---Actually, I didn't hear the later part well. Why didn't I hear it? <u>The part was too fast</u>. RE---<u>The part after "we" was too fast</u>.)
	13) *attention lapses:* Mentally switching off while listening. This led to *non-recognition of sequences of words.* *In California, for example, living in most of the garages in California, you get black widow spiders//* (TA---I missed this part as <u>I didn't have my mind ready to listen</u>.)
	14) *failure to chunk input into a manageable size:* Failure to chunk correctly the input right from one attempt at listening. This difficulty led to *non-recognition of sequences of words.* *And yet I must say I don't like to pick them up. A: Why do you think people are frightened of spiders? B: I don't know – it's very strange. People are frightened of spiders and they are frightened of snakes and well, obviously some spiders and*

	some snakes really are very poisonous. But most snakes are harmless and it's really strange that people are so frightened of spiders because it's quite difficult to find a spider that's really dangerous. (TA---Now, <u>this part should be split up in the middle. <It is> too long</u>, so I have to split it up in the middle.)
	15) *failure to identify sentence boundary:* Failure to locate a sentence boundary in continuous speech. The consequence is *non-recognition of sequences of words.* *When and all of a sudden, I realized that the place was completely empty except for the two of us, my hairdresser and I. And I was wondering what…what was going on.* (TA---<u>The "hairdresser" and I wondered what was happening</u>. Besides, the woman stuttered.)
Parsing	16) *ambiguous words and near homonyms:* Failure 1) to realize that the word being presented was a homonym, a homophone or was polysemous and/or 2) to select the appropriate meaning from the context. This difficulty results in *non-grasp of a single known word.* *In Thailand and India, elephants are often used as a **means** of transportation.* (TA---Traditional <misheard for transportation> and <u>means something?</u> RE---I heard "transportation" as "tradition", at first.) <LATER> (TA---Ah, <u>means of transportation</u>? <People> ride <on elephants>. People in those countries. Suddenly it reminds me of <the movie> 'Around the world in eighty days'. In the movie, <the hero> missed the train and travelled on an elephant.)
	17) *memory lapses:* Failure to retrieve what was just/earlier perceived/parsed (or claimed to have perceived/parsed) for further processing. Difficulties in this category caused *non-grasp of sequences of words.* *The retirement community has tennis courts, swimming pools, a golf course and a clubhouse.* (TA--- Inside it are tennis courts, swimming pools, well, something like that. <u>I can't remember, but there is something else</u>.)
	18) *arbitrary interpretation:* The subjects' shift from what they had correctly parsed into what appears to be more plausible in terms of their schema. This led to *non-grasp of sequences of words.* *And as I was thinking this, someone came back into the store…into the shop and they said 'Does anyone out here…does anyone in here have a white car? And I said 'Well I have a white car'. And he said 'Well, it's on fire.'* (TA---The man, the woman parked her white car outside. "Fire", is it on fire or out of order? Something was wrong with the car. Something happened to the car. And <the man> told her about it. RE---<u>I heard it all. But why was the car on fire suddenly? So "fire" has got another meaning, I thought it must mean something else</u>.)

	19) *fixation:* The subjects 1) listened, letting the input go without any on-the-spot judgement of the importance of the input, encountering *non-recognition of sequences of words or non-grasp of sequences of words* or 2) fixated on previous difficulties, letting the current input go while experiencing the difficulties *of non-recognition of sequences of words and non-grasp* of *a single known word.* *Some people also make the mistake of thinking that a crocodile cannot move fast on land. However, hunters warn us that a crocodile can move very fast when it wants to.* (TA---"Very fast". Then its speed? RE---I haven't picked up "when it wants to" and <u>I didn't pay much attention to "hunters warn us"</u>.)
Perceptual & Parsing	20) *speaker variation:* Failure to make adjustments to what the subjects perceived to be peculiar about individual speakers, e.g., pronunciations, voice changes, pitch movements and precision in articulation and other performance phenomena, e.g., repetitions and hesitations. This produced a wide variety of difficulties from *non-recognition of a single known word, non-recognition of sequences of words, mishearing to non-grasp of sequences of words.* *Many people seem to like this idea and it has really caught on.* (TA---<u>What is "wrike <misheard for like> this idea"?</u> The pronunciation is weird. At the end <of the sentence>, I can't catch what it is.)
	21) *strategy-related problems:* Strategy use created a listening difficulty, causing *non-recognition of a single known word, non-recognition of sequences of words, mishearing, non-grasp of a single known word* and *non-grasp of sequences of words.* *And its average weight is equal to the total weight of fifty **cars**.* (TA---<Its weight> was said to be equal to something. Weight? That, what is "to", "torun", "total"? "To", "torun", "toral", "torun", is it the name of an animal? RE---<He said> "weight", so I expected "KG" to follow, never imagining that "car" followed. So I thought at that time, why "car" here?)
Utilization	22) *lack of world knowledge:* Failure to activate appropriate schema or activation of inappropriate schema caused *non-identification of the sentence meaning.* *And yet I must say I don't like to pick them up. But you see, some people keep pet mice and pet rabbits and well they can give you a much worse bite than a tarantula ever could. And people aren't afraid of them.* (TA---This woman. They are worse than spiders… so they may be worse, worse … what? That they give a worse bite…I've never heard of that. RE---<u>I couldn't understand the fact that rabbits and rats bite people. I've never heard of such a thing.</u>)
All stages of listening	23) *earlier problem:* A listening problem not solved in the earlier part of the text has a negative impact when dealing with later input. Such earlier difficulties as *non-recognition of a single known word, non-recognition of sequences of words, mishearing, etc. led to difficulties* at a later stage – e.g., *mishearing, non-grasp of a*

single unknown word, non-grasp of sequences of words, non-resolution of reference, and non-identification of the sentence meaning.
*Both the larger fruit-eating **bats** and the smaller insect-eating ones have eyes. They can see both in the daytime and at night.*
(TA---Do insects have eyes?)
<LATER>
*Experiments show us that **they** can see when the sun is shining in their eyes.*
(TA---Who can see? Who?)

2. Quantitative data analysis

A. The frequency of individual listening difficulty types

The mean frequency of individual listening difficulty types per 100 words[3] listened to is summarized in Table 2[4].

〈Table 2〉 Frequency of individual listening difficulty types

Stages of listening	Listening difficulty types	More proficient		Less proficient	
		More difficult	Less difficult	More difficult	Less difficult
		Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
1. Perceptual	1. Non-recognition of a single known word	.51	.42	.71	.84
	2. Non-recognition of a single unknown word	.62	.23	.51	.38
	3. Non-recognition of sequences of words	3.23	1.60	5.75	4.17
	4. Mishearing	1.85	1.88	3.50	2.91

3) The length of four texts listened to was different. In order to rule out the possibility that the frequency of individual listening difficulties interacted with the differences in the length of the text, I converted the raw frequency of each difficulty type reported by each subject into a score for the number of the difficulty type per 100 words listened to. For example, a subject who encountered 100 difficulty tokens while listening to the less difficult texts of 770 words was given a new score: (100/770)100=12.99 difficulty tokens.

4) Every occurrence of the listening difficulty types/causes was initially double-coded. When quantifying it, every difficulty cause was regarded as a difficulty type that it triggered.

2. Parsing	5. Non-grasp of a single known word	.40	.32	.47	.42
	6. Non-grasp of a single unknown word	.76	.42	.67	.94
	7. Non-grasp of sequences of words	.91	.47	1.16	.97
	8. Confusion of meaning between words with similar pronunciation	.00	.03	.09	.00
3. Utilization	9. Non-resolution of reference	.18	.27	.20	.14
	10. Non-identification of the sentence meaning	.25	.18	.04	.01
	11. Non-identification of the text topic	.13	.16	.00	.12

According to Table 2, 3) *non-recognition of sequences of words* and 4) *mishearing* were most frequently experienced while 8) *confusion of meaning between words with similar pronunciation*, 9) *non-resolution of reference*, 10) *non-identification of the sentence meaning*, and 11) *non-identification of the text topic* were seldom experienced difficulty types across the two types of text. The two most frequently occurring difficulty types were associated with the perceptual stage, suggesting that the subjects´ processing difficulty was predominantly a perception difficulty.

B. Main effects of listening proficiency and text difficulty on the frequency of individual listening difficulty types

In order to investigate the main effects of listening proficiency and text difficulty on the frequency of individual listening difficulty types, I performed a series of 2×2 (listening proficiency with 2 levels×text difficulty with 2 levels) Mixed Analysis of Variances (ANOVA) on the frequency of individual listening difficulty types with listening proficiency being a between-subjects factor and text difficulty a within-subjects factor. The results are summarized in Table 3.

〈Table 3〉 Main effects of listening proficiency and text difficulty
on the frequency of individual listening difficulty types

Stages of listening	Listening difficulty types	Listening proficiency main effects		Text difficulty main effects	
		F	Sig.	F	Sig.
1. Perceptual	*1. Non-recognition of a single known word*	4.098	.058	.029	.867
	2. Non-recognition of a single unknown word	.015	.904	8.182	.010
	3. Non-recognition of sequences of words	37.407	.001	35.501	.001
	4. Mishearing	4.340	.052	.380	.545
2. Parsing	*5. Non-grasp of a single known word*	.545	.470	.463	.505
	6. Non-grasp of a single unknown word	1.643	.216	.065	.801
	7. Non-grasp of sequences of words	3.843	.066	4.476	.049
	8. Confusion of meaning between words with similar pronunciation	.751	.398	.751	.398
3. Utilization	*9. Non-resolution of reference*	.564	.463	.051	.823
	10. Non-identification of the sentence meaning	4.861	.041	.520	.480
	11. Non-identification of the text topic	3.003	.100	3.062	.097

1) Listening proficiency main effects on the frequency of individual listening difficulty types

As seen in Table 3, there were significant listening proficiency main effects on the frequency of 3) *non-recognition of sequences of words* (F (1,18)=37.407, p=.001) and 10) *non-identification of the sentence meaning* (F (1,18)=4.861, p=.041). The listening proficiency main effects on the frequency of 4) *mishearing* (F (1, 18)= 4.340, p=.052) and 1) *non-recognition of a single known word* (F(1,18)=4.098, p=.058) approached significance. As there were significant listening proficiency main effects on the two difficulty types, $H_0$1) *There is no difference between learners with different levels of listening proficiency in the frequency of any type of listening difficulty* was rejected. A close observation of the means of these difficulty types (see Table 2) shows that the more proficient group experienced a significantly higher frequency of 10) *non-identification of the sentence meaning*. The other difficulty types were associated with the less proficient group. In other words, the less proficient subjects had significantly more difficulty in isolating meaningful units from a continuous stream of speech than the more proficient subjects (*non-recognition of sequences of words*). They also had significantly more difficulties with correctly perceiving a word (*mishearing*) and with singling out a word that they had known (*non-recognition of a single*

known word) from the speech stream. On the other hand, the more proficient subjects faced significantly more difficulty in identifying the sentence meaning intended by the speaker than their less proficient counterparts (*non-identification of the sentence meaning*).

2) Text difficulty main effects on the frequency of individual listening difficulty types

Significant text difficulty main effects were found on the frequency of 3) *non-recognition of sequences of words* (F (1,18)=35.501, p=.001), 2) *non-recognition of a single unknown word* (F (1,18)=8.182, p=.010), and 7) *non-grasp of sequences of words* (F (1,18)=4.476, p=.049). Since there were significant text difficulty main effects on the three difficulty types, H₀2) *There is no difference between texts of different levels of difficulty in the frequency of any type of listening difficulty* was rejected. The means of the three difficulty types (see Table 2) showed that they all occurred more frequently when both groups of subjects listened to the more difficult texts. In other words, when the input was more difficult, the subjects had significantly more difficulty in separating the meaningful units from continuous speech (*non recognition of sequences of words*). They were unlikely to single out a word that they had not committed to memory (*non-recognition of a single unknown word*). Even after they had perceived meaningful units from the input, they experienced a significant failure in assigning grammatical roles and meanings to the units (*non-grasp of sequences of words*).

3) The frequency of listening difficulties at the three stages of listening

Earlier I placed the eleven types of listening difficulties within Anderson's three-stage model of language comprehension. By identifying the stages of listening at which the subjects' listening difficulties mainly occurred, I intended to get a profile of their listening difficulties. This analysis deals with the two aforementioned null hypotheses.

The mean frequency of listening difficulties and its percentage occurring at each of the three stages of listening are summarized in Table 4.

Regardless of the listening proficiency and text difficulty, the major listening difficulty of the subjects was perception-related. This was more obvious with the less proficient subjects regardless of the text difficulty and with both groups of subjects in regards to the more difficult texts.

〈Table 4〉 Frequency of listening difficulties at three stages of listening

Stages of listening	More proficient		Less proficient	
	More difficult	Less difficult	More difficult	Less difficult
Perceptual	6.21 69.05 %	4.13 65.80 %	10.47 80.19 %	8.30 76.92 %
Parsing	2.07 24.57 %	1.23 23.95 %	2.38 17.93 %	2.32 20.56 %
Utilization	.56 6.38 %	.61 10.25 %	.25 1.87 %	.27 2.52 %
Total	8.83 100 %	5.97 100 %	13.10 100 %	10.89 100 %

The statistical significance of the results was checked by performing 2×2×3 (listening proficiency with two levels, i.e., more proficient and less proficient, text difficulty with two levels, i.e., more difficult and less difficult and the stages of listening with three levels, i.e., perceptual, parsing, and utilization) Mixed ANOVA with listening proficiency as a between-subjects factor and text difficulty and three stages of listening as within-subjects factors. The results are shown below in Table 5.

〈Table 5〉 Main effects of listening proficiency, text difficulty, and three stages of listening on the frequency of listening difficulties

Source of variation	F	Sig.
Stages of listening	224.499	.001
Listening proficiency × Stages of listening	24.640	.001
Text difficulty × Stages of listening	9.551	.001

According to the table, there were, overall, significant main effects of the listening stages on the frequency of listening difficulties (F (1, 36)=224.499, p=.001). There were significant interaction effects between listening proficiency and the stages of listening (F(1, 36)=24.640, p=.001) and between the text difficulty and the stages of listening (F (1, 36)=9.551, p=.001) on the frequency of listening difficulties. Irrespective of listening proficiency and text difficulty, a significantly higher proportion of difficulties took place at the initial perceptual stage (see Table 4). Both groups of subjects experienced most of their processing difficulty at the perceptual stage across the two types of text. This was more so for the less proficient group. Regardless of listening proficiency, the majority of the difficulties occurred at the perceptual level across the

two types of text. This was more marked when the input was more difficult.

VI. Discussion

The effects of listening proficiency on the frequency of individual listening difficulty types reveal two things. First, there were differences in the difficulties encountered between the two proficiency groups. These differences were found to be associated with different processing stages. The three difficulty types more frequently experienced by the less proficient group were associated with the perceptual stage while the difficulty type more frequently experienced by the more proficient group was associated with the utilization stage. The more proficient subjects were better at decoding the acoustic input, which allowed their processing resources to be directed at other components of the input. They passed through the lower level processing stages with relative ease and experienced more difficulties of *non-identification of the sentence meaning*. On the other hand, the less proficient group encountered significantly more difficulties at the lower stages of the listening process. When their predominant perceptual difficulty provided none or little contextual information, they were (near) significantly less likely to recognize a word they had already known (*non-recognition of a single known word*). They were more likely to give up processing, producing a significantly higher number of the global perceptual difficulty, *non-recognition of sequences of words*. When they did not give up processing, they seemed to rely heavily on bottom-up processing in the absence of any prior information about the input. This eventually led them to mishear it.

Second, the less proficient subjects were less experienced in handling spoken English, especially in the form of a connected discourse. This was evidenced by the near significant listening proficiency effects on the frequency of *mishearing* and *non-recognition of a single known word*. The subjects were found to have more difficulty in handling spoken input: there was an imbalance between their listening skills and their reading skills. That is, the less proficient subjects´ 'listening vocabulary' (Goh, 1998: 368) was less developed. The significant listening proficiency effects on the frequency of *non-recognition of sequence of words* indicate that the less proficient subjects had more difficulty in handling input larger than a sentence. More importantly, their language base lacked the solid foundation found in more proficient learners. In addition, they were not used to dealing with extended speech. This can be inferred from their listening

experiences in the classroom, where they were mainly engaged in transcribing individual sentences – as was the case when the TOEIC tapes were being used.

The main effects of text difficulty on the frequency of individual listening difficulty types reveal two things. First, the significantly higher frequency of perception-related difficulties (*non-recognition of sequences of words and non-recognition of a single unknown word*) with the more difficult texts show that the more difficult input posed more cognitive demands on the subjects. Being beginner listeners, their processing skills were not automatized and their limited attention span was consumed while deciphering the input of the more difficult texts. Even after they had extricated themselves from the perceptual bottleneck, they did not have enough cognitive resources left to attach proper meanings to the words they had perceived (*non-grasp of sequences of words*). Second, the more difficult texts limited the subjects´ listening experiences. Two of the three difficulty types that both proficiency groups encountered significantly more frequently with the more difficult texts were perception-related. This indicates that the subjects were not able to experience all three stages of the listening process when the input was too challenging.

The main effects of the three stages of listening comprehension on the frequency of listening difficulties revealed that the decoding skills of the more proficient subjects were more routinized, enabling them to pick up more information especially when the input was less difficult. From the output obtained from this initial perceptual processing, they could proceed to the higher-level processing at the subsequent parsing and utilization stages. The initial perception was a processing bottleneck for the less proficient subjects, especially when they processed the more difficult texts. When the input was easier, they were able to get out of this bottleneck more easily. This finding suggests that English teachers should help their learners by using easier texts.

VII. Suggestions

From the findings of the listening difficulties of our subjects, I suggest some remedial actions to be taken up in the English classrooms of secondary schools in Korea.

Developing basic decoding skills

The subjects were found to have significant difficulty in processing the spoken input, the written form of which was not particularly challenging to them. An obvious gap existed between their listening and reading proficiencies. Since Korean learners of English are exposed mainly to

written English, the imbalance in the development of the two skills should be corrected by balancing the mode of input presented in the classroom. In addition, the subjects´ major listening difficulties were found to occur at the perceptual stage. In particular, the global perceptual difficulties (*non-recognition of sequences of words*) were the main cause of their listening difficulty. In the absence of a certain level of perception skills, English learners could never have any meaningful listening experiences. Thus, the most challenging task that confronts English teachers in Korea is to equip learners with basic listening proficiency as survival skills that 'will be necessary through their listening, but also give them confidence in tackling the rest of the course' (Mendelsohn 1998: 70).

Presenting input that is comprehensible to the learners

Input beyond the subjects´ comprehension was found to hinder the development of their listening proficiency by limiting their listening experiences. The subjects had more difficulties with the more difficult texts but these difficulties were mainly perception-related. The easier input, on the other hand, reduced the heavy reliance on input data, allowing the subjects to progress further into the higher-levels of listening processing. These findings support the claim made by SL/FL professionals (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Joiner, 1991; Lynch, 1998; Rubin, 1995; Sheerin, 1987; Ur, 1984;) that easier input invites the listeners´ active participation and boosts their motivation to continue listening. This is particularly important in large English classes in Korea.

Presenting extended discourse

Dealing with extended discourse was found to be a daunting task for the subjects as they were used to transcribing verbatim individual sentences, using TOEIC tapes. They had great difficulty in processing a unit larger than a sentence, encountering a high frequency of the global perceptual difficulty, *non-recognition of sequences of words*. They could not maintain their concentration or hold the information culled from the current input long enough for further processing. They also experienced difficulties with controlling the amount of input that they could process at one listening situation. The argument for implementing extended discourse as listening input somewhat contradicts the argument for the presentation of easier input since discourse processing requires the highest level of listening skills. The bottomline, however, is that the learners´ ability to cope with discourse will grow only when they are trained to do it. The difficulty involved in discourse processing can be diluted by adjusting the difficulty of the task, as suggested by SL/FL professionals (e.g., Byrnes, 1984; Field, 1998, 2000; Joiner, 1991).

Presenting spoken language

Sound systems that do not exist in written English were found to pose a challenge to the subjects, who were used to an oral rendition of the reading passages in a textbook or the TOEIC tapes. They often failed to retrieve, from the connected speech, words familiar to them in the written form. They had great difficulty in processing spoken input containing natural speech features such as the natural rhythm and pause patterns of English. Speaker variations were especially problematic. The subjects did not know how to take advantage of the features of spontaneous spoken input, e.g., fillers, repetitions, hesitations, false starts, etc. They tried to listen hard to them instead of exploiting them as extra processing opportunities. These findings justify the need to teach learners phonological rules and develop their 'perceptual normalization' (Carroll 1994: 37) through sufficient exposure to natural spoken English. There is, as well, a need to train learners in how to either recognize or ignore the features of spontaneous oral speech which do not carry an essential message and how to use them as additional processing opportunities. Transcription exercises and provision of transcripts of spontaneous speech could be beneficial. If ungraded authentic texts pose too much of a challenge to the learners, 'imitation authentic' (Ur 1983: 23) or 'relative authentic' (Richards 1983: 234) texts as a listening input could be considered as a replacement for the transcribed ones. Caution should be exercised when selecting tasks which accompany natural spoken texts. As in the transcription exercises in Voss (1984), asking the learners in this study to listen for as many details as possible without prior information about the texts was found to trigger a higher frequency of perception difficulties, especially mishearings. This result shows that a listening task itself can often trigger unnecessary listening difficulties.

Implementing pre-listening sessions

Presenting learners with prior information about the text and a purpose or reason for listening was found to be crucial to the beginner language learners´ meaningful listening experiences. In the absence of prior information about the recordings, our subjects, especially the less proficient ones, relied solely on the data-driven information, experiencing numerous strange mishearings. Their limited proficiency prevented them from decoding any meaningful unit from the input. In the absence of an output interpretation from the prior input, they could not recognize words that they already knew. Dunkel (1986: 101) views the learners´ successful comprehension as 'a function of relationships between the present input and the currently activated knowledge of the learner.' Our subjects, especially the less proficient ones, could not make full use of their

linguistic, extra-linguistic, and strategic knowledge. This provides a strong argument for fully preparing learners for the incoming input in the pre-listening sessions. Our subjects´ experiences in the classroom where they learned written English through word-for-word translation, together with the researcher's instruction that they were to listen to as much as possible reinforced their tendency to listen hard to every element of the input. Teachers need to encourage more focused listening by providing a specific reason or purpose for the listening, e.g., listening to get the gist of the input, one specific fact, etc. This will eventually help the learners make the most of their limited processing resources.

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초 록

한국 고등학생들의 영어 듣기상의 어려운 점에 관한 연구

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이 연구는 한국의 고등학교 학생들이 영어를 들으면서 경험하는 어려움들에 관한 것이다. 본 연구를 위해 20명의 고등학교 학생들이 4개의 텍스트를 들으면서 머릿속에 떠오르는 생각들을 말하고 듣기가 다 끝난 후에는 듣기를 하면서 경험했던 어려움들에 대해서 보고하도록 했다. 한국의 고등학생들은 영어를 들을 때 11개 유형의 어려움들을 경험하고 있었으며 그 어려움들은 12개의 원인들에 의해서 야기되고 있었다. 학생들은 영어의 청음(perception)에 가장 큰 어려움을 겪고 있었다. 이는 영어 듣기 능력이 더 낮은 학생들이 더 어려운 텍스트를 들을 때 두드러졌다. 영어 듣기 능력이 더 우수한 학생들은 문법적 지식을 바탕으로 인지된 소리에 올바른 의미를 부여하거나(parsing) 그 의미를 자신의 경험과 연결하고 기억하는데(utilization) 더 큰 어려움을 경험하고 있었다. 이 연구의 결과를 바탕으로 한국의 영어 교사들은 영어 듣기 지도 시 학생들의 기본적인 청음 능력 배양에 가장 많은 관심을 가져야 하며, 이를 위해서는 자연스런 영어로 구사된 담화 형태의 텍스트를 들려주되 그 텍스트는 학생들이 쉽게 이해할 수 있는 것이어야 하고, 텍스트를 들려주기 전에 텍스트에 관한 선행학습을 실시해야 한다는 결론을 얻을 수 있었다.

주제어 : 제2외국어/외국어 듣기, 제2외국어/외국어 듣기상의 어려운 점