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The Effects of the Provision of Topical Knowledge on EFL Learners' Listening Performance

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Listening has been a neglected research area despite the crucial role it plays. The present investigation was aimed at examining how the provision of topical knowledge and learners' listening proficiency level affect learners' listening performance under four different preparatory activity conditions: topical knowledge, vocabulary list, language structure, and no activity. A total of 134 participants, assigned to the four different activity groups, took part in the study. The results revealed that the learners who were provided with topical knowledge before listening performed significantly better than the other learners, followed by the vocabulary list group and language structure group, which might be attributed to the activation of their content schemata. The learners who did not perform any preparatory activities achieved the lowest scores. When it comes to the impact of listening proficiency, it was revealed that learners' proficiency level had a significant influence on learners' listening performance, and there was a significant interaction between the learners' level of listening proficiency and preparatory activity. Providing relevant knowledge was effective for both higher level and lower level learners, whereas teaching vocabulary before listening was effective for higher level learners but was not for lower level ones. Based on the results, some pedagogical implications and suggestions for future research were discussed.

[listening/listening proficiency/preparatory activity /topical knowledge]

I. INTRODUCTION

Listening is the most needed among the four language skills for effective communication (Brown, 2001; B-B Im, 2000; Feyten, 1991; Rivers, 1981; U.-K. Maeng, 2006) as Morley (2001) points out, "We can expect to listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read, and five times more than we write" (p. 70). In the first

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language environment, listening is not a difficult skill to improve, but in an EFL (English as a foreign language) environment where students of English have fewer opportunities to do verbal interactions, it must be a very difficult skill to develop among the four macro-language skills.

In spite of its crucial roles in communication, listening did not attract much class attention. Weaver (1972) referred to the lack of awareness of listening: "The talker is the center of attention for all listeners. His behavior is overt and vocal, and he hears and notices his own behavior, whereas listening activity often seems like merely being – doing nothing" (pp.12-13). With rapid globalization during the past twenty years, the image of L2 listening in language instruction has changed, and the importance of listening has been recognized (Kang, 2009; Nunan, 1998). Listening is not regarded as a passive receptive skill any more but an active process, critical to L2 acquisition (Morley, 2001). The approach to listening instruction was also changed, leading more studies to focus on methods of developing listening skill.

One aspect of language instruction widely held as enhancing comprehension is to activate learners' content schemata. According to the results of some research on reading instruction, activating learners' prior knowledge and applying it to new input greatly facilitates processing and understanding (Graves & Cook, 1980; J.-H. Huh, 2008; Stevens, 1982). The results of some research studies (e.g., Carrell, 1987; Hudson, 1982; J.-H. Huh, 2009; Pulido, 2003, 2004) have supported the positive effects of familiar topics on L2 text comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, but more research is needed to see whether providing topical knowledge to activate learners' content schemata can also facilitate learners' listening performance.

Various kinds of preparatory activities to support listening should be considered to help learners to focus on their listening tasks. Preparatory activities may provide learners with a context for interpretation and allow them to activate their background knowledge. According to Mendelsohn (1995), the preparatory activities play an important role in "activating the students' existing knowledge of the topic in order for them to link what they comprehend and to use this as a basis of their hypothesis-information, prediction, and inference" (p. 140). Those activities have a crucial role in developing learners' listening proficiency. There has been some research which investigated the positive effects of activities supporting listening (e.g., Buck, 1991; Chang & Read, 2006; H.-H. Chun, 2005; Sherman, 1997), but most of the research was conducted in EFL adult learners' listening classes, and little research was made to investigate the effectiveness of the activities in improving EFL secondary learners' performance on a listening comprehension task.

Learners' proficiency is also one of the important variables. A teaching technique employing the same teaching materials does not always result in the same amount of development from learners. Some techniques and exercises that are suitable for beginners

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look less appropriate for students at higher levels and vice versa (Harmer, 2007). This might be attributed to the learners' proficiency which plays a role in their performances.

The current study aims to compare the results of listening comprehension tasks for middle school students under four different listening support conditions, and investigate whether the provision of topical knowledge and learners' listening proficiency have influence on their listening performance. In light of the purpose of the study, the following three research questions were posited for this study.

1. Are pre-listening activities effective in improving EFL middle school learners' listening performance?
2. Does the provision of topical knowledge affect EFL middle school learners' listening performance?
3. Do pre-listening activities affect EFL middle school learners differently according to their listening proficiency?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section consists of two parts, the role of topical knowledge in comprehension and the value of preparatory activities for listening.

1. The Role of Topical Knowledge in Comprehension

Schematic knowledge is considered as one of the factors affecting comprehension. According to Brown and Yule (1983), schema is described as "organized background knowledge which leads us to expect or predict aspects in our interpretation of discourse" (p. 248). This background knowledge relates to our real world experiences and expectations that we have, so it is very important when we consider the language processing problems of students (Gebhard, 2000).

There is some research on the positive effects of background knowledge on L2 reading comprehension (e.g., Hsieh, 1999; J.-H. Huh, 2008; Pulido, 2004). Hsieh (1999) carried out a study of the effects of prior vocabulary instruction and cultural background knowledge activation on Chinese college students' EFL reading comprehension. The results showed that giving vocabulary instruction alone increased only the students' vocabulary scores, whereas providing background knowledge improved both the vocabulary and reading comprehension scores. However, the students performed the best when they were given both vocabulary instruction and background knowledge of the culture. Pulido (2007) also suggested that having appropriate background knowledge may

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have helped learners to more efficiently direct attention to input while reading the more familiar story.

However, in the area of listening comprehension only a little research has been conducted. O'Malley, Chamot and Kupper (1989) described listening as a process of constructing meanings by using cues from contextual information and existing knowledge like reading. In an EFL environment, however, it is not easy to listen in English from natural contexts. It is likely that most learners' exposure to listening material happens in an instruction setting, which makes it difficult for learners to have suitable contextual information for their listening. Therefore, it is desirable to provide effective preparatory activities before listening to familiarize learners with aspects of the input such as topical knowledge or key vocabulary items.

Several studies (Chiang & Dunkel, 1992; Goh, 1998; Long, 1990) have shown that learners more easily understand oral texts that are familiar. In Goh's study (1998), the participants reported that they were much aware of the crucial role of prior knowledge in assisting their L2 listening. Chiang and Dunkel (1992) also mentioned that topic familiarity and background knowledge played an important role in listening comprehension. They investigated listening with a comparison of high-intermediate listening proficiency and low intermediate proficiency Chinese students. After listening to a lecture, they took a multiple-choice test, and the results showed that the participants scored higher on the familiar-topic lecture than on the unfamiliar-topic lecture. Prior knowledge had a significant effect on both groups. Long (1990) conducted an exploratory study of background knowledge and L2 listening comprehension. The researcher asked the learners of Spanish to listen to one familiar text and one unfamiliar text, and then evaluated their comprehension through a recall protocol in English and a checklist comprising of statements that referred to the content of the passage including false statements. The findings revealed that there were more correct idea units for the familiar topic, but there was no significant difference for the checklist.

2. Supporting Activities for Effective Listening

Supporting activities are needed to facilitate learners' listening performance by familiarizing them with the materials they are going to listen to. Preparatory activities supporting listening have lots of positive effects as follows. First, they can generate learners' interest. Motivating learners must be one of the requisites for successful learning and teaching. If they are supposed to listen to the text about a country, allowing them to look at the pictures of some famous people from that country or some interesting cultural events will raise their interest. Second, they can set the context for listening. In real life, people have some idea of the context of the passage they are listening to. However, in classroom settings, students do not usually have opportunities to know the context of the

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listening passage which they are going to listen to before listening. Third, they can help learners predict the content of the listening text. Once learners get some idea of the context, they are able to predict possible content. This could be done by giving some guiding questions for their listening or making them preview the questions which they are supposed to answer after listening. Fourth, they can have learners acquire knowledge about the topic. Students may have limited amount of knowledge about the topic. Providing knowledge input will help learners build their confidence for their listening material. Learners could be provided with reading texts with a related topic, interesting game-like activities, answering questions about the topic, etc. Fifth, they can help learners activate vocabulary or language. It is important to activate learners' schema related with the text. If learners are going to listen to a text about describing people, it is helpful to brainstorm a variety of adjectives which can be used to describe hair, clothes and appearance. It can be also useful to acquire the knowledge about the language structure for it beforehand.

Chang and Read (2006) investigated the effects of four types of listening supports: previewing the test questions, repeating the input, providing background knowledge about the topic, and vocabulary instruction. They found that the provision of background knowledge enhanced learners overall comprehension, but it was more effective for lower proficiency students than for higher proficiency ones. Chang (2007) investigated the effects of vocabulary preparation prior to a listening comprehension test on L2 learners' listening performance, listening comprehension confidence levels and strategy use. According to the result, giving vocabulary instruction prior to a listening test could be of help for improving their vocabulary knowledge and confidence, but it could not facilitate their listening performance. The reason might be that vocabulary instruction led the learners to focus on local cues more than the global understanding of the listening material.

There have been several studies (e.g., Chang, 2007; Chang & Read, 2006) about the benefits of supporting activities in improving learners' listening performance as above. However, the participants of the studies were all university students and the results of the supporting activities for listening were varied. More research involving younger learners is needed. In addition, it is desirable to find out whether learners' listening proficiency level plays a role in listening performance through different supporting activities.

III. METHOD

1. Participants

The participants in the study were 134 Korean public middle school students in their second grade – 66 female and 68 male students, consisting of three experimental groups of

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the topical knowledge (TK) group, the vocabulary list (VL) group and the language structure (LS) group, and one control group. They have been studying English as a foreign language for more than seven years, and had little exposure to spoken English in natural English-speaking context outside of the school.

The students were in four intact classes and were randomly allocated to the three different preparatory activity groups and the control group. The assigned four groups were expected to be of similar ability in English listening, which was confirmed by the administration of a pre-test. The mean score of the pre-test was 14.26 out of 20 with a standard deviation of 2.37. Descriptive statistics for the pretest for each group and the result of an analysis of variance to find out the difference among the groups is provided in Table 1. The result of a one-way ANOVA showed that the differences in the class means were not significant.

TABLE 1

Result of the Pre-test for Four Pre-listening Activity Groups

	Group	No.	M	SD	F	P
Experimental Group	TK	34	14.09	2.74	0.284	0.725
	VL	33	14.35	2.01		
	LS	33	14.19	2.23		
Control Group	NA	34	14.42	2.42		
Total		134	14.26	2.37		

In order to use level of listening proficiency as a variable in the analysis, the whole group of 134 participants was divided at the median score of 14 into higher proficiency level (n=67; M =17.74) and lower proficiency level (n=67; M =10.78) subgroups.

2. Instruments

The instruments employed in this study were four listening texts and two kinds of listening comprehension tests.

1) Listening Text

Four different texts for listening tasks were employed in this study. They were chosen in consideration of the level of the learners in terms of their vocabulary levels, sentence length and language structures. Two of them were about social studies, and the other two were about science. The first passage described the most famous Greek cities, Sparta and

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Athens. The location of Greece and the life of people were introduced. The listening passage consisted of 153 words, and the listening stimuli were one minute and fifteen second long. The second passage was about Greek culture. Greek men and women's different lives, popular pets in ancient Greek houses and wedding ceremonies were introduced. The listening stimuli lasted for one minute and ten seconds, and the passage had 122 words. The third passage explained the types of funguses and bacteria, and their shape and size. The passage was composed of 161 words, and the length of the listening stimuli was one minute and twenty-four seconds. The last passage was about the places bacteria live. Their usefulness and harmfulness were compared. The stimuli lasted for one minute and thirteen seconds, and there were 141 words in the passage. Neither of them has been covered in class before. So, the content of the listening texts was not familiar with the learners. The description of the listening texts is shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Description of the Listening Passages

Text	Topic	No. of Words	No. of Sentences	Duration	Question Type
1	Cities of Greece	153	16	1'15"	Multiple-choice
2	Greek culture	122	10	1'10"	Multiple-choice
3	Funguses and bacteria	161	16	1'24"	Multiple-choice
4	Bacteria	141	15	1'13"	Multiple-choice

2) Listening Comprehension Tests

This study provided two listening tests. One of them was the pre-test whose purpose was to identify whether the groups have equivalent listening proficiency, to measure learners' current listening proficiency and to classify learners by their proficiency into higher level and lower level subgroups. A listening proficiency test which consisted of twenty multiple-choice questions was employed as a pre-test. The other one was designed to measure the effect of preparatory activities. In that test, there were five multiple-choice test items for each listening passage, making a total of 20 items for the test. Among the five test items for each passage, two focused on general ideas, and the other three items were about specific details.

3. Procedure

This study was conducted during regular English class sessions. One week before the

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first listening session, a listening proficiency test was administered as a pre-test. Based on the results, four classes were randomly assigned to three experimental groups and one control group, and all the participants were taught by the researcher. The three experimental groups were supposed to do their assigned preparatory activities before they listened to a text. For the topical knowledge (TK) group, the researcher asked some questions and requested learners to make a discussion to attract learners' interest to the topic, providing them with some relevant knowledge about the topic of the listening text which they were going to listen to. However, the researcher avoided referring to the content itself. For the vocabulary list (VL) group, the new vocabulary items and their Korean equivalents were given to the learners to study. They practiced pronouncing the words and tried to memorize their meanings. The researcher made an explanation of some words, their derived words and synonyms. For the language structure (LS) group, learners were taught two key structures embedded in the listening texts with some example sentences. The control group named no activity (NA) group did not do any activities before listening. After the learners except the NA group learners did the preparatory activities for fifteen minutes, they listened to the two listening passages, and took the listening comprehension test which consisted of 10 multiple-choice items. One week after the first experiment the learners took the second listening class through the same process.

4. Data Analysis

All the statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 12.5 for Windows with alpha level .05. The participants' scores in the listening test were analyzed using mainly three statistical procedures. First, in order to investigate differences in scores on the pretest and the listening comprehension tests among four different activity groups, a one-way analysis of variance was conducted. Second, in order to examine the main effects of the two independent variables, preparatory activity and listening proficiency, and their interaction, a two-way analysis of variance was employed. Third, in case there was any significant difference among groups, the Sheffe' test was administered as a post hoc test.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Effects of the Provision of Topical Knowledge on Listening Performance

The result from the listening comprehension test is shown in Table 3. As indicated in the table, the three experimental groups that did preparatory activities before listening gained higher scores (mean=14.98, 13.35, 12.53 each) than the control group that did not do any

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activities before listening (mean=11.88). The topical knowledge (TK) group obtained the highest score (mean = 14.98), followed by the VL and LS groups (mean = 13.35, 12.53 respectively). The NA group that jumped directly into the listening comprehension task scored the lowest among the four groups (mean = 11.88).

TABLE 3

Descriptive Statistics for Activity Groups on the Listening Comprehension Test

Group	N	M	SD
TK	34	14.98	2.34
VL	33	13.35	2.71
LS	33	12.53	2.29
NA	34	11.88	3.12
Total	134		

In order to evaluate the effects of preparatory activities and listening proficiency levels on the learners' listening performance, a 4 (preparatory activities) x 2 (listening proficiency levels) analysis of variance, treating a preparatory activity and listening proficiency level as independent variables was conducted. Table 4 displays the results of an ANOVA of the effects of preparatory activities and listening proficiency levels.

TABLE 4

ANOVA Summary of the Effects of Preparatory Activities and Listening Proficiency Levels

Source	SS	df	MS	F	P
Preparatory Activity (PA)	429.51	3	149.17	47.84	0.00*
Listening Proficiency (LP)	79.25	1	75.25	22.17	0.00*
PA x LP	135.39	3	45.93	14.53	0.00*
Errors	1252.22	127	9.86		

*P<.05

The results of analysis presented in Table 4 indicate that the main effects of preparatory activities (F= 47.84, p=.00) and listening proficiency levels (F=22.17, p=.00) were significant. The results also indicate that a significant interaction of the two independent variables (F=14.53, p=.00), suggesting that learners' listening proficiency has influence on the effectiveness of preparatory activities. The significant main effect for preparatory activities meant that different types of activities exerted different effects on the learners'

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listening proficiency. As indicated in Table 3 and 4, there were some differences in the scores of each preparatory activity group who performed different preparatory activities. As the difference was found significant, the Scheffe' test as a post hoc procedure was performed to identify which activity group significantly performed well and vice versa. The results of the Sheffe' test revealed that the TK group learners performed significantly better than all the other three group learners, and this might be attributed to the result of the treatment given to them. In other words, it means that it is effective for improving learners' listening proficiency to provide them with background information related to the topic prior to listening.

The result is consistent with the results of Chiang and Dunkel (1992), Schmidt-Rinehart (1994) and Chang and Read (2006) since they all claimed that providing background knowledge to familiarize learners with the listening topic would improve learners' performance in listening comprehension. Giving background information may also make listeners activate their prior knowledge and have topical knowledge. If learners have topical knowledge before listening, they may be able to pay their attention to the details and searching for information they want without wasting time listening for the topic first. They would be less dependent on vocabulary knowledge to comprehend their listening text, using their top-down processing. Kelly (1991) suggested that the top-down processing is more effective than the bottom-up processing that a lot of learners are dependent on. The result of this study confirms her research.

However, it appears that providing relevant language structures is not of help for listening comprehension. The LS group who were taught key structures of the listening text did not achieve high scores (mean=12.53), as compared to the other two preparatory activity groups (mean=14.98, 13.35 each). The difference between the LS group and the NA group was not so big, and there was no significant difference between the two groups, indicating that teaching some language structures just before listening does not have any influence on learners' listening performance. It can be also assumed that it is effective to activate learners' content schemata rather than formal schemata for better successful listening. This also means that having some topical knowledge can help listeners compensate for their insufficient language knowledge.

The NA group obtained the lowest score among the four groups even though there was no significant difference in scores between the NA group and the LS group who achieved the second lowest score. This result underscores the effectiveness and importance of preparatory activities to provide content-relevant information such as topical knowledge and vocabulary rather than structure-related information for successful listening.

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2. Effects of Listening Proficiency Level

As presented in Table 4, the main effect for listening proficiency levels as well as the preparatory activities was significant. Moreover, the interaction between the two independent variables was also found significant. Therefore, it is necessary to find out how higher proficiency level learners and lower proficiency level learners performed differently with each preparatory activity. Table 5 presents descriptive statistics and ANOVA results of effects of preparatory activities by proficiency level.

TABLE 5
Comparison of the Proficiency Subgroups in Preparatory Activity Groups

Group	Level	N	M	SD	F	P
TK	Higher	17	15.41	2.87	3.31	0.06
	Lower	17	14.55	2.24		
VL	Higher	15	15.01	2.71	41.27	0.00*
	Lower	18	11.97	2.18		
LS	Higher	18	13.24	2.36	4.55	0.04*
	Lower	16	11.89	1.97		
NA	Higher	17	12.64	1.61	12.50	0.00*
	Lower	17	11.12	1.52		

According to the results, there was a significant difference in scores between higher level (HL) learners and lower level (LL) learners in the VL and LS groups (F=41.27, p=.00; F=4.55, p=.04). However, no significant difference between the higher level and lower level learners was found for the TK group even though the TK group learners at the higher level (mean=15.41) performed significantly better than the VL and LS group learners at the same level (mean=15.01, 13.24 each). The gap of the mean scores for each activity group between higher level (HL) and lower level (LL) learners is also shown in Figure 1. The reason might be that the TK group learners at the lower level achieved relatively high scores. Their score was the best among the four group learners at the lower level. They performed significantly better than the lower level learners of the other three groups. This means that providing topic-related knowledge is more effective especially for lower level learners than teaching language structures and giving vocabulary instruction. It can be inferred that lower level learners who have a more limited knowledge of language use their content schemata to have a general understanding of the listening text which is needed to compensate for the lack of specific details.

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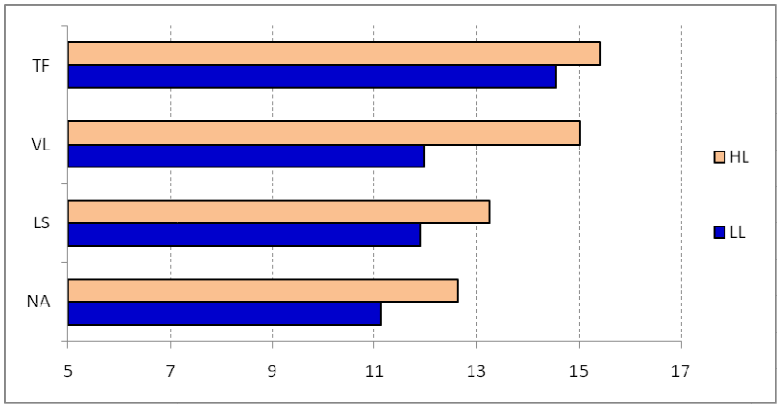
FIGURE 1
Results of the Scores from the Proficiency Subgroups



The group who had the biggest difference was the VL group. The higher level learners performed as well as the counterparts in the TK group, but the lower level learners obtained relatively low scores. The result was not consistent with that of Chang and Read (2006). In their study, the students at both levels who received the vocabulary instruction did not achieve good scores, whereas in the present study higher level learners in the VL group performed well even though the overall result revealed that the group did not show a high score. The result might be due to the role of content words presented to them before listening. There were some content words related to the topic in the vocabulary list given to the VL group, and they might be able to allow high level learners to activate their content schemata in the same way as the questions and answers related to the topic in the TK group activated their content schemata. This process might enable learners to connect what they were going to learn with what they had already known. This might be the reason why the higher level learners in the two activity groups got the similar results in their listening comprehension test.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study was conducted to investigate how the provision of topical knowledge affects learners' listening proficiency under four different preparatory activity condition. A total of 134 Korean middle school students, assigned to four different activity groups, took part in the study. The learners were requested to perform the assigned preparatory activities before listening, and then they took the listening comprehension tests, while listening to four different texts which were not familiar with the learners.

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The findings of the study were as follows. First, the three experimental group learners had a better performance than the control group learners. This implies that preparatory activities are effective for improving learners' listening proficiency. Second, the TK group obtained the best score in their listening proficiency test among the four preparatory activity groups. The TK group learners had more opportunities to activate their prior knowledge through question and answer activities and discussion, compared to the other group learners. This might allow the learners to have topical knowledge about the listening text, to predict the content and to have a better understanding of the listening passage. Third, with regard to the influence of the learners' listening proficiency, both higher level and lower level learners benefited from the provision of topical knowledge. However, providing topical knowledge was more effective for lower level learners in that their scores were significantly higher than their counterparts in other activity groups. This indicates that having more background knowledge related to a topic can compensate for the lack of language structure and vocabulary items. Fourth, higher proficiency learners of the VL group performed well in their listening test. This suggests that teaching key lexical items to advanced learners can be of help for improving listening proficiency. The reason might be that some content words in the vocabulary list played a role in activating learners' content schemata as the TK group learners did.

In terms of pedagogical implications, the present study has some suggestions. Pre-listening activities should be more attended to by both classroom teachers and researchers. With rapid globalization, learners have more and more opportunities to communicate with foreigners face to face, suggesting that they have more and more opportunities to listen in English. More systematic teaching methods for teaching listening are needed to facilitate listening performance. The use of effective pre-listening activities can be one of the solutions. As indicated in the result of the present study, providing learners with topical knowledge is an effective pre-listening activity which can facilitate learners' listening performance. Therefore, it is desirable for language teachers to give some information related to the listening passage to their students. More various kinds of pre-listening activities to provide topical knowledge should be developed.

For future research, suggestions are to be made. First, in the present study, the text type of the listening passages was all monologues, and the test type of the test items was all multiple-choice. The use of more various listening passages, test items and length of listening stimuli will strengthen the robustness of the findings of such studies.

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Examples in: English
Applicable Languages: English
Applicable Levels: Secondary

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