Teachers and Students' Perceptions of Using The Top-Down Processing To Improve Students' Listening Comprehension Skills

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Abstract
Top-down processing happens when our general knowledge guides our specific perceptions. When we utilize top-down processing, our ability to understand information is influenced by the context in which it appears (Vinney 2019). In fact, top-down processing plays an important role in our interactions with our environment. Our five senses are constantly taking in information. At any given time, we are experiencing different sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and ways things feel when we touch them. If we paid attention to each one of our senses all the time we'd never do anything else. Top-down processing enables us to streamline the process by relying on context and our pre-existing knowledge to understand what we perceive. If our brains didn't employ top-down processing our senses would overwhelm us. So I made an attempt to look for a solution to deal with their difficult situation as well as to enhance their listening skills and I determined to choose Top-down processing which was explained as employing background knowledge for topic to grasp message's meaning. The purpose of my paper was to explore if my students at the People's Police College took part in using Top-down processing in the listening sections and the explanation for their involvement. This research aimed to see how Top-down processing helping my students listen comprehension skills better.
Keywords: Top-down processing, teachers and students' perceptions, listening comprehension skills

I. INTRODUCTION

To develop the proficiency in using English independently and confidently in Vietnam students' communication, studies, and working places, the Prime Minister issued Decision No.1400/QD-TTg on 30th September 2008 about the project of Teaching and Learning foreign languages in the national education system from 2008 to 2020. According to this project, students graduating from high schools, colleges and universities must get a determined English level. In my college, the students must obtain B1 degree before graduating from the college. A2 level, the prerequisite for them to have B1, consists of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Related to listening skills, obtaining A2 level means they can listen to the uncomplicated everyday situations.

Yet, my students' listening skills were quite low, which led to their inability to satisfy the college's requirements. Under my observation in the teaching process, it was realized that my students did not willingly involve in listening activities. One of the major reasons for this matter was the lack of vocabulary. Unable to recognize vocabulary's meaning, students did not identify the key words in each listening tasks. While they were listening, they found the new expressions and words; they often stopped to conjecture the words' meaning. It prevented them from understanding the important contents of the listening sections. So I made an attempt to look for a solution to deal with their difficult situation as well as to enhance their listening skills and I determined to choose Top-down processing which was explained as employing background knowledge for topic to grasp message's meaning. The purpose of my research was to explore if my students at the People's Police College took part in using Top-down processing in the listening sections and the explanation for their involvement. This research aimed to answer the research questions "How and why do my students engage with the Top-down processing in listening comprehension skills?"

This paper indicates my students' answers to my innovation. First, I will mention the research context of the innovation. Second, I will provide a description of my innovation. Third, my research will be mentioned. Next, I will talk about research data and data analysis. Then, discussion will be showed. Finally, that is the conclusion.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

My innovation was using Top-down processing to enable my students to take part in the listening activities which could enhance their listening ability so that they could attain their learning outcomes (level B1) after the second semester. I applied the Top-down processing because of their strengths, for example, students participated actively in the listening tasks and intensified their motivation in real-life background linking with their interests because it supplied students many chances to listen with suitable listening activities focusing on meanings instead of forms (Villegas, 2013). Moreover, students having alertness with the top-down listening activities could support them to accomplish listening tasks more thoroughly and used prior knowledge to connect what they learnt with what they knew (Lingzhu, 2003). Particularly, according to Brown and Yule, the listener had to put the language in a situational context to understand the meaning (Cited in Teaching Listening, Brno, 2009, p.11). In addition, based on the topics on listening strategy application helped students perform the object language in precise context and one of most meaningful strategies was to utilize background personal knowledge to comprehend the listening tasks (Chou, 2015). Similarly, to help students reduce the vocabulary restrictions, students should base on background knowledge in order to comprehend the listening context. Particularly, to excite students' motivation and minimize their worries, teachers would choose listening materials having suitable prior knowledge for students at the beginning degree in listening directions (Huang, 2015). Moreover, promoting the background understanding from students to the introduction of the materials assisted students in predicting the listening context (Al-Qaraghooly, 2010)

My research and the research works mentioned above had some features in common such as the student participants' age in the research; English was taught as a foreign language and a compulsory subject in their educational curriculum. The findings of those research works were essential to me because it strengthened my theory and stimulated me to conduct the top-down processing to help my students involve in listening activities and enhance their listening ability. Yet, my innovation possessed some different characteristics compared with these ones. I used top-down processing as an obligatory teaching in the classroom. Additionally, the prior research pieces explored the advantages of top-down processing and they were implemented quantitatively. Despite the fact that they applied some qualitative tools for example interviews and teacher's journal, their evaluation was numerical base and there were little data qualitatively. My innovation mentioned the perception of learners about top-down processing related to listening only and a qualitative method was implemented.

My innovation was carried out within 4 weeks from 1st June to 28th June. Each listening part concluded three steps of pre-, while- and post-listening activities with dissimilar tasks. I presented the topics to my students and gave them helpful and essential vocabulary and I chose the listening lessons with slow speed so that not good students could participate. I developed the top-down processing with observing what took place in the class during putting into practice. During conducting the innovation, my research had some drawbacks. First, it was difficult to evaluate something in students' mind. This resulted in the problems of evaluating the whole procedure. So, I had to select the instruments of the study cautiously to ensure that the information gathered was helpful in evaluating the process. In addition, to limit the threats that students could confront in the study, I would give a detailed schedule to reduce the difficulties. More vitally, the assistance from my college where I am teaching is essential. During my research time, I asked for advice and support from my dean and my workmates about my process, assuring the credibility standard of qualitative research.

III.   METHODOLOGY

3.1. Methods

Qualitative methods were used in my research because of some following reasons. Firstly, qualitative methods are appropriate for the small scale research (Teorell, 2001). Moreover, the objective of my study was to explore perceptions of students towards the use of top-down processing in listening activities. Therefore, data and findings were more trustworthy and logical. More essentially, qualitative research is helpful for researchers who have a desire to investigate the motivations, thoughts and beliefs from participants (Dahlberg and McCaig, 2010). My participants were students who were taking part in the course for a year and were well known to my display in the classroom. This resulted in my belief that I was able to successfully have them show feelings and replies towards the employ of innovation. For instance, while interviewing the participants, I utilized more information from their replies and I could understand the reasons why my students did not involve in listening activities easily.

In order to evaluate my innovation, I used three instruments to get useful and supportive information developed from observation, interview and students' diaries. In Assignment 2, the three tools which I utilized were questionnaires, teacher's diaries and group interviews. Yet, I had large changes for the reason that these three instruments could not provide me many facts and figures for analyzing data. Although questionnaires can be planned and carried out for qualitative analysis, it is still considered quantitatively and the information given is inadequate. Additionally, teacher's diary is not a research tool because I am able to only pay attention to what I really observe in the class, not what my students really notice and observe. Thus, the data's value is limited.

Meanwhile, I can gather more helpful and superior information with the new alteration. In Hinchey's view (2008), triangulation should be utilized and three kinds of information consisting of observation, students' diaries and interview is collected in the procedure of gathering data to defend the study from ambiguity and intensify reliability in findings.

3.2. Data collection instruments

To gather more specific data, the first instrument utilized in my research was observation because it helped me have a description about what was happening in the classroom. Through this research method, it might make sure that my students truly took part in the listening activities used with top-down processing or not. In addition, the gathered information was utilized to check reliability of information from the remaining instruments. In Bailey and Nunan's view (1996), researchers wished to inspect the behaviors of learners, they ought to examine it in a natural setting where it occurred. Three observations were implemented in my innovation. In order not to crack the natural atmosphere from the students, they were not notified as observation were done. I supervised the classroom by utilizing the observation sheet as instructions.

In addition to gathering essential information from observation, I utilized students' diaries because it supplied students with chances to show their ideas about the strengths, contents of top-down processing applied in listening activities, the directions of the teacher as well as drawbacks they confronted during the listening process. For Hinchey (2008), diaries were used as a useful instrument for social science research because they supplied data about participants' beliefs, viewpoints and experiences. More specifically, the diaries were written after the last part of the lesson since students could assess the listening learning procedure. Furthermore, I instructed them in detail, provided each of participants a diary with designed questions to stay them mentioned the key issues earlier. They were required to write in English because this was the opportunity for them to express the ability of English writing. The information from the 2 first instruments was compared and analyzed initially to make the basis for the third instrument.

Lastly, I selected semi-structured interview to ensure the validity of information from the two methods mentioned above. In Opdenakker's view (2006), interview is one of hopeful instruments to gather thorough and detailed information. Additionally, this method assisted me make clear the diary's content and the gathered information from the observation. My students were required to take their diaries with them so that the data in the diaries were investigated profoundly.

Eight voluntary students were selected to participate in fifteen to twenty minute interviews for the reason that they represented for the whole class. When the listening sessions completed, the interviews were managed in Vietnamese in their school campus so that the students feel easeful to share their ideas and each interviewee was enquired the same questions prepared in advance. Additionally, audio recording was employed to guarantee that all the essential data was kept. Particularly, I planned meetings with interviewee at varied time to ensure that they were not essential to wait for their turn. Then I translated the questions and answers into English, the replies were transcribed for analysis. After I gathered all the crucial data, they were analyzed.

3.3. Research data and data analysis

The aim of my research was to investigate the effect of utilizing the Top-down process in listening activities and respond my research questions. After I gathered all the essential data, I began to examine them, starting with observations then students' diaries and interviews. I highlighted the resembled data with the identical color. I classified them into three chief categories, consisting students' understanding about Top-down processing, and students' engagement in the classroom, students' confidence and autonomy ability in listening skills. These three parts will be introduced in detail as following.

IV. THE RESULTS

In terms of understanding, almost of students expressed great alters in their mind about how to achieve the listening tasks at varied levels based on the topics, new words, presenter's voices and students' knowledge. In the first observation, I discovered that twelve students finished the formatted tasks after each listening parts and comprehended the overall content. In the second observation, I found that C, L, H (pseudonyms) nodded their heads and made their smiles with the content of listening materials. Additionally, I heard M speaking "this word I know the meaning" when I wrote new word on the blackboard. Another student said that: "I like this topic because I know the meaning of number of words related to fashion".

The finding was clarified by the proof from students' diaries. Most of my students expressed that they grasped the innovation because the teacher prepared the topics related to their prior knowledge carefully. Participant K indicated that: "I believe that it is not challenging for me to do section 1, because of teachers' thorough planning. The steps in each part before listening are instructed clearly by the teacher. In the section 1, I both observe the photos and think about the English expressions that can be listened to match and I try to guess the meaning of the words as I can. Coming to section 2, I often pay attention to the questions and utilize

elimination method. The final section, I have a tendency to go through the questions before listening in order that I realize what I will be asked to listen".

Student F wrote that: "I am the person who often had some troubles with listening tasks in the past, at the present time I can respond almost all of the questions planned by teacher."

However, several participants faced some matters when they did the activities. It was that students did not acquaint with diverse native accents; some students did not remember the vocabulary meaning although it was clarified by their teacher. Furthermore, some others said that bad pronunciation stopped them from engaging in the listening activities. Interviews supplied more evidences for this finding. "I mispronounce this word". "My accent is poor, so it is challenging for me to comprehend and complete the tasks". "I have vocabulary, but I do not listen to all words clearly because my pronunciation is different from presenters in the audio".

According to Gilakjani and Ahmadi's research (2011), poor pronunciation and lack of vocabulary were the components which impact the standard of EFL listening skills. In Penny's view (1984), it is problem for learners to know a word when the way of pronunciation of this vocabulary is unlike the way they read it formerly.

Additionally, some answers from students' interviews gave evidence for this finding. Three of the eight respondents identified that teacher's directions were obvious and made notes while listening so they could do the exercises. Four of them understood the content of tasks but they did not remember some details of the conversations due to time shortage to make note. Interview result also disclosed that these are fundamental stages, not too challenging. For instance, eliminated method as participant K referred in the diary. The participant said that she identified the key words she ought to listen to and choose the right answer with each kind of provided questions.

4.1. Students' engagement in the classroom

Related to engagement, the data analysis showed that students engaged with new technique actively and eagerly. But their engagement was showed differently. In the interviews, participants said that at the first time, they were not familiar with the new technique, but now they enjoyed it because they knew the strengths of using Top-down processing in listening tasks, particularly in guessing the vocabulary meanings through pictures. Student O shared his feeling as following:

"Top-down processing encourages me to apply English in the class. Before I listen to the content of the task, I pay attention to the new words and try thinking what relates to the conversation topic and predicting the answer for questions".

On the contrary, some participants expressed their engagement passively owing to unfairness of audio length, contents of topics and some difficult tasks. Student Y explained that some tasks were long; she could not manage time for each tasks and the topic about environment is not easy to me. I like listening to the topics related to holiday, shopping or sports.

Nonetheless, with the application of the novel strategies, they spent much more time on the activities than before. From my second observation, they got engaged in answering my questions; they attempted to use expressions and knowledge they knew into the real situation. The students' diaries disclosed that most of them obeyed my directions and the steps to do in the exercise were actually thorough. Some students, however, struggled to involve in the lesson. They found that the difficulties originated from their lexicon. Although they utilized the strategies in the listening procedure and found it hopeful in familiar topics, their word amount was still restricted. Student Q wrote that:

"About forty percentage of the conversation content I often received, and unluckily, it is not contained in the parts which I occasionally want to answer. Additionally, the conversations are not short, so I do not often remember what I could comprehend to respond the questions".

Thus, despite knowing how to do in every part, they were unable to think of suitable words. On the other hand, their pronunciation understanding was also limited and it led to trouble in recognizing informative words. This was also reason that they engaged less in some listening tasks. In the place of using the information they listened, they had a tendency to select the answer at random.

However, the information collected from interviews was not consistent with something in my classroom observation. More than two students did not engage with doing the tasks despite that they all said they took part in every exercise. In this situation, the observation evidence was selected due to its suitability.

4.2. Students' confidence and autonomy ability in listening skills

The gathered data showed that most of students became confident and engaged with conducting the Top-down processing in class. They seemed to be active and positive during the procedure of listening lessons. Yet, the confidence of students expressed differently. The observation showed that several students listened and noted what they were listening. Some others did the activities fast. Particularly, when I requested them to go to the blackboard to complete the tasks, they volunteered enthusiastically, only three students looked at the

textbooks and kept quiet. While students were writing the answer on the blackboard, I heard some students saying:

> "I believe that it is right"
> "This task is not too difficult"
> "The speed of the conversation between the customer and shop- assistant is OK".

Additionally, in the interviews, students expressed that:

"I feel it is fascinating when I am able to acquaint with different accents and improved my pronunciation".

"When I have more vocabulary, understand the content of listening tasks and I find it easy to do the exercise".

Furthermore, students show their confidence in the listening lessons, which was written in the diaries:

"The topics of listening activities are trendy, fantastic and update. It is reason that I feel self-confident to as listening to such acquainted topics".

"For section 1, it takes me much time to not only look at the picture and but also memorize the new words to give a description of it, it makes me find difficult due to limited time within 2 minutes. But after I make an acquaintance with it, I find it is significant and I can guess what happens in the listening lessons."

After the students were introduced with the Top-down processing, they grasped their benefits and drawbacks. Thanks to understanding this and the intensified confidence, students progressed in self-learning competence. Another student stated that she knew that she had to study various vocabularies which got similar meanings and concentrated on pronunciation.

Yet, some students shared the difficulties in completing the exercises; they felt less confident and more worried. Student K and D claimed that in section 3, the presenters talked so quickly that they could not catch up with key information. It made them puzzled. Additionally, they wanted to have time to think about the knowledge and acquainted with it.

4.3. Discussion

This research directed to explore how and why my students engaged with Top-down processing which assisted them to enhance their listening competence. The findings of this study disclosed that most of my students engaged in listening activities actively after Top-down processing was utilized in listening class. In addition, their participation was shown at different levels; some of students took part in the innovation very enthusiastically, some showed a little participation; some did not have much engagement. For instance, they were interested in topics concerning the real situations and guessing the lexical meaning through the context which permitted them to have more creativity and imagination. The finding had consistency with Villegas's research (2013) that Top-down processing heightened a variety of the participation of students in listening lessons. However, other participants thought that there was not much enhancement due to acquainting with traditional method; they preferred teacher teaching and providing knowledge for them to asking them answering the questions.

The data indicated that owing to constant practices in the listening class, participants got more confident in doing tasks than they used to be. With Top-down processing, students had more opportunities to use their English knowledge to perform the tasks successfully. The result was proved by the finding of Villegas's research (2013), Lingzhu (2003) that Top-down processing helped students to form confidence in guessing lexical meaning in context. The interview data showed that some participants could not acquaint with the new strategy used in the class because of the limited time for practice. Even though participants were willing to attend the listening activities, they did not comprehend the contents of the talks. As spoken above, the native speakers attending in the audio came from other countries, occasionally they utilized the complicated words and phrases which leaded in their confusion. Thus the results of the tests were not as fine as expected.

Furthermore, participants showed their interest with the novel technique owing to the obvious directions from the teacher, and thorough guidance helped students grasp the lessons and complete the tasks fast. Through students' diaries, I discovered that participants preferred sections one and two. However, participants with positive answers experienced some issues. They performed well in sections one and two, but in section three they did not follow the speed of speakers in spite of introducing the technique to solve section three. Therefore, I ought to supply enough suggestions and information in order that they achieved the tasks effectively. In addition, the finding illustrated that students had not enough of background knowledge that was really vital in listening skills. Therefore, it was essential that students needed to be provided with background knowledge through selecting various topics.

In spite of some restrictions, the students were able to comprehend the usage of the Top-down processing and how to put it into practice. Vitally, their benefits and drawbacks would be a good base for self-learning ability because more than half of Vietnamese students had habits to learn passively. They thought that the role of teacher was to give knowledge to them to have high results and students were regarded as knowledge receivers (Hird, cited in Lewis & McCook, 2002). Furthermore, the research's findings indicated that motivation in listening learning played a vital part in the second language acquisition. According to Kember (2000),

teachers provided materials and designed activities which were fascinating and advantageous for students' objectives. It led to motivating the attitudes of learners in relation to learning language.

In general, this study illustrated the hopeful effects of applying Top-down processing on the language performance of students in listening skills despite that several students confronted difficulties in completing their tasks and some others took part in the lessons ineffectively due to the discussed reasons in the previous parts. The prior research proved that Top-down processing had beneficial influence on increasing listening skills of learners and helped them to listen better. My study disclosed the engagement level of my participants with Top-down processing.   The research time was not long enough to affirm the impacts of employing Top-down processing in listening activities. Instead, I could confirm that almost of students felt more confident and participated in the listening activities more dynamically.

As I discussed earlier, my purpose of my innovation was to apply Top-down processing to promote my students to develop listening skills. Overall, my innovation was relatively smooth despite having some problems during the research process. Basically, most of the students showed that they felt excited as participating in the listening activities because the topics of listening lessons were hopeful, fascinating and suitable to their actual communication. First, Top-down processing encouraged them to use background knowledge related to the topics to guess the meaning of vocabulary. Next, it promoted their confidence and made them more dynamic in the learning procedure.

Besides those benefits, some obstacles needed to be identified. First, students did not have enough vocabulary and had problem with pronunciation. In order to deal with this matter, I will plan the lesson more thoroughly and write a list of things which students need to concentrate on, and teach them before asking them to fill in their practice tasks. At the final part of the lesson, I will use listening activities for them to consider the new words again, promote them to connect the words with pictures in order that they are able to remember the vocabulary more prolonged and understand the way of applying them in spoken situations.

Second, some students felt tired and bored because of some individual reasons, they could not take part in the lessons totally. I will modify the topics and design varied tasks to make my students feel interesting and grasp it at once in the classroom. Additionally, weaker students will be provided with more guidance and I will promote them to use more English. Finally, Top-down processing took more time than expected. So, the way of carrying out the study and managing time ought to be regarded thoroughly in order that all learners will make effort to fill in the tasks in the allowed time.

In my research, I applied qualitative approach because it was appropriate to my context and assisted me to answer my research questions. I investigated various kinds of data from the three instruments namely observation, students' diaries and interview. The gathered information assisted together smoothly in the process of analyzing data. Observation provided me with a concise understanding about the behaviors and attitudes from students in listening parts to realize if they comprehended and enjoyed using strategies in classroom activities which was applied to contrast with the effects after Top-down processing was presented. Additionally, students' diaries disclosed how much they grasped the listening sections and how well they utilized them to the listening tests and their point of view to it. Moreover, individual interviews supplemented the insufficient data from the prior instruments for my study.

However, I also faced several difficulties in the process of using these methods. First of all, in respect of observation, when I observed the students' performance, I found that some students often mentioned the lesson as they saw me observing them. When I altered my concentration for other students, those students began talking with each other. So I explained to them that the objective of observation was only used for my research, not for grading their display. Furthermore, teaching and observing simultaneously made me find difficult. Therefore, I determined to take note of the relevant and essential points when my teaching was happening, after that I made a detailed description of them. In terms of students' diaries, three students did not share their thoughts and views after the lessons were over because they were afraid that their statements would influence their learning results. Moreover, the writing ability of students was sometimes puzzling due to their lack of vocabulary. In order to sort out these matters, they were explained again that their dairies were not employed for evaluation purpose and their information would not be told or shared with other people. Related to interviews, I met the trouble with gathering trustworthy data for the reason that my students felt aroused in a formal interview. In addition, it took two participants much time to remember what they learnt in listening lessons. Therefore, I had to organize the interviews at school campus and put the questions to suggest for them to answer.

Although there were some difficulties happening in the research process with various instruments described above, I would select the identical research instruments if I had an opportunity to implement this research again. Because I recognized that they were useful and relevant to collect information to respond my research questions.

As an insider researcher, I evaluated detailed data straightforwardly because I comprehended my context and I got remarkable trustworthiness and friendly relationship with students who were the vital

participants in my study. Yet, I struggled with several challenges. First, I experienced difficulties with selecting right research methods to respond my research questions. Consequently, I altered them in the most recent time. I thus needed more time to reform my questions in the interviews in order that students' information could be helpful enough. Next, as a teacher, I was well-known to my students and study context. Apart from teacher, I also was a researcher. Hence, the participants did not act in the usual way. On the contrary, they behaved as students in the classroom, which had an influence on my research quality. Furthermore, as I delivered the questions, I predicted students' replies based on my prior deep understanding about them which occasionally made me lose out potentially key evidences. Meanwhile, my students thought that I already knew their responds obviously, thus, they did not give in-depth description and instead they talked about other topics.

This research was significant to me because it provided me with the instructions on how to implement an action research officially; I had a deep knowledge about qualitative methodology, the suitable instruments and ethics, as well as how to make triangulation about them and how to gather and analyze information. Despite that I met some difficulties; they were positive experience for me to carry out other research later.

V. CONCLUSION

This research explored the engagement of learners with Top-down processing and the usage of listening tasks in the class to encourage student's participation in listening activities. Based on the information analysis results, some of my students engaged in the listening tasks by using Top-down processing, and comprehended themselves. Additionally, the research fostered students' activeness and confidence in learning process. However, some other students participated in the activities unsuccessfully due to their knowledge restriction and my directions. Furthermore, their participation was not at the same levels owing to their learning style, prior learning knowledge and language competence.

My innovation was employed quite all right concerning making chances for me to apply new concept and a novel teaching strategy in my context. My students were supplied with several useful materials and directions before they did their tasks. Even though, I undertook some obstacles because of time deficiency and experience shortage in conducting action research, the research reflection helped me adjust my teaching to promote my students' listening skills.

In summary, I have some teaching experiences thanks to the findings of this study. I identify that teacher's thoughts and ideas are unlike with those of learners. Hence, I need to be adaptable and creative in the teaching procedure to meet my students' needs. Moreover, I ought to consider activities and tasks in teaching in order to increase ability of learners and create pleasant learning surroundings in order that students can exchange their ideas and learning experience together and take part in the lessons dynamically.

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