CHAPTER I

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1.1 BACKGROUND

“The limits of my language are the limits of my world.”

– Ludwig Wittgenstein

Language learning primarily occurs through two mediums, the written and the spoken. With regard to the written medium, researchers have given equal attention to investigating the role of both writing and reading on language learning; this has been reflected by the wealth of articles that has appeared on both skills in major professional journals. When it comes to the spoken medium, however, the lack of sufficient research and the need for systematic investigation into the role of listening have been continuously pointed out (Joiner, 1984; Dunkel, 1991). The dearth of research on listening has primarily stemmed from the belief that second language (L2) learners may gradually acquire listening skills with natural exposure to spoken language, whereas the other skills should be imparted through formal instruction in school settings (Schmidt-Rinehart, 1994). This belief has resulted in the least amount of attention on listening from language researchers in terms of the amount of research conducted; it has also resulted in the dearth of materials available to instructors who wish to emphasize the role of listening skills on L2 learning.

Listening comprehension is a fundamental language skill in which pupils need to gain adequate proficiency. It allows them to understand and assimilate the speech they hear and enhances their skill in spoken communication considerably. It is also a critical means of language learning (Vandergrift 1999, Rost 2001).
In the educational setting in Kerala, where English serves as a medium of instruction in the school, college and university levels, and the high demand for functional knowledge of English language for future pursuits, the role of listening comprehension skill is even more significant. Moreover, the classroom culture in this techno era of globalization requires the daily teaching-learning tasks to be achieved largely through talking and listening. As a result, effective listening becomes one of the determinants of the pupils’ success or failure both in education and in future life. Particularly, at the tertiary level of learning, the ability to listen effectively is a necessity. At this level, pupils are expected to comprehend different types of lectures, discussions, presentations, seminars and other academic spoken discourses.

However, when the pupils come to colleges and universities, their ability to listen to lectures and comprehend them seem to be rather inadequate. The investigator, working as an Assistant Professor in a training college, has clearly observed this problem from his personal experience. Many pupils appear to be below average in listening skills and are unable to comprehend even simple English. Often they expect Malayalam translation of the lectures. The motivation for the present study arose mainly from the recognition of this pertinent problem.

In principle, pupils should develop vital listening skills while they are at school. They should be provided with varied listening comprehension practice, and should be trained to employ effective listening strategies. The English language syllabus in the schools in Kerala has been revised with the intention of improving the learners’ communicative abilities. But unfortunately the listening skill did not receive the attention it warrants even in the revised curriculum. A number of factors contribute to the fact that listening is a neglected skill area. Curriculum framers and even many teachers believe
that listening develops naturally, so they need not attempt to teach listening. Others feel listening cannot be taught, or if taught, it cannot be evaluated. Some feel that the curriculum is too crowded even otherwise. Possibly the major factors in the neglect of listening instruction are; the lack of suitable materials to teach listening, and that many teachers have received little instruction in how to teach it, and they feel inadequate to try.

The result is that the pupils’ listening skill seems to have fallen short of the expectation. This leads to the assumption that the innovations in the syllabi do not effect the necessary methodological changes in the classroom teaching practices unless suitable materials are provided for the development of each skill and teachers take a conscious effort to develop the skill. There has also been a claim that most English teachers in the schools in Kerala focus on the content rather than the development of skills which is the primary objective of language learning.

To the best of the investigator’s knowledge, no studies have been carried out to prepare and test the effectiveness of instructional material to develop listening comprehension at the high school level. On the other hand, such a study can be worthwhile to find out if such materials to develop listening comprehension bring the intended changes in the actual practices for the attainment of the stated instructional objectives in language teaching.

**English Language: Today’s Need and Tomorrow’s Promise**

“English is a language which is rich in literature – humanistic, scientific and technical. If under sentimental urge we should give up English we would cut ourselves off from the living stream of ever-growing knowledge.”

- The Radhakrishnan Commission.
An ‘international language’ is a logical requirement in an area of worldwide information sharing and commercial exchange. For the better or worse, this role has fallen on English. The result is that, its status in educational systems and context is an extraordinary one all over the world and especially in India.

The need for and the importance of teaching and learning English has to be measured today in terms of international values. Of all the languages in the world today, English is regarded as the world language, as Quirk (1962) states, “it is the most international of languages.” English is the key to the storehouse of knowledge be it scientific, technological, commercial or literary development. To quote French (1960), “anyone who can read English can keep in touch with the whole world without leaving his own home.”

Nehru (cited in Menon and Patel, 1964) has rightly stated, “All regional languages must be developed and promoted. But this does not mean that English should be discarded. To do that will amount to closing a window on the world of technology. Foreign languages serve as windows on it and to suppose that translations can take their place is a mistake. It is no use getting into an intellectual prison after achieving political independence.”

Today, compulsions of learning English are no longer merely political. Its utility as the chief vehicle of scientific and technological knowledge, its nature as a dynamic and well-developed language with a vast literature, and its utility as a library and international language and above all as a link language and recently as the language of internet, ushered in all kinds of reason to learn the language.

It can therefore be rightly said that English is a language which, because of its multifarious facets and universal features, has these days become most useful to the
welfare of mankind. In fact, it would be fair to say that a majority of educated Indians probably feel grateful that our erstwhile colonial rulers left behind the valuable gift of a globally useful language like English.

Today the average English educated Indian is reasonably comfortable and fluent in English language use. In reality, though, when compared to India’s huge population, the number of those who actively use English in public domains is relatively small, and those who use it in their private domains even smaller. Nevertheless, in the general educational discourse of India today, to be ‘educated’ is commonly considered to be English literate, and this speaks volumes for the prominence of English as a language of general mental and intellectual framework in India.

The credit for this development goes to certain prestigious institutions in India such as CIEFL, Hyderabad, currently EFLU, and regional English Institutes throughout the country, and the fact that all these institutions are supported by government funds are proof that even the Government of India to a great extent has encouraged the teaching of English, teacher training and research in English.

**Place of English in our School Curriculum**

“Indians secretly believe, if not openly say, that competence in English makes a considerable difference in their career prospects….Politicians and bureaucrats denounce the elitism of English medium schools but surreptitiously send their children to them.”

_Gupta (1995)_

English was the medium of instruction in schools in the colonial period. For many years English dominated the school curriculum. But the advent of democracy and the
competing claims of regional languages have had their adverse influence on the position of English language. Due to its association with the British colonizer, English started life in India as not just a foreign language, but as a much hated language. From the despised instrument of oppression to the reluctantly adopted lingua franca to the status symbol of the upper classes to its position today as a second language, English has come a long way. Just as the status of the language underwent constant reinvention, the whole ELT paradigm was also subjected to the complete gamut of modification. In the closing years of the twentieth century, when English began to emerge as a global language, the Indian classroom was transformed with regard to the change in the environment of the learner. Whereas the earlier classroom environment had been acquisition poor with regard to English, in the globalization era suddenly everybody seemed to be jumping upon the learn-English-bandwagon.

However this acceptance of the significance of English in our life and the modifications made hitherto in the curriculum were not reflected in the levels of attainment of the learners in our country. The mastery of the basics of English is gravely unsatisfactory. To make things worse, many teachers take recourse to extensive use of the mother tongue in the English class, in order to aid comprehension. The sole aim now is to enable the pupils to pass the examination by rote learning of answers to selected set of questions. According to Kohli (1996), “… the language is not taught as a skill subject as it ought to be taught but as a knowledge subject so that at the end of the course the pupils have acquired very little proficiency in the linguistic skills that really matter.” Regarding the linguistic attainment of pupils, Professor Hill (1960) has observed, “most of the children who get through the school leaving certificate examination and go to the universities in India, know practically no English except the bits they have mugged up to get through examinations.” This is true even today with the exception that not only those
who go to, but also coming out of our universities know little English. When this situation is studied against the backdrop of the significance and role of English as an international language, the problem becomes critical.

The Official Language Commission (1955-56), appointed by the Government of India clearly indicated that English has to be taught principally as a language of comprehension. Moreover the three-language formula, recommended by the Education Commission (1964-66), clearly states the position of English in our curriculum. The National Policy on Education (1968) also supported the three language formula and emphasized the need to study English and other international languages as well. Most of the education commissions appointed in our country, since independence, have amply recognized the relevance of English in the school curriculum. As far as India is concerned English is a ‘source language’ as well as a ‘link language.’

English is introduced in Class I or Class III by majority of states or Union Territories and few states or Union Territories introduce it in Class IV or V. The position paper on Teaching of English (2005), NCERT has pointed out the place and role of English in the school curriculum in today’s context in India. It has stated that “English does not stand alone”; the position paper argues that English needs to find its place along with other Indian languages and in relation to other subjects.

English today is a compulsory second language in native/vernacular medium schools, and in English medium schools it is competing to the status of first language. In short, Kachru’s (1986) pronouncement that English “has now become an integral part of India’s linguistic repertoire” is all the more true today.
Importance of Listening

“Nothing is to be spoken before it has been heard
Nothing is to be read before it has been spoken
Nothing is to be written before it has been read.”

Widdowson (1985)

According to Howatt and Darkin (1974), “listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This involves understanding a speaker’s accent or pronunciation, his grammar and his vocabulary, and grasping his meaning.” It refers to a complex process that allows us to understand spoken language. Listening is the most widely used language skill. It is not only a skill area in language performance, but is also a critical means of acquiring a second language (L2).

Rost (2002) defines listening in its broadest sense, as a process of receiving what the speaker actually says (receptive orientation); constructing and representing meaning (constructive orientation); negotiating meaning with the speaker and responding (collaborative orientation); and creating meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy (transformative orientation). Listening is a complex, active process of interpretation in which listeners matches what they hear with what they already know.

Listening is the most common communicative activity in daily life. We can expect to listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read, and five times more than we write (Morley, 1991). Listening is also important for obtaining comprehensible input that is necessary for language development.

Listening is the fundamental language skill. It is the first language mode that children acquire. It provides the foundation for all aspects of language and cognitive development, and it plays a lifelong role in the processes of communication. A study by
Wilt (1950) found that, people spend 45% of the time in a communication for listening and 30% of communication time was spent speaking 16% reading and 9% writing.

Listening is the medium through which people gain a large portion of their education, their information, their understanding of the world and of human affairs, their ideals, sense of values and their appreciation. Therefore, in this era of mass communication listening skill is of vital importance.

**Fostering Listening Comprehension (LC) skills**

*We should teach listening by listening, reading by reading, speaking by speaking and writing by writing.*

*Anonymous*

According to Buck (1997), listening comprehension is an inferential process in which the listener constructs meaning through interaction, and the interpretation of the text is guided and influenced by the context of the situation and the listener’s purpose for listening. It is a process of matching speech with what the listener already knows about the topic. Therefore, when listeners know the purpose and the context of a text or an utterance, the process is facilitated considerably because listeners can activate prior knowledge and make the appropriate inferences essential to comprehending the message. Therefore, teachers need to help pupils to organize their thoughts, to activate appropriate background knowledge for understanding, to make predictions, and to prepare for listening which would significantly reduce the burden of comprehension for the listener.
Unfortunately, the teachers make major mistakes in approaching a text for listening, which could be listed as follows:

- Learners have their course books open – the teachers do not instruct the pupils to close their books

- Learners listen, if at all, and follow the text in the books without any reason to do so, i.e., there is no pre-listening activity or introduction

- Learners are asked to read and translate passages sentence by sentence, and no other while-listening activities are given.

- Learners are not given the comprehension questions before the listening session.

Why has all the theory collapsed in teaching listening comprehension? Are the teachers aware of the theories and methods of teaching listening comprehension? The strongest argument one can imagine is that, it is not written in the course book and teachers’ source book. At this point, one has to admit that not only novice teachers but also those with many years of teaching experience rely heavily on the teacher’s source book and pupil’s course book. If we look at the course book (Standard VIII, SCERT), we find only the following instructions: ‘Read’, ‘Pause and Reflect’ and ‘Write’. It was shocking to find that throughout the course book we wouldn’t find the instruction ‘Listen’. Review of teacher’s source book (Standard VIII, SCERT) also revealed that ‘listening’ as a process or as a skill or as a learning objective is not mentioned in any of the five units for study. Despite a gradually increasing acceptance of the importance of listening comprehension for second or foreign language learners, the teaching of listening comprehension remains a somewhat neglected and poorly taught aspect, and hence is called the **Cinderella Skill** (Nunan, 1997; Vandergrift, 1997). It is observed that, in the
English classes in Kerala following the state syllabus, learners are forced to practice listening exercise by reading.

Listening comprehension is as important as or even more important than the other skills in teaching and learning of English as a second language because, it provides input for the learner without which they cannot learn anything. No more, can listening comprehension be regarded as a skill that is taken for granted or overlooked as in the past and no more can it be viewed as a passive skill. Pierce (1988) states that, listening comprehension is not a passive but an active process of perceiving and constructing a message from a stream of sound. We need to listen actively and interactively in order to comprehend. It is a complex process. Teaching listening comprehension therefore requires an intentional approach, which acknowledges the pivotal role of listening in language learning, and which recognizes the complex interactive nature of the listening process.

The two types of cognitive processing, the top-down and bottom-up processing in listening comprehension, also have to be developed by providing opportunity to practice, employing each of them in the exercises provided. Top-down processing refers to utilizing schemata (background knowledge and global understanding) to derive meaning and interpret the message. Bottom-up processing refers to deriving the meaning of the message based on the incoming language data, that is, the combination of sounds, words and grammar that creates meaning. Stress, rhythm and intonation also play a role in bottom-up processing.

Pupils learn to comprehend when they are specifically taught to comprehend. It is not an automatic gift, it is not a byproduct of other learning (Cables, 1966). For proper development of listening comprehension skill the teachers will have to give training in
the different processes involved in listening comprehension such as speech perception, word recognition, sentence processing, constructing literal meaning, holding the information, recognizing cohesive devices, inferring the implied meaning, developing main idea, predicting, responding, etc.

To extract meaning from listening, we need to follow four basic steps:

- Figure out the purpose for listening. Activate background knowledge in order to predict or anticipate content and identify appropriate strategies.

- Attend to parts of the listening input that are relevant to the identified purpose and ignore the rest. This selectivity enables pupils to focus on specific items in the input and reduces the amount of information they have to hold in short-term memory in order to recognize it.

- Select top-down and bottom-up strategies that are appropriate to the listening task and use them flexibly and interactively.

- Check comprehension while listening and when the listening task is over.

To ensure that these steps are effectively followed, the teacher will have to develop appropriate pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening activities. The teacher should also closely monitor their comprehension and provide feedback so that the pupils can detect inconsistencies and comprehension failures, which will direct them to use alternate strategies.

Given the importance of listening comprehension in language learning and teaching it is essential for language teachers to help their pupils become effective listeners. To foster listening comprehension, teachers have to model listening strategies
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and provide listening practice in authentic situations based on the various aspects discussed above.

1.2 NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

“Speaking does not of itself constitute communication unless what is being said is comprehended by another person. Teaching the comprehension of spoken speeches is therefore of primary importance if the communication aim is to be reached.”

Rivers (1966)

The language instruction in Kerala has failed to equip learners with communicative skills necessary for social interaction and individual career achievements. The pupil feel deeply frustrated when he/she realizes that all the years of studying English have not equipped him/her to negotiate successfully in ordinary day to day encounters that demand the use of English. For most pupils English remains a burden intellectually, and a nonfeasance functionally. The enormous waste of time, effort and money has naturally prompted inquiry into the reasons for this state of failure and also prompted the development of more effective materials and methods of teaching English.

The investigator had the personal experience of belonging to an English medium school as a pupil for over a period of fourteen years which inspired him later on to take up English as subject of specialization, during which period he had the experience of surveying the teaching of English in certain aided and government schools in Kerala as part of the project work. He also had a brief experience of teaching at the B.Ed. level which gave ample opportunity for observation of English classes in different schools. All this resulted in a growing realization that the pupils, by and large, especially in the government and aided schools in Kerala, lack the ability to express themselves in simple,
lucid English. It was also realized that very little importance was accorded to the teaching of language skills especially listening and speaking which is the basis of language learning.

Listening skills are taken to be incidental to the goal of speaking. Most syllabi make no provision for teaching and testing listening skills. Any listening skills, if at all, that the pupils acquire come incidentally in the course of studying other skills and other subjects. While teaching English language, it is observed that much importance is attached to writing and reading skills, and much lesser to speaking and unfortunately listening skill is neglected at all stages and at all levels. It is often forgotten that a two-way communication would need skill of listening as well. Besides, educationalists have proved that skills of expression depend upon skills of comprehension in language development and not vice versa. (Rivers, 1968; Chastain, 1971). Unless the learners have the ability to decode an incoming message, they certainly cannot be expected to encode an outgoing message (Chastain, 1971).

It is true that the four skills in learning a language namely listening, speaking, reading and writing are always related in terms of usage, and speaking is viewed as the most desirable skill in face-to-face communication in this era of globalization. However, what is the answer to the following questions? What do we have to do before we can speak? What does a child learn before he talks? What do we do before chatting? Listen, of course! In the acquisition of the mother tongue there is ample opportunity to listen to the language in natural settings, before the child begins to speak. In second language acquisition too listening requires greater focus and attention. It is a skill that we need to work harder at for proper development of other language skills.
It is widely recognised today that listening is an active skill, or rather, a cluster of various sub-skills, which are both learnable and teachable. Listening is regarded as an essential element of foreign language proficiency, and as such plays an important role in foreign language programmes.

However, the teaching of the listening skill has been long overlooked in English language teaching in Kerala. The development of all four language skills is outlined as one of the goals of English language instruction in the syllabus. However, a closer analysis reveals that there is no systematic approach to the teaching of listening at any level of instruction, since there are no activities or materials that specifically focus on the development of this skill. This implies that there is an underlying assumption that listening skills will develop on their own.

The skill of listening comprehension is taken for granted by both teachers and syllabus framers as something which is exercised all the time and therefore does not need any deliberate practice. The method of teaching, which is generally used, is not conducive for improving LC skills. It is more like testing the learner’s LC skills. Generally worksheets are not circulated well in advance, time is not allotted for clarifications, and discussion is not often encouraged either. Peer discussion is completely restricted to maintain the classroom discipline. In other words, the emphasis is not on training LC but on testing them. Further, there are no specific exercises in the text books for listening and even if an attempt is made by the teacher it is often shifted to reading comprehension rather than listening.

Listening comprehension has been neglected in research too. Even now, we cannot say that listening comprehension research abounds when compared to that of reading comprehension.
Meanwhile listening comprehension has attained the signpost of wide range of theories of second language acquisition and classroom teaching. In contemporary second language classrooms the centrality of listening comprehension in second language learning process has been established with appropriate theories. For example, Rost (1994) summarizes the importance of listening comprehension as follows:

- Listening is vital in the language classroom because, it provides input for the learner. Without understanding input at the right level, any learning simply cannot begin.

- Spoken language provides a means of interaction for the learner. Because learners must interact to achieve understanding, access to speakers of the language is essential.

- Listening exercises provide teachers with a means for drawing the learners’ attention to new forms (vocabulary, grammar, new interaction patterns) in the language.

Krashen (1985) argues that people acquire language by understanding the linguistic information they hear. Thus language acquisition is achieved mainly through receiving understandable input and listening ability is the critical component in receiving this understandable language input. Given the importance of listening comprehension in language learning, it is essential for language teachers to help pupils become effective listeners.

In spite of the realization of the significance of listening comprehension in achieving language competency, it has been neglected. The review of literature has convinced the investigator that there are a few tests designed for assessing pupils’ listening comprehension but nothing is found in the form of materials for developing listening comprehension especially at the school level. Even though a few materials are