

# AN EVALUATION OF ANCILLARY LISTENING ACTIVITIES IN *SEE SAW*: A CASE STUDY AT SAINT PETER'S SCHOOL, NAKHON PATHOM, THAILAND

*Cai Qinghua*

Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand  
cyz.I01@I63.com

## Abstract

This study aims to evaluate the ancillary listening activities of the *See Saw* series in the Thai EFL context. Integrated with other language skills (speaking, reading and writing), the ancillary listening activities of *See Saw* include chants, songs, stories, illustrations, etc. The data of this study was collected from two grades at Saint Peter's School, Nakhon Pathom Province, Thailand.

The findings from classroom observations indicate that the pupils in the lower grade participated much more than the pupils in the higher grade at the primary level. The findings also show some positive factors of the *See Saw* materials, like the types of the activities, the sound effects of the audio recordings. However, the pupils of different grades had similar difficulties in terms of western or unfamiliar topics, the speed of the CD and the accents of the recordings.

จุดประสงค์ของการศึกษานี้คือเพื่อประเมินกิจกรรมช่วยเหลือการฟังของแบบเรียนชุด *See Saw* ในบริบทของการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศในนักเรียนไทย กิจกรรมช่วยเหลือการฟังของแบบเรียนชุด *See Saw* นั้นประกอบไปด้วยการร้องเพลง เรื่องเล่า การแสดงภาพประกอบ และอื่นๆ โดยประกอบรวมกับทักษะทางภาษาอื่นๆ (การพูด การอ่าน และการเขียน)

ข้อมูลจากการศึกษานี้รวบรวมจากนักเรียนสองระดับที่โรงเรียนเซนต์ปีเตอร์จังหวัดนครปฐม ประเทศไทย  
ผลจากการสังเกตบ่งชี้ว่านักเรียนในระดับชั้นที่ต่ำกว่าให้ความสนใจรวมกิจกรรมมากกว่านักเรียนในระดับชั้นเรียนที่สูงกว่า ทั้งนี้การศึกษายังรายงานถึงประโยชน์ของเอกสารเสริมการเรียนรู้ของแบบเรียนชุด See Saw เช่น ลักษณะของกิจกรรม, เสียงประกอบเรื่องจากเทปบันทึก เป็นต้น  
แต่อย่างไรก็ตาม การศึกษานี้ยังค้นพบปัญหาที่คล้ายคลึงกันของนักเรียนที่มาจากทั้งสองระดับอีกด้วย ปัญหาที่ได้แก่ ความไม่คุ้นเคยกับเนื้อหาทางตะวันตกในบทเรียน ระดับความเร็ว และสำเนียงของผู้พูดในเทปบันทึก

**Key words:** materials evaluation, ancillary listening activities, Thai EFL pupils, participation and listening difficulties.

## Introduction

Thai is the dominant language of the pupils at Saint Peter's School. Due to their education and family environment, the beginners' English competence is relatively limited. Appropriate listening activities which can encourage their participation are necessary for the pupils. The listening activities can be one of the features of the *See Saw* series.

The *See Saw* series contains abundant ancillary listening activities which involve aural, vocal and visual skills. The activities consist of graded phonics practice, songs, and comic strips and stories with sound effects. The CD of *See Saw* is recorded by American native speakers.

## Research context

The researcher evaluated Level I and Level 6 of the *See Saw* series through classroom observations which were carried out in Grade I and Grade 6 at Saint Peter's School. The two grades were taught by foreign (Filipino) teachers. The pupils were aged from 7 to 13 years old and were all Thai. The English teachers of the observed classes had a Thai assistant helping with the discipline and overall management of the classes.

The data were collected from classroom observations through video recordings, and supplementary data were the teachers' journals and the students' work. Four out of ten units in every level of *See Saw* were observed. Each unit contained around three to five ancillary listening activities.

## **Literature review**

Anderson and Lynch (1991: 63) categorize listening materials into two types:

Listening' would be a complete timetabled session by that name, using published material specifically designed to practice the aural comprehension skill; we might call this *autonomous* listening material...it might be only part of a lesson based on a global language course book that includes the exploitation of recorded materials that are linked-structurally, functionally, thematically-with the current learning focus. We could call this *ancillary* listening material.

Autonomous listening focuses on aural comprehension skill. Ancillary listening activities are either aural, vocal and visual skills. The activities could be mixed with reading, speaking and writing activities.

Davies and Pearse (2002) mention that at lower language level listening activities could help the learners understand the text, and the teacher should not expect listeners to try to understand every word. Listening activities are not tests that require the listeners to complete the tasks correctly, but a method to enhance the learners' comprehension ability.

According to Cunningsworth (1995: 15), materials evaluation has two main purposes: for potential and suitability. The aim of this evaluation is for suitability, that is, seeking answers to 'Would it be good for my class?' Tomlinson (1998 and 2003) states that materials evaluation should specifically concern on comprehensibility, achievability, teachability, flexibility, etc., with a criterion-referenced approach.

Brown (1994: 245) claims, "aural comprehension itself cannot be overtly 'observed'". However, by the means of verbal and non-verbal

behaviors, the learner s' understanding can be decoded. The evaluation of ancillary listening activities of *See Saw* was based on the studies of Cunningsworth (1995), Hill and Tomlinson (2003) who evaluated the autonomous listening activities, as well as Lund (1990) and Tomlinson's (2001) methods on listening' comprehension. To observe the participation of the learners, the evaluation factors are summarized below:

***Types of the listening materials:*** Listening materials should be appropriate for the learners (Cunningsworth, 1995: 67). The formats could be in words, sentences or paragraphs; monologues or dialogues; chants, songs or stories, and so on. No matter what format is, the language should be controlled and graded (Rixon 1986, Cunningsworth 1995).

***Clarity of the CD:*** The quality of the equipment should function properly in the classroom to ensure the learners hear the sound of the CD properly.

***Speed of the audio recording:*** The basic level learners may not be able to comprehend the input even at normal speed. Rost (2002: 20) explains that, there are no reliable cues marking every word boundary, so word recognition is often the most problematic process in listening.

***Pronunciation:*** The learners' ability to pronounce the words clearly is consistent with "achievement of performance objectives" (Tomlinson 2003). The basic language unit, words should be articulated clearly.

***Role of visuals:*** Resorting to the visuals is one of the facts that the pupils "do" (Lund 1990). Cunningsworth (1995) considers visuals are helpful for listening, and the *See Saw materials* [include visuals.]

***Role of written texts:*** The listening materials are in conjunction with the reading texts, which are considered as "comprehensibility of text (Tomlinson 2003)". As a cue of listening activity which helps the learners' listening comprehension, the factor is necessary to be evaluated.

***Clarity of instructions:*** According to Tomlinson (2003: 24), only when the pupils understand the instructions, they will be able to complete the activity.

## Method of data analysis

The researcher analyzed the data through an observation checklist based on a five-point scale for every activity. Five types of activities were covered in Level I: vocabulary presentation, grammar presentation, language extension, phonics and story. In Level 6, three types of activities were observed: vocabulary presentation, songs and stories. The checklists were varied in terms of the types of activities, but generally, the core criteria were the same. There were seven or eight items, and the total score was 35 to 40 points. Table I below is an example of the checklists for song activity in Level 6.

**Table I. Checklist for Activity 2(Song), Level 6**

| No.        | Criteria   | Rating |   |   |   |   |
|------------|--|--------|---|---|---|---|
|            | To what extent...                                      | 5      | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 1          | was the listening activity appropriate for the pupils? |        |   |   |   |   |
| 2          | was the CD audible in the classroom?                   |        |   |   |   |   |
| 3          | did the pupils manage the speed of the CD?             |        |   |   |   |   |
| 4          | did the pupils pronounce the words clearly?            |        |   |   |   |   |
| 5          | did the pupils resort to the visuals?                  |        |   |   |   |   |
| 6          | did the pupils resort to the lyrics?                   |        |   |   |   |   |
| 7          | did the learners follow the instructions?              |        |   |   |   |   |
| 8          | did the pupils complete the work?                      |        |   |   |   |   |
| Score      |  | /40    |   |   |   |   |
| Percentage |  | %      |   |   |   |   |

The scores were converted into percentage. The percentages were categorised on the following scale given below:

Table 2. Percentage scale

|                   |         |                 |          |                |       |
|-------------------|---------|-----------------|----------|----------------|-------|
| <b>Percentage</b> | 100-80% | 79-60%          | 59-40%   | 39-20%         | 19-0% |
| <b>Five-point</b> | 5       | 4               | 3        | 2              | 1     |
| <b>Scales</b>     | High    | Moderately-high | Moderate | Moderately-low | Low   |

The checklist emphasized on pupils' participation in the activities. Moreover, the teachers' journals and the students' work were included in the study. Journals were used to find out the teachers' views about the listening activities of *See Saw* and were another source for the classroom activities. The researcher focused on the the pupils' work: whether they completed the task independently before analyzing the possible reasons for the failure of the activities from the video recordings.

### Conclusion of the ancillary listening activities of *See Saw*

Table 3 indicates the overall results of the ancillary listening activities in Level I and Level 6:

Table 3. Overall results of the listening activities

| Level | Level I         | Level 6  |
|-------|-----------------|----------|
| Score | 66%             | 59%      |
| Scale | Moderately-high | Moderate |

The study evaluated the pupils' participation in the ancillary listening activities of the *See Saw* series, the researcher found the following factors that influence the results:

The teachers' teaching techniques influenced the pupils' participation. In Grade I, when the teacher asked the pupils to read aloud, the participation was low. Interactions between the teachers and the pupils or competitions among the pupils motivated participation. In Grade 6, the communication channel was 'the foreign teacher - the assistant - the pupils': it was obvious that the pupils relied on the assistant's translation. The

teachers had to teach the language points in a familiar context related to the pupils. Moreover, the teachers did not provide sufficient time for the pupils to process information.

The assistant's discipline methods helped during the activities. In Grade 1, the distracted pupils were warned by the assistant. The pupils tend to be distracted and undisciplined when the assistant was not present. In Grade 6, the students seldom moved in the class or chatted with the other students. One of the possible reasons was the presence of the assistant, or as they grew older they learnt to be disciplined.

Due to lack of teaching time, the teachers did not carry out all the ancillary listening activities.

The policy of not allowing pupils to write on the books influenced the teaching of the activities. For instance, the pupils had to copy the texts into notebooks before the activities in Grade 6.

The teachers (including the assistant's), lack of time, the government's free textbook policy, lack of time, etc., influenced the results. This applies to all activities and cannot be separated from the major findings of the study. The following section will try to provide answers to the research questions:

The pupils of Grade 1 participated the ancillary listening activities to a 'moderately-high' degree (see Table 3). It means the activities were moderately satisfactory to evoke the pupils' participation. However, the pupils of Grade 6 participated only to a 'moderate' degree. (see Table 3).

**Audio CD:** The pupils liked the sound effects of the audio CD which relaxed the class atmosphere. The strong points of the audio CD were the clear articulation of words, and the sound effects that relaxed the atmosphere of the class, and to encourage pupils' participation. Additionally, sound effects provided language context for the listeners.

However, the speed of the CD and the accents were difficult for the pupils. The speed of the CD was faster than their English teachers', and the native accents were different from the input they heard at school: their English teachers are Thais and Filipinos.

The pupils had certain pronunciation problems, e.g. the pupils dropped the suffix of words; they did not articulate the words and sentences clearly.

***See Saw material:*** The pupils resorted to the visuals to a 'moderately-high' or 'moderate' degree. There were abundant visuals in the books (pictures, comic strips, and illustrations). However, the visuals did not present every word clearly. Like 'talk' could not be represented through a visual.

The written texts were presented in the form of words, sentences (vocabulary presentation), chants (grammar presentation), lyrics (song), and dialogues (stories). If the pupils did not look at the texts, they could not complete the tasks.

The content gradually progressed in terms of difficulty to the pupils of Level 6. The linguistic competence of the learners in the higher grade did not match the level of the material. The learners' difficulties on the content were:

Firstly, the number of unfamiliar words gradually increased in Level 6. The number of new words in Level I was around three per unit, which was comparatively lesser than Level 6 that had around six to 15 in a unit. Texts with unfamiliar words and long sentences became difficult for the pupils who used Level 6.

The topics of Level I evoked learners' participation to a 'moderately-high' degree, but the topics in Level 6 evoked only a 'moderate' degree of participation. Western names and unfamiliar topics were not appropriate for the pupils. For example, the background of Unit 8 (Level 6) was set at Sunset Boulevard of Hollywood which was not familiar to the pupils, and the pupils did not participate when they encountered unfamiliar topics.

Although the topics were presented and organized within a unit, the topics were not reinforced in the succeeding units. The learners were not able to cope with the meanings of the items which decreased participation.

To sum up, the series of *See Saw* was suitable to the lower grade ('moderately-high', Level I) in terms of the sound effects of the CD, relevant and familiar topics, visuals and written texts. The pupils had difficulties on the speed of the CD, accents, unfamiliar topics, and instruction. The materials became more difficult for the pupils of Grade 6. The linguistic competence of the Grade 6 learners did not match with the progression of the materials. If the pupils had studied the *See Saw* before moving to Level



6, they might have been familiar with the material and the participation in Level 6 could have been higher.

The researcher does not recommend *See Saw* Level 6 for Thai Learners in Saint Peter's School as the material evoked only a 'moderate' degree of participation, especially without studying the previous levels. *See Saw* Level I encouraged a 'moderately-high' degree of participation, and the researcher considers it is suitable for the learners.

### **Suggestions for teachers**

This study is useful for teachers who use ancillary listening activities of *See Saw* or similar materials in large size classes, especially when students' linguistic competence is limited. The researcher puts forward the following suggestions for the teachers to improve learners' participation.

Teachers should select activities from the material to match the competence of the pupils to cover within a limited teaching schedule.

It is advisable to exploit other teaching techniques apart from mechanical drill practice to create a dynamic learning atmosphere. For example, competitions, games, and other interactive activities.

Teachers should devote more energy on classroom management by working with the assistant to control the class. Classroom management becomes an issue in the absence of the assistant.

Teachers could introduce language points in a familiar context especially when dealing with western cultural elements or unfamiliar items, which could be a challenge for the learners and the teachers as well. The teachers can create familiar contexts for the learners to explore their own experience.

The listening section of the final test should not be grammar-based as it is at the present moment.

### **Conclusion**

The study indicates that the ancillary listening activities of *See Saw* Level I were successful to a 'moderately-high' degree, while the activities of *See Saw* Level 6 only to a 'moderate' degree. The *See Saw* series motivates the pupils

in terms of sound effects of the CD, visuals, written texts, etc. However, the pupils encountered listening difficulties, for example, speed of the CD, different accents, and unfamiliar western cultural elements. The pupils in Grade 6, who had not learnt the other levels of the *See Saw* materials found Level 6 difficult.

The researcher considers *See Saw* Level I is appropriate for the pupils, while *See Saw* Level 6 is not appropriate for Grade 6 pupils at Saint Peter's School, especially when the previous levels of the materials are not used.

## References

- Anderson, A. and T. Lynch 1991, *Listening*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Brown, H. 1994, *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Cunningsworth, A. 1995, *Choosing Your Coursebook*, Oxford: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Davies, P. and E. Pearse 2002, *Success in English teaching*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hill, D. A. and B. Tomlinson 2003 Coursebook listening activities in B. Tomlinson (ed.) *Developing Materials for Language Teaching*, pp. 364-374, London and New York: Continuum.
- Lund, R. 1990, A taxonomy for teaching second language listening. *Foreign Language Annals*, 23 (1), 105-115.
- Rixon, S. 1986, *Developing Listening Skills*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Rost, M. 2002, *Teaching and Researching Listening*, London: Longman.
- Tomlinson, B. 1998, *Materials Development in Language Teaching*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tomlinson, B. et al. 2001, EFL courses for adults, *ELT Journal* 55 (1): 80-101.

Tomlinson, B. 2003, Material evaluation, in B. Tomlinson (Ed.),  
Developing Materials for Language, London and New York:  
Continuum. 15-36