

English Language Attrition in Short Conversation and Passage Listening Comprehension

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The purpose of this study is to examine whether language attrition in both short conversation and passage listening comprehension occurs among tertiary students. The number of the participants is 359, who are all from Nanjing University of Posts & Telecommunications. A test paper, adapted from China's College English Test Band Six, was used as the instrument to measure participants' short conversation and passage listening comprehension before and after the two-month holiday. The result indicates that participants' short conversation listening comprehension improved significantly and obviously over the holiday. However, no statistical significance was found in passage listening comprehension. The reasons for the results were also analyzed and discussed.

Key words: English language attrition, passage listening, short conversation listening

INTRODUCTION

Language attrition, whether in a first language or a second, is increasingly recognized as a normal part of changes in proficiency over time. Attrition research provides another window on the dynamism of language, another

testing ground for extant theories of language development (Hansen, 2001). It has been suggested that language attrition has a close relationship with language acquisition. de Bot (1999) argued:

There are remarkable parallels with respect to the topics studied [between language attrition and SLA]: the roles of cross-linguistic influence, age, individual differences, language setting, social-psychological factors such as attitudes and motivation in language attrition. There is also a fairly recent interest in the psycholinguistics of language attrition, which links the topic with the long-established one of memory research in psychology (p. viii).

Since language acquisition is closely related to language attrition, studies in language acquisition may contribute to the understanding of language attrition. Gardner et al. (1985) argue that, “studies in second language acquisition have suggested a significant role for attitudinal orientation.” Many theories in language acquisition may be also considered as a mirror in language attrition. Students with less favorable attitudes towards the target language show significantly more attrition than those with more favorable attitudes. And if students are more motivated, they will most likely make use of English or try to learn English longer than those who are less motivated, which has been argued and proved by some researchers (Gardner et al., 1985).

Language attrition, in this study, is defined as the process in which the acquired language knowledge degrades when bilinguals or multilinguals suspend or decrease their language learning. This process should be physiological rather than pathological. In other words, this process should belong to natural decline rather than unnatural decline.

Four areas of language attrition are often discussed. They can be categorized based on what language (L1 or L2) is attrited and where (L1 or L2 context) the language is attrited. The description of language attrition based on these criteria is known as the “van Els taxonomy” (“language attrition,” n.d.) (see *Table 1*)

TABLE 1
Attrition Taxonomy

| van Els terminology: possible attrition | | |
|---|-----------------------------|---|
| X | Language environment(L1) | Language environment(L2) |
| L1 loss | L1 (e.g. aphasia) | L1 (e.g. minority communities or immigrants) |
| L2 loss | L2 (e.g. language students) | L2 (e.g. older immigrants who revert to their L1) |

There are numerous hypotheses regarding language attrition based on individual level such as the retrieval failure hypothesis, the savings paradigm hypothesis, the relearning hypothesis, the regression hypothesis, the inverse hypothesis, and the threshold hypothesis (Neisser, 1984). While on the linguistic level, several hypotheses are also proposed such as the inter-language hypothesis and the linguistic feature hypothesis (Francisco, 2003). In this study, the focus is on the individual level, hence the hypotheses of community or neural focus will not be discussed here.

One well-known hypothesis, which is referred to as *threshold theory*, has been heatedly discussed and corroborated in literature. Neisser (1984) suggested that Bahrick's participants might have overcome a "critical threshold" which made them more resistant against attrition, implying that there was "a critical point in overall language proficiency below which attrition is rapid and extensive, but above which a large proportion of the initially acquired material is retained" (Clark, 1982, p. 58). So far, there has been an amount of research devoted to this hypothesis, arguing that threshold hypothesis should be taken into consideration in the future attrition research (Grendel, 1993; Hansen, 1999; Murtagh, 2003; Weltens & Grendel, 1993; Weltens, van Els & Shils, 1989). It is argued that those who have passed the threshold must have shaped a systematic ability to understand and internalize the knowledge structures called a schema by Neisser (1984). He argued that this schema was much more resistant to attrition than isolated pieces of information.

The *inverse hypothesis* and *threshold hypothesis* are closely related to each other, which also contributes to the detailed explanation in this study. The *inverse hypothesis* claims that the higher degree of the acquired language proficiency learners reach, the slower the attrition process will be, which is

supported by most of the researchers (Edward, 1977; Snow, Padilla & Campbell, 1984; Vechter, Lapkin & Argue, 1990; Weltens & van Els, 1986) and proved reasonable in many studies despite some disputes still exist. E.g. it is in disagreement with two long-standing forgetting theories. First is the traditional forgetting curve theory which describes that learners forget appreciably at the beginning but after that gradually the curve levels off (“Forgetting curve,” n.d.) (see *figure 1*). The second forgetting theory is that forgetting is closely related to the knowledge learners hold in the brain. Namely, if they have more knowledge, then they will forget more and vice versa.

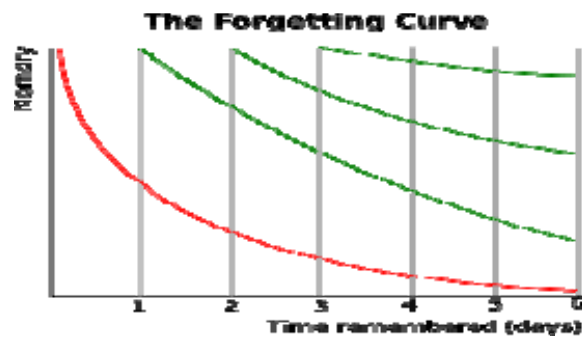


FIGURE 1
Forgetting Curve (From Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia)

Much research into language attrition over holiday has been conducted. Smythe et al. (1973) conducted a study to investigate second language attrition over summer vacation during which no SL instruction was provided. 220 students from three secondary schools in Ontario were tested for the amount of loss in French skills they might suffer during the summer vacation between grades nine and ten. It was concluded that the loss in reading comprehension was slight but significant, while there was a slight but significant gain in listening comprehension.

Cohen (1974) investigated the effect of summer vacation on Spanish oral skills. The selected 14 participants were Anglo children from the Culver City

Spanish Immersion Program. These children were taught exclusively in Spanish when in kindergarten and then gradually introduced into Mandarin in the 1st grade. The effect of summer vacation between first and second grade on spoken Spanish was studied, which showed that a three-month summer vacation reduced the Spanish oral skills. Utterance became shorter. At least one grammatical class (preposition) was slightly less used, while another (verbs) was more frequently applied. After the vacation, participants made more errors compared with before the vacation. Problems with articles and adjectives remained.

Both studies share some similarities and differ in some ways as well. Both Cohen and Smythe aimed to investigate second language attrition over summer vacation during which no SL instruction was provided. Smythe focused on reading and listening comprehension. Cohen, however, shed light on oral skills. Smythe found a slight but significant loss in reading comprehension, and a slight but significant gain in listening comprehension. Cohen argued that participants' utterance became shorter and they made more errors when speaking.

Fujita (2002), in a study evaluating attrition among bilingual Japanese children, says that a number of factors are seen as necessary to maintain the two languages in the returnee child. Those factors include: age on arrival in the L2 environment, length of residence in the L2 environment, and proficiency levels of the L1. Furthermore, she found that L2 attrition was closely related to another factor: age of the child on returning to the L1 environment. Children returning around or before 9 were more likely to attrite than those returning later. Upon returning from overseas, pressure from society, their family, their peers and themselves forced returnee children to switch channels back to the L1 and they quickly made effort to attain the level of native-like L1 proficiency of their peers. At the same time, lack of L2 support in the schools in particular and in society in general resulted in an overall L2 loss. This research, which evidences that many social factors may waive influence on language attrition and the older returnees seem to be more resistant to the attrition process, seems plausible.

This study aims to explore if students experience attrition in short conversation and passage listening comprehension. The purpose of this study is to test the theory of language attrition that relates time span to the English listening comprehension for the undergraduates at NJUPT. The time span, one independent variable, will be generally defined as the period when participants hardly receive any specific language training and have significantly less immediate access to language use, (i.e., participants do not have so many handy facilities to approach English knowledge as they do on campus), which is evidenced in *Table 5* and written in pages 12 and 13. The possibly attrited listening comprehension, the dependent variable, will be deemed as the listening proficiency after participants are beyond English learning for a certain period. The intervening variables such as testing environment and scoring criteria will be statistically and properly controlled in the study.

In order to achieve the research purpose, a research question is raised: will students experience attrition in both short conversation and passage listening comprehension over a two-month holiday break?

METHODS

The design of this study involves two tests which were conducted before and after holiday respectively (pre-and post-tests), and one questionnaire which was administered to the participants who had taken the pre and post tests. The performance scores of both tests were analyzed by means of nonparametric two-related-samples test in SPSS and the test type is Wilcoxon. The results of the questionnaires were analyzed in terms of frequency, percentage, and differences between different items.

Participants

The participants, with Chinese and English as L1 and L2 respectively, are tertiary students from Nanjing University of Posts & Telecommunications (NJUPT). The sample of the study is from non-English major students. They

are from different faculties majoring in different fields, among which male and female students are roughly proportioned. The relatively small number of English majors and the fact that English majors tend to have immediate access to English knowledge during the holiday constitute the reasons why non-English majors are recruited as participants. Having learned English in NUPT for two semesters, all the participants began to learn English in their junior middle school, therefore, all of them have learned English for around seven years in Chinese context. The age of the participants varied from 18 to 25 years old, among which those aged from 18 to 20 account for 63.8%, 21 to 23 for 30.6, and 24 to 25 for 0.3%. The male participants account for 57.7%, but females constitute 37% and the unknown 5.3%. There are totally 9 majors among participants, namely network engineering, software engineering, communication engineering, logistic management, electronic business, marketing, information management and system, communication engineering (imbedded system development) and automation.

Procedure

Participants Sampling

First of all, the information of the English learners, such as matriculation numbers, and genders, is gathered in order to define the participants. In NUPT, English is a compulsory course for students to register. Most of the students in the same grade select the same English course. Students are required to register English courses during the first 4 to 5 semesters without exception. Therefore, it is more convenient to collect data longitudinally. In this study, 9 classes are randomly selected to participate in both tests. There are totally 52 classes, each of which was numbered. The numbers were then entered into SPSS. The randomly chosen numbers of 9 classes were produced via “random number generators” in SPSS. The number of participants is 359, which is basically representative since they were randomly selected according to matriculation numbers. All of the participants have received two semesters’

English education in NUPT, in which listening teaching has been involved. 359 participants were all tested twice before and after the holiday by the same instrument, i.e., China's National College English Test Band 6 (CET 6) paper in January, 1995, and the scores were analyzed comparatively in the computer in order to explain possible listening attrition.

Pre- and Post- tests

In this study, a test paper (see the Appendix), adapted from CET 6, was used for both pre-and post-tests. Internally and externally, CET6 is highly reliable and valid to test participants' listening skills. (Yang & Weir, 1998)

Furthermore, the test in this study seems internally valid. Cronbach's alpha formula has been applied to assess the internal consistency in this study, which has provided that the test is internally consistent and reliable. The Cronbach alpha coefficient of SC for pretest is 0.96 and 0.96 for posttest, while for pre and post tests in PSS, the coefficients are 0.98 and 0.996 respectively. Integrating SC and PSS into a whole, the item-total Cronbach's alpha is 0.996. The nationally standardized and highly recognized CET 6 should be able to ensure the external reliability. As a consequence, both tests appear to have a satisfactory level of internal consistency and external reliability.

Both pre- and post- tests are identical in terms of test items, test requirements and guidelines. The only difference is that the pretest was conducted before the holiday, while the posttest was done after the holiday. The holiday is considered as a two-month incubation when most students hardly receive formal training and have significantly less immediate access to English knowledge, which has been proved by the questionnaire.

Test Description

Generally, this test is composed of short conversation and passage listening comprehension, totaling 20 points. The short conversation listening is included in the first section, which accounts for 10 points. Participants will

hear 10 short conversations. At the end of each conversation, a question will be asked about what was said. Both the conversation and the question will be spoken only once. After each question there will be a pause. During the pause, participants must read the four choices marked A, B, C, and D, and decide which is the best answer. Then they should mark the corresponding letter on the *answer sheet* with a single line through the center. For Example, participants will hear a man speaking: “*Is it possible for you to work late, miss Gray?*” and then responded by a woman, “*Work late? I suppose so if you really think it’s necessary.*” One question will be asked, “*Where do you think this conversation most probably took place?*” Participants will read: A. *at the office*; B. *in the waiting room*; C. *at the airport*; D. *in the restaurant*. From the conversation, we know that the two were talking about some work they have to finish in the evening. This is most likely to have taken place at the office. Therefore, A. *at the office* is the best answer. Participants should choose *answer A* on the answer sheet and mark it with a single line through the center. Students will gain one point on condition that they make a right choice. There are totally ten short dialogues, and each one accounts for one point. Hence the full mark is 10 points. Each short conversation includes approximately 15 to 52 English words (Mean=33.50, SD=12.48) and endures around 12 seconds. The record covers around 150 words per minute in this section.

The passage listening is included in the second section, accounting for 10 points as well. Participants will hear 3 short passages. At the end of each passage, participants will hear some questions. Both the passage and the questions will be spoken only once. After participants hear a question, they must choose the best answer from the four choices marked A, B, C, and D. Then they should mark the corresponding letter on the *answer sheet* with a single line through the center. The number of words in each passage ranges from around 197 to 238 (Mean=215.33, SD=20.84). The record covers around 150 words per minute in this section. Each passage endures around 2 minutes and 17 seconds.

To Summarize, the listening materials in both sections are read at the same speed but with different durations. Records in both sections are uttered by the

same people. The difference is that in the short conversation, there are two speakers, however, there is merely one speaker in the passage listening since the passage is a monologue and the short conversation is a dialogue. In turn, three passages are read by two people, who have read short conversations.

Questionnaire

This measurement proceeded in several phases, among which initial phases rely on classical measure development procedures. For each of the measurement phase, consent was obtained from the tertiary students who took the tests. Firstly, the literature on language attrition definitions and development, and past questionnaires such as Fader (2008), Toth (2004) and Fujita (2002) were carefully examined. After completing this process, a 4-section measure, the English language attrition questionnaire was constructed, which possessed six response options: strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree, as well as yes and no. The questionnaire was administered to 359 tertiary students. Cronbach's alpha was 0.94. To better cover the range of language attrition such as psychological and social factors, 89 items were constructed under four sections. The 89 items were grouped according to different objectives. After the participants finished the questionnaires, it was found that the items with "yes-no" response had relatively low Cronbach's alpha coefficient: 0.34. Consequently, these items were unreliable and thus removed. The revised version includes four sections, 52 items with Cronbach's alpha coefficient 0.92. Only four response options remain, which are strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree.

RESULTS

Questionnaire

The data prove that participants think their overall English proficiency has

attrited through the holiday. On average, the participants ($n = 340$) had a mean score of 35.85 (S.D. = 6.28) in the questions (Q8+10) “Before the holiday, I feel I was able to do the following in English” and “I think before the holiday I was good at English in the following areas.” The two questions were designed to test participants’ self-assessment on their English proficiency before the holiday. The average summed after-holiday English proficiency scores (Q9+11) were 37.03 (S.D. = 7.31) (see *Table 2*). The non-parametric 2-related samples test shows significant differences ($p < .01$) exist in the self-assessment on English proficiency between before and after the holiday, indicating that participants hold the opinion that their overall English proficiency has been saliently attrited during the holiday. Additionally, the reliability of both of the questions seem to have reached a satisfactory level because the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient is 0.81 for Q8+10, and 0.84 for Q9+11.

TABLE 2
Comparison of Self-Assessment on Overall Proficiency Between Before and After the Holiday

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Z | Asymp.Sig.(2-tailed) |
|-------|-----|-------|----------------|-------|----------------------|
| Q8+10 | 340 | 35.85 | 6.28 | -6.30 | .000 |
| Q9+11 | 340 | 37.03 | 7.31 | | |

As *Table 3* shows, respondents completing the questionnaire exhibit a psychological condition that their listening skills have experienced a significant attrition during the holiday. *Table 3* was produced via the questions “Before/After the holiday, I feel I am able to do the following in English: understanding BBC/VOA standard news well and understanding an English lecture well,” and “I think before/after the holiday I was good at English listening.” The mean of the pre-listening scores is 7.28 (SD 1.78) and 7.63 (SD = 1.86) for the post-listening. The compared result shows that the difference is significant ($p < .01$), indicating participants think that they have experienced attrition in English listening.

TABLE 3
Comparison of Self-Assessment on Listening Proficiency Between Before and After the Holiday

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Z | Asymp.Sig.(2-tailed) |
|------------|-----|------|----------------|-------|----------------------|
| PreListen | 339 | 7.28 | 1.78 | -4.67 | .000 |
| PostListen | 339 | 7.63 | 1.86 | | |

More than one half participants show fair motivation in English language acquisition. As described in *Table 4*, among 334 participants who responded to the question “I like to learn English”, 1.5% participants strongly disagree; 20.4% disagree; 56.6% agree; 21.6% strongly agree. It can be inferred that at least 78.2% participants like to learn English. Thus, they are well motivated to learn English. On the other hand, in response to the question “I like to learn English culture”, 3.0% participants strongly disagree; 26.3% disagree; 51.9% agree; and 18.8 strongly agree. It can be generalized that at least 70.7% participants like to learn English culture. Language and culture are mutually dependent. Learners’ liking in culture can promote their interest in the language which is a necessary tool to pool and transcend culture. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for both items is 0.66, which makes them arrive at a satisfactorily reliable level.

TABLE 4
Motivation of Participants in English Learning

| | I like to learn English | | I like to learn English culture | |
|-------------------|-------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|---------------|
| | Frequency | Valid percent | Frequency | Valid percent |
| Strongly disagree | 5 | 1.5 | 10 | 3.0 |
| disagree | 68 | 20.4 | 88 | 26.3 |
| agree | 189 | 56.6 | 174 | 51.9 |
| Strongly agree | 72 | 21.6 | 63 | 18.8 |
| Total | 334 | 100 | 335 | 100 |

Participants show less contact with English knowledge during the holiday than before the holiday. As described in *Table 5*, before the holiday, the mean frequency of participants’ English learning activities is 12.05(SD = 2.51), nevertheless 12.31 (SD = 2.76) after the holiday. And the non-parametric results show a significant difference in the activities of English learning

between before and after the holiday ($p < .01$), indicating that participants spend significantly less time learning English during the holiday than before the holiday. The holiday was around two months during which students had significantly less immediate access to English and there were hardly academic English training available for them. The result reported here is reasonable and convincing. In addition, this result is also statistically reliable. By using reliability analysis, the Cronbach's alpha for the scale of pre activities is 0.69 and 0.76 for that during the holiday.

TABLE 5
Comparison of Activities of English Learning Between Before and After the Holiday

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Z | Asymp.Sig.(2-tailed) |
|-----|-----|-------|----------------|-------|----------------------|
| Q15 | 330 | 12.05 | 2.51 | -2.73 | .006 |
| Q16 | 330 | 12.31 | 2.76 | | |

Twelve questions were designed to identify participants' social activities during the holiday, which are: During the holiday if they often watch completely Chinese movies/TV's/dramas (CM), watch English movies/TV's/dramas with/without Chinese subtitles (EM), shop with their Chinese speaking family/friends (SC), shop with their English speaking family/friends (SE), travel with their family/friends in China (TC), travel with their family/friends in foreign countries (TF), chat with their friends/family members in Chinese through the internet (CC), chat with their friends/family members in English through the internet (CE), chat with their friends/family members in both English and Chinese (CEC), gather with their Chinese speaking friends/family members (GC), gather with their English speaking friends/family members (GE), and do other things about English learning (DE).

Table 6 shows that participants were engaged in more Chinese social activities than English ones. To name a few, 129 participants disagree and only 96 participants agree that they often shopped with their English speaking family/friends during the holiday. In addition, there are more participants who disagree that they chatted with their friends/family members in English through the internet than those who agree. 122 participants

strongly disagree that they often travel with their family/friends in foreign countries during the holiday. By contrast, only 16 strongly agree they often travel with their family/friends in foreign countries. The questions to measure participants' social activities seem to be reliable to the extent of being satisfactory since the Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.701.

TABLE 6
Frequencies of Social Activities During the Holiday

| | Frequency | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|-----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| | CM | EM | SC | SE | TC | TF | CC | CE | CEC | GC | GE | DE |
| Strongly disagree | 31 | 19 | 8 | 96 | 27 | 122 | 9 | 78 | 52 | 13 | 92 | 16 |
| Disagree | 119 | 96 | 66 | 129 | 71 | 92 | 54 | 134 | 120 | 56 | 129 | 127 |
| Agree | 134 | 152 | 159 | 75 | 156 | 77 | 161 | 91 | 119 | 161 | 87 | 144 |
| Strongly agree | 38 | 55 | 89 | 19 | 66 | 16 | 97 | 17 | 30 | 91 | 13 | 34 |
| Total | 322 | 322 | 322 | 320 | 320 | 307 | 321 | 320 | 321 | 321 | 321 | 321 |

Tests

It is somewhat surprising that the study shows some results which are not completely in conformity with previous literature. By means of SPSS, a nonparametric two-related-samples test was conducted on pre and post tests. The total number of the participants is 359, while the valid number is 340. *Table 7* includes means and differences between pre and post tests in terms of short conversation comprehension (SC), passage listening comprehension (PSS), and percentage in gain or attrition as well. As shown in *Table 7*, in the test of SC, $Z (p < 0.01)$ is statistically significant, indicating that students have gained in short conversation listening comprehension during the two-month break although they think their skills have gone through attrition as shown in the questionnaires. However, the observed difference in passage listening comprehension in this study was not statistically significant. In order to compare the results with the previous literature, results of both short conversation and passage listening comprehension were combined. The general listening comprehension did not show statistical significance either.

TABLE 7
Comparison Between Pre and Post Tests(N=358)

| Test | Mean | | SD | | Difference (post-pre) | Percentage(%) | Z |
|-------|-------|-------|------|------|--------------------------|---------------|--------|
| | Pre | Post | Pre | Post | | | |
| SC | 6.12 | 6.46 | 2.87 | 2.74 | 0.34 | 5.56 | 5.14** |
| PSS | 5.65 | 5.47 | 2.88 | 2.83 | -0.18 | -3.19 | 1.35 |
| Total | 11.77 | 11.93 | | | 0.16 | 1.36 | 1.14 |

** $p < 0.01$, two-tailed

Putting aside the issue of statistical significance, however, one unanticipated finding was that the passage listening comprehension (PSS) seemed slightly attrited (3.19%), while short conversation (SC) and total listening comprehension seemed gained 5.56% and 1.36% respectively during the holiday break. Especially, SC seemed statistically and obviously gained.

It is most likely argued that the test applied in this study is not internationally standardized. However, a China's standardized test seems more appropriate since this study was carried out in China among Chinese participants who have been immersed in China's education since they began to learn English. Highly weighed and recognized throughout the country, CET 6, the applied test, is a nationally acknowledged standardized one in China. It has been proved valid to assess students' real English proficiency in terms of listening, speaking, reading, vocabulary, structure and writing. Therefore, the test is seemingly qualified to measure students' listening comprehension. (Yang & Weir, 1998)

DISCUSSION

Possibly the most striking finding in this study is that students showed statistically significant gain in short conversation understanding while no statistically significant change in passage listening comprehension although participants have engaged in many non-English social activities as described in the questionnaires. As mentioned above, each short conversation only lasted for around 12 seconds. Nevertheless, for each passage, students had to

hear it for about 2 minutes and 17 seconds, which is much longer than the short conversation. The gain in short conversation understanding after a two-month break seems in conformity with the argument that students' listening skills gained after a summer vacation (Smythe, et al., 1973), although in this study the gain is larger (5.56%) than the result (less than 2%) found by Smythe and his co-researchers (1973).

By contrast, for passage listening comprehension, no statistical significance was found, which seems somewhat deviant from previous literature. Smythe et al. (1973) found that there was a slight but significant gain in listening comprehension. The general listening comprehension seems statistically insignificant either, which does not corroborate Smythe's (1973) argument. This may result from participants' fair motivation in English learning which has been shown in the questionnaires.

The significant improvement in short conversation listening after two-month incubation is hard to explain. The possible explanation might be that learners have retained the short conversation listening skills during the two-month break since they have reached the critical point. It has been proved through questionnaires that they have much less contact with English during the holiday, however, more or less, they have unconsciously received some input of English, which might have been stored in brain. When being tested at the beginning of the semester, the retained short conversation skills and the stored English input during the holiday might have been spontaneously recovered and stimulated, which has possibly resulted in the significant gain in short conversation listening. There are numerous theories regarding memory recovery, among which some are not convincing enough. Not all the theories hereby are discussed. Instead, merely the standard description of memory recovery theory is developed. The standard description of spontaneous recovery is that the responding that was depressed during an extinction session is partially restored in a test session that is administered after a delay. (Robert, 2004) The ringing beside the ears and the psychological tension over the test might have acted as strong stimuli to activate their memory.

CONCLUSION

This study is meaningful for English L2 learners in two aspects. On one hand, ESL learners may benefit from this study that they may shed some more light on passage listening practice. On the other hand, since there is no significant attrition found in short conversation listening conversation, it is unnecessary for learners to spend extensive efforts on this aspect. Nevertheless, the reasons for the significant gain in short conversation listening skills and for insignificant change in passage listening skills are still in need of further exploration.

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APPENDIX

A Test of Listening Comprehension (from CET 6, Jan, 1995)

Section A

1.

W: You wanted to see me, Mr. Wright?

M: Yes, Miss Gray. You'll have to start getting to work on time, or your service will no longer be needed here.

Q: What happened to Miss Gray?

- A) She was given a new job. C) She was criticized for being late.
B) She was given a raise. D) She was praised for her hard work.

2.

M: You know, I'm just not too sure if the new salary will be high enough or even the new position is really what I want. Besides, I like the work that I am doing now.

W: It sounds as though you've already made up your mind about what you are going to do.

Q: What is the man thinking about?

- A) Whether to employ the woman. C) Whether to ask for a raise.
B) Whether to take up the new job. D) Whether to buy a new house.

3.

W: I'm looking for textbook for my Psychology course. It's called "Introduction to Educational Psychology". Do you have it?

M: Yes, we do. You'll find it in Section 24 on the top shelf.

Q: What's the man's occupation?

- A) A teacher. C) A librarian.
B) A psychologist. D) A publisher.

4.

W: Oh, this is a beautiful city. I'm really glad I've brought my camera.

M: Yes, there are lots of things to take pictures of here. But I hope you will not plan to spend all your time taking pictures. I have some friends who would like

to meet you.

Q: What does the man want the woman to do?

- A) To visit more places in the city.
- B) To take a lot of pictures of the beautiful city.
- C) To take some pictures of his friends.
- D) To spare some time to meet his friends.

5.

M: Why are you so sure that Anne didn't commit the crime?

W: She couldn't have committed that crime because I was with her. And we were out of town on that day.

Q: Where was the crime most probably committed?

- A) In town.
- B) Out of town.
- C) In the man's house.
- D) Outside Ann's house.

6.

M: Isn't it rather cold outside, Sally?

W: It is a bit, but I can't stand the terrible smoke inside. I'd rather stay here if you don't mind.

Q: Why does the woman want to stay outside?

- A) Because she feels very hot in the room.
- B) Because she wants to avoid meeting people.
- C) Because she wants to smoke a cigarette outside.
- D) Because she doesn't like the smell of smoke inside.

7.

W: We've lived here in Thornton for 5 years now and I think it's time to have the house painted.

M: You're right. Mr. Johns, our neighbor, just had his house painted. But we cannot afford to do it unless we paint it ourselves.

Q: Who is going to paint their house?

- A) Painters hired by the man and woman.
- B) Painters hired by Mr. Jones.
- C) Mr. Jones.
- D) The man and the woman.

8.

W: I still can't get over the show last Saturday evening. I keep having frightening

dreams all night.

M: So, next time before you walk into a theatre, make sure what you are going to see.

Q: What do we learn from this conversation?

- A) The woman enjoyed the movie very much.
- B) The woman saw a horror movie.
- C) The man asked the woman to be careful at night.
- D) The man went to the show with the woman.

9.

W: How was the job interview? I think you'll make a good journalist. I remember you as the best writer of the class.

M: Well, in fact, my application was turned down. They were looking for people with experience in the profession.

Q: Why didn't the man get the job?

- A) He doesn't write well enough.
- B) He is not a professional writer.
- C) He hasn't got any professional experience.
- D) He didn't perform well in the interview.

10.

W: We have to face the fact that it is a little hard to get fuel for the car.

M: Between you and me, I think there is always a way to get around this problem.

Q: What does the man mean?

- A) He doesn't think it necessary to refuel the car.
- B) He can manage to get the gasoline they need.
- C) He hopes the woman will help him select a fuel.
- D) He thinks it is difficult to get fuel for the car.

Section B

Passage One

In the United States, many people once lived in large, two and three story

homes. Today, many people would like to live in such houses but most people can't. They don't have enough money to buy them or even to make the first payment. So, many people rent from month to month. But some Americans really want to live in a house of their own. So they build their own home. They buy a house that is situated in an area where houses are cheaper. It is better to reside in a bad part of town, they think, than not to live in a house at all. Or they buy an old house and redesign it. Then they decorate it with old style furniture. Sometimes they can make an old house look more beautiful than a new one. Usually, it is not difficult for people to find an old home to buy. Many older people decide that they don't need a big home after their children leave. So they sell their house and move into a comfortable apartment. But when people move into a house, they sometimes have problems. Home owners have to do their own maintenance. For example, if the roof leaks, one can not ask the landlord to fix it. On the other hand, people can redesign their homes in any way they want without having to be afraid of being thrown out by the landlord.

Questions 11 to 13 are based on the passage you have just heard.

11. Why don't many Americans live in large two and three story houses?
 - A) Because they can't afford to.
 - B) Because they think small houses are more comfortable to live in.
 - C) Because big houses are usually built in the countryside.
 - D) Because they prefer apartments.
12. Why is it easy to find old houses for sale?
 - A) Because many young people have moved into comfortable apartments.
 - B) Because many old houses in the bad part of the town are not inhabited.
 - C) Because many older people sell their houses after their children leave.
 - D) Because many people have quit their old houses to build new ones.
13. What problem will people have after they buy a house?
 - A) They have to do their own maintenance.
 - B) They have to furnish their own houses.
 - C) They will find it difficult to make the rest of the payment.

- D) They will find it difficult to dispose of their old-style furniture.

Passage Two

Lions prefer to eat without having to do much work. When resting in the shade, they are also watching the sky. And if they see birds fly down, they immediately sense that something must be happening. Even in the heat of the day. They will certainly arise and run a mile across the plains to find out what is going on. If another animal has made a kill, they will drive it off and take the dead animal for themselves. A grown lion can easily consume 60 pounds of meat at a single feeding. Often, they eat until it seems painful for them to lie down. The female lions are leaner and swifter, and as a result, are better hunters than the males. Most kills are made at night or just before dawn. The kill is the most exciting moment in the day-to-day existence of the lion, since these great beasts spend most of their time - about 20 hours a day - sleeping and resting. Lions are also social cats. And during these times of leisure, they love to romp against each other, and the young lions are always playing among themselves and with their parents.

Questions 14 to 16 are based on the passage you have just heard.

14. What do we learn about lions from what we have just heard?
- A) They are not active hunters. C) They are often seen alone.
B) They don't sleep much. D) They don't eat much.
15. Why do the lions watch the birds in the sky?
- A) To catch the birds.
B) To look for shade in the heat of the day.
C) To catch other animals.
D) To look for a kill made by another animal.
16. Why are the females generally better hunters than the males?
- A) They are larger in size. C) They have to hunt more to feed the young.
B) They run faster. D) They are not as lazy as the males.

Passage Three

To be successful in a job interview, you should demonstrate certain personal and professional qualities. You need to create a good image in the limited time available, usually from 30 to 45 minutes. You must make a positive impression which the interviewer will remember while he interviews other candidates. The following are some qualities you should especially pay attention to during an interview. First of all, you should take care to appear to be properly dressed. The right clothes worn at the right time can win respect of the interviewer and his confidence in your judgment. It may not be true that clothes make the man. But the first and often last impression of you is determined by the clothes you wear. Secondly, you should pay close attention to your manner of speaking, since speech is a reflection of personality. You should reflect confidence by speaking in a clear voice, loud enough to be heard, without being aggressive or overpowering. You should be prepared to talk knowledgeably about the requirements of the position you are applying for. Finally, to be really impressive you must convey a sense of self-confidence and enthusiasm for work. If you display these characteristics, with just a little luck, you'll certainly succeed in the typical personnel interview.

Questions 17 to 20 are based on the passage you have just heard.

17. How long does an interview usually last according to the speaker?
- A) Less than 30 minutes. C) At least 45 minutes.
B) From 30 to 45 minutes. D) More than 45 minutes.
18. How can one give the interviewer a good first impression?
- A) He should show respect for the interviewer.
B) He should show confidence in himself.
C) He should talk enthusiastically.
D) He should be dressed properly.
19. What should be the best manner of speaking for a job-seeker during an interview?
- A) Speaking confidently but not aggressively.

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- B) Talking loudly to give a lasting impression.
 - C) Talking a lot about the job.
 - D) Speaking politely and emotionally.
20. What is the main idea of the short talk you have just heard?
- A) Professional knowledge is a decisive factor in job interview.
 - B) Finding a job is more difficult than one can imagine.
 - C) A job seeker should create a good image during an interview.
 - D) Self-confidence is most important for a job seeker.

Keys:

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|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. C | 2. B | 3. C | 4. D | 5. A |
| 6. D | 7. D | 8. B | 9. C | 10. B |
| 11. A | 12. C | 13. A | 14. A | 15. D |
| 16. B | 17. B | 18. D | 19. A | 20. C |