

A Study of the Relationship between Background Knowledge and the English Listening Proficiency Testing Performance of EFL Undergraduate Students in Thailand

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Abstract

The vast majority of proficiency tests taken in Thailand are generated abroad but increasingly Thai universities and language institutes are seeking to generate tests within the country that adhere to CEFR guidelines. With foreign generated tests, the perception of many test takers is that they suffer from a lack of familiarity with some of the subject matter. This study aimed to assess the relationship between background knowledge and listening proficiency performance within the format of a multiple-choice listening test, in the hope of better informing and preparing CEFR English proficiency test-takers and test writers. The researcher focused on extended listening texts in the form of short talks and multiple-choice question items regarding listening for meaning and specific information, both widely used in listening proficiency testing. The research was conducted with undergraduate English major students from a Thai university. The research instruments adopted were a Likert scale questionnaire to establish topic familiarity, a subsequent listening test with multiple choice question items, and interviews with selected exceptional subjects. Analysis focused on correlations between familiarity scores and test results utilizing mean scores and standard deviation as well as Pearson Correlation to measure the strength of the linear association between the two variables, familiarity and listening test performance.

The research group results revealed that the mean performances for familiar topics were above the total test mean and the mean performances for unfamiliar topics were below the total test mean. However, the individual subjects' results yielded an unsubstantial correlation between Likert familiarity scores and test performance using Pearson Correlations, due to a number of carefully observed factors that affect listening test performance in proficiency tests.

Key words: Background knowledge, CEFR, listening proficiency testing.

Introduction

Thai EFL students are required to take English proficiency tests in order to demonstrate their ability to either progress in their studies or perform job roles requiring English proficiency. The vast majority of these English proficiency tests are generated abroad. It can be stated that proficiency tests in Thailand often contain content that is unfamiliar to the students. While background knowledge is generally accepted as having an influence on English proficiency performance, by using tests generated abroad, attention is not paid to the specific background knowledge of Thai students. Thai students are expected to show their English proficiency within the context of topics outside their experience and schemata, while domestic or regional topics are often ignored. Tests designed to meet CEFR requirements present a unique opportunity for test makers and test takers in Thailand. Unlike other English proficiency tests, such as TOEIC, IELTS and TOEFL, they can be produced in Thailand following a framework of competencies and guidelines but with content related to the Thai experience.

There has certainly not been sufficient investigation into the background knowledge of Thai students in relation to test topics, for the purpose of generating listening proficiency tests in Thailand that adhere to CEFR proficiency requirements while providing a Thai context. Furthermore, previous research into background knowledge has tended to use recall as a means of assessment, not a traditional format for proficiency tests. Prominent research connected to background knowledge and topic familiarity such as those conducted by Schmidt-Rinehart (1994) and Long (1990) used recall as a method of assessing listening comprehension. There is a need to produce more research that assesses the effects of topic familiarity on listening performance using multiple choice tests as the means of assessing the listening performance of subjects.

Research Objectives

The objective of this study was to examine the relationship between background knowledge (schemata) and the listening performance of second language English listening test-takers in Thailand. The study involved ascertaining the level of familiarity that 31 lower-intermediate, university level subjects had with selected topics. The subjects then listened to short talks on

topics of a nature commonly found in the listening sections of proficiency tests and answered multiple choice questions regarding listening for the main idea and listening for specific details. Some interviewing took place after the testing to further investigate the depth of familiarity.

It is hoped that the results of the study will answer the question of whether there is a relationship between listening comprehension proficiency test taking performance and background knowledge. Potentially, this study can provide guidance to students preparing for English listening proficiency tests and teachers preparing them, with regards to activating and increasing background knowledge. Moreover, the study aims to provide a guideline for test writers writing tests adhering to the CEFR standards, when choosing topics appropriate or sensitive to the background knowledge of test takers in a Thai context.

Literature Review

Background Knowledge: Background knowledge, often known in its more technical guise as schemata or more simply referred to as prior knowledge or familiarity, has long been deemed as a foundation of understanding and is even referred to as one of the “information sources of comprehension” (Anderson and Lynch, 1988. p13). Past psychological research looked into the interactive nature of comprehension and Rumelhart and Ortony (1977) described schemata as “interacting knowledge structures” (p100) that can be found stored in our long-term memory. Comprehension is linked to these existing knowledge structures. In this way, what we already know helps us understand the new experiences that we encounter.

Second language researchers picked up on this insight and related it to language learners. Carrel (1983) describes new input as being “mapped against existing Schemata” (p82). She describes two modes of input processing. The first is “bottom-up” or “data driven” processing dependent on incoming data into low level schemata that goes on to activate higher level schemata. The second is “top-down” or “conceptual driven” processing, where predictions are made in the schemata and data is searched to provide confirmation. With both processing elements going on simultaneously, a language learner’s comprehension of a text is interactive. The interaction takes place between a learner’s background knowledge of content and structure, and the actual text, whether reading or listening (Carrel, 1983).

In her work on the effects of topic familiarity on listening comprehension, Schmidt-Rinehart (1994) points out that studies have often placed background knowledge under five operational headings: Cultural knowledge, technical knowledge, religious knowledge, topic familiarity and contextual familiarity. The importance of different conceptions of background knowledge are acknowledged by Bloomfield et al., (2010) who identify background knowledge about a topic as one of the factors influencing second language learner listening skills in addition to familiarity with a second languages vocabulary, structure and culture.

Multiple Choice Testing: As the tests conducted in this study took the form of multiple-choice tests, it is appropriate to highlight the characteristics, advantages and disadvantages of this test type. Multiple choice tests share common features. They have a stem that states the item problem clearly, a correct answer, preferably of the same length as other distractor choices, and distractors that should not seem too unattractive or implausible. In principle, multiple choice tests are characterized as providing one answer at a time to one tested feature at a time. Test items should have grammatically correct stems (with the possible exception of grammar tests) and in theory multiple test items should be appropriate and consistent to level the test-takers (Heaton, 1988). Multiple choice tests are reliable and easy to execute. They are, however, limited to testing receptive skills and not productive skills and have the disadvantage of encouraging guessing.

Interviews: In their book, *Second Language Research*, Mackey and Gass (2005) explain that, “Interviews can allow researchers to investigate phenomena that are not directly observable” (p173). They also provided valuable advice for researchers wishing to conduct interviews including: sensitivity to the interviewee, encouragement of open discussion, anticipation of communication problems, making interviewees comfortable, placing key questions in the middle of an interview, and neutrally repeating back interviewees responses in order to facilitate reflection and any further input the interviewee may wish to offer. Mackey and Gass (2005).

Previous Research Related to the Background Knowledge and Listening: Schmidt-Rinehart (1994) points out that background knowledge is recognized as an essential part of the listening process. In her study of topic familiarity and listening comprehension (Schmidt-

Rinehart 1994) she used language recall protocol procedures to assess whether topic familiarity affected recall measures of listening comprehension while also assessing the effects of proficiency levels, and how the effect of topic familiarity varied according to proficiency levels.

The research discovered that topic familiarity had a clear affect upon listening comprehension across all levels, with increased comprehension for familiar topics. The study also revealed a significant value of variance of listening comprehension according to proficiency levels as comprehension increased consistently with each rising level. Thirdly, the study revealed no discernable interaction between the variables of topic familiarity and proficiency as all participants in the study scored higher for familiar topics regardless of course (proficiency) level. Therefore, from this study, it would appear that topic familiarity could have a universal effect on listening comprehension.

Both Long (1990) and Chiang and Dunkel (1990, 1992) found that listening comprehension was affected by background knowledge. Using a recall protocol and paraphrased statements recognition test, with two listening texts, Long (1990) discovered that Spanish foreign language students performed better with a text they had more prior knowledge of (rock groups) than a text which they had little prior knowledge of (gold rush).

Chiang and Dunkell's study with Chinese undergraduates at a Naval Academy used 650-word lecture on a less familiar topic, "The Amish People and Pennsylvania Dutch Country" and a 680-word lecture text on a more familiar topic, "Confucius and Confucianism". Testing for passage dependent and passage independent items, it was found that prior knowledge had a substantial effect on performance with passage independent items.

Bacon (1992) used a more familiar text (mobile homes) and a less familiar text (electric convertors) to analyze the listening comprehension of Spanish language students. She found that (intermediate) students relied more heavily on top-down processing for more familiar content while they adopted bottom-up processing with more difficult, less familiar content.

Sadighi and Zare (2006) studied the influence of background knowledge on the listening performance of upper-intermediate to advanced Iranian EFL learners in a TOEFL listening test. In their study an experimental group of 12 students underwent a treatment in which the subjects were asked to research a variety of topics from the internet. These topics

were to be in the TOEFL test that the subjects would later take. The study found that when compared to the 12 subjects in a control group, listening comprehension performance had improved as a result of increased background knowledge and topic familiarity.

Research Methodology

This research design was a mixed design, with the main focus on quantitative research. The subjects for this study were initially first year undergraduate students later becoming second year undergraduate students of a lower intermediate level, majoring in English at a Thai government university in Bangkok. The initial population totaled 115 of which it was hoped that around 80 would be found to be within the same proficiency band. 70 subjects participated in the first stage of the research, namely the questionnaire and of these 31 participated in the research listening test, as the research group. Between the time of responding to a questionnaire and taking a listening test, a year had lapsed and these research subjects had become second year students. Six subjects participated in interviews following the research test. Permission was obtained from all subjects to participate in the study and they were assured of anonymity.

The trial group participants numbered 26 and were undergraduate Business English major students at the same university and of the same age group as the primary research subjects. They trialed the efficiency of the test and test taking room and its facilities.

Various instruments were used in this study. Firstly, a proficiency test was given to establish the English listening proficiency of participants. Secondly, a questionnaire was designed utilizing a 6-point Likert scale to establish familiar and unfamiliar topics. The survey asked subjects to rank their familiarity with content topics on a scale of 0 to 5 in order to establish the background knowledge of the participants. 0-No familiarity, 1 - very low familiarity, 2 - low familiarity, 3 - moderate familiarity, 4 - good familiarity, 5 - high familiarity (Appendix A).

The topics of the questionnaire were selected from a range of local and foreign topics. The topics were designed to have pairings, so as one topic might be local, such as Loy Krathong Festival, a paired topic was the Harvest Festival, perceived as an unfamiliar topic. The topics were, however, randomly distributed throughout the questionnaire to avoid a pattern being formed of familiar and then unfamiliar. By providing a lower range (0-1), a middle range (2-

3) and a higher range (4-5), subjects familiarity could be clearly differentiated, as topics scoring 2- 3 would be disregarded.

The questionnaire was then given to the 70 students that had consented to participate in the research. Following this, the results were recorded on a spread sheet and then divided between low familiarity (0 – 1) and high familiarity (4-5). The results were then analyzed in order to ascertain a group of subjects that had all scored high on at least the same three topics and also scored low for another same three topics. The remaining group of subjects would be chosen to participate in a listening test, based solely on their collective common responses. From the remaining subjects it was intended that random selection would be conducted. However, the remaining number only amounted to 31, so all were used.

With the topics established, a test with listening texts and 6 multiple-choice test items with 5 choices was written and subsequently recordings were made using professional recording equipment. In such a research test the content was paramount and importance had to be given to consistency and parallels in difficulty between paired familiar and unfamiliar content and questions. The researchers voice was used as it was equally familiar to all the participants.

The test included a total of six short talks with three familiar topics and three unfamiliar topics. The talk scripts were written by the researcher in order to keep the topics and content parallel in terms of CEFR language levels, order of information in relation to task items, manner of task items and length of script. In the eventual test the topics were mixed up to avoid any pattern forming. The paired topics were; Som Tham and Turkish Kebabs, Loy Krathong Festival and the Harvest Festival, Making a Krathong and Making a Corn Dolly. For each talk, 6 questions were written to ascertain main idea and then parallel information for specific details. The question order was main idea/topic, place/location, time/duration, number, item vocabulary/procedure (Appendix B).

Once the test and recordings had been finalized a trial group was sought. The trial group was taken from students of the same year group as the research group but were from the business English majors. They had a similar level of proficiency level, established by a TOEIC practice test taken as part of a pre-test for an existing TOEIC course at their university, and were asked to volunteer their participation. 26 were willing to participate. Prior to testing, both trial group and the research group were coached on how to take the test, so that all were equally aware of the techniques required and the ability to use the e) option of

“I don’t Know” in preference to guessing. Test participant proficiency levels and scores were recorded on a spread sheet.

A week after the trial group was tested, the research group was tested in the same room as the trial group with the same audio equipment. Having seen the results of test responses from the research group, follow up interviews were conducted with participants selected on the basis of their level of deviation from the mean score and on the basis of scoring highly on a topic previously stated as being unfamiliar. The subjects were interviewed concerning their knowledge of the topics, their test taking strategy, their perceptions of the test, and their perception concerning the effect of background knowledge on their performance. Interview questions remained the same for all the participants and Wh-questions were utilized in preference to Yes/No questions. Questions included; Before you took the listening test, how familiar were you with the topic _____?, What did you think of the audio/sound quality of the test?, Please, tell me any comments you have about the test?

Regarding analysis of the data, questionnaire answers were recorded and subjects with the same high and low familiarity scores were highlighted and tallied. Test responses of all the subjects were recorded on a spread sheet and correct responses were highlighted and tallied for each question of each topic. Pearson’s correlation test was used to analyze the correlation between established proficiency levels of the subject and their performance in the research test. It was also used to analyze the responses to familiar and unfamiliar topics in order to establish any correlation between familiarity and test scores. This was done for both group familiarity levels and group scores as a whole and for subject familiarity and resulting individual scores. Finally, interview questions and responses were recorded and hand written in note form during the interview. These findings were summarized.

Results and Discussion

Questionnaire - The Likert scale responses for the 40 questionnaire items were recorded on a spread sheet. Responses that scored 0-1 were marked as LOW, which corresponded to an unfamiliar topic. Responses that scored 4-5 were marked as HIGH, corresponding to an unfamiliar topic. Responses that scored 3-4 could be marked as X, not usable for the research purposes. The results for the 74 questionnaire responses regarding familiarity were as follows.

Table 1.1 – Table of Questionnaire Responses

	High group				Low group					
	10.Som Tham	17.Thailand	37.Thai food	34.Loy Kratong Festival	36.Copacabana	38.Turkish Food	20.Tourism in Wales	23.Windsor Castle	24.Helsinki	35.The Harvest Festival in the UK
Number of High	67	63	62	57	2	2	3	1	3	2
Number of Low	2	1	2	4	65	65	64	64	64	64
Number of X	5	10	10	13	7	7	7	9	7	8

From these Som Tham and Loy Krathong Festival were selected as familiar topics for the subsequent listening test. Under the topic Loy Kratong, ‘Making a Krathong’ was added as a familiar test topic. The justification for this decision was that krathongs are a fundamental part of the Loy Krathong experience and, as such, would also be familiar to the subjects.

Six topics were found to be most commonly unfamiliar: Turkish Food, Tourism in Wales, Windsor Castle, Helsinki and The Harvest Festival in the UK.

From these, Turkish Food and The Harvest Festival in the UK were selected as unfamiliar test topics. ‘Making a Corn Dolly’ was added as a third unfamiliar topic as it was considered by the researcher to be a fundamental part of the Harvest Festival celebrations and would be equally unfamiliar to the subjects.

The researcher noted that even topics that were perceived as alien to the experience of the subjects, such as the Isle of Skye, received some moderate familiarity responses while seemingly familiar topics such as Tourism in Thailand received some low familiarity responses. This demonstrated that the experience of learners within an ethnically homogenous group does not equate to a homogenous background knowledge. The questionnaire results also highlighted the need to thoroughly investigate the background knowledge of learners.

Test Performance -Test Performance revealed scores out of 36 ranging from 9 to 24 with a mean score of 15.9 and a standard deviation of 3.568. The total number of correct scores for the research group in relation to the six individual questions of the six talk topics, three familiar and three unfamiliar, can be seen in the table below.

Table 1.2 – Table of Research Group Results by Familiar and Unfamiliar Topics

31 Subjects (6 questions per topic) Scores - /31; Totals - / 186

	Familiar Som Tham	Familiar Loy Krathong	Familiar Making a Krathong	Unfamiliar Turkish Kebab	Unfamiliar Corn Dolly	Unfamiliar Harvest Festival
1	25	29	19	25	8	23
2	21	24	10	5	12	20
3	12	10	5	7	6	13
4	14	2	0	2	5	12
5	17	6	23	1	16	13
6	22	26	3	13	15	17
	Total 111	Total 97	Total 60	Total 53	Total 62	Total 98

Familiar topic totals = 268 Unfamiliar topic totals = 213

The performances on the research listening test for both groups revealed a host of features to be addressed. Firstly, no subjects achieved a score higher than 69% and many scored round 40%. However, proficiency levels were not sufficiently high for all subjects and the proficiency range was not as narrow as was desired.

Secondly, performance totals were higher for familiar topics than they were for unfamiliar topics. This would suggest a relationship between background knowledge and listening test performance. Subjects on the whole performed better with familiar topics, as attested to by Long (1990), Chiang and Dunkel (1990, 1992) and Schmidt-Rinehart (1994).

Thirdly, subjects' performance for main idea items was high for all subjects regardless of familiarity. This suggests that listener performance with main idea questions is not affected by levels of familiarity. Performance with question items related to specific details were not uniform and were more often affected by levels of familiarity. This varied according to the type of specific details demanded by each question item.

Fourthly, in contrast to the trial group, the research group performed comparatively better for Topic 6, The Harvest Festival in the UK. This anomaly would require further investigation at the interview stage, but a general investigation following the research test revealed that Thailand also has festivals associated with the harvest period. Shared vocabulary for festivals may have had some influence, however, the interviews would reveal more explicit reasons for this anomaly.

Finally, both groups performed relatively poorly for the third familiar topic, 'Making a Krathong' in contrast to the other familiar topics. This would require further investigation at the interview stage of the research. The consistently low scores would also suggest that either the talk or the topics were too demanding in comparison to other topics. Analysis of the language used in Talk 4, relating to the topic, 'Making a Krathong', revealed that this talk and the language for the questions related to it was indeed of the highest level, relative to all the other test topics, resulting in greater text complexity. In particular, this topic contained a question using the only C1 level vocabulary item within a question. The word in question was 'significance', which, at C1 level, was above the level of all the subjects' proficiency. The word "betel" as with 'betel nut' was also overly demanding as a key word as it required very specialist knowledge, not even recognized by CEFR.

Interviews - Six subjects from the research group were selected for follow-up interviews. These interviews were conducted 10 days after their test. Candidates for interview were selected on the basis of high or low test performance in the listening test with at least one mid-level score subject. Two of the candidates were also selected because they had previously recorded that they had low levels of familiarity with topic 6 on the test (The Harvest Festival in the UK) but performed well in the test, on this particular topic.

Topic Familiarity: The interviews of subjects from the research group had reinforced the familiarity levels of the subjects to the topics but also illuminated some discrepancies between familiarity with two topics in particular, The Harvest Festival in the UK and Making a Krathong. Harvest Festivals had been chosen as unfamiliar topic due to its consistently low

score on the Likert scale. However, test results for this topic were relatively high and in contrast, a large number of subjects performed poorly for the topic Making a Krathong, even though it had been chosen as a familiar topic.

With regards to the krathong topic and subsequent short talk and questions, it is important to note that the interviewees indicated that they had made a krathong. The researcher and test writer had, however, never made a krathong and had surmised much of the instructions from mere observation. It could therefore be possible that there was a clash between the background knowledge of the subjects and the information within the listening test. In effect, the test script written for this topic had lacked any authentic knowledge.

It was also of interest that three of the interviewees had changed their perception of familiarity concerning Loy Krathong Festival itself. While they may have made a krathong float, they did not consider their knowledge of the festival to be of any great depth. This indicates some failings in purely relying on Likert scale questionnaires to elicit levels of familiarity with listening topics.

For the Harvest Festival in the UK, when high scoring subjects were asked why they may have done so well regarding this topic, the subjects asked had two responses. One indicated that she had read about the topic in a magazine since having responded to the questionnaire, one year prior to actually testing. In this respect, the conditions and state of familiarity had changed, moving the topic from the unfamiliar to the familiar. The second interviewee asked to expand upon this issue explained that the topics positioning at the end had made her better prepared to answer the questions for this final short talk. Having found the talks quite long at the beginning the subject had adjusted herself to be better prepared for the final short talk. She had changed her listening strategy.

In regards to the audio quality, lower proficiency subjects interviewed regarded the audio to be too fast and in regards to further comments, interviewees that responded tended to equate the experience with that of TOEIC. While one was satisfied that the test was similar to TOEIC, the most articulate interviewee conveyed that she felt the talks too long and the number of questions too many in comparison to TOEIC listening tests. The researcher accepts that shorter talks and less questions would be more comparable to the subjects' listening testing experience.

Pearson's Correlation Analysis - Pearson's correlation was conducted using an SPSS program. It was conducted for proficiency to test performance and for familiarity to performance. When Pearson's Correlation Analysis was applied to the research group in regard to proficiency (from a TOEIC test) and performance on the research listening test a significant correlation was found.

Research Group = Significant correlation for proficiency and test scores.

Table 1.3 – Correlation of Research Group Proficiency to Test Scores

Correlations		RG_Prof	RG_Score
RG_Prof	Pearson Correlation	1	.615**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	31	31
RG_Score	Pearson Correlation	.615**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	31	31

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

There was a significant relationship between the research group's proficiency scores and their listening test scores, $r(29) = .61$, $p = .000$.

These results indicated that the test itself was valid.

Topic Familiarity and Test Scores: Pearson's Correlation Analysis was applied to the research group with regard to subjects' topic familiarity and listening test scores for that topic. Although Pearson's Correlation was the core data analysis technique proposed in the research methodology, problems with the validity of its application to subject familiarity and topic scores emerged when the nature of the test results were better understood.

It must be acknowledged that no direct correlation was significant between subjects' familiarity with individual topics and their scores for responding to questions on those topics. The researcher believes this to be due to the nature of the research's use of the Likert questionnaire scores. The mid-range scores of the research group had been eliminated and only consistently low scores of 0 or 1 were used, along with consistently high scores of 4 or 5. Only subjects exhibiting these traits were kept in order to match familiarity with the topics

chosen to test. Subjects were positively chosen due to the nature of the test, observing the relationship between learners' stated familiarity and test performance regarding those very topics. With this level of manipulation and the elimination of mid-range scores, plus discriminatory selection of subjects for the test the researcher believes Pearson's correlation unusable on a subject to topic basis. Familiarity scores for individual subjects were either consistently far too low or far too high to make their numbers usable.

Pearson's Correlation Analysis was then applied to the research group with regards to cumulative group familiarity for test topics and cumulative group scores.

Related to all the 6 topics/talks of the test for the Research Group (on which the test was based but with a year gap between questionnaire and testing), when we correlate the total familiarity for each topic with the total score for each topic we get the following (no significance).

Table 1.4 – Research Group's Cumulative Familiarity and Test Scores

Correlations		RG_Fam	RG_Score
RG_Fam	Pearson Correlation	1	.416
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.413
	N	6	6
RG_Score	Pearson Correlation	.416	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.413	
	N	6	6

We see here that greater numbers of cumulative familiarity scores in starker contrast to the cumulative test results made for a positive correlation but not a significant one.

However, if we ignore two of the topics (one familiar and one unfamiliar – due to discrepancies discovered in interview stage) and focus on topics 1, 2, 3 & 5 - when we correlate the whole groups' familiarity with scores for those topics, we get a significance.

1) – Familiar – Som Tham; 2) – Unfamiliar - Turkish Kebab;

3) – Familiar – Loy Krathong; 5) – Unfamiliar – Making a Corn Dolly

Table 1.5 – Research Group's Familiarity and Test Scores for Topics 1, 2, 3 and 5

Correlations

		ResFam1_2_3_5	ResScore1_2_3_5
ResFam1_2_3_5	Pearson Correlation	1	.973*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.027
	N	4	4
ResScore1_2_3_5	Pearson Correlation	.973*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.027	
	N	4	4

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

There is a significant relationship between the research group's familiarity with topics 1, 2, 3, and 5 and their listening test scores for topics 1, 2, 3, and 5, $r(2) = .97$, $p = .027$.

The greater differentiation between cumulative familiarity scores and cumulative test scores aided the correlation process. Here we can see that for the four topics selected, higher familiarity levels resulted in higher test scores and lower familiarity scores corresponded to lower overall test scores to a significant level, in both cases.

As previously established from viewing the listening test results of the research group and the interview responses already stated, it came as no surprise that the anomalies of topics 4 and 6 subsequently led to no significant correlation when including all topics. However, the removal of these topics demonstrated a significant correlation for the remaining topics. This was of course inadequate in establishing any correlation for the whole test.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Conclusions: The key issue to be addressed here was the research question "What is the relationship between background knowledge and the English listening proficiency testing performance of EFL undergraduate students in Thailand"? From the research group results, we see that the overall performances for familiar topics were above the total test mean score and the performances for unfamiliar topics were below the total test mean. The researcher can, therefore, safely assert, that an increase in background knowledge can aid students listening test performance.

The results from the analysis of question type performance and the difficulty levels across familiar and unfamiliar topics were both interesting and informative in many respects.

In terms of overall performance, main idea questions were certainly the easiest for the subjects where as specific detail type questions had more mixed performance results.

Familiarity levels seemed to have a greater relationship with *main idea*, *place*, *procedures suggestions*, *numbers*, and *purpose* type questions. Of these one might expect *main idea*, *procedures*, *suggestions* and *purpose* related items to demand a mix between top-down and bottom-up processing, known as parallel-processing (Rubin, 1994), consistent with a better performance based on increased background knowledge and the type of knowledge interaction proposed by Rumelhart and Ortony (1977).

Subject performance to *place* related questions such as “Where will Somchai and Woraporn go for Loy Krathong Festival this year?” (answer: a river) are interesting for two reasons. Firstly, they showed a marked difference (31%) in performance between familiar and unfamiliar topics, indicating a strong influence on the part of background knowledge. Secondly, where as a *place* may seem to require mostly bottom-up processing as a detail isolated to the text it does in fact appear to have a stronger cultural content nature, requiring more top-down processing.

For questions related to *time periods*, a very specific detail requiring bottom-up processing, there was no difference at all in performance on the listening test between familiar and unfamiliar topics. This strongly suggests that such objective question requirements are purely related to the text and needing data-driven processing (Carrel, 1983) where no background knowledge is engaged. While improved performance in familiar topics for *number* related questions may again demonstrate the interaction between bottom-up processing (listening for the specific number in the text) and top-down processing (how many chilis are usually used in this case?). It is important to note that where background information conflicts with information in a text, the effects can be detrimental.

Suggestions: Firstly, the researcher advises learners and potential test takers to analyze previous proficiency tests, of the type to be taken, for commonly arising topics. This would involve reviewing previous test papers and practice tests. In particular students should attempt to find scripts for listening test, in order to fully review their content, This, however, is only the first step. Once common topics have been established, the next step is to become familiar with those topics. Learners need to become fully acquainted with the established topics and acquire background knowledge where it does not exist.

Other advice for proficiency test-takers relates to test taking technique. When confronted with an unknown topic in a listening, the test-taker is advised to stay calm and allow the questions to guide the listener to the answer as much as possible. Bottom-up processing will be of paramount importance in these circumstances. In contrast, when encountering a familiar topic, the researcher's advice is to adopt caution and not be complacent by relying too heavily upon top-down processing.

Recommendations for EFL teachers in respect to background knowledge and test preparation mirrors that advice given to students. In particular, teachers should look at familiarity with localized topics, as well as foreign topics, as students' familiarity with a topic close to home in their first language does not necessarily equate to knowledge of that topic in a second language.

Regarding recommendations for test writers, it is hoped that test writers will pay greater attention to the topics they include in English proficiency tests. The researcher advises surveying background knowledge of a test's target population. There are of course universal topics such as "Weather Forecasts" but these topics can be addressed in a local context in addition to a foreign context.

Finally, the researcher hopes that future studies can research the relationship between familiarity and listening proficiency tests for EFL learners of other proficiency levels.

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Appendix

APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE

An Investigation into the Relationship between Background Knowledge and the English Listening Proficiency Testing Performance of EFL Undergraduate Learners in Thailand

Questionnaire

Number

Please, indicate your level of familiarity with the topics below by circling one of the options.

Consider your familiarity with topics using the scoring guidelines that follows:

.

0 = no familiarity

1 = very little familiarity

2 = little familiarity

3 = moderate familiarity

4 = Good level of familiarity

5 = high level of familiarity

Topic	Level of Familiarity
1. Thai Rainy Season	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
2. Canadian winters	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
3. Cricket	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5

4. Muay Thai Boxing	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
5. Ice Hockey	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
6. Thai Sepak Takraw	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
7. Badgers	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
8. Cobra Snakes	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
9. Rats	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
10. Som Tham	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
11. Beef Wellington	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
12. Volleyball	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
13. Mangoes	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5

14. Formula 1 Racing	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
15. Khao Yai National Park	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
16. Yellowstone National Park	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
17. The Isle of Skye	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
18. Phuket	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
19. Tourism in Thailand	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
20. Tourism in Wales	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
21. The Grand Palace in Bangkok	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
22. Buckingham Palace in London	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
23. Windsor Castle	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5

24. Helsinki	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
25. Thai Dancing	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
26. Blackberries	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
27. Stonehenge	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
28. Native American Totem Poles	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
29. Thai Spirit Houses	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
30. ASEAN	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
31. The European Union	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
32. Rice	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
33. Barley	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5

34. Loy Kratong Festival	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
35. The Harvest Festival in the UK	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
36. Copacabana	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
37. Thai food	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
38. Turkish Food	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
39. The European Economic Union	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
40. The ASEAN Economic Community	0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5

APPENDIX B

LISTENING PROFICIENCY TEST – SCRIPT AND ANSWER KEY

Talks scripts were not seen by the subjects.

RESEARCH LISTENING TEST

Talk 1

Listen to the first talk and then answer the 6 questions related to it.

Thai food is maybe some of the best loved food in the world. Though you may think that **Thai** food is difficult to make, some **dishes** are actually very easy to **prepare** and we suggest you try making a simple Thai dish at **home**. One such dish is **Som Tham**, which means **Spicy Raw Papaya Salad**, in English.

Spicy Thai Raw Papaya Salad is a popular dish that can be found freshly made in front of your eyes in all markets and street food locations. The dish is also simple to make at **home**, taking only a **few minutes** to **make**. Nearly all Thai families enjoy preparing and eating Som Tham salad at home together. Preparation time takes about 15 minutes and the dish only needs a mortar and a large spoon to make it.

The number of things used to make this salad depends on local taste, but standard items that people like to use include raw papaya and carrot cut into strips, cut tomatoes, cut long beans, palm sugar, fish sauce, lime juice, peanuts, 4 pieces of garlic and the always important **chilis**, which number **between 3 and 5**, depending on how spicy you like your food. Some people also like to add fresh water crabs and strong fish water.

Start by putting the **chilis** in a mortar and **crushing** them. Then add the garlic, palm sugar, lime juice and fish sauce and pound the ingredients lightly. Next add your raw papaya and carrots, pound some more and then stir with a large spoon. Finally add the long beans, tomatoes and peanuts and mix well with a spoon. The salad is then ready to **serve** on a plate **with sticky rice** and can be enjoyed with friends or with your family.

289 Words – B2 level text

1. What is the speaker talking about? – **Speaker – B1**

- a) Popular Food of the world
 - b) Thai Street Market
 - c) Making a Thai dish – dish – A2, prepare A2, Som Tham**
 - d) Thai items
 - e) I don't know
2. Where does the speaker recommend you make raw papaya salad? – **Recommend – B1 – Raw – B1 – Papaya – no CEFR level, Salad – A2**
- a) At a market
 - b) In the street
 - c) At a food court
 - d) At home – Home – A1**
 - e) I don't know
3. How long does the speaker say it takes to make the dish?
- a) A minute
 - b) A few minutes – Few -A2, Minute – A1**
 - c) 15 minutes
 - d) An hour – **Hour - A1**
 - e) I don't know
4. How many chilis does the speaker recommend? – **Recommend – B1, Chili – A2**
- a) 1 or 2
 - b) 2 to 4
 - c) 3 to 5 Three – A1, To – A1, Five – A1**
 - d) As many as you like
 - e) I don't know
5. What does the speaker say is the first step to making the salad? - **Make – A1, First – A1, Step B2**
- a) Crush the chilis – Crush C2, Chili – A2**
 - b) Mix the palm sugar and lime juice
 - c) Pound the food items
 - d) Stir the raw papaya

e) I don't know

6. How does the speaker recommend you serve the salad? – **Serve – A2**

a) **With sticky rice – Sticky – B1, Rice – A1, With – A1**

b) With fried chicken

c) With friends

d) With a plate

e) I don't know

Talk 2

Listen to the second talk and then answer the 6 questions related to it.

Turkish food is popular around the world. Easy to make street food can be found in any market and these dishes can also be made easily at home. A famous Turkish dish is the kebab, found in kebab vans on street corners and outside bars, all over Europe. The kebab is made from lamb meat and various herbs and can be eaten at any time. This meal can be made in under 2 hours and only needs 10 minutes of preparation time.

If you want to make kebabs for 4 people you will need plain flour, Italian herbs, garlic powder, onion powder, pepper, salt and lamb meat, a bowl and an oven heated to 180 degrees C.

To start with mix the flour, herbs, garlic powder, onion powder, pepper and salt together in your bowl. All these should be in half teaspoon amount except for the flour and Italian herbs, which should be in a full teaspoon measure. Then add 500 grams of lamb meat and mix that in well. When you are happy that all the items are mixed well together, put the mixture in a baking tin and then place the baking tin on a baking tray. Then bake the mixture in your oven for 1 and a half hour. Turn the meat over half way to make sure the meat is all cooked through.

After the meat is cooked, let it rest for 10 minutes and then serve it in slices with Turkish flat bread and salad on a plate. You can add chili and hot sauce if you wish to spice up this delicious

dish. Some people even like to use the meat on pizza and you can even keep the mixture cool and eat it at a later date.

287 words – B2 level text

1. What is the speaker describing how to make? **Speaker – B1, Describe – A2**
 - a) World food
 - b) A Turkish dish – Turkish – (No CEFR Level), Dish – A2**
 - c) A Pizza topping
 - d) A donut
 - e) I don't know

2. Where can you often find kebab vans? – **Often – A1, Find – A1, Kebab – (No CEFR Score), Van – B1**
 - a) On side streets
 - b) In the corner of markets
 - c) Outside bars – Outside – A1, Bar – A1**
 - d) In restaurants
 - e) I don't know

3. How long does it take to make a kebab? – **Make – A1**
 - a) Less than two hours – Less – A1, Two – A1, Hour – A1**
 - b) Around two hours
 - c) Ten minutes
 - d) One and a half hours
 - e) I don't know

4. How much flour is needed? – **Flour – B1, Need – A1**

- a) Half a teaspoon
- b) One teaspoon – One – A1, Teaspoon – B2**
- c) One and a half teaspoons
- d) One tin
- e) I don't know

5. When does the speaker recommend you turn the meat? Recommend – B1, Speaker – B1, Turn – A2, Meat – A1

- a) Every ten minutes
- b) After one hour and thirty minutes
- c) After ten minutes
- d) After forty-five minutes – Forty-five – A2, Minute – A1**
- e) I don't know

6. What does the speaker say is the best way to eat kebab meat?- Speaker - B1, Best – A1, Way – A2, Eat – A1, Meat – A1

- a) With Turkish bread – Bread – A1**
- b) In a side salad
- c) With pizza
- d) Cold
- e) I don't know

Talk 3

Listen to the third talk and then answer the 6 questions related to it.

Somchai and Waraporn are very excited because they are going to the Loy Krathong festival in Ayutthaya province, this year. They join this amazing festival every year and are always very happy to take part.

They will make a Krathong basket together and float it on the Chao Praya River at Bang Pa-in district in Ayuthyya during the festival. They plan to arrive on the day before the full moon

and will stay in a local guesthouse for a couple of nights. This will be a lovely break for them both and they are looking forward to the trip.

Loy Krathong is a very famous festival in Thailand and it brings joy and happiness to everyone, in all parts of the country.

Every year Buddhists in Thailand have this water thanksgiving festival and float krathongs, which are floating baskets made from banana tree trunks, 2 full banana leaves and flowers. The sight of hundreds of Krathong baskets floating down the river is very beautiful and magical. The festival is held on the twelfth full moon of the Thai Lunar year, which usually falls in November, and is celebrated by people old and young, all over Thailand. Loy Krathong is actually celebrated in all Tai cultures and so can be found in 3 countries other than Thailand, including Burma, Laos and southern China. People offer their thanks for the waters under the beautiful light of the full moon and it is easily one of the loveliest and most colorful festivals of the year.

250 words – B2 level text

1. What is the speaker talking about? Speaker – B1

- a) Joining Thanksgiving festival
- b) Joining the Chao Praya festival
- c) Joining Loy Krathong Festival – Join – B1, Festival – B1**
- d) Joining a half moon festival
- e) I don't know

2. Where will Somchai and Waraporn go for Loy Krathong festival this year? – Festival – B1, Year – A1,

- a) A lake
- b) A river – River – A1**
- c) A stream
- d) Southern China
- e) I don't know

3. When will they arrive? – Arrive – A2

- a) Two nights before the festival
- b) On the full moon night**

c) **One day before the full moon – One – A1, Day – A1, Before – A1, Full – A2, Moon – A2**

d) After the full moon

e) I don't know

4. How many banana leaves are mentioned in making a krathong? **Banana – A1, Leaf – B1, Mention – B1, Make – A1**

a) **2 – Two – A1**

b) 3

c) 2 to 4

d) 3 to 5

e) I don't know

5. What is a Krathong described as? – **Describe – A2**

a) A banana tree

b) A float

c) **A basket – Basket – B1**

d) A dish

e) I don't know

6. What does speaker say the festival will do? – **Speaker – B1, Festival – B1**

a) **Thank the waters – Thank – A2, Water – A1**

b) Defend against evil spirits

c) Protect the waters

d) Praise the full moon

e) I don't know

Talk 4

Listen to the forth talk and then answer the 6 questions related to it.

Today we are going to make a simple Krathong for the loy krathong festival. This is an offering to waters in the form of a floating basket. Krathongs can be made quite quickly and easily, in less than an hour. To make a Krathong we need a thick slice of the trunk of a banana tree. We take leaves from the banana tree, a couple of leaves should be enough, and attach them to side of the trunk slice. Use pins to attach the leaves.

We also attach flattened leaves to the inside of the banana slice to make a bed of leaves. Here we can beautify the krathong with flowers and place a small candle stick in the centre of the leaf bed.

We can complete the krathong by adding a yellow candle and three incense sticks before taking it to a local river. Some people also like to add coins, to ask for future riches, and even betel nut, as an offering to the gods. The candle will light the krathong at night and the incense sticks will fight off evil spirits. You will see that it is an important part of this beautiful festival.

197 words – B2 level text

1. What is a Krathong, according to the speaker? - **According to – B1, Speaker – B1**
 - a) A flower
 - b) A Basket – Basket – B1**
 - c) A Tree
 - d) A Candle
 - e) I don't know
2. How long does the process take? – **Process – B2, Take – B1**
 - a) One hour
 - b) Within two hours
 - c) Less than one hour – Less – A1, One – A1, Hour – A1**
 - d) A couple of hours
 - e) I don't know
3. How many banana trunk slices are mentioned? – **Mention – B1**
 - a) 1 – One – A1**
 - b) 2
 - c) 3

- d) 4
 - e) I don't know
4. What item is described as an additional offering to the gods? **Item – B1, Describe – B1, Additional – B2, Offer – A2, God – B2**
- a) Beetles
 - b) Candles
 - c) **Betel nut – Betel - no CEFR level, Nut – B2**
 - d) Flowers
 - e) I don't know
5. Where does the speaker suggest taking the Krathong to? **Speaker – B1, Suggest – B1**
- a) a lake
 - b) a pond
 - c) **a river – River – A1**
 - d) the sea
 - e) I don't know
6. What does the speaker say is the significance of the incense sticks? **Speaker – B1, Significance – C1, Incense – No CEFR level, Stick – B1**
- a) They provide light
 - b) They smell good
 - c) They purify the water
 - d) **They fight evil spirits – Fight – B1, Evil – B2, Spirit – B2**
 - e) I don't know

Talk 5

Listen to the fifth talk and then answer the 6 questions related to it.

Today we will make a simple corn dolly, a doll decoration made of wheat, in under half an hour. Take three long pieces of soft wheat and cross them over each other, again and again. You cross over your wheat in the same way you would do with hair, bending the pieces of wheat over each other to make your dolly's body.

You continue to do this along the length of your wheat but, leave a section of wheat at the end of each piece so you can tie your corn dolly. When you are ready, hold your pieces of wheat in place while you tie everything together.

Bend your wheat around and use a piece of string to tie it in place. Make the ends look better by cutting off the ends of wheat and then add a colourful piece of cloth to make your corn dolly more beautiful.

Corn dollies are usually left with breads at a church, popular with farmers and country people. Your corn dolly can be used as decoration during the harvest festival to thank mother earth for the harvest. It will also bring you good luck.

192 Words – B2 level text

1. What is a corn dolly? Corn – B1, Doll – A1

- a) Twisted hair
- b) A harvest festival decoration – Harvest – B2, Festival – B1, Decoration – B2**
- c) A church decoration
- d) A child's toy
- e) I don't know

2. How long will it take to make? – Take – B1, Make – A1

- a) Less than 30 minutes- Less – A1, Thirty – A2, Minute – A1**
- b) About an hour
- c) An afternoon
- d) A day
- e) I don't know.

3. How many wheat pieces are mentioned by the speaker? Wheat – B2, Piece – A2, Mention – B1, Speaker – B1

- a) 1
- b) 2
- c) 3 – Three – A1**
- d) 4
- e) I don't know

4. What can be used to decorate a corn dolly? – **Use – A1, Decorate – B1, Corn – B1, Doll – A1**

- a) Wheat
- b) String
- c) Corn
- d) Colored cloth – Color – A1, Cloth – B2**
- e) I don't know

5. Where do people take their corn dolly? **People – A1, Take – B1, Corn – B1, Doll – A1**

- a) To a farm
- b) To a church – Church – A2**
- c) To a bakery
- d) To a play area
- e) I don't know

6. What do people believe a corn dolly can bring the maker? – **People – A1, Believe – A2, Corn – B1, Doll – A1, Bring – A2, Maker – B2**

- a) Bad luck
- b) Good fortune – Good – A1, Fortune – B2**
- c) Thankfulness
- d) Beauty
- e) I don't know

Talk 6

Listen to the sixth talk and then answer the 6 questions related to it.

Tom and Sally are going to the Harvest festival celebrations for a day at a church in the market town of Cirencester, in the county of Gloucestershire this year.

They plan to each make a corn dolly and both present them at the church during the festival, before enjoying the street fair at the local market.

Every year Christians in the UK hold a thanksgiving celebration known as the Harvest Festival. People give thanks for a successful harvest, which is the bringing together of food grown on the land. The festival is held on the Sunday nearest the autumn Harvest moon and is a celebration of food with singing, giving thanks and the decoration of churches with fruit baskets and flowers. The celebration is most common in the country areas and farming areas in the UK but also in another 14 European countries, such as Germany, the Netherlands, France and Spain. In the UK schools and churches children bring food from home to a Harvest Festival Service. After the religious activities, the food is put into boxes and given to the poor. For the festival, people make bread in the shape of wheat. The bread is taken to the church to show a feeling of thanksgiving. Another common part of this festival is making a corn dolly, which is a decoration made out of wheat. This doll is not a toy, as people believe the harvest spirit lives inside it. It is kept until the next year, when it is returned to the farm land.

254 words – B2 level text

1. What festival is the speaker talking about? – **Festival – B1, Speaker – B1**

- a) Thanksgiving festival
- b) Harvest festival – Harvest – B2, Festival – B1**
- c) Fruit festival
- d) Full moon festival
- e) I don't Know

2. Where are Tom and Sally joining the festival? – **Join – B1**

- a) In a church – Church – A2**
- b) Beside the street
- c) In the field
- d) At a fair ground
- e) I don't know

3. How long will they spend at the festival? **Spend – A2, Festival – B1**

- a) A few hours
- b) 1 day – One – A1, Day – A1**

c) 2 days

d) 4 days

e) I don't know

4. Who receives food boxes? – **Receive – A2, Food – A1, Box – A1**

a) **The poor – Poor – A1**

b) Children

c) Farmers

d) Dollies

e) I don't know

5. What shape is the festival bread? – **Shape – B1, Festival – B1, Bread – A1**

a) A basket

b) **Wheat – Wheat – B2**

c) Flowers

d) A doll

e) I don't know

6. What do people believe lives in a Corn Dolly? – **People – A1, Believe – A2, Live – B1, Corn – B1, Doll – A1**

a) **A spirit – Spirit – B2**

b) The year

c) The land

d) A toy

e) I don't know

Thank you. You have completed the test.