

Some Implications for the English Listening Teaching in China

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Abstract: *Listening, one of the most important skills in a student's acquisition of language skills in language learning plays a significant part in daily communication and educational process. But, in China we had only one hour to teach and learn listening in the language lab every week before, which was far from satisfactory. Some schools even cancelled listening classes immediately and teachers thought it a waste of time doing listening practice in and out of class. So it is necessary for the English teachers to improve their teaching methods.*

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In daily communication, listening plays an important role. "Research has demonstrated that adults spend 40-50% of communication time listening, 25-30% speaking, 11-16% reading, and about 9% writing". Listening, the most widely used language skill, is often used in conjunction with the other skills of speaking, reading and writing. It is not only a skill area in language performance, but also a critical means of acquiring a second language. Listening provides opportunities to hear voices other than the teachers', enables students to acquire good speaking habits as a result of the spoken English they have absorbed, and helps to improve their pronunciation. Listening texts often provide excellent examples of functions such as apologizing, inviting and refusing. And the process of listening, especially the bottom-up and top-down model, the schema-building activities are also applicable to reading. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, applied linguistics recognized that listening was the primary channel by which the learner gained access to L2 data, and that it therefore served as the trigger for acquisition.

In the past few decades, many researchers have been enthusiastic for the research on the methods of English teaching, but it did not turn effective, for a majority of language learners has not received good results. Researchers and teachers have gradually realized that it was not enough to do research on teaching, at the same time, learning should also be paid much attention to, and learning strategies should be trained for effective learning. As is known to all, listening in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is by far the most important of four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), especially for students in the low level.

Since 2007, listening comprehension has accounted a proportion of 35% of the total scores, which is 35 points. Teachers and students began to pay some attention to listening comprehension; schools began to add some listening classes in the English curriculum. But, usually, listening comprehension lessons are just a series of listening tests in which tapes are played, comprehension exercises are done by students, and feedback is given in the form of the "right" answers.

Although complete evidence is not yet available, and although the research improvements are necessary for further study, there are some important implications for teaching listening for the English teachers in China based on the existing findings.

Firstly, being interested in a school subject is arguably the first step towards learning it effectively. Listening comprehension is no exception. Lack of genuine interest in listening comprehension is common among students. While there may be many reasons for such lack of interest, the way listening is taught in schools nowadays surely does not contribute to interest cultivation. The

teaching methods are all centered with how to deal with the CET, for which LC has been recently included as part of the foreign language test. In some schools, most English teachers believe that it is enough to have several weeks of intensive training right before the CET. Consequently, it is hard to see and expect the students to spend much time on LC, much less of interest cultivation and development.

The first category of strategy is therefore devoted to stimulating and nourishing students' interest in listening. The assumption is that a strong enough interest will turn into motivation which can in turn lead to habitual learning things one does more or less as a daily routine, such as brushing teeth in the morning and taking a walk after meal. The following have been particularly emphasized during the strategy training. First, Illustrating the importance and possibility of learning and improving LC. For example, showing students clips of English Speech Contest and introducing students to meet foreigners and to communicate with them. The key is to cultivate students' confidence in learning while demonstrating to them the possibilities that such a skill can bring to one's self-development. Second, Encouraging learning habit cultivation. One thing is to encourage the students to watch Hope English program on Saturday and Sunday, which is usually for students with the language that is not very hard to understand. Third, Making the listening practice as lively as possible to stimulate involvement. For example, sometimes, by adding a popular English song (e.g., the ones from recent 20 popular movies, etc.), the participation of the students can be much stimulated. For some easy songs, students are required to fill in the blanks with the word they heard while for some difficult ones, some necessary explanations were given to the students.

For comparison and evaluation, the end effects of this category of strategy are often measured by the time that students spend on LC and the diversification of channels/activities through which they practice listening comprehension. Teachers should ease the difficulty students may have when listening at the low level so as to enable them to develop and enjoy a continuous sense of progress. As is known to all, students have a lot of difficulty in listening since they are learning a foreign language instead of their mother tongue. In addition, according to the interviews with the teachers and students have hardly had any training in listening, let alone strategy training in listening. If at this moment, more teachers adopted appropriate teaching methods like strategy training in listening, and fewer students will finally give up their attempts at learning mainly because they do not know how to learn. Strategy training in listening enhances students' consciousness of using strategies. At the same time, the continuous sense of progress is very important because students' interest in learning will take an active part in long life learning.

Secondly, to succeed in English listening classes, a Chinese teacher of English should first change his/her attitude towards listening and concept of "teaching". Listening, important as other skills, if not more important, is mainly a matter of practice but not a matter of teaching. Zheng Lanying once stated in his essay that the use of language was more important than knowing about the usage of language. Therefore, students should be given enough time to communicate with each other in authentic situations. "This means that listening should be integrated with other skills. For example, in listening class, listening should be integrated with speaking, reading or writing". When the teacher realizes this, he/she will try to make listening classes activity oriented and student centered. When he/she focuses his/her attention on this, he/she will know how to encourage the students to express what they have heard by speaking or writing. Of course, in the strategy training, the teachers should change his/her role, just as what Rost describes that one potentially beneficial shift from that of being exclusively the manager, controller, and instructor to that of being a change agent, a facilitator of learning, whose role is to help their students to become more independent, more responsible for their own learning. In this role, the teachers become partners in the learning process.

The strategies in class: First, In addition to usual listening activities, the teachers can help students through intensive listening to recognize some special phenomena of pronunciation, complicated sentence and some difficult grammatical points. Thus they could know what their weak points are and then to overcome them. Second, We have proved the key role cultural and background knowledge have played in listening comprehension, therefore in class the teacher should sometimes provide information and knowledge of this field. Warming up exercises is often one of the good ways to apply. Third, In accordance with the features of different materials, the

teacher can introduce some skills and techniques to students, such as, pre-reading, predicting, guessing the meaning of a new word, etc. The teacher should well understand students' ability in different stages, then accordingly select different genres of listening materials which varies in difficulty. For example, for the freshmen in the college, statement, short conversation, short story and VOA special news may be appropriate for them, while for sophomores, long interview, lecture and BBC or VOA standard news will provide them with proper challenge. So it's essential to select appropriate materials. The teachers should make clear to students that the anxiety aroused in listening class is a common phenomenon which shouldn't be a heavy burden. Only by keeping a good state of psychology, can they better comprehend listening materials.

Thirdly, to have a three-year strategy training plan designed and carried out is essentially important. Therefore, as a teacher, if he/she can design a listening strategy-training plan according to the students' actual employment of strategies and language proficiency at the beginning and then carry it out for three years, there's no doubt that the students can benefit a lot more. However, this program, like any other educational planning, "does not mean an inflexible central control. The program itself includes constant renewal and revision".

Last but not least, there never exists the best teaching method but appropriate ones. At the end of the study, strategy training was found significantly related to the listening scores and consciousness of using these strategies, yet some students thought strategy training not very useful for them, for the biggest problem of listening for some students lie in the lack of background information and language knowledge but not of strategies. Some students even could not even comprehend what the teachers or what the tape said, how could they employ the strategies referred to by the teacher? It's true that for some students, what they need to increase background information and language knowledge, and develop a large recognition vocabulary. However, for most of students, strategies play an essential role in learning English. Meanwhile, a critical component for strategy training is the ability to use appropriate learning strategies and to know when to use them and in what combinations, depending on different listening purposes and tasks. So it would be highly desirable for teachers to send this message to students so that the students will be aware of the benefit of paying attention to learning strategies during the process of improving listening performance. From the grades that the students got in the proficiency tests, some students even did worse than before. Therefore, much remains to be improved.

In a word, there is not only one way to improving students' listening ability. As a teacher, the merits of any other approach that is fit for the improvement of listening should be tried.

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A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHOR

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