
STRATEGIES ON IMPROVING LISTENING COMPREHENSION
FOR EFL
STUDENTS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Wonim Son

Listening comprehension is now regarded as an essential part in "English as a Foreign Language" class. The aim of the listening class is to train the student's listening skill. The level of listening skill will influence the obtaining of the skills of speaking, reading and writing. However, listening comprehension is still the bottleneck for many primary school students. As a result, English teachers should know how to teach listening comprehension for EFL students in primary school in China effectively. This paper aims at exploring into how to teach effective listening comprehension skills by using some listening strategies from the point of many English language teachers, researchers and writers. Firstly, it reviews articles which discuss the importance of listening in the EFL classrooms. Secondly, it discusses the difficulties faced by students in the listening comprehension. Thirdly, it comes up with the strategies to solve students' listening comprehension problems.

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Chapter One: Introduction

According to Wang & Huang(2013), English learning and teaching in China is in a transition from reading-and- writing -centered phase to one that gives balanced attention to all the four major aspects of language learning- listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening, as well as speaking, has always been a weakness in English language learning and teaching in China. Many children are good at reading but they often make many mistakes in listening comprehension. In this transitional situation, how to improve students' listening comprehension becomes an urgent task that challenges both students and teachers. So English teachers in primary school should use some effective strategies to improve their students' listening comprehension in China.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the recognition of the critical role it plays in communication, listening remains one of the least understood processes in language learning (Morley, 1991). The problem expressed as a question is, “What strategies can we use more effectively to teach English listening?”

Definition of Terms

Listening is a selective process by which sounds communicated by some source are received, critically interpreted, and acted upon by a purposeful listener Jones (Wolvin, 1982).

Prediction, or looking ahead, is a basic strategy for using prior knowledge to understand a text. The learner generates a hypothesis about the type, purpose, or scope of a text to provide a framework for transacting with the text to confirm comprehension (Jiang, 2009).

Listening Comprehension: According to Brown (2001), listening is an important skill through which language learners internalize linguistic information without which they cannot produce language.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to review the importance of listening, to discuss the reasons of causing less effective teaching and to find out some effective strategies to improve EFL students' listening comprehension in China.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is to make the EFL students know the importance of listening comprehension and to improve their listening comprehension in China.

Delimitation of the Study

Because the subjects of my research are primary school students in China, the current development in this field in China and scholarly research connected to it available in China is vital to this research. Therefore the literature review will also be conducted in and through CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure).

Methodology

The research will be conducted in and through the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville using the University of Wisconsin system UW=Search tool beginning Feb. through May. 2016. Searches of the literature will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite, and JSTOR as the primary sources. Key search topics included "EFL", "China" "primary school students", "listening comprehension" and "listening strategies." In the secondary research, a brief review of literature on improving listening comprehension

for EFL students in Primary School will be conducted. Because the subjects of my research are primary school students in China, the current development in this field in China and scholarly research connected to it available in China is vital to this research. Therefore the literature review will also be conducted in and through CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure).

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

1. The Definition and Importance of Listening Comprehension

The earliest definition of Listening Comprehension is given by Tucker (Wolvin, 1982), he stated that listening is an analysis of the impressions resulting from concentration where an effort of will is required. Another leading scholar Jones (Wolvin, 1982), treated listening as a selective process by which sounds communicated by some source are received, critically interpreted, and acted upon by a purposeful listener. According to Brown (2001), listening is an important skill through which language learners internalize linguistic information without which they cannot produce language. Listening comprehension is a complex process of understanding speech in a second or foreign language. It is a comprehensive reflection of various language abilities and lack of any ability can hinder the development of listening comprehension. In listening, what the listener wants to achieve is an adequate understanding of what the speaker means (Brown, 1990). So in communication, listeners not only listen to others, but also have to comprehend what others talk about. Therefore, teaching listening comprehension in primary school is very important in TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language).

2. The Approaches to Listening Comprehension

Three main approaches to listening comprehension include Top-down, Bottom-up and Interactive Processing. The term top-down processing came originally from computer science and carried the meaning of “knowledge driven” (Field, 1999). In Top-down processing, the learner draws upon background knowledge and expectations of what will follow next in the discourse and then infers what the intentions of the speaker may have been. Inferencing is an important part of the process, and it is important to note

that the reader or listener, through the process of inferring meaning, may or may not correctly interpret the meaning of the written or spoken text (Rost, 2005). Top-down processing is particularly useful for lower-level learners to fill in the gaps in their bottom-up understanding of an oral text, for example when they lack proficiency in vocabulary or syntax of the L2 (Field, 1999).

In bottom-up processing, known from computer science as a “data-driven” process (Field, 1999), Field (1999) stated that this entire process may take no more than 0.25 second, or about as long as a typical English syllable, and that the processes of analyzing and processing first phonemes, then syllables, words, phrases and finally, sentences may all occur simultaneously, or in parallel, rather than in a step-by-step process. If learners encounter input for which they have no prior knowledge, they may have to rely on bottom-up processing to supplement or to compensate for the lack of experience or knowledge of the language (Wilson, 2003).

The Interactive Process model (Park, 2004) shows how it takes both top-down processing coupled with bottom-up processing for comprehension to take place.

From their views, we can draw a conclusion that listening is a complex and interactive process, in the course of listening comprehension, listeners can use these models.

3. Analysis of Traditional Teaching Approaches

Due to the "open door" policies and the emphasis of English in China, teaching listening has been paid more attention by many educators, so that many problems in traditional English teaching has been found. In traditional listening classroom in China, the Grammar-Translation Method has been taking a dominant place in listening.

Teaching listening comprehension has often been regarded as a passive language skill and so, in classrooms, listening comprehension classes follow a relatively consistent format:

Teaching of new vocabulary;

Extensive listening (for general understanding of the context);

Intensive listening (for some details);

Doing the comprehension exercises;

Checking answers;

Explaining some difficult language points. (Jiang,2009)

In classes such as this, listening is not taught but tested. Teachers focus on the outcome of listening, rather than on listening itself, upon product rather than process (Field, 1998). They do little or nothing to solve the problems students frequently encounter. This traditional method has a lasting influence in the listening teaching in China, which result in a simple, dull, boring arrangement of the listening class, which in turn lowers the interests of primary students in listening and affect the listening comprehension. From the above format we know that traditional teaching of listening comprehension fails to understand the mental processes that the EFL learners use in listening comprehension and it also fails to understand the listening strategies for comprehending language texts, for processing new information, and for learning and retaining concepts related to academic language and content (O' Malley, 1985).

To overcome the shortcomings of traditional listening class, Rubin (1994) suggests that it is the teacher's responsibility to teach students how to listen and that the strategy-based approach is the one that will bring the biggest improvements in

comprehension.

4. Problems of Causing Less Effective Listening Comprehension

Just as Underwood (1989) said, "for people listening to a foreign language, an unknown word can be like a suddenly dropped barrier causing them to stop and think about the meaning of the word and thus making them miss the next part of the speech". As Su (2012) have stated that Listening comprehension would be the hardest of all the four language skills of i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing, especially, to EFL (English as a foreign language) learners (p.458). Through these investigations, I've found out some potential obstacles or difficulties that students encounter in their listening comprehension. When children start to learn English at the very beginning, they may encounter four kinds of problems in listening comprehension.

4.1 Anxiety problem

Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) show that the most negative element that influences the language performance is anxiety. listening comprehension (LC) anxiety has begun to surface as a problematic area for students. According to Scarcella and Oxford (1992), listening anxiety occurs when students feel they are faced with a task that is too difficult or unfamiliar to them. This anxiety is exacerbated if the listeners are under the false impression that they must understand every word they hear. Many learners believe that in order to be "good at a language they need perfect pronunciation, massive amounts of vocabulary, extensive grammar knowledge, overseas experience, and a natural aptitude for language before they even open their mouths (Horwitz1987)".

4.2 Pronunciation Problem

According to an American scholar Wong (1993), many students are poor not

only in their phonetic knowledge, but also in their pronunciation and intonation which severely hinders their improvement in listening ability. On the one hand, many primary school students are unable to realize the assimilation of the sounds, to notice the omission, and to tell the unstressed syllables and words. They are not familiar with the pronunciation of certain words or the accent of the speaker. In English, there are many words that have similar pronunciation, but with different meanings. So students' incorrect pronunciation will affect their understanding of some words or sentences, which will bring about some listening comprehension obstacles.

4.3 Grammatical Problem

According to Wang(2010), the importance of grammar is also due to the fact that it is because of grammar of the language that makes it possible for us to talk about language. Grammar names the types of words and word groups that make up sentences not only in English but also in any language. If the students lack of enough grammar knowledge such as having no idea of sentence structures of usage of words and phrases, they won't be able to understand the grammatical and logical relations between phrases and sentences. Since their understanding cannot go side by side with the transferred information form of the listening materials, it will be difficult for them to get a correct understanding of the sentences. if we understand the system, we can use English more effectively (Underwood, 1981). What's more, Underwood states that understanding the grammatical framework of a language is extremely important for some student.

4.4 Cultural Problem

As a Chinese well-known scholar, Mr. Hu Wen-zhong (1997) once said "If one does not understand the cultural background, just learning language materials, it is as if only to

grasp the shell and not comprehend their spirit”. So culture has a close relationship with listening comprehension. If students are unable to understand the history, culture, tradition, living habits, holidays and life-styles, they will have difficulty in listening to materials about western social histories and religious festivals.

With those above-mentioned difficulties, one might not doubt that listeners have to go through several cognitive reactions (Wenden, 1991 , cited in Su, 2012) in the listening process. The issue as to how to help students sharpen listening comprehension skills are worthy of study (Su, 2012, p.459).

5. Strategies for teaching listening comprehension

Rubin (1994) suggests that it is the teacher’s responsibility to teach students how to listen and that the strategy-based approach is the one that will bring the biggest improvements in comprehension (p.199). Listening strategies are regarded as an important part of learning strategies by many scholars, because a strategy-based approach teaches learners how to listen effectively by instructing them in the use of strategies (Mendeldohn, 1995, p.134) . In order to improve students’ listening comprehension, English teachers can use the following strategies in the teaching process.

5.1 Stimulating students' interests

Interest is the foundation of all mental activity (C.E Echkersley, 1982). As Rubin (1994) and Vandergrift (1999) have noted, listening is anything but a passive activity. It is a complex, active process in which the listener must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intonation, retain what was gathered in all of the above, and interpret it within the immediate as well as the larger social cultural context of the utterance. So teachers must guide students to change

the passive listening into the active listening. As for primary- school teachers ,we should stimulate the students' interests in these ways.

1. Music can develop the music brain of people effectively and stimulate the people's innovation thought. According to Shipley (1998), music helps children develop cognitive skills, as well as enhances language skills, by singing song, children learn language appreciation, vocabulary and rhyme.

2. In English teaching, students are required to master four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening is the foundation of the speaking. Meanwhile, speaking is the extension of listening. As Harmer (1991) suggests that one skill cannot be performed without another. It is impossible to speak in a conversation if you do not listen as well. So listening and speaking ability will become a new direction in teaching. English teachers should cultivate the ability of listening and speaking in the English teaching.

3. Games are regarded as an effective way to stimulate children's curiosity and enthusiasm. Playing is one of the children's favourite activities. Phillips (1993) claims that if the activity is interesting, it is easier to be remembered, and so is the language. Therefore, using games in listening activities can continue to attract and stimulate children's interest and attention.

5.2 Improving students' pronunciation

Fraser (2000) argues that with good pronunciation, a speaker is intelligible despite other errors; with poor pronunciation, understanding a speaker will be very difficult (p.7). Terrible pronunciation leads to occasional misunderstanding. Therefore, words and sentences must be repeated due to serious errors in pronunciation (still sounds

like steel and ship sounds like sheep), word accent (words are frequently accented on the wrong syllable and sentence pitch (statements have the ‘melody’ of questions, etc.). This has been indicated in several studies reviewed by Hahn (Thanasoulas, 2003) where it has been shown that non-native like stress may make native speakers process and comprehend non-native speakers’ speech with more difficulty. The student needs to know that improving pronunciation may have greater significance and importance as it supports some aspects like listening comprehension, spelling, reading, and grammar (Wong, 1993).

5.3 Cultivating students' ability to predict

Underwood (1989) said, “it is unfair to plunge students into the listening text, even when testing rather than teaching listening comprehension, as this makes it extremely difficult for them to use the natural listening skills (which we all use in our native language) of matching what they hear with what they expect to hear and using their previous knowledge to make sense of it” . Prediction, or looking ahead, is a basic strategy for using prior knowledge to understand a text. The learner generates a hypothesis about the type, purpose, or scope of a text to provide a framework for transacting with the text to confirm Comprehension (Jiang,2009). Teachers are able to teach students to guess the contents that we aren’t familiar with or the contents we didn’t catch according to the context. predict the place, time, affairs, the relationship and question the material may present. Jiang (2009) also states that the skill of prediction depends largely on one’s prior knowledge of the world and of the language, how much one knows about the speaker, and how much one knows about the speaker’s intent. Thus the initial stage of the training program for developing the predictive skill should concentrate on getting the students to become aware of their own prior knowledge and to use this prior knowledge as their basis

for prediction and comprehension. By prediction, the students will find listening is very interesting. If they can predict accurately what they shall hear next, their listening comprehension will be much more efficient.

5.4 Practicing students' note-taking skill

Note-taking is to write down the main idea, important points, outline, or summary of information presented in the listening task(Yan Zhang, 2012, p.626). Even the students with strong listening comprehension ability , if not take certain notes , may find it difficult to remember all the details of long articles or in conversation, such as year, month, day, week, age, price, name and location. This will undoubtedly affect the listeners' understanding on the listening material. Students with good listening comprehension ability are generally good at using English special breathing, rhythm, seizing the opportunity to take down the useful information quickly in the listening process. The way of taking notes vary from person to person. For instance: Teachers could teach them to take down the key words, like time, place, name, number,facts and some useful expression of the long sentences in the listening process. Good notes should be a brief outline or the key words, phrases or sentences of the listening materials. In addition, teachers could teach students to use the following abbreviations and symbols. For example: According to Mei(2000), Eg. means “or example, for instance. etc. means “and so on”. ∴ means “because”. ↓ means “decrease, reduction.” ↑: “growth, increase”. +: “plus, and, more”. - : “minus, less”. Note-taking can help us understand the listening material, improve the ability of distinguishing useful information and useless information. What's more important is that it can also help us reduce the burden of the brain, grasp the main content of the listening material completely and accurately.

5.5 Strengthening students' grammar

Bastone (1994) asserts that "language without grammar would be chaotic; countless words without the indispensable guidelines for how they can be ordered and modified" (p. 35). Chomsky (1965) explains that grammar can be thought of as a theory of a language.

As human beings, we can put sentences together even as children--we can all do grammar. But to be able to talk about how sentences are built, about the types of words and word groups that make up sentences--that is to know about grammar. And knowing about grammar also helps us understand what makes sentences and paragraphs clear and interesting and precise. Grammar can be part of literature discussions when we and our students closely read the sentences in poetry and stories. And to know about grammar means finding out that all languages and all dialects follow grammatical patterns. Thus, for English teachers, grammar is an indispensable part in language teaching. At the primary level of teaching listening comprehension, Teacher's presentation and explanation of grammar rules are needed in learning process, students need to learn the grammatical relations, time order, logical relations, rhetorical relations between words and phrases. More importantly, according to (Jia&Fu,2011) grammar learning should be finally aimed at how to use the grammar items they learned in real life communication no matter what skills (listening, speaking, reading or writing)they are applied in. As English teachers ,we could also encourage students to remember some typical sentences to help them with listening comprehension.

Li(2013)points out Grammar teaching should be situational and meaningful, so the

teaching materials should be those normal utterance made in real-life and be practiced in authentic everyday situations. It is more meaningful and intuitive for English teachers to teach grammar in authentic situations instead of making students feel dull and mechanical. Rivers (1997) states that through interaction, students can increase their language store as they listen to or read authentic linguistic material, or even the output of their fellow students in discussions, skits, joint problem-solving tasks, or dialogue journals. Only in certain situations can language learning be truly understood and used. So the teacher can conduct grammar teaching in the real situation or the designed situation to make the grammar teaching more vivid, intuitive and authentic

5.6 Enriching students' background knowledge and culture

Language is a form of culture, the product of language communication is the cultural communication. Lotman's theory(1978) stated that no language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its center, the structure of natural language(p.211). A language is the combination of background knowledge and culture, so in order to learn English well, students must understand and grasp culture knowledge of Britain, American or other English speaking countries. With the implementation of new English curriculum reform in China, more and more people began to feel the necessity of cultivating the students' cultural awareness. Teaching culture is considered important by most teachers but it has remained insubstantial and sporadic in most language classroom (Omaggio, 1993). To enlarge the students' knowledge, teachers should pay attention to the differences between Chinese culture and The students should learn to know the way of life in the target country, the cultural connotations of words and phrases, the cross-cultural differences and the

conventional behavior in common situation (Liu, 1996, p. 7). There are two ways for teachers to teach western culture.

First, encouraging students to read materials with western cultural information. Foreign culture acquisition cannot be achieved merely through classroom teaching. Students should have things to be read. Teachers should also prepare their lessons carefully, try to find reading materials with cultural information. There should be proper language-learning strategies — such as checking comprehension with a partner, and reading groups of words instead of word-by-word — including throughout the text to help students look at their own learning process and build a repertoire of ways to become active learners, both during and after the course. Reading is integrated with listening, speaking and writing. For this reason activities should become more varied and demanding(Dai,2011).

Second, using cartoons and films to teach western culture in EFL class. Students can get a vivid picture of people's life in the western countries through cartoons and movies. It is an interesting way for young kids to learn. Through multimedia and network technology the teacher can offer students not only rich sources of authentic learning materials, but also an attractive and friendly interface, vivid pictures and pleasant sounds, which to a large extent overcome the lack of authentic language environment and arouses students' interest in learning(Dai,2011)

Summary

We reviewed many articles about listening strategy use published by different scholars. The conclusion is that: Listening occupies priority in acquiring a foreign language. It is fundamental to develop other language skills. Without listening,

speaking, reading, writing and translating could not be improved. While listening, EFL students in China may encounter many difficulties. As a result, English teachers should know how to teach listening comprehension for EFL students in primary school in China. So the effective ways for listening teaching is helpful for students in language learning. Teachers need to introduce the concept of language teaching strategies to students and make students familiar with these strategies.

Chapter three Conclusion

In summary, for EFL students (especially for pupils) in China , listening has always been the most difficulties in the English study. In traditional China's English teaching, reading is emphasized too much, while listening is neglected by teachers in the field of English teaching. English teacher has the responsibility to cultivate the students' ability to listen and communicate in English. With the development of active listening theory, scholars became critically aware that listening comprehension is an active and complex process(O'Malley&Chamot,1990). Therefore, effective ways for listening teaching are helpful for students in language learning. In order to improve the students' listening comprehension, the teachers have to start from the beginning to stimulate students' interests, to improve students' pronunciation, to cultivate students' ability to predict, to practise students' note-taking skill, to strengthen students' grammar, to enrich students' background knowledge and culture. I think that students in primary schools will make great progress in the listening comprehension if English teachers use the listening strategies practically and efficiently.

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