

IMPROVING STUDENTS' LISTENING SKILLS IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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IMPROVING STUDENTS' LISTENING SKILLS IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

IMPROVING STUDENTS' LISTENING SKILLS IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed is to identify what strategies of improving students' listening skills in ESL classroom are most effective?

Methods and Procedures

A brief review of literature on the studies of learning strategies employed by ESL learners was conducted. A second review of literature relating factors that affect the listening comprehension was also conducted. The findings were summarized and recommendations made.

Summary of Results

Through a review of the literature, it is obvious that most research conducted on how to improve students' listening skills in the ESL classroom. In most studies, listening materials, process, skills and strategies are regarded as the most important factors on improving listening.

According to the results of the report, findings of most studies analyze the different performances in listening and have a comparison between a good listener and bad one. Meanwhile, subjects in most studies have reported some influential factors on improving listening, including internal and external factors.

Through the results of the study and personal experience, it seems that the first and most important thing for Chinese ESL teachers is to raise learners' awareness of employing

effective strategies in listening process. And because of the diversity of Chinese students in the ESL classroom, teachers should also take this factor into consideration while integrating strategy instruction into classroom teaching and learning.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary and grasping the meaning, and all the final purposes are communication.

In recent days, listening comprehension has become an integrated skill more than an isolated one, and it plays more and more important role in the process of language learning/ acquisition. More emphasis has been given to the training of students' listening skills than before.

Based on previous researches, this literature review addresses information about listening processes, listening materials, listening skills and listening strategies in the ESL classroom. Many surveys and studies have found some effective listening strategies in the application of the ESL classroom.

Listening, unlike other language skills, is an internal process that can't be directly observed by teachers. To train learners to be good listeners, teachers should provide the students with suitable listening materials; right listening methods and help students build self-confidence. All these should be applied appropriately for a certain long time until it works.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed as a question is as follows: What strategies of improving students' listening skills in ESL classroom are most effective?

Definition of Terms

Listening skill/strategies. Listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, his grammar and his vocabulary and grasping his meaning.

ESL. An abbreviation for the term English as a Second Language

Comprehension Barriers. Students fail to understand the materials or meaning because of some obstacles on background knowledge, phonetics, lexicology, grammar and other dynamics of understanding.

Delimitations of the Research

The research will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over eighty-eight (88) days. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO with Academic Search Elite and Wilson Index as the primary sources. Key search topics included "listening skills," "teaching English," and "ESL."

Method

A brief review of literature on the studies of learning strategies employed by ESL learners will be conducted. A second review of literature relating factors, including listening skills, which affect the learning strategies, will be conducted. The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Background of English listening strategies

Listening plays an important role in people's communicative activities. However, listening has long been a main problem for our ESL students. Thus it has been a great concern that has haunted college English teachers. It was generally accepted that sufficient spoken input with appropriate methodology could solve this problem.

According to Jiang (2004), English listening is a very complicated linguistic activity in which the learner is expected to have the ability to understand the meaning of the speaker, to understand the speaker's intention. But past traditional teaching methods have emphasized the exam skills instead of real communication. Some applied linguists today go so far as to argue that listening comprehension is at the core of second language acquisition and therefore demands much greater prominence in language teaching. Many researchers have studied English listening strategies in ESL classroom.

In China, English listening has been seeing as an important part of CET-4 or 6 examinations, and the training in listening class is doing more and more quiz or exercises in multiple choices. Students in listening class are usually very passive and easily get bored. Most of the classroom time is used for listening to tapes and keeping silence without communication. Before long, a listening class will lose its effect.

Listening process

Pre-listening is the beginning stage for preparation and introduces the related background information or words to make students have a general image about the material. As River (1981) complains, teachers can cultivate students' prior knowledge through introduction of related topics and key words. Teachers must find out which part or skill works in order to prepare for the further listening exercises (Field, 1998).

In a well-organized listening class, the while-listening stage is a process in which the listening is accompanied with properly designed activities so that learners can experience the feeling of success (River, 1983). At this stage, teachers should make the best use of their teaching experiences and should have a clear idea of the possible difficulties of the listening material according to their students. They can help students with problems by pausing at parts and asking questions, such as "What does this talk about", "Clear...?" By doing so, teachers are more likely to focus on listeners' process of listening and make interaction with them.

Post-listening is an indispensable part of teaching listening. It can make interaction between learner and teacher, and in the stage, they can work cooperatively to go deeper into the listening text by discussion or writing on some relevant topics. Necessary feedback to learners' performance should be offered and received, learner's problems must be summarized and solved by reviewing the difficult parts, and teachers can encourage learners to apply what they learned in their out-of-class listening practice (Lei, 1999). In short, post-listening not only finishes the current lesson but also serves as a preliminary introduction to a new lesson.

According to Paulston & Brooders (1976) and Rixon (1986), there are three steps in the process of listening comprehension. In the first step, students organize the memory of sounds

into meaningful units. The second step is memorizing the information in a short term. The final step is to have listeners try to construct a meaning in their own way according to the information they have.

According to Xu's study (2008), there are two kinds of listening processes, which are *bottom-up processing* and *top-down processing*. Bottom-up processing means that listening is a process of forming understanding about the complete texts from the smallest meaning units (phonemes) (Xu, 2008). Phonemic units are connected together to form words, words are connected to make phrases, phrase are put together to construct sentences, and a certain number of sentences form into a complete meaningful text. That means meaning is created at the last stage in the process. Top-down processing means to make a general prediction or comprehend the meaning by employing background knowledge (Xu, 2008). In this process, students may use their related knowledge to understand the material in different situations. If the students are not familiar with the topic of the material, they will only rely on their linguistic knowledge.

Listening materials

Field (1998) is one of those who insists on using authentic materials, which afford examples of the hesitations, pauses, and so on, which characterize natural speech, help learners to become familiar with the conversation in real situation. Underwood (1989) objects to using non-authentic materials because too much exposure to non-authentic materials could lead to additional problems in understanding authentic talk in real life. She believes that authentic or near-authentic can be used with beginners if the related tasks are easy enough to be understood by learners. Also, teachers should not wait until their students have become advanced learners to start using authentic materials.

In choosing authentic listening materials, students' English proficiencies and interests should be considered. In Yang's study (2006), texts beyond students' listening abilities may ruin their self-confidence and interest. So choosing some interesting and various materials such as news, latest ideas, funny stories, or beautiful pictures are effective in improving students' confidence and interest in English listening.

According to Xu (2008), the listening materials involve nearly any aspects of life. Students can use different kinds of authentic materials from lectures, radio news, films, TV plays, announcements, everyday conversations, interviews, story-telling, English songs, and so on. In a word, effective listening materials have these features (Nunan, 1999): (1) listening goals should be clear and learners should know what they are listening for and why; (2) the materials should include both monologues and dialogues; (3) learners should have chances to express their understanding after listening for several times; (4) the content should be personalized and proper for different levels of learners.

Listening skills

According to Guo (2007), necessary skills for listening should include:

- (1) Distinguishing between sounds;
- (2) Recognizing words;
- (3) Identifying emphasized words and phrases;
- (4) Identifying functions in a conversation;
- (5) Using background knowledge and context to predict and check the meaning;
- (6) Retelling important words, topics and ideas;
- (7) Repeating what the speaker has said in their own words.

In developing listening skills, there are some useful principles suggested by Rost (1991):

- (1) Listening develops by focusing on the main meaning rather than single word; learners can cultivate both their linguistic and non-linguistic skills to understand what's heard.
- (2) By focusing on specific purposes for listening tasks, learners can assess their efforts and abilities.
- (3) By learning to hear sounds and words more accurately, learners can make steady progress and gain confidence in listening for meaning.

Ma's study (2002) introduced some effective listening skills in ESL classroom:

- (1) Help students to recognize differences between sounds when listening
- (2) Recognize grammatical word classes (nouns, verbs, etc.), systems (tense, agreement, pluralization), and patterns
- (3) Recognize English stress patterns, intonation and the role of speaker
- (4) Use skills of guessing at unfamiliar words and decide whether they are important or necessary to the understanding of the sentence meaning
- (5) Predict a speaker's purpose by the context of the material;
- (6) Use skimming when students just need to catch the main idea and scanning when students need to listen for specific or detailed information.

According to Richards (1983), there are some listening skills involved in listening comprehension. Listeners should do the following:

- (1) Memorize the information in a short time
- (2) Distinguish different pronunciations

- (3) Recognize stress, tone, and intonation
- (4) Recognize abbreviations
- (5) Pick up key words and main ideas
- (6) Guess meaning from context
- (7) Make prediction by context and background knowledge

Listening strategies

Effective listening strategies are key for learners in ESL classroom. Some studies have focused on the parts which has influences on listening, including speaking, reading comprehension, vocabulary learning, memory training and solving (Cohen, 1998; Cohen & Apeh, 1980; Oxford, 1996). Some other researchers hold that strategy training can improve learners' performance and let them become more autonomous, motivated and confident in language learning (Cohen, 1998; Cohen & Apeh, 1980; Oxford, 1990). EFL learners always want to catch every word they listen to; if they cannot, they will lose their confidence and interests. Actually, it is impossible and unnecessary for them to do this. So teacher should make students know what the key point is and what can be omitted. Besides, predicting, guessing, focusing, taking notes, asking questions and responding to the ideas mentioned in the materials they have just heard will help them to be active and successful listeners in ESL classroom (Jian, 2005).

To help the students overcome linguistic knowledge obstacle, teachers should let students get familiar with the pronunciations of words, with different sentence structures and grammar points. Besides, knowing some common formulas, the students will quickly determine speakers'

position, social status and attitude (Xie, 2006). For example, when hearing “hello, this is...” Students can know the situation is on the phone, and hearing “would you please...?” students know the speaker is giving a suggestion. According to Zhu (1998), build vocabulary as much as possible, because listeners must have enough vocabulary to understand most of the speaker’s sayings. The word is the most important basic unit of utterance, so to recognize enough vocabulary is a basic strategy of listening improvement. To make a real situation for English teaching, a teacher should try to speak English in class and should expose his/her students to English as much as possible and get the most language exposure (Xie, 2006). After a while, students may understand English much easily.

Zhang (2007) stresses the need for training listeners to control their attention and learn to pay attention only to the key information. Then, the exercises of “summarizing” and “paraphrasing” in their own words are good for training the listeners to repeat what they heard about the materials. Besides, every student has his or her own understanding of certain materials, so sharing valuable resource is beneficial for the whole class to make faster progress in listening. According to Goh (1997), there are two ways can be used for raising the comprehension about listening: (1) to add process-based discussions as part of the course curriculum; (2) to make the best use of pre-and post-listening discussion. From the above research, listening strategies are teachable, especially to beginners.

Application in listening class

In a typical Chinese listening class, students often listen to tests, complete multiple choice questions, and then check their answers. In order to improve learner’s listening comprehension,

when teachers are designing classroom activities, they should consider about learners' language knowledge, personal common knowledge or life experience, knowledge of situational routines (Helgesen, 2004) and some background knowledge (Hedge, 2002).

At pre-class stage, teacher should fully get familiar with the materials, including the length, difficulty points and the key points. So the teacher can decide in advance how to go on with the teaching in class. Field (2002) suggested that besides making students clear about the listening purpose (to create motivation), teachers should also motivate students to predict by relevant information and context. The usual way is to ask students to guess what will happen with the help of some background information and vocabularies. Students are also encouraged to preview the related questions in order to know what to focus on when they are listening (Jian, 2005).

At the while-listening stage, it is necessary for students to catch both main idea and specific information, but it is not easy for them to understand it for only one time, so teacher should have reasonable control on it. Richards (1990) thought that there were two listening methods: top-down method and bottom-up method. The top-down method means the fact that listeners use their background information in order to understand the listening materials. The bottom-up method means the process of listening comprehension is from sounds to words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs, that is from the lower level to the higher one. (Zhu, 2002). If teachers can choose proper ways to guide the classroom according to different kinds or levels of listening tasks, students may get a lot from it. During listening class, it is easy for listeners feel tired especially when they are listening to some difficult materials. So a listening teacher should try his best to be a good motivator who can get students more involved in listening class.

According to Hedge (2002), “Post-listening activities can take students into a more intensive step of study in which aspects of bottom-up listening are practiced.” At this stage, students are to be inspired to ask questions and respond to ideas they got from listening. Hedge also points out that post-listening work could be integrated with other skills such as speaking, writing and reading (Hedge, 2002). What’s more, evaluation and encouragement are also important for students go on study and build self-confidence in the further listening.

In the listening class, teachers could guide students to be active participants. To fulfill this goal, more techniques and practices are required. Generally it includes four stages: recognition, repetition and imitation, short-term memory and note-taking, role-playing (Liu, 1999). Practice makes perfect. But class time is limited; teachers should recommend to students some suitable tapes to listen to after class. When students are listening, ask them to repeat or imitate to practice their oral English at the same time. Besides, according to Liu (1999), VOA special English program is another good choice to practice listening and speaking English in ESL classroom; its clear American pronunciation, and slow speed of speaking, simple vocabulary and sentence structure are relatively easy for students to understand and imitate. What’s more, its current news reports and different kinds of programs are informative and appealing for students.

An effective listening lesson requires enough preparation, adequate support and appropriate tasks in class (Huang, 2000). In order to make an effective listening class the teacher must introduce the background knowledge and related information to students. The students are able to predict with these assistances. Supports include pictures, graphs, maps, etc. can help students understand and predict the upcoming listening. “Listening comprehension tasks should be appropriate to the discourse type” (Huang, 2000).

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this paper, I have discussed how to improve students' listening comprehension in ESL classroom, emphasized on the current listening class situation in China, and provided some information on listening materials, listening process and listening strategies. Some teachers think listening is the easiest course to teach; actually it is not. Listening is a very intangible; teachers could not get into a listener's brain to see his or her understanding. The only thing teachers can do is offer assistance and guidance. The following are some conclusions based on my research:

(1) In developing listening skills, authentic materials are important because learners should learn everyday English for daily communication in real life. And most of the teachers and students do not have enough chances to communicate in English with native speaker, so using authentic materials can make necessary compensation (Wei, 2001). Besides, the material chosen in class should be appropriate and effective according to different levels of listeners.

(2) In traditional listening (teacher-dominated) class, students easily get bored and tired because they are only exposed to listening texts and required to do simple exercises. Listening exercises are most effective if they are task-based. The students are required to finish certain exercises or response to the task. In this way, the students' interest and enthusiasm are aroused. It can contribute to listeners' understanding and a well-designed task should depend on motivation, and should be success-oriented, simple (Ur, 2000) and should accord with the three-stage format: pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening.

Ur (2000) stresses, “It is much more interesting to respond actively to something than to listen passively.”

(3) The main strategies mentioned mainly include predicting at the pre-listening stage, sticking to main points and doing note-taking during while-stage listening and repeating the material and memorizing key vocabularies after listening.

It is necessary for the teacher to point out the bad habits and then assist them cultivate good ways in students’ listening comprehension. Ralph G. Nichols (1960) had some practical ideas, which are paraphrased below:

(1) A poor listener will reject to listen to the materials as soon as he or she felt a listening task will be boring. A good listener will listen carefully even if he or she is not very interested in it.

(2) A poor listener will be distracted easily (footsteps, a door opening or closing, a cough, a dropped thing). A good listener is not influenced by distractions. He or she disciplines himself or herself to concentrate on the listening materials.

(3) A poor listener chooses only easy materials. A good listener tries practice tough technical or complex materials to improve his or her listening ability.

(4) A poor listener listens only using ears. A good listener will take necessary notes when listening.

These are some suggestions in teaching listening.

(1) Listening should be taught with other English skills, especially speaking. Speaking and listening are complementary. A student can not produce certain information without learning first about it. That is to say, listening is a process of input while speaking is the

output. The teacher should have good oral communicative skills; it is hard to imagine a listening class works without oral expressions. We should cultivate the listening and speaking skills together.

(2) As teachers, they should have a broad field of knowledge because listening materials consist of many different kinds of subjects. Besides, it is necessary for teacher to use only English to hold the class because it is much better to provide a pure English environment for listeners.

(3) Providing students with positive feedback. It means ensuring an experience of success, which helps remove the mental obstacle of the type discussed by Krashen (1982). In contrast, the failure for understanding will spoil students' self-confidence. It would be better for teacher to encourage students and find out problems in listening.

(4) Textbook and teacher's books should not only provide listening exercises but also some useful listening strategies and methods. And the contents or topics of the materials should be various covering every aspects of life, especially for some interesting and popular topics for young people.

(5) Since the classroom time is limited, teacher should assign some homework for students to exercise after class.

(6) Find an ideal environment for listening (Zhu, 1998). An ideal environment for effective listening is very important. It should be a comfortable, quiet, and relaxed place. In this way, listeners may encounter fewer distractions when doing listening exercises.

(7) As a listening course teacher, dictation is a very effective way to improve students' listening skill and the speed of note-taking. Through dictation, students should catch every

single word and write it down correctly. After enough dictation practices, students may find they have got a lot from doing it.

(8) English songs and films are interesting material for students to listen and appreciate.

Interest is a very effective pull for students to spend time practicing English listening.

Although this paper provides the reader a summary of useful information to the effective ways and suggestions to improve students' listening comprehension in ESL classroom, there are nevertheless limitations. It is highly recommended that further research be done to determine how these strategies are used and whether there are some new problems during English listening learning. Also, application and result of listening strategies may differ because of different age group, cultural and educational background, and geographical region, especially in China, with such a large population that includes a diversity of minorities.

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