

**A STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE ON EFL
LISTENING COMPREHENSION OF NON-ENGLISH MAJORS IN COLLEGE**

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Abstract

A STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE ON EFL LISTENING COMPREHENSION OF NON-ENGLISH MAJORS IN COLLEGE

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Under the Supervision of Professor James Romesburg

In EFL learning, listening plays an important role which is the fundamental of reading, writing, speaking. However, due to the students' insufficiency in EFL learning, there are a lot of problems, especially in students' listening abilities. According to the teaching experiences, we may find that students are able to improve their writing, reading and speaking after a short period of training. However, they may feel difficult to improve their listening abilities in the short term. Some students even complain that they understand the meaning of the new words, but they are confused with the whole text without any background information. Therefore, this study will investigate how the background knowledge affects listening comprehensions of EFL students in college.

Input Hypothesis and schema theory are the important areas of research in EFL learning which show that the efficient listeners are able to understand the listening materials with the relevant background knowledge than the listeners with no such information. So, this study will demonstrate how the background information affect EFL listening abilities based on the Input Hypothesis and schema theory to explore the relevant relationship with listening. Meanwhile, EFL teachers will be aware of the importance of background knowledge and instruct the students to build up their schemata for the existing knowledge to improve their listening abilities efficiently.

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Chapter I Introduction

In EFL learning, listening plays an important role in evaluating the students' language proficiency. In order to help students figure out the key points in the listening materials, EFL teachers often require students to make the preview to get familiar with the context. Generally, EFL teachers may design some activities in the pre-listening stage, such as the question preview, topic-centered discussions, brainstorming, etc. These techniques enable students to effectively focus on the main ideas and key words in while-listening stage. However, the reality is that many students, especially non-English majors in EFL classrooms, cannot grasp the general idea even though they make use of these techniques and listen to the materials several times. They have the false assumption that if they understand the meaning of the words and practice repeatedly, they will feel easier to understand the material and improve their listening abilities quickly. But after a period of training, they find that they are able to understand the meaning of single words, phrases, and sentences, but when it comes to the main ideas, their minds are blank. According to Littlewood (1981), "listening demands active involvement from the hearer. In order to reconstruct the message that the speaker intends, the hearer must actively contribute knowledge from both linguistic and non-linguistic sources (P.66)." Rumelhart (1980) thinks the role of background knowledge in language comprehension has been formalized as schema theory. According to schema theory, comprehending a text is an interactive process between the learner's background knowledge and the text. Therefore, the comprehension of listening is not merely the language learning, but also involves the accumulation of the background information and your recognition of certain culture.

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed is, "What are the major problems of listening

comprehension among Chinese non-English major college students? How does the background knowledge affect the EFL students' listening abilities?"

Definition of Terms

Schema: an active organization of past reactions or past experiences (Bartlett, 1932).

Schema theory: an organized pattern of thought or behavior that organizes categories of information and the relationships among them. It can also be described as a mental structure of preconceived ideas, a framework representing some aspect of the world, or a system of organizing and perceiving new information (Bartlett, 1932).

Input hypothesis: a group of five hypotheses of second-language acquisition. Understanding spoken and written language input is seen as the only mechanism that results in the increase of underlying linguistic competence, and language output is not seen as having any effect on learners' ability. Linguistic competence is only advanced when language is subconsciously acquired, and that conscious learning cannot be used as a source of spontaneous language production (Krashen .S., 1981).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to help students realize the importance of the input background knowledge, to strengthen their learning of background knowledge or the cultural-related knowledge, to improve the students' listening comprehension in different contexts, thus to improve the proficiency of EFL learning.

Significance of the Study

This study helps students realize that background knowledge has a positive effect on listening comprehension. Therefore, EFL teachers may consciously add some background knowledge to their teaching contents and enable EFL students to build up the relevant schemata to enhance their comprehension of the new text. With the improvement of listening comprehension, students are expected to integrate their knowledge into reading, writing and speaking and improve their comprehensive abilities.

Methodology

This study is based on library research, so all the databases and information are from the previous studies. In the library research, I make the inductive and deductive analysis on the previous studies to summarize the previous opinions and conclude my own opinions. I conduct the literature review on the schema theory and input theory and find out the influence of background knowledge on listening comprehension from other researchers. Finally, I summarize some effective strategies on how to input background knowledge into the listening materials and propose my own opinions.

Chapter II Review of Literature

Concerning the listening comprehension in EFL learning, the scholars have studied it from different perspectives. In this chapter, the relevant precious studies on how the background knowledge affects the EFL learners' listening abilities will be demonstrated based on the Input Hypothesis and the Schemata theory.

Here, three questions will be asked:

1. What are the problems in EFL listening?
2. How does Input Hypothesis affect the EFL students' listening abilities?
3. How does Schema Theory affect the EFL students' listening abilities?

The review of the literature focuses on the three questions.

2.1 The Problems in EFL Listening

In second language acquisition, we cannot underestimate the importance of listening. Listening comprehension has become the keystone of many theories of second language acquisition and instruction (O'Malley & Chamot, 1989). According to Vandergrift (1999), listening comprehension is a complex activity. Coordinating sounds, vocabulary, grammatical structures, and background knowledge, listening involves a great deal of mental process on the part of the listener. Rost (2002) clearly stated that listening, in its broadest sense, is a process of receiving what the speaker actually says, constructing and representing meaning and creating meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy. These findings show that listening is a process which involves the processing and combination of different elements.

Lindsay and Knight (2006) stated that "although listening is a 'receptive skill', rather

than a 'productive skill', in the process of interpreting messages of what people utter, listening comprehension would be the hardest of all the four language skills, especially to EFL learners (P.47)." For example, in China, due to the different aims in language learning, such as passing the CET-4 or CET-6 exam, listening becomes especially difficult for the students in EFL learning. Lee (1991) stated that the aim of English teaching in China has been primarily to train students to pass various kinds of examinations: entrance examinations for high schools and colleges have been especially emphasized. The traditional grammar-translation instructional methods have been widely adopted in both junior and senior high schools (Chen, 2003). So when students in China learn English, they focus more on grammars, writing, reading and the skills which may improve their listening abilities in the short term, but pay little attention to the authentic environment of language learning, so it makes listening more difficult for the students.

Some researchers also address problems posed by listeners' background knowledge and schemata. Anderson and Lynch (2003) stated that language is the means used by a community to express facts, ideas, beliefs, rules and so on- in short, to express its culture. So the listener may be confused at the meanings of these words in this context, if this were not an element in his or her culture of origin (Wu Xiaojuan, 2013).

Apart from the listening problems in cultural aspects, Brindley and Slatyer's (2002) research identified still other problems. Among these are:

The nature of input: speech rate, length of passage, syntactic complexity, vocabulary, discourse, noise level, accent, register, propositional density, amount of redundancy, etc.

The nature of the assessment task: amount of context provided, clarity of instructions, response format, availability of question preview, etc; and the individual listener factors: memory, interest, background knowledge, motivation, etc.

Anderson and Lynch (2003) also discuss prerequisite skills for listening that may pose problems for listeners deficient in cultural aspects, such as “the ability to recognize the topic of conversation from the native speaker’s initial remarks, to make predictions about likely developments of the topic to which he will have to respond and to recognize and signal when he has not understood enough of the input to make a prediction or a response (Anderson & Lynch, 2003).”

Therefore, a listener’s effective listening involves the combination of these skills and “systemic knowledge and schematic information (Wu Xiaojuan, 2013).”

2.2 Input Hypothesis

2.2.1 The definition of Input Hypothesis

In the 1970s and the 1980s, the linguist Stephen Krashen formed five hypotheses: the input hypothesis, the acquisition-learning hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the natural order hypothesis and the affective filter hypothesis. And the input hypothesis plays one of the most important roles in the second language acquisition. According to Krashen (1985), human beings acquire language in only one way—by understanding message, or by receiving “comprehensible input.” In the Input Hypothesis, all learners must go through the “i+1” progress, in which “i” stands for learners’ current level of a second language, “i+1” refers to the next stage in the learner’ language development along the natural order (Krashen, 1985). For the students with low listening levels, how do they move from stage “i” to “i+1”? As Krashen (1985) stated:

Learners progress along the natural order by understanding input that contains structures a little bit beyond their current level of competence. Human are able to understand language containing grammar they have not acquired with the help of context including

extra-linguistic information, knowledge of the world, and previously acquired linguistic competence.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis has been used to prove that background knowledge has a great effect on the students' listening abilities.

However, the Input Hypothesis also states that acquirers must not be forced to produce early. Acquisition will come when acquirers feel ready (Zheng Donglin, 2008).

2.2.2 Input Hypothesis and Listening

Input in listening refers to the materials students listen to and the background information or related information students are given (Liu Min & Gong Yifan , 2013).

Listeners' linguistic knowledge and background knowledge are the essential factors that could affect their understanding of the foreign language (Christine& Christa, 1995). Gass (1977) points out that it is trivial to point out that no individual can learn a second language without input of some sort.

Anderson and Lynch (1988) stated that "listening comprehension is affected by many variables, including organization of listening materials, prior/background knowledge, modified and unmodified input, methods of processing input, and listener's proficiency level (p.13)."

Based on this research, we'll find that input is of great significance in second language acquisition. Bacon (1992a) pointed out: "listening to speech involves one of the two tasks: first, one listens in order to participate in discourse; second, one listens in order to gain information."

Krashen (1985) borrowing insights from first language acquisition, stressed the aural reception of language that is just a little beyond the learner's present ability. Krashen (1983) also stressed that classroom may be an excellent place for second language acquisition, at least up to the intermediate level, especially at the beginning level, because within an hour in the classroom,

comprehensible input of a whole day outside can be provided.

These studies show that students in the second language acquisition are supposed to be provided with the authentic listening materials and input the relevant background information and knowledge to enhance the efficiency of listening comprehension.

2. 3 Schemata Theory

2.3.1 Schemata Theory

As an EFL learner, we can't underestimate the part that Schemata play in the listening acquisition. The concept of the schema was first proposed by the German classical philosopher Kant in 1781, with the meaning of the appearance and the shape (Li Hongxia &Tuo Xin, 2015).

Bartlett (1932) defines schema as “an active organization of past reactions or past experiences” and schemata as “structures of information which exist in our memories (p.20).”

According to schema theory, language comprehension depends largely on learners' background knowledge because any text does not by itself carry meaning instead it only provides directions for learners as to how they should retrieve or construct meaning from their own previously acquired knowledge (Rumelhart, 1980).

Based on this research, we may find that a schema is built up on the basis of our experience and prior knowledge. According to Carrell and Eisterhold (1983), new information, new concepts and new ideas can have meanings only when they can be related to something the individual already knows.Carrel and Eisterhold (1983) also stressed that “comprehension is an interactive process between the reader's background knowledge and the text.”

Anderson and Pearson (1984) stated that comprehension is the process of relating new or incoming information to information already stored in memory.

Brown and Yule (2000) define schema as “a high-level complex (and even conventional or

habitual) knowledge structures, which function as ideational scaffolding in the organization and interpretation of experience (247-248).” From the perspective of Carrel (1984), a schema is a structure in semantic memory that specifies the general or expected arrangement of a body of information.

Borrowing from schema theory, provision of pre-listening tasks is seen as beneficial in building up prior knowledge and expectation of the texts’ content, as well as exciting linguistic knowledge. The further use or analysis of the language or content material in post-listening tasks is also viewed desirable (Underwood, 1990, qtd. in Brett, 1995).

So these theoretical researches emphasize the importance of the stored or existing knowledge to our comprehension in EFL learning comprehension. According to Doughty (1991), listening comprehension consist of three stages: “locating a schema that appears to match the linguistic input; finding the elements of the input that correlate to the roles of the schema; and making inferences to cover any gaps that emerge (P.9).” Due to the insufficiency of the background information, listening based on schema becomes difficult for the EFL students.

2.3.2 Features of Schema

Bartlett’s theory was not accepted in his time, no long after it, mainly because he relies heavily on mental introspection (Zhang Yinzhi, 2006). But Zhang Yinzhi (2006) also stressed that the relation to text comprehension attracted a lot of theorists, including Howard, Eysenck, Keane and Baddeley. They summarize the schema as follows:

Firstly, schema can be instantiated. According to Markham and Latham (1987), a schema is to be framed with many slots. Once the new information is integrated with the existing background knowledge and is put into the appropriate slots, the schema is considered as being activated. If a schema finds exemplars in the practical world, the schema should be instantiated

or activated (Huang Zidong, 1998)

Secondly, schema can be composed of several sub-schemata, or be a part of another schema (Howard, 1987). For example, a schema for “house” should have the sub-schemata “kitchen,” “bedroom,” “study,” “living room,” etc. Those sub-schemata will help students activate the existing information when listening to the materials related to house.

Thirdly, schema can be used to express knowledge at an abstract level. The notion of schema has been applied widely, ranging from abstract ideological form such as rightness and science to specific entity like face and hair (Huang Zidong, 1998).

Fourthly, schema can be used not only in the mental perception of the world but also in the interpretation of language, especially the EFL. Based on the built-up knowledge, people feel easier to describe or memorize things. For example, people are used to describing a house from the outer side to the inner side or from general to specific. So the schematic knowledge will help people understand the discourse on the similar topic (Huang Zidong, 1998).

2.3.3 Classifications of Schema

2.3.3.1 Content schemata

Schema are the basis of the cognition which has been classified into different types from different perspectives. Two types of schema most often discussed are content schemata and formal schemata. Content schemata are knowledge relative to the content domain of a text (Carrel Eisterhold, 1983). Johnson (1982) has noticed that a text on a familiar topic with background knowledge is better recalled by EFL students than an unfamiliar topic without background knowledge. For example:

Business had been slow since the oil crisis. Nobody seemed to want anything really elegant any more. Suddenly the door opened and a well-dressed man entered the

showroom floor. John put on his friendliest and most sincere expression and walked toward the man (Rumelhart, 1980).

This text was difficult to understand for the Chinese subjects in a research done by GuiShichun. Even though the language was not complex for them (GuiShichun, 1991), some students couldn't make sense what the goods are. Because the Chinese students lived in a different environment, they didn't possess the content schemata of "oil crisis" and "buying the car."

So content schema could be specific to a culture, as culture does help to determine our life experiences and how we make meaning of them. Moreover, misunderstandings can arise even between speakers of the same language, when content schema differs, perhaps because of cultural differences (Hedge, 2000).

2.3.3.2 Formal schemata

Formal schemata are higher order structures containing knowledge of rhetorical organization structures, including knowledge of the general properties of text types and differences in genre (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983). That is, readers can make sense of the text by the stored textual features or the prior knowledge of content. When either form or content is unfamiliar, unfamiliar content poses more difficulties for the reader than unfamiliar form (Carrell, 1988).

Formal schema includes knowledge of different text types and genres. Generally speaking, different types of texts use text organization, language structures and level of formality differently.

2.4 Schema Theory and Listening

Researches on the Schema Theory indicate that the prior knowledge has a fundamental

significance on listening. But Li Ting (2010) stated that good and poor listeners do not always use their schemata appropriately or are unaware of whether the information they are listening to is consistent with their knowledge. So students' prior knowledge must be activated in order to facilitate their current abilities to understand and learn (Bransford, 1985).

Bacon's research emphasized the influence of background knowledge during listening process. She (1992a) reported that successful listeners tended to use their personal, world, and discourse knowledge while less successful listeners either built erroneous meaning from their prior knowledge or ignored it altogether.

Chiang and Dunkel (1992) investigated the effect of speech modification, prior knowledge, and listening proficiency on EFL listening comprehension. He found the subjects scored higher on the familiar-topic lecture than on the unfamiliar-topic lecture.

Schmidt-Rinehart (1994) made a study to discover the effects of topic familiarity on L2 listening comprehension and concluded that background knowledge in the form of topic familiarity emerges as powerful factor in facilitating listening comprehension.

Every input event must be mapped in terms of certain schema, and all aspects of that schema must be compatible with the input information (Carrel, 1987). So EFL listeners often adapt two different kinds of processing model to receive the effective information, namely, bottom-up and top-down processing. The former processing also called data-driven processing because "it is evoked by the incoming data whose features enter the system by finding the best fitting from the bottom-level schemata." The latter top-down processing occurs as the system searches for information which fits or partially satisfies schemata already installed in people's mind. It can be called conceptual driven processing owing to the way of information activation (GuiShichun, 2000; David W. Carroll, 2000). Mark A. Clarke (2001) stated that the most

effective model to process a text is the interactive model—a combination of both “bottom-up” and “top-down.”

Above all, the previous researches placed great emphasis on the importance of the background information to their understanding of a foreign language. In order to yield good performance in EFL listening, the effective learners must be able to input the relevant background information as well as “activate all the schemata to make sense of the incoming information (Li Ting, 2010).”

Summary

To improve the students’ listening abilities, teachers should be aware of the importance of knowledge input and the pre-listening schemata. Meanwhile, whatever the aims of EFL learning, students need to read or listen to a wide range of material, relating to culture, economy, politics, etc, to enhance their storage of knowledge and build in the schemata which will be helpful for the EFL listening.

III Conclusion and Implication

From the previous research, we find that an effective listeners are able to comprehend texts depending on the efficient input and the built-in schema. In order to improve the students' listening skills, they need to do as follows:

3.1 Enrich students' background knowledge

Due to different cultural backgrounds, people in different cultures will establish the different schemata which becomes one of the main factors leading to the failure of listening among EFL students. For example, in Chinese dining manners, we get used to putting all the food on the table and sharing the food together. If we assume that foreigners have their meals in the same way and invite them to eat hotpot, it will cause both of us a dilemma. So for EFL learners, especially the low-level students, the background information will be of greater importance. Therefore, teachers should encourage students to learn the diverse cultures in English-speaking countries and realize the cultural differences to enlarge the storage of information in their brain and enrich their schemata.

3.2 Activate the students' schemata and cultivate the ability of predication

Input and the built-in schemata don't mean the students know how to use these stored knowledge. For the EFL teachers, they need to instruct the students to make use of the stored information stored in their knowledge and cultivate their ability to analyze, predicate and infer the relevant information and find the correct answer. Li Ting (2010) stated that listening is not a passive activity. Teachers must attempt to activate the students' world knowledge before presenting any listening selections, such as encouraging students to discuss about what they know to activate the relevant knowledge. Moreover, when listening to the materials, teachers should instruct the students to apply the different listening skills, such as top-down skill, to make

predication for the existing information and help them build in the relevant schemata. With the background information in mind, EFL learners will be more focused on the efficient information while listening.

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