

Analysis of Young Learners' Listening Skills

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Abstract: The importance of listening as one of the communication skills cannot be overstated. However, in many areas, listening is neglected. For young learners, learning to listen is even more beneficial for their future studies, therefore, listening skills should be given due importance.

Keywords: Listening skills; Communication skills; Young learners; Teaching materials

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1. Introduction

The world is becoming increasingly globalized and proficiency in English is seen by many non-English speaking countries as key to professional communication and improving the quality of opportunities^[1]. One of the most important aspects of communication is listening, which accounts for about half of the time spent in communication. It has been recognized that listening plays a vital role in language learning and the classroom^[2]. For young learners, listening can be beneficial. This essay discusses listening learning for young learners.

One of the major problems with English education in China is students' weak listening skills. In traditional Chinese education, the teacher is the one who speaks, while the students listen and take notes^[3]. The Ministry of Education^[4] emphasizes the importance of English as a medium of teaching and learning. However, teachers in English classes usually use their first language—Chinese—to teach. As a result, students have little opportunity to practice their English listening skills in class. For extracurricular English activities, Huang^[3] interviewed the students and many of them suggested that “there are no English activities outside of class.” Students prefer to speak their first language in life, and they have few opportunities to practice English in the only classroom where they have access to English. Apart from the language issue, the teaching style of Chinese teachers also contributes to students' weak listening skills. In Chinese public schools, the teaching methods emphasize more on grammar, reading, and writing^[5].

2. Listening skills

DeVito^[6] defined listening as an effective process of perceiving, understanding, recognizing, appraising, and

responding. In terms of learning, listening is one of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) of language acquisition. To understand a particular language, a person must learn to listen ^[7]. Linse ^[8] stated that listening is the basis for other language skills. When learners are introduced to a new language, listening is the first step in their exposure to the language. When listening skills are improved, it can enhance other language skills. According to Adem and Berkessa ^[9], the achievement of communicative competence is the goal of language teaching. When it comes to communication skills, listening as the basis of language skills, can help in speaking skills, and it is even more helpful for young learners.

Phillips ^[10] believed listening is essential for primary school students as the linguistic data acquired by the students through listening gradually enables them to develop their views on how a foreign language works. It is therefore necessary that listening is taught from primary school onwards. When speaking a new language, young learners are not as embarrassed as adults, which helps them to acquire the accent of a native speaker ^[11]. Young learners do not learn to speak suddenly but through listening and imitation. Imitation of the sounds of the target language is an important feature of young learners' listening and speaking skills ^[11]. Listening not only helps learners to understand the content of a discourse but also allows them to hear the phonetic intonation of a language and imitate it, thus improving their listening skills as well as their speaking skills.

Listening skills do not come naturally but are improved through learning and repetition ^[12]. Listening skills in learning are not only about hearing. The listeners need to process the information from the oral presentation and give their explanation ^[13]. Due to the importance of listening, young learners must engage in listening activities. However, listening is not easy for adult learners and even more difficult for young learners, which makes it hard for them to improve on their own and require the help of others. Due to the learning characteristics of young learners, specialized methods of teaching them to listen are needed.

3. Effective ways to teach listening skills to young learners

Two strategies often used in listening are top-down and bottom-up. Sun and Zhang ^[14] introduce top-down and bottom-up in their research: top-down is using previous experience and using that information to understand, while bottom-up is to start with a combination of details to gradually build an understanding of what is being heard. Young learners, for instance, use the top-down strategy in their listening to learn that parts of speech that begin with “long, long ago” are fairy tales. By bottom-up method, they learn that “yes” is affirmative and “no” is negative. In addition to the widely used strategies, the characteristics of young learners need to be considered.

Cameron ^[11] presented several learning characteristics of young learners, firstly, their learning is holistic and indirect, secondly, their attention is easily diverted. For the first feature, learning for young learners is not straightforward, so learners need to be exposed to a lot of listening. Cameron ^[11] claimed the goal of listening is not language but meaning. Young learners may not be able to understand every word they hear, but a large amount of listening would expose them to the English language environment and give them an impression of what they have heard. In this regard, Arnold ^[15] suggested choosing topics that are familiar to children. Young learners do not have the knowledge and language skills to support them in understanding content that is too difficult and abstract. Familiar topics would give them a sense of familiarity and make it easy to understand the meaning of the speech without a lot of thinking. Extensive familiar listening material is therefore beneficial for young learners, who can hear a large amount of comprehensible output and convert it into their own knowledge by imitating or processing simple information.

The second characteristic of young learners is that they have difficulty concentrating for too long. Thus, listening activities should not be long and tedious. Young learners' listening and speaking tasks need to be

diverse, short, inspiring, and fun ^[16]. A variety of activities would keep the learners fresh and willing to engage in different types of activities. Activities need to be short to prevent young learners from losing focus in the middle of the activity. As a result, the desired goal of the activity cannot be achieved. Meanwhile, the activities need to be able to motivate them. Young learners struggle to persevere with activities they find difficult ^[11]. This requires activities that appeal to them and are within their capabilities. When they have the information to be able to complete an activity, they are more willing to participate. Another type of activity for young learners is fun activities. Fun activities appeal to young learners, who are more likely to focus on them. Taking into account the learning characteristics of young learners, the corresponding listening activities should be different from those for adult learners. Activities that are varied and interesting are more likely to attract the attention of young learners, while activities need to be short, motivating, and tailored to their characteristics.

In addition to these methods, there are other ways to teach young learners effectively according to their characteristics. Linse ^[8] believed that presenting information using auditory, visual, and tactile methods is what all young learners' listening activities should do. As young learners are more able to imitate language, listening materials can be repeated during listening activities. In terms of auditory, a popular way of teaching listening is through songs. The most striking features of the songs include their rhythmic and repetitive nature, as well as the connection between melody and content that brings joy to learning ^[17]. The melody of a song often engages young learners more than the phonetics, and the rhythm of a song would make it fun for young learners to imitate it, they would be more willing to listen to a song and sing along. The multiple repetitions in the song give the learners the opportunity to repeat the imitation. Due to the relevance of the songs to what they are learning, the children are able to learn new things as they go along. In addition to songs, Santos ^[18] believed that using stories to teach young learners is a great way to teach listening because children usually enjoy stories. Stories can be a valuable way to introduce a new language in the early stages of language acquisition. Stories not only capture the attention of young learners but they can also be told repeatedly. Young learners would not get bored of listening to the same story easily, and this can be used as an opportunity to refresh their knowledge ^[19]. These linguistic elements are therefore repeated, making them more impressive to young learners as they listen, and more conducive to their learning. Moreover, the songs and stories bring a relaxed atmosphere to the classroom, helping the children to learn.

In terms of visual methods, the pictures attract young learners' attention and thus make the listening activity more interesting for them. Meanwhile, learners can recall visual materials more easily than abstract things ^[20]. Thus, with the help of visual material, learners would be able to recall what they have heard more easily. When it comes to tactile methods, young learners are more interested in what is present. For instance, reading an introduction to apples to children is very different from giving them an apple and then introducing them. Plus, teachers can give the children more listening activities where they can be physically active so that they remember what they are learning more clearly through physical movement ^[17]. Therefore, for young learners, auditory, visual, and tactile listening activities are more effective.

4. Teaching materials evaluation criteria

For many young learners, it is difficult to have the opportunity to work on listening activities other than in the classroom. Teachers' activities are basically textbook activities, which makes the activities in the textbook even more important. For young learners, teaching materials should be designed to meet the characteristics and be different from those of adult learners.

Textbooks are well-deserved teaching materials. Many scholars have given criteria for evaluating

textbooks, and this essay makes a brief summary for reference. Tomlinson ^[21] produced a learning material evaluation rubric, referring to his criteria for the evaluation of teaching materials, and also for the assessment of second language materials. Together with Krashen's theory of input comprehensible (Question 2) ^[22] and Gilmore's meaningful and relevant theories about the material (Question 1) ^[23], combined with the useful strategies for teaching young learners mentioned in the previous section, the questions have undergone some changes to be more in line with this essay. The questions are as follows:

- (1) Is the listening material meaningful?
- (2) Is the content of the material comprehensible?
- (3) Is the amount of listening material sufficient?
- (4) Are the listening material instructions clear?
- (5) Is the listening material appealing to young learners?
- (6) To what extent do listening activities fit the profile of young learners?
- (7) Is there any repetition of the listening material?
- (8) Can the materials help young learners feel at ease?
- (9) Is there flexibility in the material?

5. Conclusion

English is increasingly being studied today and young learners have more to learn. However, in the traditional education model, the important skill of listening is not given the attention it deserves. The importance of listening cannot be ignored. Appropriate listening strategies enable learners to succeed in their studies. For young learners, they need help from the outside. With many listening strategies for young learners being proposed, learning materials also need to be tailored to their learning characteristics. It is hoped that listening skills will receive more attention and be taught in an appropriate way to young learners to help them in their future studies.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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