

The Reasons of Students' Difficulty in Improving Their Listening in China

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Abstract: With the promoting of world integration, the role of English listening and speaking is becoming more and more important. English listening is attached more importance to in higher education. Although many universities and college students take different measures to improve the students' English listening abilities, it is found that it is difficult to improve the students' English listening abilities effectively. This article will analyze the reasons of students' difficulty in improving their listening in the aim at discussing the measures to improve the students' listening effectively with other educators.

Keywords: reasons, English listening, difficulty, college students

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1 Introduction

The target of English teaching is nothing more than cultivating the students' communicative competence, that is, the students are capable of exchanging the ideas and information through language learning. Listening, speaking, reading and writing, as the four basic skills for English learning, are the key elements and effective ways for students to learn English.

Hedge (2000) points out that listening takes proportion as much as 45 percent in the individual communication^[1]. As a result, listening is not only the essential access to getting the information in the daily life, but also the pivotal elements in language teaching. Though English listening teaching has been paid more and more attention to in China recently, it is a pity that most students' listening competence is in the infancy.

A quite large number of students have the idea that listening comprehension is the most troubling part in English listening section in the examination, let alone communicate in English in the daily life. Therefore, it is a big puzzle for many students to improve their listening in English learning. This article intends to find out some reasons why they are difficult to improve their listening by collecting data and analyzing data.

2 Literature review

2.1 Listening comprehension

At the mention of the listening strategies, it is necessary to mention the characteristic of listening comprehension. Listening comprehension plays a very important role in the four language skills.

Brown (1997) summarizes the nature of listening comprehension as five different aspects^[2]:

1. identify vocabulary and related meanings.
2. understand the interaction between vocabulary and the context and create the context correspondingly.
3. not only understand the literal meanings of the sentences in the given context, but also the meanings of the sentences in the given context, but also the meanings of the discourse.
4. make a deduction from the connotation of the discourse.
5. master the general idea of the long discourses whereas memorize the vital details and information of the short ones as much as possible in the process of listening.

Richards (1983) states that listening comprehension can be divided into three interrelated aspects, that is, finding out the proposition of the sentences, making the intention of the speakers clear and activating related background knowledge^[3]. Another psychologist

Anderson's (2005) theory, the process of listening comprehension is the interdependent process of perception, parsing and utilization^[4].

Based on the above views, listening comprehension can be considered as the dynamic process and active process instead of the static process and passive process. In their opinion, they view the listening comprehension as the channel of communication in the daily life, in other words, if a person intends to communicate with others smoothly, he must have a good listening comprehension first. If a person wants to be a good speaker, he must be a good listener first. In my opinion, to be a good listener is much more important than to be a good speaker. If we can't catch the speaker's contents, how to proceed with the conversation and communication with others?

There are two basic models in the process of listening comprehension currently: bottom-up and top-down models first advanced by Anderson and Lynch (1988)^[5]. And Hedge perfects the two models:

"In the bottom-up part of the listening process, we use information in the speech itself to try to comprehend the meaning. We segment speech into identifiable sounds and impose a structure on these in terms of words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and intonation patterns." (Hedge, 2000, p. 230)

With the development of many researches, there are some limitations about bottom-up model. Therefore, top-down model is in its existence.

"Top-down listening infers meaning from contextual clues and from making links between the spoken message and various types of prior knowledge which listeners hold inside their heads." (Hedge, 2000, p. 232)

In bottom-up process, it can save plenty of time and a listener can spend much more time to get the under-meaning of the materials, for example, when a listener hear such a sentence as "I talked with the lady who wore the red hat yesterday", the listener can be easily to divide the sentence into [I talked with] [lady] [who wore red hat] [yesterday]. The listener can easily get the information about the goings-on, the conversation participants and the time of occurrence. From another point of view, top-down process is efficiency, because a listener can get the speaker's contents by the schemata or the background knowledge. But in my view, there is shortcoming about the top-down process, if the listener is insufficient with the background knowledge, the top-down process is not very suitable for the listener.

Flowerdew and Miller (2005) propose another listening

model---interactive on these two models^[6]. The nature of interactive model is a comprehensive process of bottom-up and top-down models. The process that a listener explains a speaker's contents with the help of his prior background knowledge when the current knowledge is insufficient is the top-down model and the process is the bottom-down model on the contrary.

On the basis of the definitions, listening comprehension can be described as a listener's ability to acquire or apprehend useful information by intention by the means of listening. In other words, purposefulness and interpretation are the key factors in listening comprehension. In the process of listening, on the one hand, we should decode the acquired information quickly and then combine into the meaningful information. Buck also advances the similar idea as^[7]:

"If listening is to be successful, it is clear that language processing must be fast and efficient, and there is little time to think about the meaning. Thus knowledge of language must include the ability to process the language automatically in real time." (Buck, 2001, p. 29)

On the other hand, the process of listening comprehension is a complicated process. In the process, a listener should have the ability to analyze a speaker's contents with the prior knowledge, schemata or the present knowledge. Buck mentions it as well:

"The normal process of listening comprehension allows the sum total of the listener's knowledge, past experience, current thoughts, feelings, intentions, personality and intelligence to interact freely with the acoustic input and with each other, to create the interpretation of the text." (Buck, 2001, p. 29)

At last, listening comprehension is reluctant with the context. The listener can judge the language itself and non-verbal information so as to totally grasp the speaker's contents in terms of the context. Buck gives the description on this point like this:

"Listening is a cognitive process and in reality the context is not external to the listener. Listening comprehension takes place within the mind of the listener, and the context of interpretation is the cognitive environment of the listener." (Buck, 2001, p.29)

No matter whose view, it can be concluded that the process of the listening comprehension is related to the listener's background knowledge, past experience, the schemata or the listener's internal personalities. Indeed, it is quite clear that if a listener hears some very familiar information, he can give a quick response; in

contrast, if he hears some unknown information, he may know nothing and become quite silent. Under such circumstance, the conversation or the communication can't keep going on.

2.2 Listening activities in the language classroom

2.2.1 The aim of the listening class

In the English language classroom, teachers, who should ensure that students should have definite listening requirements and purposes, exert themselves to make the listening materials relevant to the real-life listening situations. Plenty of researchers have put forward many purposes of listening for classroom listening activities. Galvin (1985) suggests that there are five purposes of listening: "1. to engage in social rituals; 2. to exchange information; 3. to exert control; 4. to share feelings; and 5. to enjoy yourself." (Galvin, 1985, cited by Hedge, 2000, p. 243)^[8]. Harmer propounds six aspects of listening requirements in classroom^[9]:

"1. listening to confirm expectations; 2. listening to extract specific information; 3. listening for communicative tasks; 4. listening for general understanding; 5. listening to recognize function; and 6. listening to deduce meaning." (Harmer, 1991, cited by Hedge, 2000, p. 243).

As Ur argues, "the main goal of teaching listening is to enable our students eventually to cope with the natural situations that they are most likely to encounter in real life." (Ur, 2012, p. 102)^[10].

From the above, we can see that the aim of the listening is to proceed with the conversation in the real life. That we teach the students listening is to make sure them to communicate with others, but from my observation, it is a pity that the aim of teaching English listening in China is helping students get a good mark in many kinds of the examinations.

2.2.2 Designing listening activities for the classroom

The researchers all over the world carried out a series of wide researches centered on the design of the listening activities for the classroom and formulated a perfect theory for the procedure of the listening classroom.

Current idea indicates that the listening procedure should usually be divided into three parts: pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening. Many researchers advance their own opinions about the process of listening.

2.2.2.1 Wilson's view

"The pre-listening stages described below help our

students to prepare for what they are going to hear, and this gives them a greater chance of success in any given task." (Wilson, 2008, p. 60)^[11]. In while-listening stages, "the students hear the input once, probably for gist... They then listen a second time, either in order to check or to answer more detailed questions" (Wilson, 2008, p. 60). In post-listening stage, "the whole class checks answers, discusses difficulties such as unknown vocabulary, and responds to the content of the passage, orally, sometimes in writing." (Wilson, 2008, p. 61).

2.2.2.2 Hedge's view

Hedge (2000) raises the pre-listening stage is preparation phase for students listening. A main objective is to contextualize the text, providing any information to help students comprehend the context and the relationships between speakers. In the phase, the teacher's role is to arouse the students' listening interests and requirements and to assist the students to build confidence. There are some listening tasks or activities in the stage, for instance, predicting content from the title, talking about some related pictures or questions, answering some relevant questions and agreeing or disagreeing with opinions. The next stage, the while-listening stage is the implementation phase for students listening. In the phase, the teacher's role is to ensure students to carry out the task independently without any intervention on the premise that students have understood what the task and content involve. The tasks or activities in the stage may be like ticking multiple choices, filling in a chart, matching pictures with the text, drawing pictures or taking notes. Last stage, the post-listening stage is the consolidation phase for students listening. In the phase, the teacher's role is to consolidate and extend the students' listening practice. The tasks and activities can be designed as students writing down the feelings, listing out the essential expressions or doing a dictation.

2.2.2.3 Lynch's view

Lynch (2009) gives out the following activities^[12]:

*"Pre-listening: to activate schemata and vocabulary
While-listening: first listening for gist, second listening for more detailed and third listening for learners answering five true/false questions. Post-listening: for inferring from context."* (Lynch, 2009, p. 94)

2.2.2.4 Field's view

Here is one view of the traditional listening class from Field (1998)^[13]:

In the pre-listening stage, teach the new vocabulary

first. In the while-listening stage, do the extensive listening to the tape recording and ask some questions about the general idea about the content at the first listening, next, do the intensive listening relatively and ask some questions about the details at the second listening. In the post-listening, on the one hand, examine the vocabulary or the grammar of the contents, on the other hand, do some activities about the words or the expressions from the contents.

2.2.2.5 White's view

White (1998) holds the views that first, do a relevant warm-up activity about the listening contents in the pre-listening stage, second, give the gist questions for the students to answer and play the tape recording once and ask the students to answer the gist questions, then check the answers, third, ask some detailed questions for the students to answer and play the tape recording once more and ask the students to answer, then check the answers in the while-listening stage, last, use the output skills, for example, writing or speaking to practice the input the students learning from the listening materials in the post-listening stage^[14].

2.2.2.6 Scrivener's view about the listening skills in class

Scrivener (2011) proposes some guidelines for listening skills work in class^[15]: keep the recording materials short, two minutes is enough; play the recording sufficient times according to the difficulty, three times is enough, but maybe play some difficult or key words, phrases or sentences over and over again in order to get more detailed information; do not give the correct answers directly and immediately; provide listeners with the opportunity to work in pair or discuss together; give help if listeners are really confused; and last, make sure the recording materials not to be beyond listeners' reach in case of losing their heart.

From the above opinions, it is common that the process of listening can be divided into three stages. Pre-listening stage refers to the application of the schemata; while-listening stage refers to the application of the present knowledge while post-listening stage refers to the extension of the knowledge. At present, most English teachers following these three stages in listening class, including me. The listening strategy is helpful to students to improve their listening skill and enhance their listening level to a certain degree.

2.3 Factors affecting the listening comprehension

2.3.1 Ahuja's view

“Effective listening is an active process. Good listening-listening with intent to understand - is more than passively acting as a symbol receptacle.” (Ahuja, 2006, p. 35)^[16]. Ahuja (2006) believes that many problems in social, personal, and business relationships can attribute to poor listening, and in contrast, good listening can foster the relationships in many ways.

2.3.1.1 Listener's attitude

Ahuja (2006) argues that efficient listening requires a listener having objective, unbiased attitude. The listener usually refuses to accept the ideas that challenge his beliefs or he feels impatient with the ideas that are dull to him.

2.3.1.2 Emotional state

Listening ability sometimes is affected by the emotions. On the one hand, emotions cause deafness when the contents are contrary to the existing beliefs, on the other hand, emotions may make listening much easier when the contents pleases the listener. (Ahuja, 2006).

2.3.1.3 Lack of concentration

If a listener desires to improve his listening, he must form the habit of listening with concentration and he should know concentration needs effort. (Ahuja, 2006). “Adopt a co-operative and objective attitude; create an interest in the subject; realize how subject matter of speech can be of help, and turn off one's emotional blocks.” (Ahuja, 2006, p.75).

2.3.1.4 The differential between thinking and speaking speed

Nichols and Stevens (1957, cited by Ahuja, 2006, p. 76) stresses this factor as follows^[17]:

“The brain deals with words at lightening pace, but when we listen, we ask this brain to receive words at an extremely low pace. It might seem logical to slow down our thinking when we listen. ...But slowing thought processes is a difficult thing to do – almost painful. Therefore, when we listen, we continue thinking at high speed while the spoken words arrive at slow speed. In the act of listening the differential between thinking and speaking rates means that our brains work with hundreds of words in addition to those we hear, assembling thoughts other than those spoken to us.” It is obvious that this differential between thinking and speaking speed can affect the listening.

2.3.2 Underwood's view

Underwood (1989) regards that a student's different cultural and educational backgrounds can influence the

listening comprehension^[18]. She classifies the following factors as follow: 1. be difficult to control over the speaker's speed; 2. be difficult to repeat the previous information; 3. students' limited vocabulary; 4. be difficult to recognize the signals; 5. be difficult to understand; 6. be difficult to concentrate; 7. existed bad learning habits. (Underwood, 1989, cited by Yao, 2010)^[19]

On the basis of different researchers' views, it can be concluded that some factors, for instance, the listener's pronunciation, limited vocabulary, the contents of the listening, the listener's concentration and the speaker's speed can influence the listening comprehension.

3 Analysis and discussions

As putting forward in the section of 2.1 and 2.2.1, listening is the element part in the process of the communication and the main sources of the information in our daily life. Listening process is a complicated one, and the aim of the listening teaching is making students equip the ability to communicate in the real-life situation through listening. Though both the whole country and the Chinese English teachers have attached importance to the English listening teaching in recent years, the effect of the listening teaching is not so good and the level of the students' listening stays in such a lower level that they are not able to communicate in English in their everyday life, not to mention communicate fluently and freely.

3.1 The limited time and unlimited information

Nowadays, almost every English teacher takes advantage of the learning strategy and follows the process of listening---pre-listening stage, while-listening stage and post-listening stage as having mentioned in the section of 2.2.2, but students can't always improve their English listening effectively. In most teachers' opinion, they should teach too much knowledge about listening in limited time. They all complain that they must finish one unit in one class according to the teaching schedule. They feel difficult to provide for the students with too much listening in such rush time. For example, the strong accents of the speakers and some unknown background knowledge about different countries make the students difficult to understand the listening materials. Even though the teachers provide many hints and play the recorder at least three times, the students can't catch the main ideas of the conversations. But considering the teaching plan which demands teachers should finish one unit

in one class, most teachers choose to tell students the standard answers to each question although they deeply know most students do not master the listening because most students can't interact with the teachers and just keep silent in class. The teachers may feel they can do nothing other than to finish the teaching course first because all the contents of every unit maybe relevant to the content of the final examination. In addition, the teachers react that they can't take care of every student in class because of the teaching schedule and the limited class time. Despite they know some students can't catch the listening materials entirely, they just try their best to ensure 80 percent of the students understand the listening materials. For one reason, there are at least 50 students in one class, the teachers do not have enough energy to pay attention to every student, and for another reason, not every non-English major student takes an interest in English and they are unwilling to spend time in learning English, let alone listening because some of them view English useless in their future. In this case, most teachers do their endeavors to ensure the students who are willing to improve their English to have a clear understanding of the listening.

3.2 The pronunciation and the accent

No matter the students' levels are higher or not, they all believe that there is something wrong with their pronunciation. The teachers often teach the new vocabulary about the listening material before listening in order to make students catch the meaning much more easily, however, most students can't catch the new words during the listening. Talking of the reasons, one of them is the pronunciation as Underwood's view. First, many non-English major students can't pronounce every word correctly even though they learn the phonetic symbols from the very beginning. On the one hand, not every English teacher has a good pronunciation, on the other hand, many students can't grasp the phonetic symbols very well and form a bad habit of using Pinyin to mark the pronunciation of the word, for example, many students mark the pronunciation of "Thank you very much" as "san ke yo wai rei ma chi", in that case, they can't pronounce most words exactly gradually. And what's more, maybe some of them are affected by their own dialect. So it is self-evident that they don't know which words when they are listening even if there is no new vocabulary. Second, even though the students have a good pronunciation and they learn the new vocabulary well, there are some rules such as liaison, weak forms, and

elision in the discourse when listening. Once such rules occur in the listening and the speed is too fast, maybe many students can't guess the real words, take it for example, the phrase, "take it off", is very easy, but if it exists in the listening, it is pronounced as /teikitɒf/, /f/ is elided at times, some students may feel confused when they hear such pronunciation and they wonder which word is, therefore, they can't understand the meaning obviously. Third, many speakers speak with an accent in the listening materials. It is quite difficult for students to catch the real meaning by listening the standard English, let alone English with the accent. Last, there are many words with same or similar pronunciation in English, for instance, "here & hear", "wait & weight", "fair & fare", "ship & sheep", "bear & beer" and "sit & seat". It is quite difficult for students to identify which words exist in the listening materials in such a quick speed and short time.

3.3 Vocabulary

From the beginning of learning English, the students have been told the vocabulary is quite important to the English learning. In theory, many educators and researchers have long realized that the capability of vocabulary is the core of the communicative competence. (Meara, 1996, cited by Wang, 2011). Vocabulary is the fundamental part in English learning. The amount of vocabulary plays a vital role in English learning and it is also the basic part for listening. It is the lack of vocabulary that makes most students have the poor listening, and Underwood also mentioned it. As the students' view, they acknowledge that they haven't master sufficient vocabulary in fact, whereas they have a confusion that there are many words they know well, even if they can make use of them flexibly and fluently in speaking and writing, nevertheless, they feel difficult to comprehend or they need longer time to give the reaction when they hear these words in listening. It is bound to influence the students' listening in such a case. There are two factors causing such case: first one is the students' lack of solid vocabulary foundation, which causes the students not to use the words flexibly, for example, when students hear such a conversation like this

"A: How about your new apartment?"

B: Oh, it is good, but it needs about two and a half hours' drive to the city."

Though there is no new word at all, many students can't give the correct answer if they are asked what the speaker complains about his new apartment. Most

students can't give the quick reaction in the short time. Another reason is many words belonging to polysemy. When a listener hear such kind of words, the only meaning they know or the most familiar meaning they know appears in his mind first, which is hard to avoid misunderstanding. Take "view" for example, "it has a great view", when students hear such a sentence, the first response is "it has a great opinion" because the most familiar meaning of "view" equals "opinion", but clearly, here, "view" means "scenery".

3.4 Grammar

Grammar is considered as a bone and important component in language teaching. The students can draw inferences about other cases from one instance if they are good at grammatical rules. Correspondingly, they can practice listening comprehension better. But from the interview with the students, they have the misunderstanding that grammar is not so important in English and grammar can be mastered automatically in the process of speaking, reading and writing, as a result, they neglected grammatical study when they were young. Furthermore, there are many problems in their grammatical study, which brings about their difficult in listening. As is seen, it is unavoidable that every sentence refers to grammar such as tense, voice and syntax in the process of listening. Therefore, the students are not able to understand sentence entirely if they do a bad job in grammar. For example, such a sentence "I have intended to leave tonight" appears in a listening material, if the students have a good understanding in grammar, it is easy for them to know the true meaning of the sentence, that is, the speaker wants to leave tonight, but he does not leave due to some uncertain reasons; on the contrary, if the students do not master the point of grammar, they may have the opinion that the speaker is going to leave tonight. Under such circumstance, the students are sure to misunderstand the listening materials.

3.5 Students' psychology and listening habit

Many researchers (Ahuja, Nichols and Underwood) mentioned the listener's emotions and habits can influence the listening skill. All of the students mentioned that they are nervous, anxious or afraid or haven not any confidence when listening, especially, doing the listening in the tests or communicating with others in daily life. Some students show they are willing to practice listening in their spare time with the intention of overcoming the nervous psychology

by practicing more, however, to their disappointment, they always feel nervous when they do the listening in public, particularly when they can't catch the contents of the materials. As a consequence, students' nervous psychology is relatively irrelevant to the times of their practice. It is easy to find out that many students often take very deep breath before listening to relax and ease themselves, but it is common that quite a few students start fidgeting when hearing new vocabulary or hear unclearly, even some students break into a cold sweat, which influence the students' psychology in turn and make them more nervous. In that case, they may not comprehend the meaning of the material even if the material is within their reach.

Another factor is the students' listening habit. Most students do not have the habit of taking notes in listening as the teachers' words and my own observation. And what's worse, sometimes, some students are inclined to close their eyes when listening with the reason that they believe they can concentrate themselves better without being disturbed by the surroundings. Yet, they neglect two problems, that is, first, they may sleepy or absent-minded once they close their eyes, another is about the memory. They can't memorize the detailed information as much as they can in such short time if they don't form the habit of taking some important notes in the process of listening. Besides, many students are likely to translate the contents into Chinese sentence by sentence when listening. They don't use the English mode of thinking. Quite a large number of students wouldn't continue listening if they are not allowed to translate it into Chinese. But the biggest drawback of translation is leading to the slow reaction of their brains, furthermore, it will take a lot of time and the students can't catch useful information during listening.

4 Conclusion

In short, listening competence is the essential part in language learning, which not only can promote the abilities of speaking, reading and writing, but also can be an important channel to obtain information. As many researchers' view, the aim of teaching listening is to

make students have the ability to communicate in their life as listening is regarded as a competence. Listening is an essential tool to grasp English as listening is regarded as a means for learning. Listening must be paid enough attention to in the future in order to find more factors or some practical suggestions aiming at helping students improve their listening skill.

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