

An Investigation of Factors Influencing English Listening Comprehension and Possible Measures for Improvement

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Abstract

This paper discusses an investigation of a one-year experiment of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) conducted at Shanxi University of Finance and Economics. The experiment involved three teachers and 550 non-English major undergraduates of the University, sponsored by the Chinese Ministry of Education. The study aims to find the factors influencing English listening comprehension and the strategies to be taken that might improve students' listening comprehension. The study has also sought new ways of cultivating listening comprehension competence in TEFL in the Chinese context. In the light of constructivist linguistics theory and practice this paper analyses the nature of listening and comprehension and the process of listening comprehension. The paper indicates that among current problems, and their causes in English teaching practice, the most frequent is that of cultural difference and its affect on listening comprehension. According to the practice of TEFL in the University, the author puts forward the teaching approach of "listening-based, overall development" and addresses listening comprehension strategies such as distinguishing different stages of listening teaching, matching instruction to students' individual differences, developing students' listening comprehension micro skills, and especially focusing on cultural learning in language teaching. Results of the research are of significance and may prove beneficial to English language teaching in Chinese tertiary institutions

Key words: Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), listening comprehension competence, listening comprehension strategies, and cultural knowledge

1. Introduction

With China's entry into the WTO and opening its markets to the outside world, the demand for English speaking proficiency among workers is rising. In recent years, the communicative approach has become more and more widely used in Chinese English tertiary education and therefore, students' communicative competence has been stressed. The changes to the requirements of College English Test (Band 4 and Band 6), National Matriculation English Test, and Graduate Record Examination make listening teaching a priority all over the country. The need for competence in listening in English learners is increasingly recognized, so that listening teaching has recently attracted considerable attention.

However, careful observation of College English teaching practice has found that the teaching of listening skills is still the weak link in the language teaching process. Despite students having mastered the basic elements of English grammar and vocabulary, their listening comprehension is often weak. Through systematic study of basic English teaching stages at university it has been recognized that while students' integrated skills in reading, writing, translating have been improving, their listening and speaking capabilities have been left behind. The key factor that has been recognized in the preliminary studies is students' limited listening comprehension.

Both teachers and students recognized that the listening levels of each learner are different, particularly because English listening is affected by an array of factors. Important among these factors is the necessity to emphasize to teachers and students the importance of listening, to encourage the study of listening teaching theory and to explore listening teaching methods by using the most advanced teaching methods.

The traditional grammar-translation method of teaching English in China has been found inadequate to the demands for producing efficient English speakers and listeners. The old approach has been shown to be ineffectual; research has stimulated an entirely new conception of teaching English as a foreign language. Central to the new approach is the understanding that there must be a rigorous application of the communicative approach in English classrooms. English must be taught as a tool for communication. It is now widely accepted that students' listening ability must be at the core of teaching practice, and it is the area in which teachers need to concentrate their own efforts to improve their teaching. This is a significant challenge for teachers of English in China; however it is crucial in the development of English language competence.

Beginning in 2004, the Chinese Ministry of Education launched a program of teaching reform with an experimental study of TEFL programs across China. The Ministry issued its new document of *College English Curriculum Requirements* for trial implementation. The new curriculum emphasizes the need for the development of students' communicative competence, particularly listening and speaking (Wang Dong, 2004). The intention is to introduce teaching reform that will result in an improvement to the students' English overall linguistic capability, based on a foundation of oral and aural competence.

The objective of this paper, then, is to provide an examination of the literature into TEFL, particularly in China, and a descriptive explanation of the experimental situation at Shanxi University of Finance and Economics (SUFU). The experiment has been designed to assist students to learn how to listen and develop the metacognitive knowledge and strategies crucial to success in listening comprehension. The analysis of the experimental outcomes has informed this paper and the information has already proved beneficial in the decision-making process of curriculum and teaching reforms to English teaching at SUFU in particular, and in China more generally.

2. Theoretical basis of listening comprehension

Beginning in the early 70's, work by Asher, Postovsky, Winitz and, later, Krashen, brought attention to the role of listening as a tool for understanding and emphasized it as a key factor in facilitating language learning. Thus, listening has emerged as an important component in the process of second language acquisition (Feyten, 1991).

2.1 Definition of listening

According to Howatt and Dakin (1974), listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This process involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, the speaker's grammar and vocabulary, and comprehension of meaning. An able listener is capable of doing these four things simultaneously.

Thomlison's (1984) definition of listening includes "active listening," which goes beyond comprehending as understanding the message content, to comprehension as an act of empathetic understanding of the speaker. Furthermore, Gordon (1985) argues that empathy is essential to listening and contends that it is more than a polite attempt to identify a speaker's perspectives. Rather more importantly, empathetic understanding expands to "egocentric prosocial behavior". Thus, the listener altruistically acknowledges concern for the speaker's welfare and interests.

Ronald and Roskelly (1985) define listening as an active process requiring the same skills of prediction, hypothesizing, checking, revising, and generalizing that writing and reading demand; and these authors present specific exercises to make students active listeners who are aware of the "inner voice" one hears when writing.

2.2 Significance of listening

Language learning depends on listening since it provides the aural input that serves as the basis for language acquisition and enables learners to interact in spoken communication.

Listening is the first language mode that children acquire. It provides the foundation for all aspects of language and cognitive development, and it plays a life-long role in the processes of communication. A study by Wilt (1950), found that people listen 45 % of the time they spend communicating. This study is still widely cited (e.g., Martin, 1987; Strother, 1987). Wilt found that 30 % of communication time was spent speaking, 16 % reading, and 9 % writing. That finding confirmed what Rankin discovered in 1928, that people spent 70 % of their waking time communicating and that three-fourths of this time was spent listening and speaking.

According to Bulletin (1952), listening is the fundamental language skill. It is the medium through which people gain a large portion of their education, their information, their understanding of the world and of human affairs, their ideals, sense of values, and their appreciation. In this day of mass communication, much of it oral, it is of vital importance that students are taught to listen effectively and critically.

According to second language acquisition theory, language input is the most essential condition of language acquisition. As an input skill, listening plays a crucial role in students' language development. Krashen (1985) argues that people acquire language by understanding the linguistic information they hear. Thus language acquisition is achieved mainly through receiving understandable input and listening ability is the critical component in achieving understandable language input. Given the importance of listening in language learning and teaching, it is essential for language teachers to help students become effective listeners. In the communicative approach to language teaching, this means modeling listening strategies and providing listening practice in authentic situations: precisely those that learners are likely to encounter when they use the language outside the classroom. Therefore, we in China should establish "listening-first" as fundamental in foreign language teaching.

3. Nature of listening comprehension

Since listening is, according to Wang Shouyuan (2003), the most important component in the five aspects of overall English competence he suggests as listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation, it deserves particular attention. Educators must actively explore the nature and process of listening comprehension and study the theory and methodology of listening comprehension in order to improve listening teaching outcomes and make students recognize that listening comprehension is the crucial aspect of English learning.

From the point of view of constructivist linguistics, foreign language teaching should focus on language form and structure, thus, listening teaching is undertaken in each of the four aspects of language form. When students are taught to understand a passage of text, teachers first let them discriminate between the pronunciation of vowels and consonants, then understand vocabulary, sentences and discourses. The goals of this listening teaching model from the "bottom-up" is to help students understand the meaning of vocabulary by discriminating sounds, to understand sentence meaning, and to monitor and control the meaning of discourses by understanding sentence meaning.

Since the 1970s, with the development of functional language theory, there has been an emphasis on the research of language function in society. Functional linguistic experts recognise language as a communicative tool, but not an isolated structure system. Consequently the teaching of listening is not simply intended to make students hear a sound, a word or a sentence, rather, the goal is to cultivate students' abilities to understand speakers' intentions accurately and communicate with each other effectively.

4. The process of listening comprehension

With a greater understanding of language quality and the development of teaching theory, there has been a recognition of the process of listening comprehension as needing greater emphasis.

Listening is an invisible mental process, making it difficult to describe. However, it is recognised by Wipf (1984) that listeners must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intonation, understand intention and retain and interpret this within the immediate as well as the larger socio-cultural context of the utterance. Rost (2002) defines listening, in its broadest sense, as a process of receiving what the speaker actually says (receptive orientation); constructing and representing meaning (constructive orientation); negotiating meaning with the speaker and responding (collaborative orientation); and, creating meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy (transformative orientation). Listening, then, is a complex, active processes of interpretation in which listeners match what they hear with what they already know.

5. Strategies of listening comprehension

Listening strategies are techniques or activities that contribute directly to the comprehension and recall of listening input. Listening strategies can be classified by how the listener processes the input.

Top-down strategies are listener based; the listener taps into background knowledge of the topic, the situation or context, the type of text, and the language. This background knowledge activates a set of expectations that help the listener to interpret what is heard and anticipate what will come next. Top-down strategies include:

- listening for the main idea
- predicting
- drawing inferences
- summarizing

Bottom-up strategies are text based in which the listener relies on the language in the message, that is, the combination of sounds, words, and grammar that creates meaning. Bottom-up strategies include:

- listening for specific details
- recognizing cognates
- recognizing word-order patterns

Listening comprehension tends to be an interactive, interpretive process in which listeners use prior knowledge and linguistic knowledge in understanding messages. Listeners use metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies to facilitate comprehension and to make their learning more effective. Metacognitive strategies are important because they regulate and direct the language learning process. Research shows that skilled listeners use more metacognitive strategies than their less-skilled counterparts (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, Vandergrift, 1997a). The use of cognitive

strategies helps students to manipulate learning materials and apply specific techniques to a listening task. Socio-affective strategies describe the techniques listeners use to collaborate with others, to verify understanding or to lower anxiety.

6. Current problems in English teaching practice in China

Since the beginning of English teaching in modern China, the Grammar-Translation Method has held dominant ways in college English teaching. Traditionally, teachers of English focused on passing on knowledge; their attention was on written examination scores and they paid much less attention to cultivating students' listening and speaking abilities. In this kind of regime students tended to rely excessively on their teachers and, by comparison with European students, they would be considered very passive learners. Although Chinese students have often learned significant amounts of grammar, and memorized many English words, they have commonly been unable to apply their knowledge to real life. Generally they have found it difficult to make themselves understood in spoken conversation; conversely, understanding what is said to them is often a challenge.

Currently, in the early stage of college English teaching, there are problems in listening teaching that may have their origins in high school where few students have been the recipients of listening teaching. Consequently students find it difficult to adapt to college English teaching. All too often, these students are unable to understand what is taught in listening classes because they do not understand the spoken content of the lessons. Frequently such students lose all confidence as second language practitioners.

During their first year of college English, the problem of listening deficiency is not particularly noticeable since language teaching at this level tends to focus on vocabulary and grammar structure. However, on entering second year, when listening content increases and the range of listening texts widens, some students feel they have some understanding, but all too often they do not. While listening, they are struggling to grasp each word and the meaning of every sentence. When the listening task is complete, they are disappointed to find they have been unable to understand. Although they might hear every word, they are often unclear about speakers' intention. The stress of the situation frequently results in the student forgetting the first sentence when they hear the second one, totally disrupting their efforts to gain meaning. Thus, the goal of developing an integrated language capacity is to achieve teaching that will affect students' listening comprehension and influence students' psychological well-being.

7. Causal analysis of listening comprehension problems

Listening comprehension is a complex psychological process of listeners' understanding language by sense of hearing. It is an interactive process of language knowledge and psychological activities. However, this process is not simply decoding the message; it also involves the combining of the decoding of the message process with its reconstruction as meaning (Ma Lihua, 2002). Although teachers of college English at SUFE have attempted to teach listening and listening comprehensive competence, all too often, the teaching outcomes have proved less than adequate. The results have shown that even when teachers have doubled their efforts the results have been consistently disappointing. In the next section the reasons for these outcomes are explored.

7.1 Students' psychological obstacles influence their listening capacity

Psychological factors refer to those non-mental factors not directly involving cognitive processes, such as students' interests, attention, learning emotions, attitudes, and willpower. Although these non-mental factors are directly influential in the students' learning processes, they play a part in promoting and controlling learning effectiveness. For example, two students' listening levels might be similar, and, while their test results may be quite different, the explanation for their difference is seen to lie in their different psychological states.

The cultural attitude of students is particularly influential in the way that students address their studies. There is, in China, a long history of reverence for written text, and this attitude has

influenced the official assessment processes. Thus students generally pay less attention to developing listening comprehension because they recognize it gains a lower percentage of marks in examinations, while reading and writing are highly rewarded. Students understand they will gain high scores only if they master the prescribed knowledge of grammar and writing. Furthermore, listening comprehension seems to the students to have little practical value. Consequently these psychological factors have a direct impact on students' willingness and commitment to listening instruction.

As a direct consequence of the factors mentioned above, many Chinese students lack confidence in their oral English language capability and they frequently have a self-defeating and defensive attitude to their engagement in it. In the listening classroom, teachers need students' active participation but, having so many students who lack confidence and who feel nervous and anxious, makes the task of generating discussion and conversation particularly difficult. Students are reluctant to answer questions and will not risk being laughed at by their peers. When attending examinations the stress of being shown as inadequate and being criticized by the teacher and parents is frequently more than students will tolerate. Thus, it is unsurprising that college students who are under pressure for a considerable period of time are often stressed and depressed; factors that compound their efforts to improve their English proficiency.

7.2 Grammar knowledge affects listening comprehension

Language knowledge is the foundation of learning English. If students' knowledge of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary is insufficient, it is probable that their English listening comprehension will be negatively affected by lack of language knowledge.

However, the most basic outward shell of language is pronunciation and intonation. Therefore, the first step of listening comprehension is learning how to identify and select sound signals according to pronunciation; thus pronunciation knowledge must be developed. When students' pronunciation knowledge is inadequate their capacity to discriminate will be weak and will affect listening comprehension

For the Chinese student of English the challenge of listening poses particular demands because there are many sentence types that are complex and very different from the home language. If the student is unable to distinguish the main clause from a subordinate clause and is unable to understand their relationships, despite understanding the meaning of every word in the sentence, understanding is unlikely to occur with accuracy. Students do become accustomed to analysing grammatical structure relatively quickly when they are taught the psychological analysis method. Nevertheless many students become confused about relationships in a sentence and connections between sentences and they are often unsure of relationship within sentences. Thus lack of grammatical knowledge can reduce English listening levels.

7.3 Cultural background knowledge and thinking affect listening comprehension

According to Trudgill (1983) language is rather like a mirror that reflects the national culture of its speakers. The American linguist Sapir (1921: 60-90) maintains that, "Language cannot exist without culture... Culture can be explained as what the society thinks and does, and the language is the expression of the ideas of the society." Consequently, the marriage between language and culture is inseparable; language is the carrier of culture and the capsule that holds a way of thinking.

Language carries knowledge and cultural information and it reflects the substantial and particular ways of thinking of that people. Thus culture is embedded in even the simplest act of language

(Liddicoat, 2000), it is an inseparable part of the way in which we live our lives and the way we use language.. As found by O'Malley and Chamot (1989), the effective listener was the one who was able to draw on a knowledge of the world, on personal experiences and by asking questions of themselves.

Therefore, the student with no background knowledge of culture in English, American or other English speaking countries, is unlikely to understand Anglophone modes of thinking as expressed in English language. Kramsch (1993) maintains that every time we speak we perform a cultural act. Consequently, there is now, an emphasis in modern language teaching on cultural knowledge as a basis for language learning. An important requirement, then, for learning spoken English, is the acquisition of cultural knowledge. Thus if students' pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and cultural knowledge are to prosper, they must be grounded in a sound knowledge of the society in which the language is based.

8. The investigation of the new listening teaching model

The investigation reported here was conducted at Shanxi University of Finance and Economics (SUFU) to examine the effectiveness of the new teaching model of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in a Chinese context as a response to the teaching reforms introduced by the Chinese Ministry of Education.

8.1 Features of the new teaching model

In the new teaching model adopted in this research, the author used the teaching approach of "listening-based learning for overall language development" to teaching practice, especially focusing on cultural learning in language teaching.

The pedagogical approach in this experiment was a combination of face-to-face teaching, and encouragement of students' autonomous learning and online coaching. The model was intended to be student-centered, with the goal of encouraging students to monitor and control their learning processes, to choose their learning content and learning methods, and to reflect on and assess their own learning outcomes. At the beginning period of the first term, the teacher guided students in setting up learning groups. Then the teachers and students identified learning objectives for each unit and designed teaching activities. In this way students' initiative was stimulated and enthusiasm was aroused.

Students not only took an active part in the development and planning of classroom activities they were also made aware of the intention, by teaching staff, to adopt a rather different teaching role than the students had previously been accustomed. The teachers' role expanded from the single role of distributor of knowledge to one in which the teacher was to become a multi-skilled facilitator. Communications between teachers and students also changed and became more frequent and less formal. The new approach reduced the social distance between teacher and student and, while it brought about positive benefits, it also had unforeseen consequences. In the new teaching model the process of English teaching and learning took on some of the newer features of the workplace, with more flexible time arrangements, individualization and an encouragement to take initiative and act with personal autonomy.

8.2 Research approach: Contrastive investigation

The research program at SUFU is the responsibility of the college English reform group who designed a contrastive teaching experiment, which set out to achieve the goals of the "*College English Curriculum Requirement*" and the teaching objectives of the university.

After the students of Grade 2004 entered the university, they attended the first graded test. Based on the results of the overall grades (60% for the test results and 40% for the results of National Matriculation English Test), students were divided into two-level classes (Classes A and B). Three classes A and six classes B were selected to do the experiment in order to put the experiences of the new teaching model into practice. There were 550 undergraduate students taking a major in English, with three teachers involved in their instruction, during the experimental period at SUFE.

The teaching approach of the experimental classes was to combine the teacher's face-to-face instruction with the Reading and Writing unit to allow the students' autonomous learning as a component of the ICT network in the Online Learning unit. Then to reinforce this engagement with listening and speaking training in small groups in the Listening and Speaking unit.

The teaching ratio of in the face-to-face, autonomous learning, and listening and speaking training is 2:1:1. Experimental classes had four class hours each week. The teachers engaged with students face-to-face in the ICT-assisted classroom. The three natural classes were put together to have a large-size class for two class hours once each week. The Internet-based autonomous learning was arranged at the computer center with the teacher's guidance; each session ran for two class hours once every two weeks. Listening and speaking training was in small groups, each conducted as face-to-face sessions, once every two weeks, for two class hours each session.

Experimental Class A were required to study the text book *New Horizon College English* (Volumes 2-4) commencing in first term and continuing through to the third term. Volume 1 was given to students to learn by themselves. At the end of the third term the students were organized to attend College English Test-4 (CET-4). During the fourth term the experimental classes studied Advanced English (Volume 5). There were four class hours every week for College English Band 2 to Band 5. Those students who passed CET-4 were able to attend CET-6 at the end of the fourth term. Non-experimental classes were required to study *New Horizon College English* (Volumes 1-4) from the first term to the fourth term, and at the end of the fourth term students were organized to attend CET-4.

Experimental classes and non-experimental classes of Grade 2004 both adopted the use of *New Horizon College English (Reading and Writing course)*. The textbook has web-based teaching software produced by the Chinese Ministry of Education. The experimental classes were given an additional seventy-six hours of study time when they were able to have free access to the computers. This access was allocated to each student's computer-card at the beginning of the term. Sixteen of seventy-six class hours were organized for autonomous learning, which was, initially, supervised by the teacher. Once the teacher felt that the students were sufficiently prepared to work autonomously the students organized their own study time to study on computers, work on assignments, engage with the campus-web or checking teacher's explanations to questions on the website and in self practice (Teaching Reform Committee, SUFE, 2004).

8.3 Teaching processes in-class and outside-class

The new teaching model of listening comprehension has three stages. Stage one is preparation before class; stage two is classroom teaching; and stage three is learning after class. During these stages, teachers and students set teaching objectives, choose teaching content and design teaching activities mutually.

8.3.1 Pre-listening activities:

The activities chosen during pre-listening may serve as preparation for listening in several ways. During pre-listening the teacher may:

- Set a purpose or decide in advance what to listen for
- Decide if more linguistic or background knowledge is needed
- Determine whether to enter the text from the top down (attend to the overall meaning) or from the bottom up (focus on the words and phrases)
- Make students aware of the type of text they will be listening to, the role they will play, and the purpose for which they will be listening
- Provide opportunities for group or collaborative work and for background reading or class discussion activities

8.3.2 Activities while-listening

Activities while-listening relate directly to engagement with text, and students do them during or immediately after the time they are listening. These points are kept in mind when planning while-listening activities:

- Decide what is and is not important to understand
- Use predicting to encourage students to monitor their comprehension as they listen.
- Use questions to focus students' attention on the elements of the text crucial to comprehension of the whole.
- Organize activities to guide listeners through the text. Combine global activities such as getting the main idea, topic, etc.
- Give an immediate feedback whenever possible. Encourage students to examine how or why their responses were incorrect.

8.3.3 Post-listening Activities:

The teacher writes questions on the board and asks students to answer them. Students are also stimulated to talk and actively participate in the task.

- Tell students to compare their notes and discuss what they understood in pairs or small groups.
- Encourage students to respond to what they heard. For example, where possible ask questions like “Do you agree?” And encourage debate.
- Tell pairs to write a summary of the main points. Then have them compare their summaries and check if they covered all the main points.
- Evaluate comprehension in a particular task or area
- Decide if the strategies used were appropriate for the purpose and for the task, modify strategies if necessary

By raising students' awareness of listening as a skill that requires active engagement, and by explicitly teaching listening strategies, teachers help their students develop both the ability and the confidence to handle communication situations they may encounter beyond the classroom. In this way they give their students the foundation for communicative competence in the new language.

8.4 Roles of teachers and students

The planning committee at SUFE found that changing the curriculum demanded considerable changes in attitude from both teachers and learners. Teachers were no longer able to take their previously dominant positions as the privileged speakers at the front of the class; neither could they continue to consider themselves as the holders of all wisdom. And of course students, too, could not shelter behind the quiet façade of their previous role as the passive receivers of information.

The changes in teacher's roles and students' roles were introduced to the students from the beginning. Teachers first provided students with appropriate tools and opportunities to practice using them, i.e. teachers facilitated the changes. The presupposition was that teachers were willing to change and shift their roles in the classroom from information providers to facilitators, shifting from 'teaching knowledge-based' to 'supervising students learning-based', from 'a protagonist' on the stage, to becoming 'a director' behind the scenes. Teachers were no longer the only source of information, but acted as mentors who helped students to actively interpret and organize the information they were given, fitting it into prior knowledge (Dole, et al., 1991). Students became active participants in learning and were encouraged to be explorers and creators of language, rather than passive recipients of it (Brown, 1991).

According to constructivist learning theory, language learners become active constructors of knowledge by recognizing problems, producing hypotheses, confirming hypotheses and solving problems; and then finding new problems. In the process of recycling, learners build up knowledge structures. Students who are active constructors of knowledge through experience and opportunities are more prone to discover and enquire. This implies that students are co-learners, using available knowledge through interaction with others in socially significant tasks of collaborative work.

8.5 Assessment Methodology

The **formative** assessment of the teaching/learning process takes into consideration three aspects of student activity. There are students' self-assessment, students' assessment of each other and the teacher's assessment of students. The teacher of each class has the responsibility of coordinating the process of students' self-assessment and students' assessment of each other. The results from these assessments serve as **respective** 5% of the overall term grades. The teacher of each class also assesses the students' performance in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating in class and outside class. The results of this anecdotal record form another 10% of the overall term grades. The computer automatically records the hours of students' study on computers. At the end of term students' computer interactions form 20% of overall term grades.

Final assessment refers to the end of course examination and the level examination. The final course examination consists of a written test and an oral test. The examination content of the experimental classes has the same content as those of the non-experimental classes. However, the results of the final course examination and the results of the level examination are respectively 50% and 10% of the overall term grades. At the end of the term the Foreign Language Faculty of SUFE compared the teaching results of the experimental classes and those of the non-experimental classes. A detailed analytic report concerning the two teaching models was then completed.

9. Teaching methods for listening comprehension

Second language acquisition theory and the development of foreign language competency relies heavily on two salient features: language learning and language acquisition (Krashen, 1985). Language learning refers to learning foreign language knowledge consciously, including lessons in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. The language acquisition process is similar to what occurs when children acquire their mother tongue, when language competence is gained through natural language communication, normally with the stimulation of much language information. Krashen

maintains that language acquisition is much more effective than language learning, since, in language acquisition, learners really do break the fetters of mother tongue and use second language to express thoughts and to communicate freely. But how to help students engage with the challenge of improving their listening comprehensive ability effectively by this method? The author believes that it is possible by following these aspects of best teaching practice.

9.1 Level-based listening teaching

In English listening teaching, there is a need to gauge students' listening comprehensive ability in order to cultivate their listening skills according to individual differences. Wu Zhengfu 1991 points out that a student of English language needs to experience five stages in listening comprehension. First, hearing a series of sounds students cannot understand the content at all. In this stage, teachers should encourage students to listen frequently so they develop an instinctive feel for the pronunciation and intonation of English. This will benefit students' pronunciation, and more importantly, students will gradually get used to the regular language flow.

In stage two, students can distinguish some isolated, content-related words. At this point, the greatest achievement for students is the formation of good habits of listening. If students encounter new words in the process of listening, teachers should tell them not to worry about that but let students grasp the gist and guess the content from the context.

At stage three, students can distinguish phrases and sentence patterns from the language flow, and have general understanding of the topic. Teachers should concentrate on cultivating students' ability to control sentences or the content of a whole passage.

The fourth stage occurs when students can distinguish clauses or sentences in the language flow, knowing their implications, and having a reasonable understanding of the whole content. At this point, students' difficulties are likely to be that they have inadequate vocabulary related to particular texts. Students need to listen to recording about subjects that are not familiar to them so that they can learn to guess at meanings successfully, thus gradually enlarging vocabulary and their skills of prediction.

By the fifth stage students can generally understand most spoken texts coherently. However, when students' listening ability has reached the fifth stage it will only take a change of content for students to return to the third and the fourth stages. Even when students have reached the fifth stage they still needs constant help to absorb new words and knowledge.

9.2 Cultivating students' listening skills

Cultivating students' listening skills is one of the most difficult tasks for any ESL teacher. This is because successful listening skills are acquired over time and with lots of practice. The demands of the task are often frustrating for students because there are no precise rules, as in grammar teaching. Speaking and writing also have very specific exercises that can lead to improvement. However, there are quite specific ways of improving listening skills but these are difficult to quantify. Teachers must develop students' micro skills of listening comprehension. Brown (1994) identifies seventeen listening comprehension micro skills. Some of the more important of these skills are discussed here.

For beginners, the most important listening skill is discrimination in English pronunciation, intonation and language flow. They need to acquire the crucial skill of identifying the main information. Wu Zhengfu 1991 recognizes that when students acquire basic discrimination ability, they can select and analyze the meaning of what they hear and grasp the main content. In the teaching process teachers should cultivate students' ability to select main information and instruct students to control the general meaning of listening materials on the whole. In class, for example,

teachers can ask students to listen to the general meaning of the passage, and to sum up key points and main information.

Predictive ability is also an extremely important listening micro skill. In everyday communication, people continually make unconscious predictions about what speakers will say, and these predictions are made on the basis of their knowledge of the context in which the communication is made. The development of predictive ability has many aspects. Before listening training, teachers might ask students questions related to listening materials, or introduce relevant background knowledge to enlighten students' thinking to allow students a clear recognition of the goals and requirements of listening training.

The ability to guess the meaning of words is also an important listening micro skill. Listening comprehension does not mean understanding every word, but some words do play a crucial part in listening comprehension. It is a normal phenomenon not to understand every word that is uttered. However, students may guess the meaning of new words on the basis of the topic being discussed and gain some understanding of the probable linguistic items on the basis of the context of discourses, the grammatical structure and the background knowledge of the topic.

9.3 Textbook-based learning and other listening contexts

Listening lessons require listeners to concentrate on the content and make fast responses to what is heard. If students are passive and apprehensive during listening training, they will probably feel nervous and wary of taking chances. Teachers need to take a non-punitive approach and structure lessons that are varied, vivid and interesting. Teachers need to select a wide range of materials to increase listening content besides using textbooks. Students need to listen to different levels of English in order to be exposed to natural, lively, rich language, such as listening to English songs, seeing films with English text. In these ways it is possible to raise students' enthusiasm, cultivate their listening interests, and achieve the goals of learning English.

9.4 Passing on cultural knowledge in language teaching

Understanding that language is controlled by particular cultural experiences is a necessity for the language learner. If the cultural differences between the students' own culture and that of the language they are to learn is excessive, learners will usually keep some distance from the target language in their efforts to maintain their psychological comfort level. As a consequence the operating processes of memory and input will certainly be limited (Cheng Huaiyuan, 1999). Thus teachers need to be aware that breaking down the barriers is a significant part of cultural teaching and forms an important aspect of the whole process of language teaching.

English teaching in China is particularly fraught by the need to emphasize the properties of linguistic communication, but also its cultural propriety. Cultural teaching and language teaching become united in the same project. The aspect of cultural knowledge transmission is an equal part of language improvement and development of work in listening development has the potential for achieving a powerful influence on the formulation of students' thinking habits and the application of foreign language expressions. Cultural teaching, then, has direct and concrete influences on intercultural communication.

When students gain an intimate knowledge of the culture of the target language they begin to understand how the language is used to reflect the thoughts, behaviors and customs of that society. In teaching English listening, teachers need to develop students' consciousness about intercultural communication and they need to energize students' capacity for wanting to engage with a different

culture.

Great care needs to be taken when selecting listening material and auxiliary texts, since these are a crucial aspect of the cultural factors in listening teaching. The selection of material related to British and American cultural background knowledge is of particular importance, since these tend to be the focus of much of the classroom time when students' thinking ability and intercultural awareness is being cultivated.

9.5 Combining “intensive listening” with “extensive listening”; focusing on listening

Intensive listening requires students to understand the meaning of each discourse and, ultimately, to understand every sentence and word. Generally, intensive listening requires students to listen to a text several times, or divide the text into paragraphs and sentences to understand each one; or by doing dictation word by word. The goal is for students to understand every sentence.

Alternatively, extensive listening does not require students to understand every sentence, and every word, instead, students are encouraged to grasp the general meaning of the passage. The key point of listening is to understand the content. The purpose of intensive listening is to build basic listening skills, while extensive listening is to strengthen and enlarge effectiveness of intensive listening in order to improve overall listening ability.

In listening teaching, both intensive and extensive listening should be combined with cultivating students' basic skills, the development of the productive listening habits of active thinking and the ability to understand the text. Therefore, teachers must encourage students to engage in intensive listening in class, requiring students to understand the general meaning and also to become familiarized with English pronunciation, intonation and the changes in language flow. In activities outside the class students need to engage in extensive listening; listening to many different variety of language phenomena and gaining more knowledge through TV programs, radio, the Internet and as many other kinds of exposure to listening training they can find. Exposure to demands of listening should include aspects of everyday life, science and technology, and academic lectures. Teachers must create language-learning environments that stimulate students' interests and raise students' passion and enthusiasm for learning English.

9.6 Combining listening with other skills

According to language acquisition theory, human capacity for discrimination between language intention and language content is a crucial step in the language acquisition process. Thus listening comprehensive ability plays an important role in acquisition and improvement of language skills. Therefore, in listening teaching, there is a need to combine the development of listening ability with the development of other skills such as reading.

In order to improve listening ability it is necessary to listen frequently to a teacher reading well, since it is very difficult to generate a high quality output without appropriate input. Secondly, students need to practice reading aloud amongst themselves. By such activity students will learn to combine the act of listening with reading. Students must be actively engaged in producing language of high quality if they are to improve their English proficiency levels.

Similarly, by combining listening with writing, teachers can divide the work into two parts. First, students might answer teachers' questions in written English after listening to spoken language

material. It is also important to remember that good listening entails recalling the essence of the material rather than the precise detail. Thirdly, teachers should combine listening activities with speaking in ways that bring out the basics of oral communication. Inevitably, listeners will lose the information resources without speaking; speaking will lose its objective without careful listening and, as a result, speaking ability will not be acquired. Listening and speaking rely on each other and regulate each other.

It is important to strengthen listening through speaking and to improve speaking through listening. Students need to retell and discuss the material they have just heard in order to synthesize their understanding. In this way they learn to combine listening with speaking properly. Students who are able to do this are able to overcome their passive response to the situation and gradually they learn to feel safe when they respond. In order for this to happen, a truly interactive and penalty free listening class is required. Teacher/student and students/student exchanges should be emphasized as opportunities for a free exchange of opinions when participants can consolidate their listening approaches and skills during the process of communication.

Through a variety of listening-reading, listening-writing and listening-speaking activities, students can not only strengthen their language skills but also sharpen their interests and raise their motivation to improve their learning efficiency.

9.7 Make better use of advanced teaching facilities and learning conditions

We have found in our research that a two-hour time allocation per week it is not an efficient use of time; since listening is the foundation of language learning, it should have a prominent place in the teaching schedule. Students need to make the most effective use of the teaching facilities at university, the language laboratory, the micro computer classroom and the self-learning classroom with listening facilities to train their listening ability in their spare time. Teachers need to assign students to outside-class listening tasks. For example, when students watch films, they must write the general meaning of the film or write a comment on a sound recording. In order to make good use of students' spare time the Foreign Language Faculty of Economics and Trade established a Campus English Radio Station, which has produced a number of programs broadcast at regular times every day, such as *Current Affairs*, *Entering Science*, *American Slang* and *Listening to This*. In addition, students are encouraged to listen to the VOA and BBC as well as original sound recordings.

9.8 Evaluate listening effectiveness regularly and further improve listening approaches

When teaching listening skills, teachers should also evaluate students' listening effectiveness regularly in order to improve their own listening teaching approaches. Teachers need to discuss the content and approaches of their teaching with students regularly, and they should make adjustments in response to students' feedback.

10. Preliminary Findings

At the conclusion of the yearlong experiment from September 2004 to July 2005, the Foreign Language Faculty of Economics and Trade organized a final examination in July 2005. According to the new requirements issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education, the content of listening comprehension section includes dialogue, short passages in subjective form, a short passage stenography and a picture description. By analyzing and comparing the results of the listening test section of the term examination conducted by experimental classes and contrastive classes, it was found that the results of the listening test between the experimental classes and contrastive classes were clearly different. The results of experimental class A were higher than contrastive class A, and the results of experimental class B were also higher than contrastive class B. These results showed

that the measures taken in the experimental classes were both effective and efficient in cultivating students listening comprehensive competence.

In addition, by making careful classroom observations, it is recognized that there are three possible explanations of why the students in experimental classes did make better progress than the students in the natural classes in listening comprehension. Firstly, the experimental students came to understand the importance of listening comprehension and established the concept of "listening-first". Secondly, students did learn active listening strategies and applied those listening strategies to learning English; especially important were the skills of combining intensive listening with extensive listening and combining listening with the development of other language skills. Thirdly, students were able to make good use of their spare time to listen to a variety of language materials through a variety of facilities to develop their listening ability.

11. Conclusion

The paper has explored some of the factors that have influenced our efforts to improve students' English listening comprehensive competence. An outcome of the study is that we have been able to make some suggestions for measures that might be taken in terms of teaching listening skills in the actuality of a Chinese tertiary institution. Subsequent to the introduction of these measure at Shanxi University of finance and Economics we found that they were practical and effectual.

English listening competence is a complex skill that needs conscious development. It can be best developed with practice when students reflect on the process of listening without the threat of evaluation. Guiding students through the process of listening provides them with the knowledge from which they can successfully complete a listening task; it also motivates them and puts them in control of their learning (Vandergrift, 2002). It was found that by focusing on the process of listening students acquired a useful tool to raise their English comprehensive competence. The results of the experiment indicate that listening comprehension is foundational in learning a foreign language. Furthermore, listening comprehension levels do influence the capacity for improvement in other language skills such as speaking, reading, writing and translating. The evidence from this study suggests sound reasons for emphasizing listening comprehension, which highlights the importance of spending much more time doing it. However, improving Chinese students' ability as English speakers is a demanding process and there are still many factors, intellectual and non-intellectual, subjective and objective, influencing language acquisition that need to be considered and further explored.

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