Teaching EFL Listening in an Input-poor Environment: Problems and Suggestions

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Abstract:

Successful listening comprehension (LC) relies on the availability of adequate linguistic knowledge and world knowledge on the part of the learner. LC difficulty is closely related to learner’s inability to activate the knowledge needed. In an input-poor EFL environment, the writer observes 3 problems in the teaching and learning of EFL listening: lack of authentic listening input; absence of listener strategy training; low learner motivation. Suggestions are made in this paper concerning the solution to the problems and concrete examples are offered as well.

1. Introduction

Listening comprehension (LC) is an essential language skill, as well as a prerequisite for oral proficiency. Since the 1960’s, listening comprehension has “moved from a status of incidental and peripheral importance to a status of significant and central importance” in language education (Moley, 2001). It has been recognized as a dynamic, multi-level, interactive process of meaning creation. Anderson (1985) divides LC into 3 phases: perceptual processing, parsing phase, and utilization stage. First, the sounds enter the sensory register and are organized into meaningful units. Second, in the short-term memory (STM) the words or phrases received from sensory are checked and compared with information from
the long-term memory (LTM). The information is stored into one meaningful chunk (chunking). Third, the information is transferred to LTM in the form of schemata and stored for later retrieval. Rost (1990) emphasizes listener’s internal construction of meaning. These models acknowledge that LC is a complex process that involves both linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge.

Two distinct processes in LC have been recognized: bottom-up processing and top-down processing. “Bottom-up processing refers to the use of incoming data as a source of information about the meaning of message” and “Top-down processing … refers to the use of background knowledge in understanding the meaning of a message” (Richards, 1988: 59-60). It is generally accepted today that the cognitive processing of spoken language involves activation of both top-down and bottom-up modes in order for listeners to construct the intended meaning of the spoken language. It is found that successful listeners use both processes to comprehend meanings at linguistic and socio-linguistic levels. The implication of this psycholinguistic processing is that teachers need to provide students with practice in both kinds of processing at different proficiency levels.

O’Malley and others (1989:418) found 3 strategies that distinguish effective listeners from ineffective ones: self-monitoring, elaboration and inferencing. Self-monitoring means that listeners select what they want from the incoming information and focus on specific items according to their interests (selective listening). Elaboration means that listeners relate the new information with their prior knowledge so that they can comprehend and retain it more easily. Inferencing means that listeners use information in the text to guess the meaning of new items or to complete missing parts.
2. Problems and suggestions

English is one of the compulsory courses that all students must study at Shanxi University of Finance & Economics (SUFE) where I teach. Normally each week students attend 4 hours of reading lesson and one hour of listening which is conducted in a language laboratory. The listening course-book the students use contains about 20 lessons each book and each lesson contains two parts: micro-listening and macro-listening. The micro-listening part involves mainly preliminary or warm-up activities such as comparing minimal pairs; the macro-listening contains dialogues and passages, followed by multiple-choice questions or True-False statements. Most teachers follow the structure of the textbook closely and conduct the lessons in a routinized or mechanized manner like this: Play tape ---Check answers--- Play the next part---Check answers…. Little time is spared for listening-strategy training. Once correct answers are given to the students, the lesson is “finished”.

After 2 years of learning in the listening course, the listening competence of students at SUFE is still weak in general. Many students have failed to reach the required proficiency level. When they meet English speakers outside the classroom, they often find themselves unable to understand the real speech. This incompetence is attributable to the following 3 major problems that I’ve identified in the teaching of listening:

1. Inadequate listening input
2. Absence of listener-strategy training
3. Low learner motivation

2.1 Problem 1 - Inadequate listening input

This problem involves two aspects: 1) the absence of authentic materials and 2) the constraints of lesson hour.
1) Because native speakers are scarce in the EFL environment, students have to rely totally on the textbook for L2 input. The listening materials contained in the textbook, however, have failed to provide students with authentic language input. The dialogues and passages are scripted ones, read slowly, clearly, with unnatural or monotonous intonation. Some are originally written materials meant to be read, not listened to. No wonder our students find spoken English in real life so different from what they have heard in the language lab. If the goal of EFL teaching in China is really to develop the communicative abilities of learners so that they will be able to meet the language demand in their future career, we must expose students to the kind of speech they will actually encounter in real life, not refined or distorted speech.

A text is authentic if “it was produced in response to real life communicative needs rather as an imitation of real life communicative needs” (Forman, 1986 cited in Underwood, 1989). A less strict definition also includes any speech that sounds natural. Authentic materials give students a true representation of natural, spontaneous speech with all their imperfections (hesitations, false starts, mistakes, fast flow, interruptions, etc.), which will prepare them better for real life linguistic demand outside the classroom. Authentic materials also have higher relevance and transferability. Therefore, they appeal to students more than non-authentic ones do.

One major concern of language teachers about using authentic materials is difficulty level, as too advanced speech will not be comprehensible for learners. The question here is whether we can provide authentic or near-authentic texts that are just “one step beyond” the student’s level. There are a number of ways to do that, though some may demand considerable extra work on the part of the teacher.
Today there are a large number of resources from which teachers can select authentic and usable listening materials, such as radio, TV, the Internet, telephone conversations, and so forth. Here are some examples I think of:

1. For low-intermediate level:
   
   Recordings of real messages in telephone answering machines.

2. For high-intermediate level:
   
   A recording of *Kids Say*. This is an American TV show aiming at amusing adult audience by eliciting funny talks from children. The conversation is simple, natural, spontaneous, as well as entertaining.

3. For advanced level:
   
   A recording of a session of *Dialogue*. This is a talk show on China Central TV, in which several English-speaking guests are invited to talk and comment on current issues concerning China and the world.

Teachers can also create their own authentic materials. For example, teachers can visit their former students and talk with them about their life after graduation. The talk is recorded and played to students, who certainly will be very interested in what their alumni are doing now. Tasks or exercises must be carefully designed to go with the listening. For instance, in Example 2 above, the teacher can give students all the questions the anchor asked prior to listening and ask them to focus on what the kids said that made the audience laugh.

2) The constraints of the limited lesson hour

The lesson hour allocated to listening is only one hour per week in the timetable of SUFE, which does not provide students with sufficient language input. It is suggested that a second language is acquired through processing comprehensible input, that is, language that is not only
heard but also understood by the learner (Krashen, 1985). Comprehensible input is a necessary, essential environment ingredient, without which SLA will not be possible. Learners must be exposed to sufficient amount of target language in order for SLA to be successful.

As one-hour-a-week is not enough for competence building in LC, students should be given extra listening practice outside the classroom. A self-access language learning (SALL) center can be a good solution to the problem. The SALL center could be an assigned classroom or a section of a library, where a wide choice of audio-visual materials (as well as books, apparatus) appealing to various interests are available for free use by students. The advantages of the SALL center are: it gives students maximum exposure to the target language where native speakers and authentic materials are scarce (Gardner and Miller, 1999); it offers users the opportunity to learn in a quiet, comfortable atmosphere, with a large choice of materials which are not accessible at home; individual interests and needs can be better satisfied; learners have higher motivation; they will gradually develop a habit of independent learning, a habit that Chinese students need most. Based on these merits, I believe that a SALL center should be established in every educational institution where EFL is taught.

To ensure the success of SALL, teachers need to raise student’s awareness of the benefits of SALL and offer training in skills for independent learning. SALL needs to be integrated into the existing English curriculum to make students feel that it is an inseparable part of the course.

2.2 Problem 2 - Absence of training in listening strategies

For most classroom teachers in my institution, the focus of listening lessons is on the product of listening, rather than the processes that go on while students listen. When students fail to get correct answers, the teacher simply plays that section of the aural tape again and
hopes they will get them right this time. Much time is spent on checking answers instead of analyzing why students fail to comprehend. In other words, listening is tested but not taught.

With the focus on the product of listening, teachers often adopt the bottom-up processing mode, which “involves the listener paying close attention to every detail of the language input” (Morley, 2001:74). The emphasis of instruction is on linguistic information at lexical and syntactic levels, instead of on the message contained in the discourse. Teachers seldom spend much time (if any) teaching students how to use strategies to activate their background knowledge (schemata) about the topic. Teachers favor the bottom-up processing over the top-down processing probably because they regard the limited linguistic knowledge as the single barrier hindering students’ LC. While we fully recognize the importance of developing students’ linguistic knowledge, we cannot afford ignoring the significance of top-down processing and strategy training. A balance should be maintained between them. Instructions and exercises that provide learners with practice in self-monitoring, elaboration and inferencing should be included in listening activities.

The following examples are suggested to help students consciously build up a habit of mobilizing their world knowledge for listening:

Top-down processing

1. For beginning-level listeners:

   Listen to a statement about a movie and decide whether the speaker enjoyed the movie or not.

   Goal: To discriminate between emotions.

2. For intermediate-level listeners.

   A. Listen to 3 short news stories and match them with the appropriate headlines.
Goal: Listen to identify the topic. (Gill and Hartmann, 2001:187-189)

B. Listen to a woman and a man ordering dinner at a restaurant. Based on the food choices they make, tell which person is more conscious of health concerns. (Gill & Hartmann 2000:71)

Goal: Make references (elaboration).

3. For advanced listeners:

Before listening to a conversation about food, write a description about the way that food is prepared and eaten in your culture; share this information with your partner. Use your idea to write questions that you think may be answered in the listening text. (Leshinsky, 1995:27-28)

Goal: Elaboration and inferencing.

Based on the same principle and the goal of strategy training, teachers can design various activities of their own.

2.3 Problem 3 - Low motivation on the part of students

Many students in my university are not adequately motivated for the listening course. Some attend lessons because they have to, and some play truant because they have entirely lost interest in the course. This may seem hard to understand, given the pressure of examinations and the common belief that English is a useful international language that will benefit their future career. This negative attitude actually has resulted largely from 1) the low interest level of the routinized listening activities and 2) the lack of confidence.

1) The low interest level of listening activities

Researchers suggest that positive affect is necessary for SLA (Krashen, 1981). A high affective filter prevents language input from being used and processed. With the success of
language learning depending on learners’ attitudes, teachers must make the listening lesson interesting enough to grip students’ attention.

Task-oriented activities are believed to be more interesting than question-oriented ones, for they require students to do something immediately after listening to the information. Students are involved mentally and physically in order to achieve an objective or outcome. Here are some examples teachers can use:

A. For beginning level:

   Students listen and draw a picture according to the information they hear.

B. For intermediate level:

   The teacher brings a camera to the class and gives instructions. Students listen and learn how to use it.

Dictation is also found to be a powerful listening tool that taps learners’ internalized grammar. Jokes, humors and short stories make interesting dictation texts.

There are many types of listening material that appeal to students. So long as there are high student involvement, real communication (Information Gap) and adequate novelty and variety, teachers can expect high motivation and interest from students, which will eventually lead to acquisition (Krashen, 1985).

2) The lack of confidence

   The lack of confidence in listening competence is quite common among non-English major students, largely due to their misunderstandings about the listening processes, including these widely held beliefs: one needs to catch every word of the utterance in order to understand what the speaker means; the spoken language is the same as the written language;
comprehension relies entirely on one’s linguistic knowledge; one hundred per cent understanding is the goal of LC, etc.

These misconceptions can cause great problems. For example, most students will panic when they fail to catch a certain word or phrase in LC and lose the more important information that is coming up continuously. Instructions on effective listening processes that native speakers use and on the unique features of spoken English should be given to students in order to raise their metacognitive awareness of their own LC processing, so that they can gradually eliminate their fear of LC and consciously build up confidence in their listening competence. Such instructions should be given at the very beginning of the course.

3. Conclusion

Successful LC relies on the availability of adequate linguistic knowledge and world knowledge on the part of the learner. Learners should be sufficiently exposed to authentic L2 input and should be trained in the skills of activating world knowledge. Learners of a different background may encounter LC problems different from the ones discussed above, but guided by the same principle, teachers can design various activities of their own so as to equip students with the necessary skills to achieve successful listening comprehension.

References


Heinle & Heinle.


