A Brief Analysis of the Interrelation between Understanding, Memory and Oral Expression in Listening Comprehension Training

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Abstract
Listening comprehension as a course is offered to students at all colleges and universities in China. But what is the ultimate target of listening comprehension class and what is going on with the teachers and students in the classroom? These are questions that deserve careful and serious consideration. A widespread phenomenon is that the teacher, in a listening comprehension class, just simply interprets the new words, replays the material and reads the correct answers to the questions listed in the textbook while students have to listen passively without any chances of expressing themselves. The author of this paper believes that, in terms of foreign language learning, listening and speaking are two important and indispensable skills that rely on each other, influence each other and stimulate each other. The two skills are deeply interrelated with each other during students’ long process of learning. Therefore language teaching can and should never rely solely on the training of a single skill in order to establish students’ ability of understanding and their ability of practical application.

Key words: listening comprehension   ultimate target   skills   memory   express

Introduction
In order to develop students’ ability in understanding and using the language, it is far from enough for language teachers to rely solely on the training of a single language skill. In spite of the fact that the training of a single skill has its indispensable function for students in class, the ability to use a language, however, is deeply involved in such elements as listening, speaking, reading and writing etc. Even when the training of a specific skill is going on, the influence of other relevant skills should never be neglected. The reason is simple that the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in the process of second language acquisition are closely related to each other and none is isolated from the rest. The four skills, which rely on each other, interrelated to each other and stimulate each other, thus form an organic whole. The ignorance of any of these four elements is bound to cause negative influence to the rest. This paper, by presenting to readers the relationship between understanding, memory and oral expression, intends to make sure that the ultimate purpose of classroom listening comprehension training is to enable students to express themselves freely and adequately whereas understanding is just an elementary purpose. In
listening comprehension class, therefore, teachers should aim at developing students’ ability to speak English as well as training and consolidating their comprehension.

I. The Target of Listening Comprehension Training (LCT) in Class

For years a considerable number of foreign language teachers have kept very firmly in their mind the idea that the focus of LCT should be set on comprehension or in other words on how much students understand. Meanwhile, they do not seem to care very much whether or not students are able to express themselves in class. Teachers believe that their job is to help students with those problems that may cause any difficulties in students’ comprehension, so the various items of exercises in the textbook can be regarded as a standard to measure students’ understanding level. With this concept in mind, teachers have to adopt teacher-centered teaching mode under which they just interpret language points mechanically, read the answer keys and replay the tapes. Consequently there have been very little oral practice, very little students’ participation in class and students are simply told to listen passively and tick the choices listed in the textbook. A set of modern multi-media equipment for language training is thus found useless and it works just as an ordinary tape recorder, which is also a waste of equipment source. What is worse lies in the fact that teacher-centered teaching mode does not encourage students to participate in classroom activities actively and they remain passive from the beginning to the end. And this usually results in a dull and gloomy classroom atmosphere and students’ loss of confidence as well as their loss of interest in LCT.

How can teachers be sure whether students have already understood the listening material? A traditional method is to check the result of students’ exercises. But the author of this paper strongly doubts the reliability of this method. Exercise results tell only part of the truth. Of course it is natural for students to guess in both exercises and in tests. The problem is that test results based on guessing are fundamentally different from that based on full understanding. The latter obviously tends to show greater reliability. Therefore checking exercise results and test results never tell the EXACT truth of students’ understanding. If a teacher’s only role is to press the buttons and announce the answer keys, what’s the point of organizing classroom teaching then? Students may use a copy of the taped material and train themselves at dormitories or at home, and they do not have to be tightly restricted to the classroom and it would be unnecessary for teachers to appear in class.

The author believes that LCT, if the target is solely aimed at understanding level, will always remain shallow and suffer from inefficiency. Blind guesses do enable students to score high sometimes, but not always. Some students do not score high not because they do not understand the material but they are unable to remember as more facts or details as possible. Therefore they have to make blind guesses when they are not sure of their choices, which does not encourage students to achieve a higher goal than understanding. But when students are found able to reproduce properly what they have heard, that will undoubtedly indicate that they have already not only understood and remembered the material but also managed to use the material for oral examination. When this happens, the teacher learns immediately the truth of student’s situation, and the student, by expressing himself (answering questions, making comments or retelling stories etc), has the opportunities to exercise his speaking skill, his memory and, little by little, overcome his psychological difficulties when speaking in the public. Comprehension or understanding can only be the basic goal whereas the ability of remembering things and expressing themselves should be the ultimate goal in LCT. In other words, LCT solves not only problems of
understanding but also problems of remembering and expressing.

II. Interrelation between Understanding, Memory and Oral Expression

LCT focuses on the rate of understanding of certain amount of material within certain given time. Time limit here, therefore, plays an important role. A careful and responsible teacher may check whether the students have understood or not by asking them to retell what they heard or by asking various questions based on the material. There are no multiple choice exercises here because students have to take their own initiatives to decide what to say and how to say according to both their understanding and memory. If students are found ready and able to retell what they hear adequately, it is doubtless that they have understood the material and managed to remember it. If they, on the contrary, have not yet had proper understanding, or if they do not have a good memory in spite of their proper understanding, students will most probably be found unable to do the retelling job satisfactorily. The teacher will easily find out what problems the students are now suffering and he will learn which part of the material has been understood and digested, and which part the students can remember so clearly due to length or other psychological elements.

All these questions can be easily answered in the process of students’ retelling the material. That is to say that students’ performance in retelling can both be seen as a criterion that reflects their rate of understanding and their rate of remembering and a method by means of which a teacher evaluate his students.

What is more, the teacher will enjoy the merits of the method as follows:

1. he can see whether the students have understood the material
2. he can see how much or how well the students have understood the material
3. he will learn about students such problems as understanding or memory
4. he will be able to tell the students how to improve themselves
5. he will learn, by the way, other problems that students are currently suffering, pronunciation, intonation, language points, knowledge, or grammatical structure etc.
6. he will see the students potential and foresee his future progress.

Therefore students’ exercise of expressing themselves in LCT is effective enough in developing their ability and skills of using the language, and the ability and skills of expressing themselves should be set as the ultimate goal in an LCT class for both teachers and students. With this goal in mind, students will be highly motivated in learning and they will become more active in participation in class, respond to teachers’ questions more eagerly, and concentrate on the material, the topics and the questions. All this will be a great help and stimulation to students and, as a result, they will surely make great improvement in their understanding rate and in their learning efficiency for the simple reason that expressing oneself is a process of language application and language learning will not make any sense if a language is not to be used. What is the point of learning a language without its practical application?

People may ask the question: what, then, is the difference between LCT class and oral English class? That is just the reason why I write this paper. As I mentioned in the beginning of this paper, the four skills in the process of learning all aim at the target of using a language and they work together and are interrelated to each other. Listening and speaking are two skills that work side by side, like the arms and legs in human action. The inadequate movement of one part will surely cause the loss of balance. All language training, therefore, must be application-orientated. In LCT, the training of students’ expressing themselves is closely based on the given material, which is the very source of expression students rely on. There is always
something new that stimulate the students to remain active by thinking and remembering. They have to try hard to catch, to understand and to remember as more as possible so as to be able to reproduce.

With the material and opportunities provided in LCT classroom, students will be busy racking their brains and organizing proper phrases, proper sentence structures, proper tones and proper voices in order to express themselves satisfactorily. Students’ oral performance conveys a strongly reliable message to the teacher, who always keeps a close eye upon students’ improvement and never stops observing and judging his students. What is more, any achievements in this process will surely increase students’ confidence in using the language. Therefore listening and speaking are two different skills which lead, as a matter of fact, to the same purpose. There is an undeniable fact that some students, in spite of their strong ability in listening comprehension, do not show equivalent ability in expressing themselves. In other words, their levels in listening comprehension and speaking are not synchronous. This case is natural with common people, yet it is definitely unnatural with foreign language learners. Language is invented, rather than a game, as a tool, which only shows its value when it is put into practical use. Teachers have the duty and responsibility to constantly remind students of this point. With this in mind students will be able learn actively and practice consciously. That is why LCT demands active and creative guidance from teachers in stead of simply checking students’ exercise results and repeated replaying tapes mechanically.

III. The respective tasks of keeping notes in mind and taking notes by hand.

It is well-known that human mental power to remember things vary greatly and a good memory is always a solid foundation for all forms of learning. As is mentioned above, LCT demands strong sense of time. A good memory enables students to bring relevant information together swiftly and adequately and this will increase understanding rate. By directing students to answer questions and guide them to retell stories, teachers can activate students’ brain so that they will remain highly alert to all related information. Scientists believe that human mental power to remember things can be increased with a certain amount of adaptable training. Young students all have good memories and they will, if trained adequately in language learning, achieve far greater achievements. In what way can students’ memory be exercised or trained in class properly and efficiently?

In LCT, the teachers should encourage his students in habit of remembering things, while listening, as more details as possible including the topic, examples and anything relevant to numbers in particular. To remember as more as possible does not mean to copy everything and store it in mind, for part of the listening comprehension material is suitable to be kept in mind and part of the material is only suitable for note-taking. For instance students find it easier to keep in mind the main ideas and major events because they use logical deduction, and the main ideas and events are closely related. Whereas it is extremely hard for students to keep in mind such numeric information as the exact date, year, price, amount etc. Therefore students have to take notes in order to capture this part of the information, which is indisputably important either in taking tests or in practical application. This exercise, I have to point out, is not expected to encourage students to note everything like tape recorders. They are trained, on the contrary, to note down those necessary details that are out of the reach of their memory. Little by little students will learn to know WHAT notes to take and HOW to take these notes. Naturally numeric information should be noted down unconditionally and precisely.
IV. Teacher’s role in LCT

It is a difficult task to encourage students to demonstrate their understanding and memory by means of expressing themselves. A teacher in class plays a far more important role than simply pressing buttons, replaying the tapes, telling answer keys or interpreting new words and difficult sentences. So how the students behave in class and how much they make progress rely heavily, to a large extent, on the positive function of the teacher.

1. First of all, the teacher must know the material extremely well, and he must make full preparation for the LCT in class so that he has every tiny detail in mind.

2. Then the teacher must be good at asking questions that will make students eager to speak, to argue and to debate, and the questions should be original, inspiring and must be different from those listed in the textbook.

3. The teacher has also to pay close attention to students’ performance in class and to be ready to ask new questions according to students’ participation. It is equally important for the teacher to ask students to retell, to make sentences of their own and even do the interpretation from English into Chinese or vise versa.

Apart from classroom activities, students are expected to take time before or after class to do single training of listening comprehension with the necessary material and in their own way at their own convenience. Modern equipment such as tape players, VCD or DVD players, radio, computers and even Internet have made it possible for students to do LCT themselves and class hours for this training are far from enough.

V. The role of students’ classroom participation

Teachers as well as students ask the question: why do students have to express themselves in class when they can practice speaking anywhere else as they like? It is not at all difficult to answer questions like this, for organized LCT is based on following considerations:

1. By expressing themselves in class, students will establish confidence in themselves. Most young students are nervous and psychologically fragile. They may normally understand things well enough. When they are told to make a short speech in the public, however, they tend to show extreme shyness and timidity, which undoubtedly result in the negative effect in the organization of their presentation. That is to say, they may have little problem or even no problems at all in understanding but their nervous state of mind will influence their memory badly and make them stumble in organizing their speeches. The quality of students’ presentation, as a result, will be negatively influenced, too. Therefore the classroom is the laboratory, in which all language learners are expected to participate verbal activities actively. They will, little by little, get psychologically braver and more mature with gradual and systematic exercises and finally become more and more confident.

2. Classroom activities will increase students’ sense of competition. As is mentioned above that the teacher’s role in class is to encourage and lead the students to express themselves and answer questions according to what they hear from the material. When one student is doing the presentation, others, who are listening attentively, will consciously or unconsciously play the role of a referee and make relevant judgment in their mind about the speaker’s performance, his wording, his fluency, his pronunciation and his intonation etc. When their turns come, they will automatically try to avoid making similar mistakes they have just noticed. Each student tries every means to do his best and thus they will all develop a strong sense of competition, which is a very powerful motivation for progress.
3. Classroom activities enable teachers to have an overall knowledge of the situation of each individual student. The teacher is expected to be a person who shows his students the proper ways in the acquisition of language skills rather than just demonstrate them. When the teacher is sure what kind of difficulties their students are suffering from, he will be able to try necessary means to help them and train them step by step with intentional exercises. He will know what questions to ask, how to ask; what task to give and how to give. When the teacher deals with this properly, he will surely tend to have a lively classroom atmosphere and, as a result, he will achieve high efficiency in his classroom teaching.

4. Classroom activities enable teachers and students to communicate with each other. When the teacher directs students to participate classroom activities, students learn his ways of saying things and his solutions to certain language problems. Similarly the teacher, from students’ presentation, will learn a lot about their habits, their hobbies, their emotions and even their psychology and their opinion about things. LCT class is a place where the teacher and students get to know each other.

**VI. Conclusion**

There is no doubt that the training of language skills should, on no condition, be alienated from the practical use of the language. For LCT, encouraging students to express themselves in class is right intended to develop students’ ability of using the language. Therefore the above method, if properly carried out, will play an extremely important role in enhancing students’ understanding rate, increasing their memory capacity and verbal power, and what is more, establishing healthy habit of learning.

**References**


