An Empirical Study of Training College English Learners to Integrate Listening Strategies into Their Actual Learning

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Abstract:
This research project, with College English learners as subjects, aimed at exploring a successful way of integrating learning strategy training into actual College English listening teaching, thus aiding the learners to solve their problems arising from English listening and improve their listening comprehension. Some scientific means such as questionnaire, interview, dairy and authentic CET Band 4 papers were used to collect and analyze the experimental data.

Keywords: College English; Listening comprehension; Learning Strategies; Strategy Training

1. Introduction

College English education has made great progress in China since the reform and opening up to the outside world. However, the learners’ insufficiency in listening and speaking abilities has long remained a big issue because reading has always been the focus of College English teaching. A survey made by China Foreign Languages Education Research Center among more than 900 College English teachers nationwide in 2002 found that lacking in appropriate learning strategies is one of the main problems the students are facing in their English study (Zhou Yan, 2002). Our research project was set to train the College English learners to integrate effective listening strategies into their actual learning.

Researches on English (as a second language or foreign language) learning strategies abroad started in the mid 1970s, which was a transitional period with the research focus shifting from teaching to learning. The 1990s witnessed more researches on strategy training and the measurement of its effectiveness (O’Mally & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990, 1996; Wenden, 1991; Cohen, 1998). It was found that learning strategies can be used to enhance language learners’ learning abilities and improve their English level, and strategy training should be treated as part of foreign language course and integrated into English teaching (Wen Qiufang, 2000). There already exist some modes in strategy training; however, an optimal and omnipotent method is still in people’s expectation. In China, studies on English learning strategies began in 1980s, but most of them were focused on theory introduction and questionnaire analysis rather than on strategy applications. In order to help the learners to improve their weakness in listening and speaking, we set our research project to train the college English learners to apply effective listening strategies to their real learning course.

2. Literature review of research papers on learning strategies published in ten home foreign language periodicals in the past 13 years
We had consulted all the papers published in ten foreign language home periodicals in the past 13 years (1990-2002) and found 105 relative articles. We then classified the articles into four types: theoretical studies, questionnaire analyses, discussions on strategy training and empirical studies on strategy training and six subcategories according to the language skills and areas involved: listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary and comprehensive subcategory. (see Table 1):

Table 1  Classification of the Articles on Learning Strategies Published from 1990 to 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category One</th>
<th>Theoretical studies</th>
<th>Questionnaire analysis</th>
<th>Discussions</th>
<th>Empirical studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical studies</td>
<td>(29) 27.6%</td>
<td>(37) 35.2%</td>
<td>(13) 12.4%</td>
<td>(26) 24.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empirical studies</td>
<td>(66) 62.9%</td>
<td>(39) 37.1%</td>
<td>(39) 37.1%</td>
<td>(39) 37.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Two</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Comprehensive</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical S.</td>
<td>6 (5.7)</td>
<td>5 (4.8)</td>
<td>2 (1.9)</td>
<td>16 (15.2)</td>
<td>29 (27.6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire A.</td>
<td>3 (2.9)</td>
<td>3 (2.9)</td>
<td>7 (6.7)</td>
<td>5 (4.8)</td>
<td>3 (2.9)</td>
<td>16 (15.2)</td>
<td>37 (35.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussions</td>
<td>12 (11.4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (0.9)</td>
<td>13 (12.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empirical studies</td>
<td>5 (4.8)</td>
<td>1 (0.9)</td>
<td>8 (7.6)</td>
<td>3 (2.9)</td>
<td></td>
<td>9 (8.6)</td>
<td>26 (24.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>26 (24.8)</td>
<td>9 (8.6)</td>
<td>15 (14.3)</td>
<td>10 (9.5)</td>
<td>3 (2.9)</td>
<td>42 (40)</td>
<td>105 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 1, we can see that twenty-six articles are on listening learning strategies, accounting for 24.8% of the total. However, only 4.8% are on actual listening strategy training. This illustrates that studies on real listening strategy application are far from enough. Of the five articles on actual listening strategy training, two involve adult learners. One is the Influence of Background Knowledge on Listening Strategies by Liu Shaolong (1996), which denotes an empirical study of 7 adult students applying 19 listening strategies such as “Choice Awareness” and “Prediction” in their training, and the other is “Using Learning Strategies to Develop Listening Comprehension---A Case Study” by Wu Weiyi (2000), which is a record of how the author trained an adult learner (a candidate for master) to apply strategies such as “Self-adjustment”, “Selective Attention”, “Association”, “Guessing”, and “Note-taking” so as to improve his listening score in CET Band 6.

The other three articles: “On Consolidating and Training of Listening Skills” by Zhou Fuqin and Liu Xiuyun (1993), “An Empirical Study of the Effect of Strategies-based Instruction on Listening Comprehension” by Liu Zhi and Zhu Yuezhen (2001), and “Listening Strategy Training” by Lu Changhong (2001) are on college students. The first instructs the College English students to preview the context and background material to improve their ability to “guess”, and another two integrate listening learning strategies into actual listening teaching. In Liu Zhi and Zhu Yuezhen’s experiment (2001), the subjects were two classes of students who were close in English level, the total number being 85. The experiment lasted for 18 weeks. Teachers of the two classes were different in their knowledge of language learning strategy. The one who instructed the experimental class was a learning strategy researcher, and the one instructing the control class knew nothing about strategy training. The students in the experimental class were trained to master 13 strategies including “Direct Attention”, “Selective Attention”, “Monitor” and “Assessment”. The two test papers used to measure the learners were written by the teachers themselves. The findings were that the experimental class was higher in score than the control class, and the students of the medium level benefited more from the strategy training than the top
and the bottom students. The same findings were obtained from Lu Changhong’s experiment (2001). Lu chose an experimental group (10 students) and a control group (10 students) from the two classes he taught and paired them according to their English level. He had trained the students with the cognitive strategies for listening comprehension for a whole term, taking syntax structures as perception units.

3. Research Method and Process

3.1 Participants

Systematic sampling was used in choosing participants. Two groups of students (40 in each) were chosen respectively from Class 608/609 and Class 610/611 of the Business College of Beijing University of Clothing and Technology as the experiment subjects (one as the experimental group and the other the control group), who were enrolled in 2001 and close in English level.

3.2 Instrumentation

The following instruments were used in this study:

- The textbook used was *New College English for Listening (Book Two)* written by Zhejiang University, published by Foreign Languages Teaching and Research Press.

- The learning strategies used in the training were what Oxford (1990) termed and classified as memory, cognition, compensation, meta-cognitive, affective and social strategies as well as some other effective strategies often used by Chinese language learners.

- Some scientific means such as questionnaire, interview, dairy, authentic CET Band 4 papers and SPSS software were used to collect and analyze the experimental data.

3.3 Process

The experiment was carried on in two phases and was implemented by two teachers (each for one phase), who had never received any training of learning strategies before. So the research was expected to provide findings not only from the students’ learning, but also from the teachers’ experience in conducting the training. Both the results of the experiment and the process were of the same significance and recorded in detail.

The first phase of the experiment, beginning from March of 2002 and ending in June, lasted 14 weeks, mainly focusing on training the students to learn and use memory, cognitive, compensation and meta-cognitive strategies. The second phase of the training experiment, beginning from September and ending in December, also lasted 14 weeks, with the first eight weeks focusing on affective strategies and the latter eight weeks on social strategies. At the beginning of the experiment, the teachers studied English learning strategies both at home and abroad and received instructions for conducting strategy training. Then the students were asked to finish the SILL (50 items) of Oxford (1990) to find out their knowledge of learning strategies (cf. Table 2). They were also required to write down the learning strategies they often used and their problems in listening comprehension. Finally the training was
planned according to the data collected from the survey and the written reports.

Table 2  Mean and standard deviation (in bracket) of the learning strategy use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2.64(.59)</td>
<td>3.26(.57)</td>
<td>3.09(.57)</td>
<td>3.32(.68)</td>
<td>2.58(.47)</td>
<td>2.99(.69)</td>
<td>2.95(.47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2.49(.52)</td>
<td>2.87(.60)</td>
<td>3.02(.73)</td>
<td>2.87(.84)</td>
<td>2.27(.65)</td>
<td>2.70(.89)</td>
<td>2.69(.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>2.58(.56)</td>
<td>3.09(.61)</td>
<td>3.06(.64)</td>
<td>3.13(.78)</td>
<td>2.44(.57)</td>
<td>2.86(.79)</td>
<td>2.84(.64)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The survey showed that affective (2.44), social (2.86) and memory (2.58) strategies were used much less frequently than cognitive (3.09), compensation (3.06) and metacognitive (3.13) strategies, which indicates that affective and social strategies were difficult to learn and apply, and more time and energy should be spent on the strategy training.

Three authentic CET Band 4 tests were given to the students to evaluate their listening comprehension and improvement in the experiment. The first one was given before the training, the second one and the third one in the eighth week and the fifteenth week of the first phase.

The actual training was conducted by integrating strategy instruction into listening teaching and the students were motivated to apply the strategies they learned to their actual learning and practice both in class and after class. As to the use of the textbook, of the four articles in each unit, one was used to teach the strategies, and two were used for the students themselves to practice the strategy they learned in this lesson as well as the strategies they learned in the previous lessons. After class, the students were required to finish listening assignments with the strategies they learned. The students were often reminded to use the strategies comprehensively. Besides, the students were required to write “fortnight diaries” to record the actual training processes so as to evaluate their learning and make adjustments in time.

The results of the three tests

The results of the three listening comprehension tests were analyzed with SPSS 11.0 (cf. Table 3 and 4). The scores were treated as in normal distribution. The result of the first test shows that the experimental group and the control group have no significant difference (t=1.332, p=.187) and the two groups were of the same level before the experiment. But as the experiment goes on, the two groups show significant difference in the second test (t=2.443, p=.017) and in the third test (t=2.144, p=.036). The mean score of the experimental group shows a significant increase by 1.69 (t=-2.466, p=.019), while that of the control group is an increase only by 0.96 with no significance (t=-1.311, p=.199). It also should be pointed out that the quality of the tape prepared for the second test was poor and might have some influence on the scores.

Table 3  Independent-Samples T Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Experimental Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Control Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>T-value</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Test One</td>
<td>15.72</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>14.57</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>1.332</td>
<td>.187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Two</td>
<td>15.49</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>13.41</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>2.443</td>
<td>.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Three</td>
<td>17.27</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>15.24</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>2.144</td>
<td>.036</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In order to find out the efficiency of the training on students of different levels, we categorized the subjects of the experimental group into three subgroups: top group, medium group and bottom group according to their scores in the first test. Then five subjects were chosen randomly from each subgroup and their scores were analyzed and compared. We drew the same conclusion as Liu Zhi and Zhu Yuezhen (2000) did, that is the students of the medium level benefit more from the strategy training than the top and the bottom students. To have a better understanding of this conclusion, the teacher chose three students from each of the subgroups and had a discussion with them. The reasons found were as follows:

Students of the medium level insist on practicing the strategies learnt and listening to English every day. Their self-confidence is enhanced when they found some improvement in listening comprehension after a period of hard work. Top students usually have good learning habits and efficient learning methods. They do not use the strategies learnt purposefully because they think their methods work very well. They prefer the comprehensive use of the strategies and believe that the improvement in listening should also have something to do with other aspect of learning, such as reading, enlarging vocabulary, being correct in pronunciation and intonation as well as developing one’s sense of English. They do not benefit more from the training just because they are already good at listening. The problems with the bottom students are that they do not practice listening regularly and the amount of the input is far from enough. Even when they listen, they cannot concentrate. They just listen mechanically and seldom use the strategies learnt.

From the above analysis, we find that raising one’s self-confidence, focusing one’s attention and keeping on practicing listening are effective strategies to improve one’s listening ability.

**The learners’ “fortnight diaries”**

To write “fortnight diaries” is a good method to record the students’ plans to use strategies, their difficulties in learning, as well as achievements. Therefore it is also a valuable resource for the evaluation of the training program. Most learners can keep on writing diaries, which is not only a good practice in the training but also an effective way to improve the learners’ writing ability. The following are two diaries of the learners’ in the second phase of training to record their emotional changes after learning affective strategies:

**Diary 1. Fang Hang Class 01611 Nov.17~29, 2002**

I usually sum up the whole day’s listening activities before going to bed. I find that when I listen to English my emotions have changed a lot, from being worried even before the actual listening began to being more confident now. This is due to my using of self-suggestive method to encourage myself. I have used many learning methods such as self-encouragement, listening to music, communicating with classmates, and the one used most often is self-encouragement, for it can be used at any time. By using affective strategies, I feel my English listening is improving gradually.

**Diary 2 Li Qian Class 01610 Nov. 17~29, 2002**

I keep on listening to English for half an hour every night; I listened to authentic CET Band 6 listening parts between 7pm to 9pm in the evenings of the 18th, 19th, 21st, and 22nd. In the evenings of the

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**Table 4 Paired Samples Test**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>T-value</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>-1.69</td>
<td>-2.466</td>
<td>.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>-0.96</td>
<td>-1.311</td>
<td>.199</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Following two days, I listened to English songs. On 26th, 28th and 29th, I listened to the listening comprehension parts of simulated CET Band 6 papers.

At first, I was a little nervous for I was afraid I could not understand it. After I had finished several paragraphs and found they were not so difficult, I would feel relaxed. I still would feel anxious if I missed some of the contents.

I used the method of self-encouragement. I have trust in myself and try to understand as much content as possible, thinking that those I cannot understand will also be a hard nut to others. I used to listen to music but only found it a distraction. I don’t communicate with others about listening because I don’t have such a habit.

Both of the diaries reflected the psychological changes of the two learners and their experience in practicing the strategies learnt, although the first one was more general and the second one more concrete.

Feedback from the questionnaires after the training of affective and social strategies

Two questionnaires were given to the students to get the feedback after their training to use affective strategies and social strategies respectively and 40 copies of answers were received from each questionnaire. As to the strategy of overcoming instant anxiety, 80% of the 40 students found it effective and their anxieties could be relieved to certain extent when the strategy was used. 60% preferred the strategy of listening to music, and 35% preferred the strategy of deep-breathing. But 55% of the students thought they could not use the strategies learnt subconsciously. As to the strategy of overcoming long-term anxiety, only 24 students answered the question. 46% had finished the listening homework and were able to adjust their emotion by employing the strategies of self-control and self-encouragement. 54% failed to finish their homework due to such reasons as “small vocabulary and poor comprehension”, “being busy”, “lack of clear targets” and “losing heart for seeing no improvement in a short time”. This feedback tells us that it is not easy to motivate the students to practice listening strategies after class.

As to the social strategies, 95% of the students were interested in developing cultural understanding and learning differences between western and eastern culture. 50% liked to participate in group discussions with the guidance of the teacher, and they could feel the effect of the help from their peers. It is worth mentioning that 80% of the students would not like to cooperate with others, 65% due to their own learning habits and 15% due to their personality. 72.5% of the students thought the strategy of cooperative learning good but they could not stick to it just because of their laziness. Generally speaking, the training of the social strategies has not received satisfactory results.

At the end of the second phase, a questionnaire was used to survey the answers to the use of the six main affective and social strategies and the results were shown in Table 5:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lowering Anxiety</th>
<th>Self-encouragement</th>
<th>Taking emotional Temperature</th>
<th>Having Clear Motivation</th>
<th>Cooperating with Others</th>
<th>Developing Cultural Understanding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adoption Rate</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Rate</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Conclusion

After the experiment, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. The integration of the listening strategy training into real classroom teaching does play an important role in improving students' listening ability, and 72.5% of the students think that they have benefited a lot from the strategy training.

2. The experimental group is found to have improved their abilities significantly in doing the Listening Comprehension part of CET Band 4 paper, while the control group shows no significant change. The experimental group has achieved a higher mean score in test two and three than the control group does and they differ significantly.

3. The adoption rate and its effective rate of the six major strategies in the affective and the social strategy groups are: self-encouraging (95%/87.5%), lowering your anxiety (92.5%/67.5%), having clear motivation for learning (75%/42.5%), developing cultural understanding (62.5%/50%), taking your emotional temperature (50%/37.5) and cooperating with others (17.5%/7.5%).

4. Students’ enthusiasm for in-class strategy training is higher than that for off-class self-practice, and therefore in-class training is more successful than off-class self-practice.

5. Teachers need to explore better solutions to the learners’ problems of ineffective use of the strategies in their inertia and exhaustion period and find effective ways to mobilize the learners to actively participate in the strategy training.

6. Teachers have realized their weakness in conducting the experiment due to their limited knowledge in language learning theory and lack of strategy training experience. They strongly wish to be given valuable guidance and training by the experts and the research institutions concerned.

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