Understanding Listening Comprehension Process and Effectively Organizing Listening Class

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Abstract

According to psycholinguistic and SLA researches, comprehending a language as it is being spoken is a complex, active skill involving many processes. In EFL teaching, listening teachers should keep in mind this complexity of listening comprehension process and carefully arrange classroom listening activities. In actual listening comprehension stage, schematic knowledge, context knowledge, and knowledge of the L2 system are all important. The selection of listening materials is also very important to prepare students for real-life English communication and listening comprehension. And in the classroom, the teacher should encourage the students to be inventive, imaginative and active in all the three stages (pre-listening stage, main listening stage and post-listening stage)

Key Words: schematic knowledge context knowledge linguistics knowledge

It is found that among the four language skills, the most frequently used skill in the course of a day in adult life is listening (42%), followed by speaking (32%), reading (15%) and writing (11%) (Flowerdew, 1994). But until recently, EFL listening comprehension attracted the least attention of the four skills in China’s schools and universities, in terms of both the amount of research conducted on the topic and the neglect that it suffered in most English training programs. This neglect may have stemmed from the fact that listening was considered a passive skill and from the belief that merely exposing the students to the spoken language was adequate instruction in listening comprehension.

In my university, what the listening teachers do in the listening course is just to play
the tape recorder and check answers. They say they have nothing to teach concerning EFL listening. I always hear some students complain that their listening comprehension ability improved little after having taken one term or even two terms’ listening course and they have learnt nothing from the listening teacher.

As a matter of fact, listening teachers have a lot to teach in the listening course. Comprehending a language as it is being spoken is now recognized to be a complex and active skill involving many processes that have become the focus of classroom-oriented as well as psychological studies. It involves not only the language dimension but also the background knowledge and context. According to Anderson and Lynch (1988) listening comprehension needs the following information sources:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background knowledge</th>
<th>schematic knowledge</th>
<th>c</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>--factual</td>
<td>schematic knowledge</td>
<td>c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--sociocultural</td>
<td>↑ ↓</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>procedural knowledge</td>
<td>↑ ↓</td>
<td>m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--how language is used in discourse</td>
<td>↑ ↓</td>
<td>p</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>knowledge of situation</th>
<th>↑ ↓</th>
<th>e</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>--physical setting, participants, etc</td>
<td>↑ ↓</td>
<td>h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowledge of context</td>
<td>context</td>
<td>e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--what has been/will be said</td>
<td>↑ ↓</td>
<td>n</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>knowledge of the language system</th>
<th>↑ ↓</th>
<th>i</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>--semantic</td>
<td>↑ ↓</td>
<td>o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--syntactic</td>
<td>systemic</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--phonological</td>
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This form shows two aspects of current views of listening comprehension. Firstly, it highlights the fact that the listening process draws on multiple sources of
information—schematic knowledge and context having as important a role as knowledge of the L2 system. Secondly, the direction of the arrows leading to “comprehension” underlines the potential co-occurrence of top-down, expectation-driven processing and bottom-up, data-driven processing. In EFL teaching in China, listening teachers should keep in mind this complexity of listening comprehension process and carefully arrange classroom listening activities.

**Teaching Strategies**

1. Top-Down Teaching Process

   The top-down process is mainly neglected by listening teachers in my university. But this process is very important. In the pre-listening stage, teacher should arrange suitable activities to activate students’ mind, provide necessary background knowledge and contextulise the tape recorded listening material. Students benefit in three main ways from having an introduction to the topic of a listening material before they begin to listen. First, an introduction helps students to recall any information that they may already know about the topic (content schema), either from personal experience or other reading or listening. If the students keep this knowledge in mind as they listen, they increase their opportunities to make sense of the information they find in the listening material. An introduction may also bring to mind cultural factors that help them understand the listening material, thus enhancing listening comprehension. Second, getting the students to start to think about the topic should increase their interest in the topic and thereby motivate them to listen to the material. Third, if the
introduction activity is conducted in the target language, it will also review or introduce the relevant vocabulary for the topic. Pictures, photographs and brainstorming in this stage can also help to make listening comprehension in the main listening stage much easier for the students.

2. Bottom-Up Teaching Process

In actual listening comprehension stage, besides schematic knowledge and context knowledge, knowledge of the L2 system also plays a very important role. H. Byrnes (1984) characterized listening comprehension as a “highly complex problem-solving activity” that can be broken down into a set of distinct subskills. Two of these skills were the recognition of component parts of the language (words, verb groups, simple phrases) and memory for these elements once they have been recognized. Recognizing linguistic elements, while essential to the process, is not sufficient for comprehending what is heard. Listeners must be able to retain these elements in short-term memory long enough to interpret the utterance to which they are attending.

Fodor, Bever, and Garrett (1974) suggest that native language words are held in short memory only long enough for the listener to organize them into clauses and to extract the meaning that they convey. As soon as the listener has interpreted the clause, the elements that made it up are purged from memory in order to make room for incoming sounds. Foreign language input seems to be processed in the same way, but Rivers and Temperley (1978) point out, short-term memory for target language words is often overloaded, causing words to be purged before they can be organized and
interpreted. Thus, even though language learners may be able to recognize each word of
an utterance as it is spoken, they may not be able to hold lengthy utterances in mind
long enough to interpret them. Data findings (Call, 1985) suggest that students benefit
from a knowledge of syntax, which enables them to group words into syntactic units
and be kept in short-term memory long enough to be interpreted. An understanding of
this relationship between short-term memory and listening comprehension is important
for the purpose of improving instruction. A listening curriculum that includes aspects of
both formal learning and informal acquisition needs to be developed. Activities that
formally introduce new vocabulary and word-study exercises will contribute a great
deal to students’ repertoires of familiar words. However, knowledge of vocabulary is
not enough to make students good listeners; they must also be able to use syntax to help
them recognize the relationships among the words they have heard and to retain
utterances in memory long enough to understand them. Formal exercises focusing on
the recognition of syntactic structures are essential to the development of this skill.

Teaching syntactic structures for auditory recognition is not a new one. Nida
(1952/1953) recommended teaching students to listen for specific aspects of the
linguistic structure of the target language in order to get overall receptive skills.
Similarly, Taylor (1981) has noted the importance of recognizing grammatical signals in
the skillful processing of spoken language. Yet despite this consensus that knowledge
of structure is an important component of listening proficiency, listening teachers
should emphasize listening for the meaning of the passage rather than listening for the
structure that gives shape to the meaning.
Diversified Listening materials

The selection of listening materials is also very important to prepare students for real-life English communication and listening comprehension. The listening materials used in my university are too monotonous and formal. Most of them are, as a matter of fact, read-out written English. Penny (1984) gives us a list of the types of listening educated people in an English-speaking country may be exposed to:

- listening to the news/weather forecast/sports report/announcements etc. on the radio

-discuss work/current problems with colleagues

-making arrangements/exchanging news etc. with acquaintances

-making arrangements/exchanging news etc. over the telephone

-chatting at a party/other social gathering

-hearing announcements over the loudspeaker (at a railway station, for example, or airport)

-receiving instructions on how to do something/get somewhere

-attending a lesson/seminar.

-being interviewed/interviewing

-watching a film/theatre show/television program

-hearing a speech/lecture

-listening to recorded/broadcast songs

-attending a formal occasion (wedding/prize-giving/other ceremony)
-getting professional advice (from a doctor, for example)

-being tested orally in a subject of study

This list is naturally rough and incomplete; nevertheless it is fairly representative. There are certainly some useful generalizations which can be drawn from it and which have some immediate implications for EFL listening classroom practice in my university, or perhaps for all the EFL teaching schools and universities in China. These are all real-life listening situations which are characterized with redundancy, “noise” (extra information) and colloquial language and which can be directly used by the students outside the listening classroom. A contact of these real-life situations in classroom can prepare the students to communicate effectively in real-life English communications.

**Comprehensible Input**

Besides using top-down & bottom-up teaching strategies and selecting diversified listening materials, listening teachers should also pay attention to choosing listening materials which are neither too difficult nor too easy for their students. According to Input Hypothesis (Krashen), uncomprehensible input can not help to improve learner’s language (listening) proficiency. Comprehensible input has been described as i+1 (Krashen 19840)—that is, material that is familiar to the student (i) and a certain amount of unfamiliar material whose meaning can be induced from the context (1). When students are presented with input at the i+1 level, they make use of “key vocabulary items (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and syntactic structures)” (1984) that are
familiar to them in order to understand the global meaning carried by the input. Context (linguistic and nonlinguistic) serves to clarify the meanings of unfamiliar words which can subsequently become part of the students’ familiar vocabulary. If a listening material is far beyond students’ present level, no matter what teaching strategies the teacher use, they will all be invalid.

**Conclusion**

All in all, instead of only telling the students which answers are right and which answers are wrong, there are a lot for the listening teacher to do in the listening classroom, such as using proper teaching strategies (top-down & bottom-up), selecting diversified listening materials and seeing to that the chosen listen materials are of appropriate difficulty level. Besides these, in the post-listening stage the teacher can arrange lighthearted and humorous activities, for it is a good opportunity for the students to air their views on the topic they have just heard, thus practicing their oral English. In all the three stages (pre-listening stage, main listening stage and post-listening stage), the teacher should encourage the students to be inventive, imaginative and active.
References


