REVIEW

Toward More Effectiveness of Communicative Behavior: Listening Input Acquisition

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Listening and speaking are crucial communicative skills. It goes without saying that, under normal circumstances, almost two-thirds of our daily language use is spent on listening and speaking. However, a quite number of students have not yet been provided with the opportunity to acquire listening and speaking appropriately in China, so that there are still a considerable number of students, even university graduates, who are not satisfied with their oral English skills, especially their listening abilities. Therefore, this study attempts to focus on investigating and analyzing the effectiveness and practicality of English listening behavior in English learning. In order to effectively teach and learn, different groups of people should also have relatively appropriate and efficient learning behaviors, so as to enhance the awareness and ability of language input acquisition.

1. Introduction

What is listening? Is it to remember everything that is heard? The answer is absolutely "NO". Anderson and Lynch (1988)[1] argue that "Remembering should not be regarded as comprehension" by comparing two views of listening: (1) The listener as a tape-recorder. (2) The listener as an active model builder. The view of the listener as a tape-recorder equates the ability to remember spoken input with the ability to comprehend it. It suggests that as long as the input is sufficiently loud to be recorded and does not exceed the length of the available blank tape, then the message will be recorded, stored, and can be played back later.

However, the kind of tape-recorder analogy does not capture the relevant features of comprehension. First, listeners can remember input that they do not understand and some listeners can understand far more than they can recall. In fact, in many situations, it would be inappropriate to attempt to remember everything. Second, the ability to produce the message in word-perfect form does not mean the ability to use the information. In order to use the message, what was said has to be interpreted and relate to the speech in the current non-linguistic environment. The ability to remember something word-to-word does not necessarily involve active processing of input with the interpretation. Third, the tape-recorded analogy cannot explain the way listeners select, interpret, and summarize input when they listen. Listeners tend to be selective in what they find most interesting or important or comprehensible in any particular message.

The fact is the view of the listener as an active model

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builder starts from the assumption that listening requires us to carry out relatively complex mental operations that the tape-recorder view of the listener cannot cope with. Anderson and Lynch(1988.6)[1] mention co-operative listening: when "the listener attends to messages fully and from the messages he tries to construct a coherent interpretation, that situation can be considered to be one of maximally co-operative listening in the sense that the listener is both able and willing to play a part in the reciprocal activity of communication." They argue that the role of the successful listener has to be thought of as an active one. They write that "The listener has a crucial part to play in the process, by activating to what he hears and trying to understand what the speaker means." (Anderson and Lynch, 1988:6)[1]

Rost (1990)[8] also argues that the listener plays an active role in successful listening. He said that "Before we look at how people understand language, we need to know what it is that is understood, who is responsible for creating this understandable content, and who is responsible for understanding it." He stresses the responsibility of the listener who interprets ideas that are related to the words that an interlocutor uses. Rivers (1981)[14] says that "it is possible that the listener hears the actual sounds of utterance quite clearly but he or she cannot construct significance for them which seemed to fit the situation context." He argues that the nature of listening is as follows: listening is not a passive skill, nor is it, as has traditionally been believed, a receptive skill. Listening is a creative skill. In order to comprehend the sounds falling on one's ears, one takes the raw material of words, arrangements of words, and the rise and fall of the voice, and from this material one creates significance. There is meaning in the linguistic arrangement the speaker has produced, the speaker's meaning; but significance is in the mind of the listener. "In comprehending oral message, we are not just extracting linguistic information but are selecting and matching what we have selected against probable messages that we are anticipating." (Rivers, 1981)[14]

In short, listening is an active (creative) processing of input involving interpretation. The listener as an "active model builder" (Anderson and Lynch, 1988),[1] selects, interprets, and summarizes input when listening. A listener actively constructs a meaning rather than just receiving a speaker's meaning passively. Besides, listening is co-operative part in the reciprocal activity of communication. The listener is responsible for constructing an acceptable understanding (coherent and reasonable interpretation). The listener constrains the inferences that can be drawn from the speaker's words.

2. Effect of Familiarity and Unfamiliarity on Listening Comprehension

The listener needs to be motivated actively. This is because listening is not a passive act, but rather is an active one. It involves predicting, guessing, and responding mentally to ideas. Furthermore, listening to spoken languages is different from reading texts; but it is similar in the sense that the listener must be familiar with the topic and the discourse pattern. The familiarity makes comprehension easier. In addition, the listener's background in the process of interpretation should be highlighted since interpretation depends on schematic or non-linguistic information (Widdowson, 1983).[4] A schema is "a mental structure, consisting of relevant individual knowledge, memory, and experience," in Schank and Abelson's (1977) terms, which explains, "how the mass of memories of individual experience might be organized into networks of connected knowledge (Anderson and Lynch, 1988:14)."[1] In other words, putting together incoming information with one's own mental script gives birth to comprehension. Brown and Yule (1983)[2] wrote that "Comprehension is also the integration of what we listen into experience." This is another way of saying the same thing. Brown and Yule (1983)[2] said: "The native speaker normally encounters spoken language… in a context of situation. He encounters context with a set of stereotypical knowledge which he has been building up from the time he first acquired languages as an infant in the culture." Their statement refers to the activation of the mental script associated with the context of situation. According to Rost (1990),[8] listening difficulties may arise from what calls an "inferential problem." He suggests that an "inferential problem" is caused by "inappropriate activation of background or contextual knowledge."

Therefore, the importance of background knowledge must be stressed as a fundamental aspect in the success of listening. Listening actually involves a lot of interpretation, taking into account our familiarity with the topic and the kind of relationships between different speakers. Moreover, according to Smyth, Morris, et al. (1987),[7] one of the listening problems is attributed to listeners' failure in "utilizing context to aid ongoing word recognition." It should be pointed out that "Context is used to increase activity in the recognition units for likely next words (Smyth, Morris, et al., 1987)."[7] In practice, it often happens that we can instantly guess what words come next because of the context in which the messages are spoken. Lastly, Morley (1983)[6] points out that linguistic knowledge helps them "to segment discourse into the appropriate chunks as part of the process of prepositional identification." In

other words, he argues that "to chunk incoming discourse into segments or constituents" is a necessary process to identify propositions. Call (1985)[3] shares Richards' (1983) view of the important role that syntax plays in rendering input comprehensible. She stresses the importance of the function of "short-term memory for auditory input" and "knowledge of syntax, which enables them (students) to group words into syntactic units." Rost (1990)[9] writes that it is defined as "non-understanding of linguistic items due to phonotactic, or syntactic, lexical decoding problems." One reason for this is that foreign listeners are not accustomed to certain changes of English sounds, such as elision, assimilation and vowel reduction.

Let us summarize what has discussed above. One can say listeners' activation of their schematic knowledge is essential in the process of interpretation. The listener's mental script is a crucial factor in facilitating comprehension. It is also important for listeners to grasp a given context in which messages are spoken. Context may facilitate listeners to guess likely next words. In the end, syntactic knowledge is essential in chunking incoming messages or information. So next, one needs to consider what we teachers can do to drive all these points home to the student.

3. Implications for Listening Activities in the Classroom

The presentation of new language material is essential; however, this should not be the end of a teaching unit. The students should be helped to know how to improve their listening skills effectively, to the point where they can communicate using the language in real-life situations. Ur (1984)[13] writes, "Listening exercises are most effective if they are constructed round a task. That is to say the students are required to do something in response to what they hear that will demonstrate their understanding." Therefore, it is the teacher's task to introduce various listening activities after the presentation, so that the student can develop not only linguistic competence but also communicative competence.

3.1 Implementing Schema Knowledge

This activity involves stopping at some point in a discourse and asking students to predict what is likely to come next. In order to perform this task accurately, students must be attentive to the meanings and relations expressed in the discourse and demonstrate their awareness of those meanings and relations. It is important when listening to a recorded source to take two stages into consideration. In the first stage, before listening, two skills are developed[10]:

(1) Using a description of the setting to help understanding.

(2) Using a description of the task to help understanding.

An example of the listening materials can be the "Birth of a Pop Group" (English for French Speaking Africa, p.46-47), where a journalist is interviewing a pop group. Two teachers can be used to record the interview (one being the journalist and the other the group leader). Students can be encouraged to guess, trying to find out the content of the interview, after the teacher has given a quick description of the setting. They can write down their guesses and discuss them in pairs. Guessing could revolve around the following questions:

(1) What is the journalist going to talk about?

(2) Where is the conversation going to take place?

(3) What words and expressions can you hear in the conversation?

Students may be spurred by the teacher to use their background knowledge or context and some of the difficulties the group may encounter. Or, they can use the description of the task to help understanding.

One of the ways to help learners' understanding is to remind them that in real life, people listen for a purpose. That purpose will determine the way they listen. Students can find out the following points:

(1) The type of music the group plays.

(2) The number of concerts they have.

(3) The instruments they use for the music.

(4) Their future plans.

"In the early stages of language learning, identifying the topic accurately enough to make an immediate relevant reply is apparently a very hard task." (Anderson and Lynch, 1988) [1]If the student has listened to this story before, he might manage in some way to compensate for such difficulties, and thereby comprehend the topic.

3.2 The Practice in Pronunciation And Intonation

Fluent oral communication cannot be achieved without proper training in pronunciation and intonation. Therefore, particular attention needs to be paid to the recognition of phonological code. This then steps up the level of understanding from recognizing a word to organizing a whole sentence with syntactic knowledge. To put it in another way, listening, practice of pronunciation, stress, rhythm and intonation should be brought to conscious awareness in classroom practice.

Most Chinese students seem to have no difficulty in identifying and producing individual English vowels and consonants separately. But people, when they speak, do not pronounce individual sounds separately; they produce

a smooth continuity of combined sounds. It is these combined sounds that cause difficulties for Chinese students, because Chinese has no consonant clusters. So when producing English consonant clusters, they tend to insert a schwa between two consonants. For example, Chinese may say "play" as [pəlei]. Therefore, the teacher should lay emphasis on consonant clusters while giving the students systematic practice of all the phonemes of English[11].

Spoken English is made up of strong-stresses and weak-stresses, with strong-stressed syllables occurring at fairly regular intervals of time. In Chinese, if two similar syllables occur together, the second syllable is something reduced by one tone-level. For example, we say "shū shu (uncle) rather than "shū shū". However, this is unusual and it happens almost exclusively in addressing someone. Generally speaking, Chinese is not a stress-timed language; therefore, it is difficult for Chinese learners to make a distinction between strong-stressed syllables and weak-stressed syllables in both understanding and producing English speech. In producing English speech, the Chinese students tend to over stress those syllables that should not be stressed. The students, therefore, should be provided with plenty of practice in stress and rhythm.

Perhaps intonation is the most difficult aspect for Chinese students in listening to English pronunciation. Wrong intonation will convey wrong mood or attitude, thus running the risk of offending others or making others feel embarrassed. Teachers should point out the intonation patterns of various kinds of utterances and ask the students to practice them. Usually, recordings of the dialogues in the text provide a good model for the students to mimic.

3.3 Dictation

Dictation is a transcribing activity. This activity is based on the principle of audio-lingual methods of foreign language teaching. That is, students learn language by mimicry, memory, and pattern drills. Ur (1984)[13] argues, "Dictation can be used to check accurate perception and comprehension as well as spelling." He regards diction as a written form of repetition exercises and he says that the use of repetitions as a listening comprehension exercises is justified because "Longer coherent passages of discourse can be accurately repeated only if there is high level of comprehension on the part of the repeater." Thus, in order to reproduce a sentence, learners will listen carefully not only for the sounds but also for the meaning. This justifies using repetition as an occasional listening comprehension exercise.

The teacher can first read the passages at normal speed and the students listen to it. Then he repeats the material with pause for the students to write. Finally, he reads the passage at normal speed so that the students can check their own writing. While the students are writing what they heard, they may segment the stream of sounds in some way. Segmenting will give them chances to readjust their developing interpretation.

3.4 Answering Questions

For intelligent listening that requires action and reaction between a speaker and a listener, the teacher presents students with different sorts of questions. Types of questions should be designed depending on the students' level of listening proficiency. These include questions requiring recall of details or an outline of the main points, or questions that require inferences or evaluative comments. Listening materials for students answering different sorts of questions should consist of samples of natural language from as many different sources as possible. This will give students experiences with many different topics, situations, and speakers.

3.5 Scanning

Students extract selected items by scanning the input in order to find specific information. There are a lot of exercises of this type. "The important aspects of this type of activity is the need for the students to seek out specific item and to let the other parts pass." (Underwood, 1993)[12] Listening to weather forecasts or news can be an example. Or teachers can present students with a short story requiring them to write an outline of main points based on what they heard. This activity may be regarded as one that focuses on retrieval of information in memory rather than on listening comprehension. However, it can be an activity that involves a dynamic process of listening comprehension and results in the constructive process of the message being heard and understood.

In summary, the activities discussed above provide students with a purpose for listening by providing appropriate activities. Activity listening makes students motivated to response actively to something rather than to listen passively. That is to say, students do purposeful things in response to what they hear. In addition, activities above involve a collaborative process of listening during pair work or group work. If the activities are done through the target language, English, then students will have opportunities to interact with each other as speakers or listeners in order to perform tasks. Bedsides, activities focus on the processing activities themselves rather than on retrieval of information. The procedures try to help the students develop listening skills by using background knowledge and

by improving linguistic abilities.

However, there is one issue that cannot be ignored: what kinds of materials can best help students? Because successful activities are based on selecting ideal listening materials, teachers should know how to select them. According to Underwood (1993),[12] teachers "need to discover what topics their own students find interesting and then to provide them with a wide range of stimulating materials." This means materials that are geared to the interests of students should be selected like AI, Sci-fi issues nowadays because students enjoy them and perform better with materials to which they want to listen. No matter how, teachers should select materials of appropriate level of linguistic difficulty as regards vocabulary and syntax.(McKeating, 1981).[5] Lastly, listening materials selected should be different from reading material. It is better to select comparatively easier and shorter ones. In these cases, students may listen attentively. So, selecting materials plays an important role in classroom language teaching.

4. Conclusion

In China, quite a number of English teachers have strong teaching skills in reading and writing, but not many of them seem to have the confidence and ability to teach listening well. However, without the teacher having professional competence and confidence in using and teaching English, one probably cannot expect Chinese students to develop their communicative competence effectively, which is considered to be one of principle targets of language teaching. If our teachers pay more attention to helping students gain listening skills through listening comprehension exercises and organizing in place classroom activities, with careful selection of materials, teachers can then be effective in helping students acquire their sound listening skills.

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