The Significance of Contest in Teaching Listening of College English

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Abstract. Listening, as an important part in language development, should be greatly stressed. It is soundly proved that our students are suffering a lot from the barriers of listening. Due to the limited condition and students' ability, the college teachers are all facing various problems in their listening lessons. This paper has made an analysis on these problems, and studied how the contest in teaching listening can help. Contest is a complex process of mental activity, it is easy to produce excitation, psychology, and hearing and thus be affected. Students’ mental quickness will be improved by contesting with others, and this is the mechanism of contest. In teaching practice, the appropriate listening methods will be developed to make the listening class more effective and livelier, and the contest shouldn’t be ignored.

Introduction

Listening is a skill to get and understand the messages. It is suggested that listening is not only a perception of sound, but it also requires comprehension of meaning in that message. Listening may be one of the most important of language skills of English learning. Nearly half of the people’s communication time has been spending in listening. It is also the medium through which much significant foreign cultural information is conveyed. Listening will also offer the students an opportunity to get a feel for the language and help them to improve their all-round ability in learning English, for listening comprehension is a highly integrative skill and it plays an very important role in the process of language learning and skill facilitating.

Problems in Teaching Listening

In the current Chinese education, all the English teachers are facing a problem of how to improve students’ ability of listening comprehension and doing examination as well. We should study and analyze the various problems in listening teaching, then can solve them and improve our teaching methods.

In Terms of Teaching

Currently, the listening materials in college English class are mainly provided by the textbooks and examination papers. Among them the contents of listening exercises in teaching materials which go with the text is relatively difficult instead of getting more difficult gradually. In the widely used textbooks, the listening exercises are designed to match the theme of each unit. But many teachers think that those exercises do not meet the college entrance listening question pattern; also some teachers feel that the speed of listening exercise is too fast, too difficult to understand, and too time-consuming, not suitable for students, thus English teaching has easily neglected this part. Even if they use those materials, the methods are limited to playing back, doing questions, correcting answer. After listening, teachers just explain the new words and difficult sentences and neglect the listening skills, strategies, and emotional attitudes.

In Terms of Learning

Large-scale classroom teaching is a common phenomenon for English lessons in colleges and universities. Although students in the same class are at the same age groups, development process
of them shows differences. The traditional English teaching mode mainly focuses on the average students, and it is very hard to reach the teaching purposes of improving excellent students and supplementing the poor.

In addition, since college students use most of the time in preparing for college examination, they have little time to learn cultural knowledge. It makes student lack cultural knowledge and feel difficult in their listening comprehension.

The Significance of Contest in Teaching Listening

As mentioned above, many teachers just assume that listening is a passive skill and therefore quite easy, so it is not actually taught in classroom. Teachers enhance the students’ capacity of achieving high mark by taking intensive training, but seldom teach students the correct method of listening. Students are not active in learning but driven by listening. In the long run, they would have been tired of listening.

So we must take measures to inspire students to listen more and let them love listening. As there are many problems to be solved, such as lower ability of distinguishing sounds, lack of adequate vocabulary, barriers on grammar and deficiency in background knowledge, this paper establishes a new concept for teaching listening, that is the contest.

What is a Contest?

Instead of separating listening from reading and other skills, this paper emphasizes that listening is equal to them or even more important than them. The contest combines reading and listening and place extra emphasis on speaking. You may say that the contest means an occasion on which a winner is selected from among two or more contestants and it places extra emphasis on speaking. But if one can’t understand what others speak, how can he or she contest with others? So we can say that the improvement of listening ability can be achieved by combining listening and speaking.

It is very important to develop speaking and listening skills together, because most of the time in real life the two skills are needed at the same time. Most of time, we can see the people we are listening to. This means we can see their facial expressions, gestures and other body language as well as the environment, which is relevant, for example, people point at objects or in certain directions. This visual clue helps us understand and predict what we will hear. Of course there are also situations where we cannot see the speakers, such as listening to the radio or using the telephone.

Generally speaking, listening, reading, writing and speaking can't be separated. Be sure to let the lesson go on in a foreign language situation. You can ask the student’s questions about the text, do some discussion, and check the students' homework. This helps students raise their ability to listen and speak. It also helps the students understand or comprehend the sentences and the text.

How does a Contest Work?

As we can imagine, contest is a more complex process of mental activity. Students’ mental quickness will be improved by contesting with others, and this is the mechanism of contest.

To improve the Ability of Distinguishing Sounds. Some students usually do not pay attention to the correct pronunciation of English words and it will affect correct understanding the content of the material although their vocabulary is large. Some students can read correctly, but don't know the correct intonation, so they are still unable to understand the meaning of the contents. The students’ pronunciation is not accurate, causing hearing difficulties. Some students did not start as a way to imitate the correct pronunciation, self-pronunciation is not accurate, and hearing the pronunciation of the material is not on the right number; identify the unclear meaning of a word. So contest in teaching listening is an efficient way to practice pronunciation. By contesting with others, students can correct the wrong pronunciation of each other.

To Increase Vocabulary. It is well-known that vocabulary is the foundation of language. On one hand, without vocabulary, it is impossible to achieve verbal communication; On the other hand, language study can’t go through lacking a certain amount of vocabulary. While listening, sometimes
only two or three key words may severely prevent them from understanding. Just as a famous British linguist once said, “Without grammar little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.” Generally speaking, vocabulary in the listening materials of college English is moderate. However, in practice, we often feel that many words, expressions and phrases which we have learned can’t be understood. We can’t catch the meaning of the words without teacher’s slow-down reading or writing on the blackboard. That is to say, not every word which should be comprehended after seeing can be caught during listening. It is a real demonstration of Chinese students’ learning English. Their reading comprehension ability is more fantastic than their listening comprehension ability. But how can contest help increase vocabulary?

We can encourage our students to remember more words and even hold the view that the more the better. However, if students just recite and recite to remember words, it may not work very well, and it would be too boring. So we may encourage students to remember words by competing with others; for example, they can compete that who can remember more words or phrases when given a definitely period of time, or give them a topic, let them think of some words which are related to it as many as possible. As you can see, this method will stimulate students’ interest in memorizing words and learning English. If necessary, we can hold some formal competitions to reward those who are rich in vocabulary and inspire students to challenge with them as well. And we have the reason to believe that this scheme will work efficiently.

To Learn More about Background Knowledge. Different countries have different cultural background. If listeners know little about the environment, cultural background, custom or even living mode, they can’t have a good understanding of the speakers even though they are familiar with the words they hear. During the process of learning language, culture differences are very common. And sometimes you feel strange about American religions. However, after learning that there are over 88% Christians in American residents and 95% American people declare to believe in God, you will further understand American culture. It is worse that still there are such cases as some students have no idea of Christmas. Every time they listen to something related to Christmas, they will be curious, surprised or even puzzled. Christmas Day is a common festival in foreign countries, but if learners don’t have enough knowledge about this festival they will not understand the happiness of people on that day.

According to the Feature of top-down information processing, the background knowledge we already know is the key to deal with the exercises. If this kind of knowledge is rich and correct, the students’ prediction will accord with the actual situations, the abilities of identity will be accelerated and the understanding will be enhanced. On the contrary, if their knowledge is poor and wrong, the ability of society will became sluggish, and the understanding will not be smoothly.

As we all know, the differences of society and culture between eastern and western countries are great, and it’s these differences that lead to the difference of language, behaviors, habits and customs. So students can’t develop their listening comprehension efficiently without knowing the western countries’ society, culture and knowledge. It’s one of the keys to break through the barriers of listening comprehension. In fact, there are many students in the university who lack this kind of knowledge badly. They don’t master the associated meaning, social meaning or pragmatic meaning of some vocabulary, so they often don’t know what the meanings of the sentences are even if they have already written down the words or the sentences correctly.

If the teacher encourage students to join in the different contests, the students can learn more about the culture of different countries, and this can arouse their interests in learning and speaking English, which can improve students’ listening to a certain extent.

To Train Students’ Psychological Quality. According to the study of psychology, most of the psychologists believe in using a number of different teaching methods, with a great emphasis on interaction between students and teachers. So, some courses are advised to use in the training psychology quality process, contest is a good way to train English for communicating factual information. Given the small number of students some free topics, the students can be easily encouraged to ask questions. In the training process students can be divided into small groups and large groups. Small groups are made of 4 - 6 students who discuss specific readings relevant to the
lecture course and have the opportunity to ask questions about anything unclear from the lectures; in large groups, the training may include activities of demonstrations, videos, and presentations to other students or other classes.

**To Combine Listening and Speaking.** Most of the listening in daily life allows the listener to respond to the speaker, such as in a conversation. This means we can interrupt the speakers and ask for repetition or clarification. In most cases, the speaker is talking directly to the listener, so he or she can adjust the way of speaking according to the listener’s reactions. For example, if the listener indicates that he or she does not understand what is being said, the speaker may rephrase or elaborate. Generally speaking, listening, reading, writing and speaking can't be separated.

**Conclusion**

Listening is so important in English learning and that we should keep improving our teaching methods. The purpose of English teaching is to improve the students’ four skills of listening, speaking, and reading and writing, with the base of necessary phonetics, large vocabulary and good grammar, however, this is not the final purpose. The final purpose is to let students be able to use the language. Teachers should learn the basic theories of teaching listening and keep close to the development in theories and teaching practices. In order to make students to communicate freely in real life, the teachers should expose the students to authentic listening materials and books at all different levels. Furthermore, teachers should have more patience and passion in deciding what students hear. In teaching practice, the appropriate listening methods will be developed to make the listening class more effective and livelier, and the contest shouldn’t be ignored.

**References**


