Internationalization and Academic Listening Instruction and Assessment

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Abstract. In the process of educational internationalization, English has been the major means of instruction in universities worldwide. Some of Chinese universities have started to incorporate English-mediated courses into their curriculum development in order to equip their students with adequate EAP skills. With more academic lectures delivered in English at the tertiary level, it has become significant to implement practical and valid academic listening instruction and assessment. The paper revisits challenges and requirements in academic listening research pertaining to the modern internationalized context and urges investigations on the nature and construct of academic lecture comprehension. Solid research in this line enables us to understand students’ cognitive processes involved in lecture comprehension and develop more effective and efficient academic listening instruction and assessment approaches to improve students’ academic listening ability.

Introduction

Currently, we are in the middle of “educational globalization” where English has become the major means of instruction in universities worldwide. Meanwhile, in order to internationalize the tertiary education, more and more Chinese universities have started to import English course books and deliver academic lectures in English. This new trend poses new challenges not only in classrooms, but also in assessments. First, the cognitive processes in the listeners’ mind when they hear an academic lecture remain a “black box”. Second, some traditional test types fail to target higher levels of listening comprehension [1]. So, we cannot help asking ourselves the following questions: what really happens when students are hearing an academic lecture? To what extent do test-takers differ in terms of their performances involved in listening to an academic lecture? How can we adjust our academic listening instruction and assessment to meet new challenges in the process of educational internationalization. On the whole, all these questions press for a better understanding of academic listening instruction and assessment.

Limited Research in Academic Listening

Based on the literature review in the field of applied linguistics, it is obvious to see that listening has drawn less attention compared with the other language skills, namely, speaking, reading and writing. “Unlike speaking, listening never had its own powerful advocates”[2]. Through the British testing history, until the late 20th century, listening was still the skill “least practiced in the language classroom, least researched in the literature, least understood in the language testing field” [2]. According to Field [3], there is sufficient evidence proving listening is “undervalued”. Alderson and Bachman wrote in the Series Editor’s Preface of Buck’s Assessing Listening: “the assessment of listening abilities is one of the least understood, least developed and yet one of the most important areas of language testing and assessment” [4]. There are a number of other scholars who hold the same view that the processes, instruction and assessment of L2 listening are less understood and researched than the other three conventional skills [5].

The reasons accounting for the lack of research into listening may vary, yet quite a number of scholars have pointed out that one of the important reasons leading to the neglect of listening lies in people’s misconception of treating listening as a passive language skill as reading and hence the
assumption that listening and reading naturally undergo the same cognitive process. Weir (2005) pointed out that in language testing, testing of listening was based on researches into reading since quite a few scholars held a firm assumption that these two skills shared many similarities in terms of their comprehension processes [6]. Quite a few scholars argued explicitly that listening has been misconceptualized as a passive skill similar to reading. On the one hand, listening comprehension and reading comprehension do share some similar traits (see Dunkel 1991; Freedle & Kostin 1994, 1999; Buck 1992, 2001; Brindley and Nunan 1992; Bae and Bachman 1998); on the other hand, Buck [4] argued
testing listening is technically more complicated, more time consuming and far less convenient than testing reading: providing good quality recorded sound, for example, is just not as easy as handing out pieces of writing. (p. 32)

Despite technical demands, listening comprehension has its unique features that differentiate itself from reading comprehension, e.g., decoding of various accents in acoustic input, real-time comprehension of the spoken language, just to name a few. In terms of cognitive process, listening is also unique. One of the early scholars Donald Sperritt (1962) once designed tests to determine whether listening was different from other cognitive processes, such as reasoning, attention, etc. and drew the conclusion that listening was a separate activity. A very obvious difference lying in the cognitive demand between reading comprehension and listening comprehension in the testing situation is that test-takers can repeatedly read the same text within the time limit while they can never retrieve any information from the original recorded text after it has been read during a listening test. Nevertheless, what really defines listening comprehension and makes it a very distinctive language skill is still vague. We are badly in need of investigation of the listening process to enrich our knowledge on listening construct. Even if Richards (1983) [7] listed detailed conversational listening sub-skill and academic listening sub-skill taxonomy, there’s a lack of empirical studies supporting taxonomies of listening sub-skills [4]. Going back to academic listening, we can hardly find empirical evidence proving the validity of academic listening sub-skills.

On the whole, up till now, we still have learned little about the cognitive nature of academic listening and second language listening remains the least researched compared with other language skills. Moreover, students’ listening proficiency has already proved to be one of the biggest impediments on the way to their final academic achievement both at home and abroad. It is not a rare case that keen Chinese students and scholars who endeavor to further their research abroad are deprived of this opportunity because they once failed the academic listening section of an international academic English test, such as iBT TOEFL, IELTS, etc. The reality demonstrates a need to do the research on the nature of academic listening and validation of academic listening tests. Without understanding and conceptualizing the construct or competence underlying academic listening, it would be hard to implement valid academic listening assessments and effective academic listening instruction.

**New Challenges in Academic Listening Research**

The top challenge of doing academic listening research still lies in the investigation of the cognitive process of academic listening. Field put this challenge as “the inaccessible nature of the skill” [8] and the current knowledge available about it is far from enough. The processes in the listeners’ mind when they attend an academic lecture remain a “black box”. The crux here is in which way we can peek into the “box” without interfering with its own functioning. Listening is real-time comprehension of audio input and hence the cognitive process is invisible and transient. To meet up with this challenge, we need to rely upon innovative research methods in data collection and data analysis.

In terms of academic listening testing, innovation is also needed. How to test the higher levels of listening comprehension is the question that afflicts test designers especially in the case of testing
academic listening. Field (2013:133) criticized some traditional Cambridge listening test formats: “the ability to target the highest levels of decision making is limited by their design” [1]. For example, he believed that the test format such as MCQ only targeted discrete points of information and concerning those test formats, test-takers are not required to recognize the logical connections between different points or construct a more holistic meaning at the discourse level.

More challenges lie in academic listening instruction. There are also some newly-emerging problems. In China’s current situation, EAP is not a conventional teaching practice. According to a recent needs analysis of the students from four key universities in Shanghai, Cai (2012: 12) concluded that in the background of internationalizing academic studies at the tertiary level, it was significant to implement practical and effective EAP instruction [9]. The same study also revealed the high demand from students to improve their academic abilities within which academic listening ability was highlighted. Similarly, in Graham’s study (2006), very few students were confident with their listening ability and a range of studies [5][10][11] have indicated that students struggle with listening as a source of frustration.

Because of the lack of knowledge in understanding the nature of academic listening, how to effectively design academic listening teaching materials and how to train learners to listen for academic purposes are still hard nuts to crack for language researchers and instructors. When academic listening instructors experience these puzzles, they have rather limited resources to resort to. A handy solution could be offering students videos or audios of academic lectures and asking them to listen to those lectures without properly training their listening strategies or substantially sharpening their ears. Meanwhile, we still lack authentic input for both academic listening instruction and assessment. The prerequisite of measuring listening is that we can ensure authenticity of the test input by clarifying the “aspects of proficiency and comprehension unique to listening” [12].

All these above-mentioned deficiencies pose challenges concerning the research into academic listening construct to a certain depth.

Gaps between Requirement and Reality

In the previous sections, we have already stated the gaps between new challenges emerging in academic listening assessment and instruction and limited research concentrated on investigations into academic listening construct. In the context of EAP teaching and assessment in China, the gap is even more obvious. Given the fact that English has become the lingua franca in the world and a booming number of overseas students are now pursuing their academic study, especially at the tertiary level, in English, academic listening should be a focus for L2 listening comprehension research [13][14]. Even in countries where English is not used as an official language, such as in China, in order to internationalize the tertiary education in line with the fast pace of economic globalization, more and more Chinese universities have embarked on delivering professional academic lectures in English with imported teaching materials. Correspondingly, a considerably growing number of college students generate the need to fully grasp and comprehend English-mediated academic lectures. Lack of note-taking skills and inability to follow English-speaking professors’ lecturing speed now pose as college students’ major barriers to effective lecture comprehension. With the purpose to improve college students’ academic English competence, traditional college English teaching is then gradually giving way to EAP instruction and inevitably, academic listening also becomes an indispensable module of EAP curriculum and academic listening test, with its main purpose to test test-takers’ academic lecture comprehension and note-taking ability, is also becoming an important part of EAP proficiency test.

In spite of the growing requirement of college students’ academic listening competence, there still remains a gap between their unsatisfactory performance in English listening comprehension and a lack of attention paid to listening instruction [15]. Moreover, traditional teaching methods of listening comprehension might not suit the new development of EAP that focuses on students’ real ability to use English for academic purposes. Therefore, the research that explores the nature and construct of
academic lecture comprehension in a local context can also help us understand students’ cognitive processes involved in lecture comprehension and then help them develop more effective strategies to better comprehend English-mediated academic lectures via creative and innovative academic listening instruction and assessment tools.

**Conclusion**

In the more and more internationalized context of tertiary education, we are in the urgent need of designing practical and effective academic listening instruction and assessment approaches. It is not a rare case when students are required to follow academic lectures in English, they are not accustomed to it. Usually, they might be wondering what the key points are, what information should be written down and how the main ideas in a lecture are coherently organized.

In terms of academic listening instruction, we need to probe into students’ cognitive processes while listening to an academic lecture and the major problems they encounter while listening so that we can help them in an efficient way. Likewise, academic listening test designing is not only a matter of science, but also a matter of art especially in order to target the presupposed construct. In the process of taking an academic listening test, students might not really respond to the test in the same way intended by the test developer. In addition, students might also lean heavily upon test-taking strategies, though we, instructors emphasize from time to time that strengthening the overall language proficiency is the basic step toward satisfactory academic listening performances. Therefore, we need to develop scientific academic listening tests which are not merely an absolute scale to measure students’ academic listening ability, but rather a supportive type of scaffolding to help them understand the ability better.

**References**


