

A Study of English Listening Barrier and Effective Solutions

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Abstract. Listening is an important part in the process of English learning. However, for most L2 English learners, listening barrier is a long-term problem and hard to overcome. Based on questionnaires, practice in class and listening tests for sophomore English majors in our university, this paper analyzes the main reasons of students' listening barrier and provides effective solutions to help improve college students' listening ability, both English majors' and non-English majors'.

Introduction

As one of the four basic language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing, listening is a key part in the process of English learning. Therefore, listening teaching plays an indispensable role in the whole English teaching. At present, the listening part accounts for 30% in TEM-4 and 25% in TEM-8; as for CET-4 and CET-8, it both accounts for 35%. Based on these data, the status of English listening cannot be emphasized more. However, for most L2 English learners, listening barrier is a long-term problem and hard to overcome. How to improve listening ability has become the main concern of both English teachers and students. In this case, questionnaires and listening tests for sophomore English majors in our university were conducted to find out main reasons of listening barrier. At the same time, based on literature review, practice in class and teacher reflection diary, effective strategies are provided to improve college students' listening ability.

Reasons of Students' Listening Barrier

For obstacles existing in listening comprehension process for college students, two kinds of reasons are listed in this paper—linguistic factors and non-linguistic factors. The former includes voice disturbance, grammar problems, shortage of vocabulary, etc. The latter consists of mental factor, lack of cultural background, weak listening skills, etc.

Linguistic Factors

Voice Disturbance. In spite of more than 6-year English learning experience, a large proportion of university students have difficulty in recognizing stresses, reductions, elision, liaison and distinguishing differences in pronunciation between American accent and British sound. Therefore, although listening vocabularies usually are easier than reading vocabularies, students still cannot understand the listening material because of voice disturbance. For example, in one of our listening tests, the correct answer rate of one fill-in-the-blank question “One thing to notice is that these predictions will never make sense” is only 45.65%. A large percentage of students fill in the wrong word “know” or “note”, because they mistook the liaison of “notice” and “is”. Another example is the fill-in-the-blank sentence “Sleepwalking is a sleep disorder affecting an estimated 10 percent of all humans at least once in their lives”. The correct answer rate of “estimated” is only 28.3%, because most students with this test failed to recognize the reduction at the end of the word. Examples similar to the above situations are very common. Therefore, voice disturbance can be regarded as a main barrier for listening comprehension.

Grammar Problem. In the aspect of grammar structure, many complicated sentences in listening materials are different from Chinese sentences in respect of logic expression. This in a large extent would influence listening recognition and comprehension. Thus, students who are poor at grammar, actually lots of students are, consider this problem really a big obstacle while listening.

For example, in our test, there is a fill-in-the-blank sentence “It may run in families”. The blank word “run” is very easy, but there are still a percentage of 23% students writing “running” instead of “run” because of voice disturbance. However, if they considered the grammar structure of this sentence (there is a word “may” in front of the blank, which means the blank word must be room form of the verb), their mistake might have been avoided. Another example is the sentence “Sleepwalking is not usually a sign that something is emotionally or psychologically wrong with a child”, in which the correct answer rate of the blank word “psychologically” is only 41.3%. Without the consideration of grammar structure, many students wrote its adjective form instead of the adverb form. Based on these analyses, it is obvious that knowledge level of grammar could affect students’ listening judgement as well.

Shortage of Vocabulary. Words are the basis in learning a language. Only if students have a good command of large numbers of vocabularies, could they achieve breakthrough in their listening training. Small knowledge of vocabulary directly weakens their listening ability. For example, in our test sentences “you will view some seers trying to prove that the world is going to end” and “They probably won’t even remember the nighttime stroll”, both the correct answer rates are very low. According to students, they said they were unfamiliar with these blank words, so they just guessed the answer which increased the error rate. In their daily learning, students pay less enough attention to words recitation, which definitely has a negative effect on their listening comprehension. Hence, shortage of vocabulary is another reason of listening barrier.

Non-linguistic Factors

Lack of Cultural Background. Knowledge of cultural background refers to a country’s history, politics, economy and customs, moral code, religious belief, etc. in the listening materials. Therefore, in order to improve listening level of a language, having a command of its pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar is far from enough, one must have profound knowledge of its culture as well.

The more one knows about a language’s culture, the easier it is for him/her to comprehend listening materials. For example, there are two essays having the same degree of complexity: one introduces Chinese traditional festival “the Spring Festival” and the other talks about a western festival “Thanksgiving Day”. Thanks to cultural background, students are more familiar with Spring Festival than Thanksgiving Day. Hence, it is easier for them to understand the listening material of the former (Guo, 2016, said).

Mental Barrier. Mental barrier refers to the negative mentality while listening. In general, while doing listening exercises, students would keep intensive concentration. Once they cannot keep up with the speed or cannot understand some words, they would be nervous and thus cannot concentrate as much as they could have, which naturally influences the whole listening comprehension because they have been thinking about the words they have failed to recognize and are totally in loss of what is going on. According to an empirical research, tension and anxiety are very common in listening class. However, they are negatively correlated with the understanding effect of listening content (Sun J, 2011, said).

Weak Listening Skills. Students quite often ignore the purposes of listening. For some materials, intensive listening is a must while for some others extensive listening can be accepted. According to a research, a percentage of 31.2% students would choose to understand every word and every sentence while listening (Sun H, 2015,said). What kind of method they should use depends on what relevant listening questions they are required to answer. But the truth is students seldom pay attention to the connection between sentences and their logical relationship, so it is hard for them to grasp the whole topic and content of listening materials. In addition, while listening, some students would firstly

translate what they hear to Chinese and then try to understand the content. This habit would greatly waste time and badly influence listening comprehension. Therefore, weak listening skills and bad listening habits would also be responsible for listening barrier.

Solutions

Based on the application of anchored instruction in listening class, several strategies are conducted to cope with listening barrier according to feedbacks from teachers and students.

Consolidate Language Foundation

To overcome obstacles of linguistic factors, students must consolidate their language foundation from aspects of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, etc. (1) Listening materials should be selected properly and real language materials are advocated. Real language materials refer to those spoken by native speakers and related to the realistic life students should be familiar with. Real language materials could help restore real contexts, contributing to solve problems of stresses, reductions, elision and liaison; (2) Strengthening grammar learning including practices and analyses on long and complicated sentences; learning to know what the grammatical structure a sentence has while reading the questions before listening. In this way, students will know which members of the sentences are missing and thus the scope of filling the blank with a correct answer is largely reduced. (3) Expanding vocabulary. Apart from learning new words continuously, students should be familiar with “old” words’ synonyms, antonyms, etc. Reciting words could be tedious, boring and dull but it is worthwhile the effect. Also students could make use of different approaches to do it such as using affixes, association method, comparison and contrast method and so on.

Emphasis on the Input of Cultural Background

Through our innovation training program “innovative application of anchored instruction in listening class”, it is found that students’ knowledge of cultural background is very important in listening class. This mainly happens in the preparing process before class.

Considering students’ interest and selection, teachers would assign them to search for relative cultural background information before class. For example, if a listening material is about British’s politics, then students should research in advance for relative information about its regime, political parties, political institution, etc. Besides, reading English novels and watching English movies after class could also help learn the cultural background. In a word, input of cultural background ahead of time could gradually solve the intellectual problem of listening comprehension.

Paying Attention to Listening Skills

(1) Predictive ability. It requires students to predict the possible information according to the topic, which is a crucial ability in listening. Also, teachers could design some questions for students to ponder and concentrate their attention on before listening. Research finds that on the condition of same materials and same-level students, the listening effect would be better if students are provided with some material-related questions in advance;

(2) Associative perception. While listening, students should consider the context and logical relationship between sentences. Wasting time on one or two words would ruin the whole listening effect; Students should learn to give up some petty and minor parts for important and major points. No losing, no gaining.

(3) Combining intensive listening with extensive listening. The purpose of intensive listening is to cultivate listening basic skill and the purpose of extensive listening is to consolidate and enlarge the effect of intensive listening (Wu, 2005, said). In another word, intensive listening is the basis of extensive listening and the latter is an effective method to guarantee listening time. Listening ability would be improved comprehensively by combing these two methods. Which method should be used largely relies on what questions are.

Cultivating Learning Interest

Interest is the best teacher. In the process of teaching, audio-visual combination could be adopted to arouse students' learning interest and listening materials could be authentic videos, voice bands, movie fragments, etc. Besides, group discussion and debates could also make class atmosphere more active. According to a psychological study, relying on visual memory alone, the efficiency would be 27%; relying on auditory memory alone, the efficiency would be 16%; but combining the two memory methods, the efficiency would be 66% (Wu, 2005, said). Therefore, integrating the visual aids with some audio ones in class would have a far better result.

Summary

Generally speaking, the improvement of listening ability would be a gradual development process. Students could adopt relative strategies which have been mentioned in this paper for their specific reasons of listening barrier. Only in this way, can they overcome their listening obstacles scientifically and effectively. Meanwhile, the progress they make in their listening comprehension could also make a good example for their holistic breakthrough in learning English.

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