

## Teach more strategies in EFL college listening classroom

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**Abstract:** Listening is very important. Conversations will take place only when we can understand what our interlocutor says; listening is also an important input. Yet, many of my students got frustrated in listening. Being a teacher, I tried to rethink about what I did in my listening classes and did some literature review. As a result, I found that there are a lot of important listening strategies that were neglected by both teachers. I argue in this paper that more listening strategies should be taught in classes and a simple teaching plan is given.

**Key words:** listening classes; listening strategies; teachability; teachers' roles

### 1. The Background of Writing This Paper

Listening, together with speaking, reading and writing is one of the four skills in language learning. Undeniably, listening is very important—we have to listen to many utterances in our everyday life; conversations will take place only when we can understand what our interlocutor says; although input (listening and reading) alone is not sufficient for acquisition, input is absolutely necessary for second language learning (Gass & Selinker, 2001). Though my students have been having listening lessons for years, I find that their listening abilities are poor. Two incidents can prove it. One was that last year my students took part in the Test for English Majors (TEM), none of them got a point in a dictation item which occupied 15% of the whole paper. Although dictation result is influenced by many other factors, such as memory, spelling, I still think that students' listening ability is a serious problem. The other was that many of my students could not understand what their foreign teacher said. This sets an orientation for me to find out what's wrong with my teaching.

#### 1.1 How I taught listening

When I was an English teacher, I taught listening in a college for one year. I just taught in the way as my teachers had done. Usually, I taught some new words which occurred in the new word lists in the first few minutes, and then I let the students listen to the materials two or three times and at last I checked the answers to the exercises according to the reference book. My feeling that most of the students got frustrated in listening class was confirmed by interviewing some of my students and my observing others' listening classes. My students told me that listening was very difficult for them because sometimes they could not even recognize a known word or they were not familiar with different accent or different background knowledge. They usually were absent-minded in classes or extremely tired in listening classes. As a result, after two years' "hard work", they could not improve their listening to a satisfactory level.

#### 1.2 My thinking about my problem now

To sort out the problem, listening teachers should do and can do something to help their students improve listening ability and the following aspects need being taken into consideration: what are listening skill and

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listening strategy, the teachability of listening strategies, and how to teach listening strategies. These are likely to help me find out the underlying reasons for my teaching and give me some hints on future teaching. Now let's come to the literature review.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Definition of listening skill and listening strategy and major listening strategies

#### 2.1.1 The definitions of listening skill and listening from literature

According to Rost strategies are conscious steps or actions by which learners can guide and evaluate their own comprehension and responses (Rost, 2002).

Quite similarly, Wang (WANG Chu-ming & QI Lu-xia, 2003) defines that learner strategies are the thinking activities consciously selected by learners in order to understand or grasp the language materials. And listening strategies are the strategies used by learners while listening to language materials.

More detailed, White explains that “strategies are efforts to compensate for uncertainties in understanding, and could include making inferences, realizing where misunderstandings have occurred, and asking for clarification” (White, 1998).

#### 2.1.2 My understanding of listening strategies and skills

Listening strategies are some techniques used by listeners consciously while listening to help understanding. If the listeners need the strategies less and less or can use the strategies unconsciously, the strategies have become listening skills.

The definitions of listening strategies and skills serve as the basis of the understanding of the following part—the major listening strategies in listening classes.

#### 2.1.3 The major listening strategies

The Danish applied linguist Claus Færch divided listening strategies into two types: *Psycholinguistic* and *behavioral*. *Psycholinguistic* strategies are unseen actions that are “in the head” (Færch, & Kasper, 1983). They involve the listener's conscious use of their personal “comprehension resources”: For example, the listener might exploit contextual clues and background knowledge, or to guess at meaning on the basis of a word's structure. Lynch (1996) refers to these as *internal* strategies.

*Behavioural* strategies, on the other hand, are visible actions “in the world”. They include negotiation with the speaker—making general requests (“I don't understand”), specific requests (“What does X mean?”) and admitting ignorance (“I don't know the word”) (Færch, & Kasper, 1983). Lynch (1996) call these *interactive* strategies, as they depend on collaboration with other person or people.

Since the listening my students have is transactional listening but not international listening, the role of the students in listening is as an overhearer, I would focus on psycholinguistic strategies in the following parts.

There are many kinds of listening strategies that are useful to listeners. Please see Table 1 for the names of strategies and the description of them according to Wang (WANG Chu-ming & QI Lu-xia, 2003).

This table shows that there are a lot of listening strategies for us to utilize. However, in my teaching problem, I just focused on the teaching of words and grammar, and neglected the others. Because I thought strategies should be learned by students themselves on the condition that they had enough practice. I think it is quite necessary for me to know whether it is teachable or not. In the following part, I will try to show some theories on the teachability of listening strategies witnessed by researchers.

**Table 1 The major psycholinguistic listening strategies**

The name of strategy	The description of strategy
Metacognitive Planning Monitoring Evaluating	Set the learning goal, make learning plan and schedule Examine the fulfillment of the plan and the understanding of listening materials Evaluate the fulfillment of the plan, the effect of the using of strategies, and the progress the student himself has made
Form strategies New words Grammar	Pay much attention to new words Use grammar knowledge to help your understanding
Meaning strategies Inferencing Connecting predicting	Make use of the present information to inference the result or the missing information Connect the present information with the acquired knowledge to help understanding To predict with the help of pictures or titles, etc.
Native language strategies	Translate every word or sentence heard into the native language
Social/ affective strategy	Communicate with others or adjust feeling to promote the understanding

## 2.2 The teachability of listening strategies

Good listeners need different sub-skills according to different kinds of text they are listening to, and the reasons for listening to it. Of course, no one will not be very good at these skills to begin with, it is teachers who need to teach them strategies for coping with what they have missed or misunderstood (Euck. 2001). The teachability of listening strategies also has been proved by some researchers. They have come to realize that language learning will be facilitated if learners are more aware of the range of possible strategies that can select during language learning and language use, and the most efficient way to highlight this awareness is through strategy-based instruction. Extensive studies on instruction in LSs (learning strategies) have been carried out in a worldwide context in various areas of the curriculum, including speaking, reading comprehension, vocabulary learning, memory training, and solving (Cohen, 1998; Cohen & Apeh, 1980; Oxford, 1996); some other researchers hold that strategy training can improve learners' performance, help them become more autonomous, motivated and confident in language learning (Cohen, 1998; Cohen, & Apeh, 1980; Oxford, 1990); other studies have proved that instruction can improve the listeners' performance (Brown, & Palinscar, 1982), increase strategy awareness, help them develop a more structured approach to tasks (SU Yuan-lian, 2002).

A recent research by SU Yuan-lian (2002) has arrived at the following conclusions:

- (1) "Learner-based instruction in metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective strategies can improve Chinese EFL (English as a foreign language) beginners' performance in transactional listening" (SU Yuan-lian, 2002, p. 79)
- (2) "Learner-based instruction in metacognitive, cognitive and social/ affective strategies can enhance the Chinese EFL beginners' awareness of strategy use to a large extent" (SU Yuan-lian, 2002, p. 79).
- (3) "The effect of instruction on the ineffective listeners is greater than that of the effective listeners and the ineffective listeners seem to need strategy training more than the effective listeners do"(SU Yuan-lian, 2002, p. 80).
- (4) "Integrated, long-term training is more effective than separate, one-time training" (SU Yuan-lian, 2002, p. 80).

Two main points could be concluded from the above researches. Firstly, listening strategies are teachable, especially to beginners. Secondly, the teaching of listening strategies is of great significance. Who will teach the

listening strategies? Now let's come to see the roles of a teacher in listening classrooms.

### 2.3 The roles of a teacher in listening classrooms

To solve my problem, it is necessary for me to reconsider the roles of a teacher in a listening class. According to Field's opinion, first of all, the role of teachers in listening classes is a **guide**, who is to give their students some help, including skills, in the process. Then, the teacher should be a **diagnoser**, who can identify listening problems and put them right. At this point, "wrong answers are more informative than right ones; it makes sense to spend time finding out where and how understanding broke down." (Field, 2002) Thirdly, he should be a **designer** who is able to select or design suitable texts and tasks for his students. It is commonly suggested that pieces of authentic listening be introduced at the early stage of listening, alongside scripted texts, to help the learners get familiar with the cadences of the target language (Field, 1998). Some possible modifications are given to the listening passage, if it is beyond the students' level; such as to record a simplified version or to reduce the length of text by playing just one paragraph (Lynch, 1996). To design suitable task, teachers can adjust the complexity of the task to match the students' level (Lynch, 1996). Sometimes one's native language can be used to report the answer, or just ask the students to choose the answer from a list if the listening passage is too difficult (Lynch, 1996). Otherwise, if the listening passage is easier, we can ask the students to repeat the whole sentences. Lastly, a listening teacher should try his best to be a **motivator** who can get his students more involved in their listening classes and learn more listening skills. To enhance motivation, the following suggestions might be helpful to teachers:

(1) Give a purpose of listening.

(2) "Make sure there is sufficient variety of listening materials, of pace and intensity, and of activity to allow to work in their style and with their own strategies" (Hedge, 2002).

(3) Acknowledge that listening is quite difficult to non-native speakers, and be sure to give reassurance (Hedge, 2002).

Obviously, the role of a listening teacher is quite different from what I thought he should be. I have a lot of things to do besides teaching words and grammar. Now I can safely conclude that I should teach more listening strategies in my future listening classes.

### 2.4 How to teach listening strategies: A diagnostic approach (Field, 1998, p. 111)

The roles of a listening teacher above reveal that teachers should not only focus on correct answers, they should focus on the listening itself. "a diagnostic approach to listening involves revising the conventional lesson format" (Field, 1998, p.112). Its main point is that "there would be an extended post-listening session (possibly in a subsequent lesson) in which gaps in learners' listening skills could be examined and redressed through short micro-listening exercises" (Field, 1998, p.112). It also includes a shorter pre-listening period, of as little as five minutes, which is to create motivation and establish context, and a lengthy listening session, with several replays for learners to re-listen and check their answer (Field, 1998). "From a process perspective, wrong answers can be seen to be of more significance than correct ones" (Field, 1998, p.112). Teachers use the incorrect answers to determine where understanding broke down and how to put things right. Misunderstandings may occur because of the knowledge of phonology, lexis, syntax, semantics and discourse structure, which have something to do with the bottom-up view, or because of the unfamiliarity of the topic, unclear context or poor motivation, etc. Once the reason has been found out, a lot of remedial micro-listening practice will follow.

After a lot of micro-listening practice, students may have improved their listening ability in this certain part. Teachers can continue to test comprehension to find out the difficult points their students have and to provide some micro-listening practice accordingly.

This diagnostic approach will give me a guide in listening teaching in the future.

### 3. Implications

Though listening ability is decided by many factors, such as the enough exposure to the target language, intelligence, feeling and some other unexpected elements, I will try to give some implication in the following part from the angle of a teacher/what a teacher can do.

#### 3.1 Some general implications

##### 3.1.1 Listening strategies are important to my students

Good listening effect needs not only linguistic knowledge but also non-linguistic knowledge. To utilize the knowledge of these two aspects, I need some listening strategies. If enough input has been given to students, some diagnostic strategies training will promote listening learning, shape their self-control learning habit and improve independent learning ability. Since my students are college students and they have learned a lot of words, phrases and grammar, what they need most is listening strategies.

##### 3.1.2 Listening strategies are teachable to students

Listening strategies as well as linguistic knowledge are necessary to successful listening comprehension, but some listening strategies are not acquired automatically. They could be learned more effectively with the help of the teacher.

##### 3.1.3 It is listening teachers who should teach students listening strategies

Listening strategies are important and teachable. Who teaches the listening strategies? The role of the teacher discussed above shows that listening teachers should do it.

##### 3.1.4 Not to teach too many strategies at a time

Selected strategies should be taught gradually to the students. In addition, review the strategies learned before from time to time is of great importance for students to internalize the strategies.

3.1.5 Listening strategies training should be systematic, since “Integrated, long-term training is more effective than separate, one-time training” (SU Yuan-lian, 2002).

#### 3.2 A sample teaching plan

The students are asked to listen to a piece of news like this:

Now the news is Special English. This is Al Ross reporting.

At least thirty persons have been killed and more than 100 others injured in a strong earthquake in eastern China. The Chinese agency Xinhua said many houses were destroyed. The earthquake measured about 6 on the Richter scale. Its center was reported in Shangdong Province, about 600 kilometers south of Beijing.

The teaching procedure will be the followings:

(1) Pre-listening tasks Now you are going to listen to a piece of news about an earthquake. Please predict what will happen if an earthquake happens. Compare and discuss your answers with your partners.

(2) Listening tasks Listen to the news on the tape to see whether your predictions are right or not according to the report of this earthquake. Listen to it once again and focus on the numbers in the news and identify where the earthquake took place.

(3) Post listening tasks Check the answers to questions, interview the students who have not got the correct answers in or after class.

In the pre-listening stage, I try to let my students connect the knowledge they have acquired with listening

information, and ask them to predict what will happen in this earthquake. By comparing their answers with others, they will have more clues while listening and find it easier for them to listen. These correspond with the connecting, predicting and social/affective strategies mentioned in 2.1.3. It also creates motivation and reason for students to listen.

While doing the two listening tasks, the students have a clear purpose for listening every time. The purpose will lead the students to focusing on the meaning of the news but not breaking down when they meet an unknown word. During the first listening, the students are encouraged to confirm the prediction they made. It emphasizes the using of meaning strategies too. During the second listening, the students are asked to listen for detailed, which is important to a piece of news like this.

In the post-listening task, I will try to check their answers and diagnose their strengths and weakness and get ready for the next remedial micro-listening strategies training.

For example, if some students can not have the meaning of the word “destroyed” in the news, that means they still are not able to guess the meaning of a word according to a context. I will give them some micro-listening strategies training afterwards.

Of course, it is just an example. Different listening texts and tasks demand different strategies and different ways to diagnose the weaknesses.

#### 4. Conclusion

Students’ poor listening ability is a big problem. To solve the problem, in this paper, I have argued that I should teach my students more listening strategies in EFL college listening classroom. To make my argument more practical and plausible, I also give some general implications and a sample teaching plan.

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