

# On Affecting Factors and Teaching Strategy of English Listening Comprehension in China

## Author Details:

**Zhen Zhou-** Foreign Language School, Nanchang Normal University, Nanchang, Jiangxi, China  
Correspondence: Zhen Zhou - Tel: 15083549166. E-mail: zoye100@sina.com

**Abstract:** *Listening is the basic and also the most important skill among the four skills of listening, speaking, and reading and writing, which plays a significant role in the English learning. However, most college students in China fear English listening and are much frustrated by listening, and their listening achievements are not satisfying. The present college English teaching needs much improvement and reform. The article first elucidates the problems arising from English listening teaching, and then explores the affecting factors of English listening teaching, and finally puts forward some teaching strategy based on the English listening teaching and learning problems, in order to supply some implication and reference for the English teaching and learning and ultimately enhance the teaching and learning efficiency of English comprehension in China.*

**Keywords:** *listening comprehension, short-term retention, psychological factors, background culture, cultural differences.*

## 1. Introduction

Listening is a basic form of oral communication and is also an important way for people to absorb information. American foreign language methodology expert Rivers once has done statistics and found that in human communicating activities, which include listening, speaking, reading and writing, people averagely spend 45% of our time in listening, 30% in speaking, and 16% reading and 9% in writing. Therefore, listening plays an important role in actual language social communicating. Listening level being improved is an important part of college English study. Teaching syllabus for college English" raises some requirements for college students' English level. As China's economy is progressing, foreign exchange is expanding, university students as society's main force should realize the importance of listening in English communication. But because the teaching and learning thoughts are very backward, listening teaching cannot catch up with the progress of 'teaching guideline". So listening is hard to enhance. From the test scores of College English Test Band 4, and College English Test Band 6 in China every year, the English listening is still a weak point. These years, though many teachers have realized that English teachers should not be a machine-operator in English listening class. They begin to be concerned about "teach students how to learn "and class teaching also gains some huge improvement. The present article attempts to analyze some typical factors which affect listening comprehension and supply some methodology measures for English comprehension teaching and learning.

## 2. Present Situation

At present, in colleges, many listening teachers neglect the importance of listening class and they normally function like a machine operator. In class, teachers play recordings, check answers, and replay recordings, which is a usual circle. Thus, college students tend to lose interest in English listening in such situations. And most students only listen to English in class, not after class. And every week, in most universities, students have two periods of listening class only. As for college students, when they come to society, it is a sad thing that many are mute and deaf. Traditional education supplies our society with too many students high in scores, but poor in communicating. We must find out the factors affecting listening comprehension and change traditional methodology to foster practical talents.

## 3. Factors Affecting Listening Comprehension

### 3.1 Short-term retention

In terms of the relation between short-term retention and listening comprehension, Sperling and Darwin's experiment shows that in aural memory, short-term retention takes up the largest part, and aural memory's capacity is the smallest among all the memory forms. The amount of listening, the content, past experience knowledge of listeners have direct relations with the quality and quantity of short-term retention. As we know, short-term retention, especially during receiving information, normally occurs because of sudden stimuli. It is a kind of shallow impression which has not been processed deeply. And it is usually in an unstable state of always changing and turning. Therefore, no matter how much information listeners get, if no noting aids, when it gets to a certain scale, the short-term retention amount in the head is like in a saturate state, which is like a funnel filled with water, although you pour water into it continuously, the amount it holds still remains to be a certain level.

### 3.2 Psychological factors

#### 3.2.1 Motivation

Learning motivation is the inner force which directly stimulates individual to study. At first, study motivation is a

kind of inner force. Different students have different learning motivations. Motivation is closely related to learning effect. In English listening learning, some students think, improving listening ability can supply a way for another language culture; some think it is good for finding a good job; some think if listening is good, they can score high in English exams. The relation between motivation and learning is typically complemented, not a relation of only one direction. This is to say, motivation can promote listening, and meanwhile listening can improve English listening motivation.

### 3.2.2 Anxiety

Anxiety means some actual response similar to worry, or a kind of response tendency which holds fear to present or any expected situation with potential threat to our self-esteem. Students feel more anxious when listening to English than reading it. And the anxiety from listening to recordings is much greater than practical English communicating. English listening is a hard thing for students. When the level of anxiety is too high, students' psychological language activity is at a state of depression, and mind working slows down. So students cannot understand even when they listen again and again because anxiety increases. If in listening class, student is always frustrated and failed, they may get seriously anxious, or leads to unpractical intention level. Chronic serious anxiety can harm student's self-esteem, and destroy study mood, and even make students lose confidence in learning.

### 3.2.3 Will-power

Will-power is a psychological process in which people set aims consciously, adjust behavior according to aims and realize expected aim. Will-power, desire from learner's heart, is a kind of tendency to study. Will-power is always with conquering troubles, which is not only reflected in overcoming external troubles, but also internal ones. In listening learning, students with great will-power always can surmount various troubles with powerful will. For example, while in class, they cannot understand, after class they spend more time and energy than average students. In this way, listening ability is bound to be enhanced. But some weak will-power students lack courage and spirit of overcoming difficulties. Once confronting troubles, weak will-powered students have trouble in overcoming such psychological reaction as nervousness, anxiety, and fear during listening. Furthermore, they have no good resistant ability to external disturbing factors. All these form great barriers to the listening practicing.

### 3.2.4 Peer influence

College students have entered adolescent stage, although the development of body and soul tends to be matured, yet they are not good at controlling their emotions and the influence from peers still function in some way. As college students all study and live in some collectivity and they influence each other in life and study habit. If most members of some dorm think highly of English listening, they all spend much time and energy, which inevitably affects other classmates. On the other hand, students whose listening is strong and score is high can gain identification and applause from peers, which can promote them to study even harder. Those students poor in study are bound to try to catch up, in order to keep equal status with peers.

### 3.2.5 Fake listening

Fake listening means "absent-minded", which is a kind of sub-conscious behavior. Fake listening is often caused by lack of interest in the listening content, having prejudice, or time of listening being too long and so on. All these can unconsciously distract attention. Although the listener may give some signal response out of politeness, such as nodding, smile, yet actually attention already is distracted to elsewhere, affecting the listening effect. Fake listening is a kind of dual behavior. On the one hand, the listener keeps the relation with the speaker and on the other hand, he is also thinking about other things. So, fake listening reflects listener's inner potential. Therefore, restricting fake listening consciously can obviously improve effect of listening.

### 3.2.6 Over-concentration

Over-concentration means the process of attentive listening. Just like paying too much attention to the process of writing, speaking too much can prevent normal expression. Over-concentration on the process of listening disorders the activity and behavioral custom one has gained, which brings about imbalance of psychology state, disorder of heart, and distracts attention, and affects the development of organ mechanism. At normal times, when practicing listening, we always feel "more attention we pay, the worse we hear". As a matter of fact, when listening, if paying no attention, we probably get nothing. But, over-concentration is neither good. We should pay adequate attention to the material. Also, we should relax, and keep calm, just in a state like that in the daily life, when we talk with others.

## 3.3 Objective factors

Many objective factors also affect listener's emotion and the effect of listening as well. For example, sultry teaching room, gloomy room, noisy disturbing environment, hard-to-understand content; terrible sound effect, stiff class atmosphere, bad weather, teachers' speech lacking art and being dull, which also influence students' listening. But as long as we take good care of these unfavorable factors and make necessary arrangements beforehand, these can easily be avoided.

## 3.4 Background knowledge

The scheme is the inner structure which organizes us to know the world. Our perception of the world is stored in our

long-term memory in the form of the scheme (framework). In fact, the listener not only uses his language knowledge, but also to a large degree, uses related background knowledge to expect what the speaker would say, and check, testify his guessing while listening. Related background knowledge can mean a listener's knowledge about the place, time and environment in which the conversation occurs. And it can also mean familiarity with the speaker's age, gender, and opinion, a viewpoint about some problems. Successful listening comprehension depends on the interaction of the listener's language knowledge and background knowledge with the listening content.

### 3.5 Cultural differences

As we all know, the main task of foreign language teaching and learning is to cultivate cross-cultural talents. Only teaching them English is not enough. We must let them know the culture of English speaking countries. The special relationship between language and culture is gradually realized by people. Culture includes two sides. One is the English speaking countries' culture, including literature, and all the knowledge about the country people's daily life -- eating, etiquette, life attitude, history, political system, PE activities. Through these contents' learning, we can acquaint students with different lifestyles, the cultural background of language and make them use language appropriately.

### 3.6 Phonetic barriers

Students' pronunciation and listening are greatly influenced by English teachers' oral English. It is a pity that many teachers are not qualified in oral English. And teachers do not correct students' oral English expression often, and their only concern is whether students can get high marks in exams. So when students enter college, when they do listening exams, they are at a loss. In fact, the words are so familiar to them. Even to some students, they are puzzled for they do not know the word is pronounced that way. Actually, the first step to improve listening level is to pass phonetic barrier. Pronunciation is the material outer cover of language, only if you pronounce right and your intonation is appropriate, you can understand other's words and let yourself understood. If the listener's pronunciation is wrong, intonation is not accurate; it is very easy for them to make mistakes even with familiar words.

### 3.7 Vocabulary

Vocabulary is another headache for listening. The larger your vocabulary is, the better your listening ability. But out of different reasons, our vocabulary is so limited that normally we can always meet with vocabulary problems in listening. Either because we meet with new words, or we have not grasped the usage of learned words. Although we always recite words from dictionary, yet making a good command is very tough. A large vocabulary is surely of great help to listening. A good command of English is based upon stable enthusiasm and steady diligence. Never does it allow any relaxation or conceit. Never forget to keep your vocabulary amount if it is large enough, and keep enlarging it if not enough.

## 4. Suggested Teaching Methodology: Period Listening Teaching

In order to reach the aim of listening teaching, we had better divide the basic listening teaching stage into two periods. At different stages, we adopt different methods, namely, period listening teaching. And the division must be done according to students' level. In every period, it should have some definite teaching aims with appropriate teaching method going with it. The premise of this method is that teacher should have all-around knowledge and the ability and desire to learn new knowledge. Period listening teaching must have outstanding key points, definite content, and let students grasp correspondent ability at different stages. After every stage is over, there must be different kinds of tests to find out the distance between students, and to make preparations for the next stage.

### 4.1.1 Junior stage

Basic period of listening teaching can be divided to two stages: junior stage and middle stage. In junior stage, we should cultivate students' five basic abilities to lay basis for middle stage.

#### a. The sound-identifying ability

Sound-identifying ability is very important in the junior stage. As for freshmen who just come to college, their special listening training is almost void. So it is necessary for teachers to make targeted practice, and to enable them to master some listening skills. And this requires students to be able to distinguish stress, non-stress, form; identify phonemes, detect omission, liaison, incomplete plosive, and sentence stress and group of meaning. In listening class, teachers can spend ten minutes to train these skills. Thus they can understand knowledge about phonetic sounds.

#### b. The word mastery ability

There are many new words confronting students in listening, and even we get into trouble with familiar words. An ordinary English word can have many different meanings. And on different occasions, the collaboration is various. So it is hard for us to master word use. For example, "I remember my father was absolutely furious when we got back. He gave me a long lecture about danger. I've never forgotten it. "Here," lecture' means "blame", but not "speech". If we master word use well, listening would become much easier.

#### c. The grammar using ability

Grammar using ability is a great part in listening which cannot be neglected. All the difficult and important grammar

phenomena should be pointed out. However, there is no need to teach the language point systematically. But teachers must guide students to pay much attention to the grammar phenomenon, and understand the listening content more deeply. Thus listening comprehension can be combined with grammatical knowledge very well.

#### d. The guessing ability

This ability plays a significant role in listening process. In theory, 50% of listening skills is related to guessing. In practice, guessing can strengthen student's abilities of mastery and working out questions concerning the whole passage. Guessing can be divided into pre-listening guessing and in-listening guessing. Guessing is particularly important when we deal with long passages and solve questions. Before listening, through scanning the choices make a guess about the possible questions and the general content of the passage. During listening, guess what the passage is telling. Especially we must grasp the beginning sentence and the finishing sentence.

#### e. The retelling ability

In the junior stage, teacher should foster students' oral expressing ability according to the chosen listening material. Through retelling, students can combine phonetic sound identifying skills with oral English practice. Thus, listening goes along with speaking. This can enhance students' listening comprehension ability. In this stage, teacher should choose language materials which are novel, short but good, easy to express. This can expand student's knowledge scope and enlighten them to think actively.

#### 4.1.2 Senior stage

In this stage, students already have mastered the above five abilities. So based on this, we should train them to gain higher abilities.

#### a. The ability of catching main information

When entering the senior stage, listening materials get longer. While listening, it is not necessary for students to understand all of the content. They should listen to it as a whole body, find out the main idea, take notes while listening, store information in head, and do not grasp all. We should grasp the material from the whole to the details.

#### b. The guessing and associating ability

Listener can use their background knowledge about the material and experience to guess out new words' meaning and even predict what they are going to hear. If they are more familiar with the content the topic deals with, the information range of his guessing will be much clearer, much closer to the actual content he will hear. In this sense, it is unnecessary for listener to pay attention to every word or sentence. Guessing and associating ability fits in with long passage very well.

#### c. The ability to distinguish culture differences

Culture conceives language, and language develops culture. They have close relations. In listening comprehension, due to shortage of culture knowledge, many times, even we hear very clearly the words and sentences of the material, but still cannot figure out its meaning. So in ordinary times, we must strengthen student's such ability, or they may make unnecessary mistakes in listening comprehension.

#### d. The language memorizing ability

Teachers should train students' memorizing ability. Teachers guide students to grasp keywords, such as time, place, people, and memories them efficiently and ask students to take notes while listening and store information for the shortage of short-term memory.

#### e. The analyzing, concluding and synthesizing ability

In fact, the listening level is a comprehensive check of one's English level, knowledge scope, analyzing, speculating, associating abilities. So after learning so many skills, we should foster integral abilities. Some information is not obvious. It needs us to analyze and deduce. Of course, if we carry out the process of analyzing, concluding and synthesizing. We must have the good memorizing ability. Good memorizing ability helps deeper understanding.

At this stage, we should choose original broadcast, movies, plays, speeches, pop songs and long passages of middle level listening texts. In a word, period teaching is a good method. It overcomes blindness of traditional teaching and changes the dull atmosphere of student's passive position. The method is to improve our listening level. Although it is divided into two stages, yet the two are correlated.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, listening is an important but very demanding skill that makes many college students feel anxious and even scared. It is a common phenomenon that English listening has not been attached due attention and there are some problems existing in the English listening and learning. As for the factors impeding the listening comprehension and development of listening skills, there is subjective and objective, of which the subjective factors outweigh the objective factors. Based on the problems and affecting factors in the English listening teaching, the article mainly put forward a typical teaching method to enhance the listening teaching efficiency.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study was financially supported by “11531” Construction Project of Nanchang Normal University of China (English Language and Literature Discipline Construction).

## References

- [1] A. P. Gilakjani , M. R. Ahmadi, “A study of factors affecting EFL learners' English listening comprehension and the strategies for improvement, ” *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, (2), pp.295, 2011.
- [2] A. U. Chamot , & J. M. O'malley, “The cognitive academic language learning approach: A model for linguistically diverse classrooms, ” *The Elementary School Journal*, pp. 259-273, 1996.
- [3] Field, J, *Listening in the language classroom: Cambridge University Press*, 2008.
- [4] R. Ableeva, & J. P, Lantolf , “Mediated dialogue and the micro-genesis of second language listening comprehension, ” *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, (18), pp.133-149, 2011.
- [5] S. L. Huang, “A study on the effectiveness of grammar-assisted lexical chunks teaching in College English listening teaching, ” *Journal of Chengdu Normal University*, (1), PP. 61-66, 2018.
- [6] W. Rivers, M. Temperley, *A practical guide to the teaching of English*, Oxford University, New York Press, 1978.
- [7] Y. A. Wu, “What do tests of listening comprehension test? — A retrospection study of EFL test-takers performing a multiple-choice task. *Language Testing*, (15), pp.21-24, 1998.
- [8] Y. Chen, “the optimization strategy of middle school English listening teaching, ” *Basic Education Research in Fujian*, (2), pp. 81-82, 2018.
- [9] Y. Ma, “On the Ways to Improve English Listening Teaching, ” *Modern Communication: Academic Edition*, (3), PP. 207-208, 2018.
- [10] Y. Qi, “Application of discourse analysis in English listening teaching, ” *Journal of Heilongjiang Vocational College of Ecological Engineering*, (1), PP. 144-145, 2018.
- [11] Z. Wang, “A brief analysis of English Listening Teaching in junior middle schools, ” *A Brief Analysis of Curriculum Education Research: A Study of Learning and Teaching Methods*, (15), PP. 222-223, 2018.