

An Investigation of English Listening Strategies Used by Continuous Education Program Students in Taiwan

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to investigate continuous program students' listening comprehension strategies. Two research questions led the study: (1) What listening comprehension strategies do adult language learners use?, and (2) Are there differences between female and male adult language learners in listening comprehension strategies? The participants were 125 (F = 61; M = 64) randomly chosen from two-year system continuous education program students in Taiwan. The data was keyed into the computer and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS). The research findings display the top ten frequently use strategies and four different strategies that show differences between male and female students

Key words: Listening comprehension, Listening comprehension strategy

Introduction

Listening comprehension is one of the most difficult tasks of language learners. According to Conaway's (1982) findings, poor listening skills were a main factor in college failure than the other factors, such as poor reading skills or low academic aptitude. Oxford (1993) also claimed that listening is the most fundamental skill to develop the other three (speaking, reading, and writing) skills. With increased attention to listening skills of second language/foreign language instruction, teachers must understand the listening strategies their students adopt in order to help them in improving their English proficiency. There are several studies on English listening strategies; however, none or very few studies focus on the students who enroll continuous education programs in Taiwan. This study will focus on listening strategies used by continuous program students. The investigator hopes that by examining these learners' listening comprehension strategies can find out the effective listening strategies to revitalize their learning motivation and upgrade their English proficiency. The following research questions led the study:

1. What listening comprehension strategies do adult language learners use?
2. Are there differences between female and male adult language learners in listening comprehension strategies?

Review of the Literature

The importance of listening

Listening is an important part of the communication process. Students spend most of each school day listening and much of what they learn is acquired by means of listening. Exposure to oral English is vital for ESL/EFL students who need to hear the language spoken in meaningful contexts in order to acquire it. Listening, therefore, is an important skill in language learning. According to Feyten (1991), of the total time people spend on communication, 45% is on listening, 30% on speaking, 16% on reading, and 9% on writing. Among the four skills, listening is the language skill which usually develops faster than speaking and which affects the development of reading and writing abilities in learning a new language (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992; Vandergrift, 1997). It is also the most frequently used skill in the classroom and in daily life (Yang, 1996). Vandergrift (1997) claimed that listening internalized not only the rules of language but also facilitated the emergence of other language skills. Therefore, an investigation of listening comprehension skills could help understand the process of listening as well as offer a more solid theoretical base for more effective instructional practices in the classroom. For students, awareness and use of effective listening skills would assist them in utilizing the language input they received. Rost (1994) also pinpointed the importance of listening in the language classroom as the supplier of supplied the input for students. More concisely, without comprehensible input at the right level, learning cannot take place. Therefore, listening is a fundamental and vital skill in the acquisition of languages (Nunan, 2002).

The Listening Comprehension Process

Teng (1997) addressed the relationship of listening comprehension to spoken language. She stated that listening consists of active and complex processes that would determine the level and content of comprehension. Anderson (1983) divided the listening comprehension process into three stages: the perceptual, parsing, and utilization. During the perceptual process listeners focus their attention on the oral text and preserve the sound in echoic memory. However, listeners were affected by selective attention due to the limitation of their echoic memory. Listeners almost immediately transferred the information in echoic memory to short-term memory to process the sounds for meaning. In the next stage, the parsing process, listeners constructed meaningful mental representations by using words and messages. They reorganized the information into a meaningful unit that could be stored in short-term memory. In the utilization process, the final stage, listeners utilized long-term memory in order to link the incoming message to their existing knowledge. If the new input and existing knowledge matched, comprehension occurred (Anderson, 1983).

Five stages of listening comprehension were proposed by Coakley and Wolin (1986). First of all, listeners were motivated to listen to certain aural input. Second, listeners received the vocal message and visual stimuli from speakers including facial expressions, gestures, and movements. Next, the received message must be attended to through the short-term memory system. At the same time, listeners' attention was influenced by their background knowledge, prior experiences as well as physical and mental states. Fourth, listeners fitted the received and attended information into the appropriate linguistic categories that were stored in the brain and then assigned meaning to perceived information. This stage serving to frame the interpretation of the aural input had much to do with the cognitive processing of listeners. In the final stage, listeners responded to the interpreted message which included an internal response referring to the storage of the information in the long-term memory and an external response, the immediate feedback communicated to speakers.

Nunan (2002) explained both the bottom-up and top-down processes. Bottom-up processing refers to acquiring the meaning of the message based on the incoming language data from sounds, to words, to grammatical relationships, and ultimately to the meaning. That is, the process is in a linear fashion. The meaning itself was derived as the last step in the process. On the other hand, top-down processing refers to utilizing schemata which was known as a learner's background knowledge and global understanding to deduce the meaning from and interpret the message. In addition, listening comprehension is neither top-down nor bottom-up processing. It is an interactive, interpretive process where listeners employ both prior knowledge and linguistic knowledge to make sense of the incoming message (Nunan, 2002).

Variables Affected Strategy Selection for Listening Comprehension

Different researchers have identified factors involved in L2 listening comprehension. Faerch and Kasper (1986) identified three internal factors in L2 listeners' comprehension. The first one was learners' knowledge of the L2 linguistic code. Next was the degree of sociocultural competence, such as learners' understanding of the rules of conversation in a certain setting. The third one was strategic competence, such as learners' ability to guess what speakers meant from the context.

Affective and cognitive factors which affect listening comprehension were proposed by Carroll (1977). Affective factors included the degree of motivation to understand and learn the information contained in the message and the amount of interest in the topic of discussion. Cognitive factors involved the ability to perceive relations among elements of discourse and the ability to concentrate on the discourse and neglect distractions in the environment (Dunkel, 1991).

Boyle (1984) listed three types of factors that may have an influence on listening. To

begin with, listener factors include biographical, sociological, intellectual, physical and psychological categories such as experience/practice in listening to the target language, general intelligence, general background knowledge of the world, home and educational background, memory, motivation, listeners' attitude to the speaker and the message, and listener's powers of attention and concentration, etc. Second, speaker factors involve language ability and production (pronunciation, accent, variation, voice etc.), speed of delivery, and prestige and personality of the speaker. Finally, factors in the material and medium include the diversity of language use, difficulty of content and concepts, acoustic environment, and amount of paralinguistic support provided.

After reviewing over 130 studies, Rubin (1994) synthesized the existing research on factors influencing listening comprehension and identified five major factors that researchers believe to be the most influential in listening comprehension: 1) text characteristics such as speech rate, pause phenomena and hesitation, level of perception, sandhi, stress and rhythmic patterning perception, L1/L2 difference, syntactic modifications, redundancy, morphological complexity, word order, discourse markers, and visual support for texts; 2) interlocutor characteristics such as gender and language proficiency; 3) task characteristics such as task type; 4) listener characteristics such as language proficiency level, memory, attention, affect, age, gender, learning disability in L1, and background knowledge; and 5) process characteristics such as top-down, bottom-up, and parallel processing, listening strategies, and negotiation of comprehensible input.

In Yao's (1995) study, she found that the speaker's speed, accent, vocabulary, the listener's background knowledge, and listener's interest affected listening comprehension. Of these factors, the speaker's speed and accent were the most important factors that influenced students' listening comprehension. The students found that clear pronunciation and speech were important to their comprehension (Yao, 1995).

Research on Listening Strategies

Studies carried out on listening strategy instruction suggest that students could indeed be instructed in strategy use to enhance their performance on listening tasks. Vogely (1995) investigated 83 students' perceived strategy use during performance on authentic listening tasks. The participants were students of Spanish at a Catholic university. The native language of all subjects was English, but some of them had lived with or near Spanish speakers. The subjects first took the Listening Comprehension section of the Spanish Advanced Placement Exam. They then executed recall tasks on three authentic video programs. Finally, they completed a Metacognitive Awareness Strategy Questionnaire (MASQ).

The strategies employed by the subjects included getting the overall meaning of the text

(79%), relating background knowledge with the information in the text (66%), understanding the meaning of each word (50%), focusing on the details of the text (40%), and mentally sounding out the words and phrases (39%). The subjects also perceived they used less top-down strategies such as anticipating, guessing, or inferring what would come next in the text. The subjects used the following strategies to repair the breakdown of comprehension, such as continuing to listen actively in the hope for clarification (84%), listening carefully to the next segments to look for additional clarifying information (83%), and guessing the meaning of the missing part based on the context (70%) (Vogely, 1995).

Goh (1997) conducted a study using a diary of performing listening tasks with 40 students from the People's Republic of China learning English in Singapore. The subjects were asked to keep a diary about their thoughts concerning learning to listen and how they practiced their listening after class.

The subjects demonstrated an extensive awareness of learning strategies, both for assisting comprehension and developing their listening. The strategies assisting comprehension included using visual clues, activating knowledge of context from titles, ignoring unfamiliar words, taking notes, guessing or inferring meanings, paying attention to repetitions, visualizing the setting, using existing knowledge to interpret, and recognizing discourse markers, tone, intonation features and so on. The strategies for developing listening included listening to different varieties of English and local accents, listening to all kinds of materials, listening to different types of input and be familiar with their organization and structure, improving vocabulary, and developing specific listening skills.

This study strongly implied that diary-keeping raised the learners' awareness of what they were doing. In other words, the learners had a high degree of metacognitive awareness. They had specific beliefs concerning the factors which could enhance or hinder their listening comprehension. Not only were they capable of observing cognitive processes in their listening, they were also capable of verbalizing their theories about learning to listen in another language (Goh, 1997).

Lee (1997) explored the listening strategies used by 190 Taiwanese Junior College EFL students, including 150 females and 40 males. The participants completed the Chinese Listening Comprehension Questionnaire, including 33 items. The finding identified the most frequently used strategies involving asking speakers for repetition or paraphrasing to clarify comprehension (N = 190, Mean = 3.80), trying to understand each word (N = 190, Mean = 3.79), self-questioning for comprehension (N = 190, Mean = 3.54), and checking comprehension (N = 190, Mean = 3.45). On the other hand, the least frequently used strategies were thinking only in English (N = 190, Mean = 2.28), deciding in advance to listen for specific aspects of texts (N = 190, Mean = 2.23), listening for structures (N = 190, Mean = 1.95)

and setting oneself up for tasks (Nil).

Teng (1997) also carried out an investigation of EFL listening comprehension strategies used by college students in Taiwan. The subjects were one hundred and twenty-four freshmen from one public college in central Taiwan. The strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1989) was used to elicit the strategies the subjects used.

The findings of this study revealed that effective listeners made use of more strategies than ineffective listeners during the process of listening. For examples, in the “memory” strategy group, effective learners used three individual strategies which were “using imagery” (N = 124, Mean = 2.81), “associating/elaborating” (N = 124, Mean = 3.12), and “semantic mapping” (N = 124, Mean = 3.28) more often than ineffective listeners did. In the “metacognitive” strategy group, effective learners significantly showed higher frequency on strategies that were relevant to “arranging and planning listening task”, such as “identifying the purpose of a language task (N = 124, Mean = 2.68)”, and “setting goals and objectives (N = 124, Mean = 2.59).” In the “cognitive” strategy group, effective learners had higher frequency on the strategy of “summarizing (N = 124, Mean = 2.90).” Besides, effective learners had significantly higher frequency on the strategy of “highlighting (N = 124, Mean = 3.21)”, which suggested that effective learners tended to pay more attention to important messages than ineffective learners did. In addition, the subjects reported that “compensation strategies (N = 124, Mean = 3.52 for effective group; Mean = 2.76 for ineffective group)” were used most often and “affective strategies (Mean = 2.62 for effective group; Mean = 2.13 for ineffective group)” least often. Also, the subjects indicated translating as the cognitive strategy used most frequently, followed by “repeating.”

Ku (1998) also adopted Oxford’s SILL as the research instrument to identify strategies associated with listening comprehension. The subjects were 126 freshmen and 40 juniors learning English as a foreign language at a university in North Taiwan. The major for the juniors was Applied English, and more than 50% of their teachers were English native speakers. For freshmen, the majority was Information Management, and most of their teachers were Chinese. The findings suggested that previous English learning did have an impact on freshmen’s listening comprehension. This was not the case for juniors. The results also showed that juniors used global strategies more frequently, such as conversing in English, writing journals in English, and reading English for self-entertainment, while freshmen favored analytical strategies, such as trying to talk like native speakers, not looking up every word while reading, making up new words, word analysis, and practicing English sounds (Ku, 1998).

Chao’s (1999) research project investigated the strategies used by English majors while viewing an authentic English video text. Three hundred and sixteen students were randomly

selected from six universities in Taiwan to participate in this study. The subjects were asked to view a 3-minute segment of Good Morning America, a listening text, as warm up listening activity. The subjects were then told to watch and listen carefully to the second segment also from Good Morning America. After watching the second segment, the subjects wrote an immediate recall protocol and completed a Listening Strategy Use Questionnaire. Finally, a focus group interview was conducted right after the subject completed the Listening Strategy Use Questionnaire.

Eight strategies with the highest mean reported by the subjects included grasping the overall meaning of the text (N = 116, Mean = 4.08), relate the text to what one already know the topic (N = 116, Mean = 3.96), focusing attention on the listening (N = 116, Mean = 3.95), clear one's mind (N = 116, Mean = 3.78), relate to personal experience or knowledge (N = 116, Mean = 3.76), guessing the meaning based on the context (N = 116, Mean = 3.75), set oneself up for the task (N = 116, Mean = 3.69), and keeping up with the rate of speech (N = 116, Mean = 3.65). The subjects did not listen for the grammatical structure (N = 116, Mean = 2.35). Briefly, the research findings showed that the learners tended to use top-down strategies more frequently than bottom-up strategies during listening. For example, "grasp the overall meaning of the text" and "relate the text to what I already know about the topic", got the highest and the second frequencies (4.08 and 3.96 respectively). Most of them tended to employ self-reliance strategies more frequently but tend to use social strategies least frequently. For instance, "ask for help" this item got the lowest average frequency of response (2.45).

Another study concerning learner's listening strategies was reported by Goh (2002). The study proposed to identify the comprehension and learning strategies used for listening by 118 Chinese ESL learners in a Singapore university. The researcher defined comprehension strategies as those strategies used for facilitating understanding during listening, whereas learning strategies were for improving listening ability in general. There were 94 male and 24 female learners who had recently enrolled in an intensive English language program in a Singapore university. The questionnaire, Techniques for Learning to Listen (TELL), was used to collect the responses from the participants. The results indicated that the participants used only five strategies (with mean scores close to or above 4.0) frequently to facilitate listening comprehension. These strategies included inferencing, directed attending, elaboration, contextualization, and self-encouragement. The fixation strategy had a relatively low level of use. In this study, there were no significant differences between male and female students in choice of listening strategies.

Methodology

The participants were 125 (F = 61; M = 64) randomly chosen from two-year system continuous education program students in Taiwan. Their age ranges were between 25 years old and 50 years old. The participants completed two questionnaires: Individual Background Questionnaire and Listening Comprehension Strategies. Both of them are written in Chinese to make sure the participants understood the questions and ensured the accuracy of results.

Result

The main purpose of the present study is to investigate continuous program students' listening comprehension strategies. Generally speaking, both male and female students employed a variety of strategies when listening tasks. Based on the frequency counting of each item, the results of the top 10 strategies are described as below. Close to 43% subjects reports they guess unfamiliar words by contexts, which is ranked Top 1 strategy adopted by the subjects. Up to 40% subjects will translate English messages into Chinese while listening. More than 39% subjects listen to details and put them together to understand the text. Thirty-eight percent subjects read English scripts while listening. Slightly over 37% subjects say they repeat what they are listening to, they re-listen to unclear items, they try to keep up with the rate of speed even though they have difficulty understanding certain items, and they make connection with the coming messages. Thirty-six percent of subjects point out that even though distracted by unknown words, they focus on the incoming message again. And, 34 % subjects say they take note to remember the messages. Table 1 shows the top 10 listening comprehension strategies used by the subjects.

Table 1 *Ten Listening Comprehension Strategies Most Often Used (M = 64; F = 61)*

<i>Item No.</i>	<i>Listening Comprehension Strategy</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
14	I guess the unknown words by contexts.	1	3.26	1.02
15	I translate the incoming message into my language.	2	3.22	1.04
18	I listen to the details and put them together to understand the text.	3	3.22	.98
7	I read the English scripts at the same time.	4	3.11	1.05
5	I repeat what I am listening to.	5	3.15	1.03
8	I re-listen to unclear items. When I still can't understand, I read the English scripts.	5	3.18	1.09
10	I try to keep up with the rate of speed even though I don't understand certain words, phrases, or idioms.	5	3.13	1.02
21	I associate the new messages to my personal experiences or previous knowledge.	5	3.12	1.04
11	When distracted by unknown words, I focus on the incoming message again.	9	3.18	1.04
6	I take notes to help me remember.	10	3.05	1.04

In order to examine whether the gender has an influence on the strategies use, T-test is performed. The findings imply that the following four listening strategies among the 26 strategies show great differences between male and female. Female students have a tendency to get themselves ready for listening tasks but male don't. Female students indicate that they will re-listen the unclear items and then read the English scripts. However, the male students don't. While the female students report that they won't immediately read the Chinese script while encountering the unclear or unknown items, the male student will. Besides, in contrast to the male students, the female students tend to guess the unknown items. Table 2 presents the results.

Table 2 *T-test of Listening Comprehension Strategy use for gender differences*

Listening Comprehension Strategy	Gender	No. of Subjects	Mean	SD	t	p
Set myself up for English listening tasks such as getting used to English intonation, or trying to concentrate on the listening materials.	Male	64	2.75	.99	-2.94	.004
	Female	61	3.25	.89		
I re-listen to unclear items. When I still can't understand, I read the English scripts.	Male	64	2.89	1.14	-3.09	.002
	Female	61	3.48	.96		
I listen again to the parts I don't understand such as words, terms, or linking sounds without reading the Chinese scripts.	Male	64	2.53	1.14	-2.65	.009
	Female	61	3.03	.97		
I guess the unknown words by contexts.	Male	64	2.98	1.08	-3.15	.002
	Female	61	3.54	.89		

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to look into listening comprehension strategies employed by those students who enroll continuous education programs. By understanding these students listening comprehension strategies use hopes that the findings will help them overcome their difficulties in learning English. Generally speaking, the subjects in this study employed a variety of listening comprehension strategies during the listening process, with some listening strategies receiving more frequent uses than others. Some of these frequently adopted strategies included guessing unknown items, translating incoming messages, and note-taking, etc. It also shows that female subjects employ greater use of metacognitive strategies than male subjects, such as getting ready for listening tasks, re-listening the tasks, and guessing the unfamiliar vocabulary. The findings can serve as strategy training in English listening instruction, especially for those adult learners who have learned many grammatical rules but have few opportunities to use in their real lives.

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