Enhancing Technology College Students' English Listening Comprehension by Listening Journals

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Abstract

English listening plays a very important role in the language acquisition. However, most Taiwanese college students' listening comprehension is not very good due to the influence of the question types on college entrance examination. Therefore, the author tried using a mandate of English listening journal assignments to enhance technology college students' English listening comprehension. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effects of using English listening journals to enhance technology college students' English listening comprehension, the listening difficulties students encountered, and listening strategies they used. The subjects were four-year technology college freshmen majoring in English. Data were collected from questionnaires. Overall, the English listening journal assignments helped students enhance their English listening comprehension, especially in English listening strategies, English vocabulary, and English pronunciation.

Key Words: Comprehensible input, listening strategy, listening difficulty

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以英文聽力週記協助提昇技術學院學生英文聽力之研究

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摘要

英文聽力在語言習得過程中扮演一個很重要的角色。然而，由於大學入學考試題型的影響，導致大多數的台灣大學生的英文聽力並不是很好。因此，筆者嘗試使用英文聽力週記作業來協助提昇技術學院學生之英文聽力。本研究之目的是調查使用英文聽力週記協助提昇技術學院學生英文聽力之成效以及學生所遇到之聽力困難和所使用之聽力策略。參與本研究計畫的對象為四技一年級英文主修的學生。資料透過問卷收集。整體而言，本英文聽力週記作業的確有助於提昇學生之英文聽力，尤其是在英文聽力策略，英文單字及英文發音方面。

關鍵詞：可理解的輸入，聽力策略，聽力困難

INTRODUCTION

English listening plays quite an important role because the key to acquire a language is to receive language input. Many researches support the point that acquisition takes place only when students absorb enough comprehensible input (Krashen, Terrell, Ehrman, & Herzog, 1984). Taiwanese students were trained to be good at English grammar and reading instead of English listening and speaking (Katchen, 1995). In addition, Taiwanese students live in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) environment, where students don't need to communicate with each other in English in daily life. Therefore, they lack the opportunities to acquire English language input. Generally speaking, Taiwanese students' listening comprehension is not very good due to the influence of the question types on college entrance examination. Therefore, the author tried using a mandate of English listening journal assignments to enhance technology college students' English listening comprehension. The aim of this paper is to investigate the effects of using English listening journals to enhance technology college students' English listening comprehension, the listening difficulties students encountered, and listening strategies they used.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Listening is an important component of English teaching and which was originated from James Asher's (1977) Total Physical Response (TPR). In the teaching method of TPR, English listening is the first and the most important medium in English teaching. If students do not understand English commands, they won't have physical responses. In The Natural Approach, Krashen and Terrell (1983) suggested that teachers gave students a silent period in the beginning of learning English. The purpose of that is to give students opportunities to receive extensive language input and after they digest the language input, it will become language output, which is English spoken ability. Stephen Krashen (1985) emphasized the importance of comprehensible input. If there is no listening in the language learning process, students won't acquire the language. From this point, we can see the importance of English listening.

Listening strategies can help students improve English listening comprehension. In Yang's study (2002) about listening strategies, she suggested the following strategies that would help improve English listening comprehension: providing pre-listening activities, listening for the GIST, guessing the meaning from the context, accessing contextual cues, associating visual aids with a listening text. Chang (2003) indicated that the following strategies were beneficial to better English comprehension: paying continuous attention, prewriting, recognizing key words, using pauses, taking notes, using background knowledge, and taking advantage of lengthy texts. Wang (2006) found that the most frequently used listening strategies for vocational college English majors were listening to key words, reading options in advance, and concentration.

Sue (2003) indicated that EFL learners' listening difficulties were speaking speed, new terms and concepts, concentration and physical environment. Moreover, some researchers noted that the following elements would influence EFL learner's listening comprehension: background knowledge, deficient linguistic knowledge toward the target language, speech rate, anxiety level, and lack of listening strategies (Sun, 2002& Teng, 2002)

Trites (1993) conducted a research with students in an intensive English program in the USA and indicated that the mandate of keeping a listening log can be beneficial to students' listening ability. Furmanovsky (1994) conducted a study with Japanese University students and claimed that requiring students to keep a listening diary would enhance students' listening proficiency. Katchen (1995) conducted a research with Taiwanese university students and claimed that requiring students to keep a listening journal would improve students' listening comprehension.

METHODOLOGY

1. Subjects

For this study, subjects were 46 freshmen majoring in English from a four-year technology college in Taoyuan, Taiwan. There were 36 female and 10 male students. The ages ranged from 19-20 years old. They had taken a 2-credit required course in English listening and speaking for two semesters. All subjects had been studying English for at least 6 years before entering college. Their English proficiency level ranged from elementary level to intermediate level. Among them, about 42 subjects indicated that they were interested in learning English listening.

2. Materials and procedure

As the study was conducted, the subjects were taking a course of English listening and speaking. This course was set to build up students' listening and speaking abilities. In order to enhance students' listening competence, the author required students to do a weekly English listening journal assignment. From the first class of the semester, the author introduced the requirement and procedure of the assignment. Besides, the author instructed students some listening strategies which they may use while doing their English listening journal assignments. Some of the listening strategies taught in class were as the following: repeating listening, guessing the meaning of new words from context, listening to keywords, listening to main ideas, and listening to details. Students were allowed to choose any English teaching materials of their interest as the sources of their assignments. The author suggested some English teaching magazines with radio programs or CDs such as Studio Classroom, Live Interactive English Magazine, English 4 U, and CNN Interactive ESL Magazine. In order to help students understand their current English proficiency level, the author required students to do elementary and intermediate listening comprehension tests of General English Proficiency Test in the second class of the first semester. Therefore, students could choose English materials which are suitable for them. They were required to listen to one English material at least once a week for two semesters and then write an English listening journal about it. The journal included what they

had learned from the materials and their reflections. Students had to hand in their journals to the author each week. Some students would ask questions about how to learn English well, so the author would give them some replies and comments on the listening journals. The journals were graded according to the contents instead of accuracy. The listening journals reveal students' gradual progress in English listening comprehension. At the end of the academic year, the subjects did elementary and intermediate listening comprehension tests of General English Proficiency Test to see if they made any progress, and then filled out questionnaires regarding the English listening journal assignments.

3. Instruments

The study used a questionnaire survey of 46 freshmen majoring in English from a four-year technology college. The survey questionnaire used in this study was designed by the author. The questionnaire focused on three areas: (1) difficulties in listening to English, (2) listening strategies they applied, (3) improvements in English listening. In the questionnaire, the subjects were asked to check the best answers. Some of the questions were multiple choices, so they could check more than one answer. The last question was an open-ended question, which asked the subjects to write down their reflections on the listening journal assignments. The questionnaire was written in Chinese to make sure that every student could understand the questions. The subjects were not required to write their names or student identification numbers on the questionnaires. At the end of the semester, the subjects filled out the questionnaires.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The quantitative data were tallied and put into percentages to show the results. The results from the questionnaire are presented in the following tables 1-9. Table 10 shows an open-ended question. The qualitative data are presented under table 10.

TABLE 1

Question 1: What's the English proficiency level of the English materials that you choose to listen and read?

	Number	Percentage
a. Elementary	13	28
b. Intermediate	27	59
c. High-intermediate	6	13
d. Advanced	0	0
e. Superior	0	0

Analysis 1

As it can be seen in Table 1, twenty-eight percent of the subjects chose elementary level English materials to listen and read. Fifty-nine percent of the subjects chose intermediate level English materials. Only thirteen percent of the subjects chose high-intermediate level English materials. According to the results of the English listening comprehension test which the subjects did in the second class of the first semester, the percentage shows that most of the subjects chose the appropriate proficiency level English materials as their sources. Therefore, they would feel comfortable while listening to English teaching programs. In other words, they would not feel discouraged by too difficult English teaching materials.

TABLE 2

Question 2: After doing the listening journal assignments for two semesters, have you formed the habit of listening to English spontaneously?

	Number	Percentage
a. I have formed the habit of listening to English materials at least once a week.	23	50
b. I listen to English materials once every two weeks.	7	15
c. I seldom have time to listen to English teaching programs.	16	35

Analysis 2

As it can be seen in table 2, fifty percent of the subjects had formed the habit of listening to English materials at least once a week. Fifteen percent of the subjects listened to English materials once every two weeks. Thirty-five percent of the subjects seldom had time to listen to English materials. It shows that most students have the habit of listening to English once a week or once every two weeks. However, there is still thirty-five percent of the subjects seldom had time to listen to English. They were busy in doing their part-time jobs after class, or they lacked the strong motivation in listening to English. How to enhance students' motivation in listening to English spontaneously is a good question for researchers to do a future study on this regard.

TABLE 3

Question 3: In what aspect do you feel difficult while listening to English materials?

(You can choose more than one item)

	Number	Percentage	Rank
a. English pronunciation	12	26	6
b. Speech rate	31	67	2

c. New vocabulary and phrases	35	76	1
d. Idioms	28	61	3
e. Speaker's sex	3	7	9
f. Unfamiliar accent	16	35	4
g. Unusual sound quality	10	22	7
h. Stress and intonation	10	22	7
i. Lack background knowledge	9	20	8
j. Lack listening strategies	13	28	5

Analysis3

As it can be seen in table 3, most subjects indicated that the difficulties they had in listening to English materials were c) new vocabulary and phrases (76%), b) speech rate (67%), d) idioms (61%), f) unfamiliar accent (35%), j) lack listening strategies(28%), a) English pronunciation (26%), g) unusual sound quality (22%), h) stress and intonation (22%), j) lack background knowledge (20%), e) speakers' sex (7%). Results show that new vocabulary & phrases, speech rate and idioms are more difficult for subjects. Therefore, teachers can try to expand students' vocabulary, phrases and idioms in the English listening class. Besides, teachers can also encourage students to listen to the same materials many times in order to get used to the speech rate.

TABLE 4

Question 4: What are the listening strategies that you use while listening to English materials?

(You can choose more than one item)

	Number	Percentage	Rank
a. Repeat listening	23	50	2
b. Guess the meaning of new words from context	21	46	4
c. Use background knowledge	7	15	7
d. Wear earphones while listening	2	4	9
e. Concentrate on listening	22	48	3
f. Listen to keywords	31	67	1
g. Listen to main ideas	10	21	6
h. Listen to details	5	11	8
i. Try to keep up with the speech rate	17	37	5

Analysis 4

As it can be seen in table 4, most subjects noted that the listening strategies they used while listening to English materials were f) listen to keywords (67%), a) repeat listening (50%), e) concentrate on listening (48%), b) guess the meaning of new words from context (46%), i) try to keep up with the speech rate (37%), g) listen to main ideas (21%), c) use background knowledge (15%), h) listen to details (11%), d) wear earphones while listening (4%). Results show that the listening strategies that most subjects used are "listen to keywords", "repeat listening" and "concentrate on listening".

TABLE 5

Question 5: After doing the English listening journal assignments for two semesters, how much has your English listening comprehension improved?

	Number	Percentage
a. A lot	30	65
b. Some	5	11
c. Little	11	24

Analysis 5

As it can be seen in table 5, sixty-five percent of the subjects indicated that their English listening comprehension had improved a lot after doing the English listening journal assignments. Eleven percent of the subjects noted that they had made some improvement on their English listening comprehension. Only twenty-four percent of the subjects thought that they made little improvement on their English listening comprehension. The result shows that most subjects' English listening comprehension has improved after doing the English listening journal assignments for two semesters. As the author mentioned earlier, the subjects did elementary and intermediate listening comprehension tests of General English Proficiency Test at the beginning and the end of the academic year, so the subjects could compare the scores they got from the first and second tests to see how much progress they had made.

TABLE 6

Question 6: In what aspects have you improved on English after doing the English listening journal assignments for two semesters?

(You can choose more than one item)

	Number	Percentage	Rank
a. English vocabulary	25	54	2
b. English phrases	15	33	6
c. Idiom	7	15	9
d. Keep up with speech rate	20	43	5
e. English listening strategies	29	63	1
f. Extensive background knowledge	5	11	10
g. English pronunciation	23	50	3
h. English intonation	21	46	4
i. Familiarity with different accent	8	17	8
j. Concentration	10	22	7
k. Memory	3	7	11

Analysis 6

As it can be seen in table 6, most of the subjects noted that the aspects they had improved on English listening comprehension after doing the English listening journal assignments for two semesters were e) English listening strategies (63%), a) English vocabulary (54%), g) English pronunciation (50%), h) English intonation (46%), d) keep up with speech rate (43%), b) English phrases (33%). Results show that most subjects have improved their English listening strategies, English vocabulary, English pronunciation, English intonation, keeping up with speech rate, and English phrases.

It also shows that most subjects did practice using the English listening strategies taught in class while listening to English materials, so their English listening strategies had been improved.

TABLE 7

Question 7: You are allowed to choose any English material of your interest. Will this free choice increase your motivation on listening to English?

	Number	Percentage
a. Yes	43	93
b. No	3	7

Analysis 7

As it can be seen in table 7, most subjects (93%) indicated that the free choice of English material would increase their motivation on listening to English. Only few subjects (7%) noted that the free choice of English material would not increase their motivation on listening to English. Results show that most subjects approved that the free choice of any English material they like would increase their motivation on listening to English. Therefore, allowing students free choice of listening materials is very important in the process of doing the listening journal assignments.

TABLE 8

Question 8. Will this listening journal assignment help you cultivate the habit of listening to English periodically and spontaneously?

	Number	Percentage
a. Yes	30	65

b. No	16	35

Analysis 8

As it can be seen in table 8, most subjects (65%) noted that doing the English listening journal assignments would help them cultivate the habit of listening to English periodically and spontaneously. However, about thirty-five percent of the subjects didn't think so. Results show that most of the subjects approved that the listening journal assignment would help them cultivate the habit of listening to English periodically and spontaneously. According to table 2, as for those who didn't approve this, the reason might be that they seldom had time to listen to English materials.

TABLE 9

Question 9: Will you listen to English materials spontaneously without the requirement of doing assignments in the future?

	Number	Percentage
a. Yes	40	87
b. No	6	13

Analysis 9

As it can be seen in table 9, most of the subjects (87%) indicated that they would listen to English materials spontaneously without the requirement of doing assignments in the future. Only a few subjects (13%) indicated that they would not listen to English materials spontaneously without the requirement of doing assignments in the future. Results show that most of the subjects will listen to English materials spontaneously in the future even when no one asks them to do so. Results also suggest that most of the subjects have developed interests in English listening, so they will listen to English materials on their own initiative.

TABLE 10

Question 10: After doing the English listening journal assignments for two semesters, what have you improved in English? Please write out something to share with us.

Data collected from the open-ended question were presented as the following:

-- My English pronunciation has improved. (23 persons)

--I found that I could keep up with foreigners' speech rate because of this training. (20 persons)

-- I have learned foreign cultures and traditions, which is really helpful. (5 persons)

-- I am happy that I know many interesting things while learning English. (35 persons)

--Even if I heard unfamiliar words, I could also guess the meaning from context. (21 persons)

--I get used to guess the meaning from keywords. (31 persons)

--I get used to different accents. (8 persons)

--It is so good that I have learned many colloquial conversation and many of them are very useful daily conversation. (28 persons)

--After doing the English listening journal assignment for two semesters, I have learned how to learn English and have increased much knowledge in English. (30 persons)

--It is easier for me to concentrate on listening to English. (10 persons)

-- I have learned more about idioms. (7 persons)

The data collected from the open-ended question verify the results in the questionnaire, and provide more details about what the subjects had learned from doing the English listening journal assignments.

CONCLUSION

Overall, most students approved that the English listening journal assignments would help them enhance their English listening comprehension and cultivate the habit of listening to English periodically and spontaneously. Besides, they enjoyed choosing English materials of their interest, and believed that it would increase their motivation on listening to English. As to difficulties they encountered most are new vocabulary and phrases, speech rate and idioms. Moreover, the strategies most students used are "listen to keywords", "repeat listening" and "concentrate on listening". Furthermore, most students indicated that the aspects they had improved on English listening comprehension are English listening strategies, English vocabulary, and English pronunciation. Therefore, English teachers can encourage students to listen to English materials of their interest regularly and teach them some useful listening strategies which will facilitate their English listening comprehension. All of these will enhance students' English listening comprehension. To sum up, the study results verify that using listening journals to enhance technology college students' English comprehension is effective.

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