

# Autonomous Development of Learner's Listening Skills under Teacher Guidance

Yan ZUO

*School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Beijing Wuzi University, Beijing, China*

**ABSTRACT:** Listening is the basic language ability for foreign language learning. It is closely related to other language skills like speaking, reading and writing. It is the vital tool for communication. For some students, especially the freshmen, listening ability is their big problem. This paper mainly introduces the action research done in one listening class. Problems and solving methods were the important constructing factors of the research. To find the problems in class and find the effective ways to improve the students' listening skill is the researcher's final aim. Reflected thoughts accompanied with the whole action research.

**KEYWORD:** Autonomous development; listening; teacher guidance

## 1 INTRODUCTION

"Listening is the activity of paying attention to and trying to get meaning from something we hear", [12] which involves listening and understanding or comprehension skills. For some freshmen in university, listening difficulties become a prominent problem in English language study, whether they are English majors or non-English majors.

The following study was carried out to find out the learner's perception on listening, then help the learners to find more suitable ways to improve their listening skills autonomously.

## 2 CONSIDERATION OF METHODS

During the process of research, the methods of questionnaires and interviews were applied. The two techniques were both defined as "involve asking questions of other people". [13] The initial aims of the questionnaires were to discover the students' perception on listening; then the aims were to find out the students' feedback after research. Closed and open questions were carefully chosen to keep the balance. On using the interview method, actually the semi-structured interviews, the interviewees were students of Class A and some colleagues in the researcher's school. While doing the research, the limitation of the two methods were tried to be avoided, that is, trying to make the data more evident. Also, when the researcher wants to find out the teaching problems, class observation was used.

The researcher's own listening class was the observing object. After each stage of the whole research, research journals recorded the researcher's reflective thoughts and improving methods. Combined, it was a kind of quantitative reflection.

## 3 PROCESS OF RESEARCH

### 3.1 *Listening problem*

According to the questionnaires to the students of Class A, 88% of them regard listening problem as the first difficulty after entering the university; As for the future plan or exactly the study project, 90% of the students decided to have listening problem as their first rival of that term.

Obviously, the level of listening has become an important factor that affects the development of other language skills like speaking, reading and writing. Just as Littlewood has summarized, Listening is difficult because when listening, we "cannot normally exercise any control over the language that is used." The learner must prepare carefully to what is going to be heard because "his (the learner's) receptive repertoire must be matched not against his own productive repertoire, but against the productive repertoire of the native speakers he will need to understand. In addition, he must be prepared to cope with a wide range of situational and performance factors which are outside his control." [10] It is such uncontrolled nature that marked the importance of listening and difficulty of listening.

### 3.2 Students' own solving method

Facing with the difficulty of listening, nearly all of the students set up a plan to do something to improve listening skills. By interviewing the students, their own types of listening may be roughly categorized into two:

Table 1: Students' options on listening

Students' type Item	Class-dependent	Self-dependent
Characteristics	Follow the class very well, whereas no after class listening	Think that listening skills can be approved by one's continuous listening only, listening class is a waste of time and useless
Problem	Slow development of listening ability	Can't persist on, sometimes fell into unconscious listening
Requirement	Call for the lengthening of the listening class every week	Need teacher's guide

As we know, the time for listening class is limited. In common college, there are only two periods of listening class every week for freshmen. What they usually do is intensive listening, aiming to find prominent listening problems of the students and help them to improve listening skills from limited materials. However, "students would benefit from regular practice in listening to extended discourse". [1] Class listening is insufficient.

After class, students should have the activities of listening to different styles of materials. Whereas, being low-experienced in selecting materials, the students unavoidably will meet many difficulties: If the selected materials are too easy, they will not have interest to persist on; whereas facing with very difficult materials, they will also drop out (What the researcher called unconscious listening: the organ of ear is listening, the mind is gone). How to choose the proper material? That is a prominent problem; the students need teacher's help.

### 3.3 Teacher guidance

The above description was what was found at the end of the testees' first term. In order to improve the situation, some materials were decided to be added at the beginning of the second term. The specific process is as followed:

#### 3.3.1 Material assignment

Every week, one cassette tape was assigned to the students to listen after class. What they will do themselves are "pre-listening" and "while-listening".

Their understanding of the tape will be checked the following week, which was called "post-listening", usually in the form of discussion, asking questions and solving the problems, occasionally a task of writing was given to the students to check the extended ability of understanding.

#### 3.3.2 Material chosen

The whole term, exactly the whole stage of the experiment was divided into three periods: the first period is "confidence-build period". Some relatively easy materials were chosen for this period to build up students' confidence in their own listening ability. As from Underwood, "Success breeds success, the teacher's role is to provide experiences and activities in which students can be successful." In this period, the students should be encouraged to feel confident about their ability to understand by setting a task within their capability. The second period is "challenge period", a little difficult material would be chosen for this period, aims to challenge the students and to arise more interest in learning. The last period is "consolidation period". The materials chosen for this period were neither too difficult nor easy. The students tried to integrate the listening skills they have already learned and reflect the improvement of the listening ability. As for the styles of materials, various types ranging from fairy tales, extracts of novels, and essays to news, songs and so on were carefully chosen. However, it is vital to select some interesting materials because the students were "unlikely to be very successful without the commitment that such interest will bring." [7]

#### 3.3.3 Class time distribution

The common listening class proceeded. While each time the teacher left less than 30 minutes to check the students' understanding of the tape or to answer some questions from the tape. (The post-listening stage)

### 3.4 Problems

#### 3.4.1 Checking problems

For many students, they listened to the tape and understood what they had listened to. However, the problem arose with how they had to "demonstrate their understanding". [1] They failed to answer the questions of listening comprehension. As Brown showed us, "What was required in order to show that you had understood a text was, at least in part, an ability to memorize the discourse and then to relate the questions to your memory of the discourse — this was often an extraordinarily difficult task which adult native speakers of English would frequently have had difficulty with." [1]

So the researcher knows, that is not a problem of understanding. This is only a problem of memorizing. To improve the checking method, teachers should give students task-based materials to listen or give them purposeful listening.

### 3.4.2 Time consuming

While listening, students prefer “bottom up processing”: the phonological code. That is “to recognize what most of the words intended by the speaker were, how they were grouped into phrases, how they were structured into larger clauses (or sentences) and how these related to each other.” [1] As a result, they wrote down all the tape scripts, word by word. Once one student showed a whole notebook of tape scripts, which is only the content of one tape. On answering the question “How many hours do you spend on listening every week?” four students give similar answers like “I listened to the tape every day of the whole week, then I can master it.” Their aim is to “master” the whole tape. This is one misleading of listening. As Brown indicates, teachers should not “require the students to process all of the discourse as though it were equally important but rather to listen for, and to select for attention, certain specific points in the discourse.” [1] So the way to influence their attitude towards listening material and to the time distribution is also purposeful listening. And the researcher still finds one problem on class time. Originally 30 minutes were planned to be left for the question-answer of the tape. After practicing for some time, 30 minutes is far from satisfaction. The observation to the question time of ten classes shows this trend.

Table 2: distribution of checking time

Class	Materials	Question time
1	Fairy tales	50minutes
2	Short stories	90minutes
3	Conversations	70minutes
4	Song	20minutes
5	Essay	95minutes
6	News	80minutes
7	Novel	90minutes
8	Materials from <i>step by step</i>	50minutes
9	News	70minutes
10	Dialogues	60minutes

The table shows “extra class time” every week to both the teacher and the students. Since we don’t want to give the teacher too much burden, effective ways need to be obtained to improve the “free listening”. Under the above checking distribution, the common teaching discipline was ruined. The listening class seemed to be in the uncontrolled atmosphere. The messy distribution needed to be avoided.

### 3.5 Adjustment to “free listening”

Purposeful listening or task-based listening is the better way to solve the above problems.

“The most familiar technique for providing a purpose for listening is, of course, by means of questions, which prompt learners to listen for specific facts or to make inferences from what they hear”. [10] It suggests that students should listen selectively to discourse, not every word of the materials. It doesn’t matter whether or not the students have caught every detail of what they have heard. All that matters is that, they were able to work successfully on the “pre-specified task” that teacher put forward to them.

As for different styles and different levels of difficulty, teacher needs to design various tasks.

Table 3: various tasks for different styles

Styles		Tasks
Stories	Easy	Summary
	Difficult	Main idea
News	Easy	Announce in their own words
	Difficult	What, when, where (one factor is OK)
Essay	Easy	Outline
	Difficult	Hero, event
Dialogues	Easy	Imitation the pronunciation
	Difficult	Understand the talking topic

### 3.6 Interviews for feedback

After the whole process, 5 students from the class were interviewed. The expected answers were got from the students. One student said:

“I like fairy tales very much. The music in it makes me be interested in it.”

Another student said: “I can follow your direction and I think I can understand more while listening.”

In order to get suggestions from the colleagues, the interviews to the teachers were carried out. 5 colleagues of the school (two are teachers of other courses for this class, the other two are teachers of listening for other class, the left one is selected at random) were chosen. Their attitudes were not from their own, but indirectly from the students’ voice. They said the students told them “they learned a lot” in listening class. Until then, the data showed that the research did something to help the students. A directed information was from the following year’s CET band four, the students’ reaction to the listening part showed their great achievement.

## 4 CONCLUSION

Listening activity has many purposes. According to Harmer, listening skills have some sub-skills: “listening for general understanding will be different

from the way we listen in order to extract specific bits of information". [7] Therefore, In order to develop the every sub-skills of listening, students should have more chances to listen to more materials.

However, the time of listening class is far beyond satisfaction in today's common colleges and the students' after-class listening cannot be fulfilled very well by their own effort. The teacher needs to drill them into a way of intensive listening on class and extensive listening after class. In this passage, the importance of the teacher's role was stressed. Only with teacher guidance, students were hoped to develop their listening skills autonomously.

The improvement of listening skills by autonomous activities is a trend.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Brown, G.1990. *Listening to spoken English*. Longman.
- [2] Dickinson, L. 1990. *Self-instruction in Language Learning*. Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Dickinson,L.1987.*Self-instruction in Language Learning*. Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Ellis,G. and B. Sinclair.1987.*Helping learners discover their learning styles*. Presses Universitaires de Nancy.
- [5] Ellis,G. and B. Sinclair.1989. *Learning to Learn English: A course in Learner Training*. Cambridge University Press.
- [6] Gardner,R.C. and W.Lambert.1972. *Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning*. Newbury House Publishers.
- [7] Harmer, J. 1991. *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Longman.
- [8] Holec, H.1981.*Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Pergamon Press.
- [9] Holic, H. 1979. *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Council of Europe.
- [10] Littlewood, W. 1981.*Communicative Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- [11] Oxford, R.1990. *Language Learning Strategies*. Newbury House.
- [12] Underwood, M.1989.*Teaching Listening*. Longman.
- [13] Wallace,M.1993. *Training Foreign Language Teachers: A Reflective mApproach*. Cambridge University Press.