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LEARNING FOR LISTENING: METACOGNITIVE AWARENESS AND STRATEGY USE TO DEVELOP LISTENING COMPREHENSION

Review by Zhang Donglan

INTRODUCTION

Increasing attention has been given to the importance of listening comprehension for better academic success (Flowerdew, 1994; Goh, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000; Vandergrift, 1997). Listening, it seems, internalises the rules of language and facilitates the emergence of other language skills, and addressing students' needs in second language listening can help clarify the process of listening. However, listening skills development in Singapore has generally been neglected. One of the possible causes, as observed by Zhang (2001), is a popularly held belief that Singaporean students' listening ability will come along naturally given that they learn English as the first language and live in a relatively input-rich environment for learning English. The painful fact is, however, that not all students listen equally well.

As early as 1986, Seet (1986) cautioned that more attention needed to be paid to the development of Singaporean students' English listening comprehension skills and he chose to do so by finding out ways of developing teachers' listening competence. Rather recently, Dr Low Ee Ling of the National Institute of Education stated in a roundtable discussion organised by the Sunday Times (25 July 1999, p. 37) that some of her teacher trainees said that they often had to code-switch to SCE (Singapore Colloquial English) or Singlish, simply because they found the teachers' English is too "*cheem*" (deep) and that they didn't understand when they were spoken to in full sentences.

Listening comprehension is more complicated than normally assumed. Beside the transient nature of speech and the general linguistic challenges imposed on the listener, many other factors contribute to listeners' comprehension problems (Goh, 1999, 2000; Rubin, 1994; Samuels, 1987). Recent research shows that what distinguishes good and poor listeners is the extent to which listeners are aware of their own efficiencies as listeners and the effectiveness of their particular strategies for meaning construction (Goh, 1997, 1998). Good listeners have a better understanding of themselves as listeners and of listening itself, and use strategies actively and flexibly to assist their comprehension, not only in daily life interactions, but also in their verbal interactions in the academic environment (e.g., Goh, 1997, 1998; Murphy, 1985; Vandergrift, 1997).

These new findings should offer us some options for helping our students enhance their listening and thus improve their academic performance.

This article reviews the research findings about the dynamic nature of second language listening comprehension processes and the effects of strategy training on listening comprehension. It concludes with some recommendations for developing listening skills in the classroom.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

One relatively recent focus of research has been on identifying listeners' problems in second language listening and their metacognitive knowledge about their problems (Goh, 1997, 1999, 2000). Other research has examined differences between good and poor listeners in using listening comprehension strategies (Goh, 1998;Vandergrift, 1997) and investigated the effects of training learners to use listening strategies (Chamot, 1995; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Because this research focuses on the listening processes of language learners, the findings could offer insights for English teaching in Singapore.

Metacognitive Awareness about Listening

Metacognitive awareness is thought to contribute significantly to language learning (Wenden, 1998). According to Flavell (1992, p. 4), metacognitive knowledge consists "primarily of knowledge or beliefs about what factors or variables act and interact in what ways to affect the course and outcomes of cognitive enterprises". This knowledge has three components: person, task and strategy.

Adopting Flavell's three-divisional framework, Goh (1997) investigated the metacognitive knowledge about listening in English possessed by a group of PRC tertiary-level students who were on an intensive English programme in Singapore. Through detailed content analyses of the data gained from listening diaries, she was asked to construct a profile of these listeners' metacognitive knowledge about learning to listen in ESL. Table 1 outlines the three types of metacognitive knowledge and their respective subcategories that emerged from the study.

Table 1
Categories and Subcategories of Metacognitive Knowledge about ESL Listening Possessed by 40 Subjects in the Goh (1997) Study

Person Knowledge	Task knowledge	Strategy Knowledge
- Cognitive processes during listening	- Factors that influence comprehension	- Strategies that assist comprehension
- Problems during listening	- Input that is useful for developing listening	- Strategies for developing listening
- Obstacles to comprehension	- Nature of second language listening	- Strategies that do not always work
- Obstacles to listening development		

She found important differences between high-ability listeners and low-ability listeners.The main difference was that high-ability listeners showed almost twice as much metacognitive knowledge about listening as low-ability listeners.

A recent study by Cromdal (1999) investigated Swedish-English bilinguals' metalinguistic ability, i.e., their awareness about language features. Divided into two groups, they were asked to complete three tasks: symbolic substitution, grammaticality judgement, and grammatical correction. Cromdal wanted to see if the dual language skill components - control of linguistic processing and analysis of linguistic knowledge - enhanced bilinguals' linguistic awareness. His findings show that indeed bilinguality may enhance linguistic knowledge, but it probably does not improve production. This suggests that there is a link between bilingualism and aspects of metalinguistic awareness.

Use of Listening Comprehension Strategies

Goh (1998) also examined PRC students' listening strategies. From data collected through listening diaries, group interviews and individual verbalisations, she identified a number of comprehension tactics. Six strategies were used most frequently by students: inferencing, fixation, contextualisation, comprehension monitoring, directed attention, and selective attention. Goh found that high-ability listeners employed more and more varied strategies and tactics than low-ability listeners. She also found that prior knowledge played a crucial role in learner comprehension, and that first and second language comprehension involved similar strategies.

Goh then compared listeners' strategy knowledge and strategy use. Fifteen of the strategies used during listening were also reported as useful for facilitating comprehension. However, although students identified specific tactics as useful, fewer students actually used those strategies. Goh suggests this could be because students might use strategies and tactics "spontaneously yet not consciously", probably because they are drawing on cognitive resources they have developed in their first language. In more simple terms, what were already automatised mental procedures in their first language are perhaps now partially automatised in L2, still requiring conscious attention and some degree of control.

Goh concluded that students' use of strategies might not always be as systematic and predetermined as generally believed (Chamot, 1995). Instead, strategies might begin initially as deliberate steps but gradually become more spontaneous with practice and use, and eventually become fully automatised. If this is the case, teachers clearly have a role to play.

Vandergrift (1997) found that metacognitive strategy use increased with proficiency levels, i.e. that intermediate listeners used twice as many metacognitive strategies as novice listeners. Novice listeners, he found, tended to use lower level cognitive strategies, such as translation, transfer and repetition. The metacognitive strategies

reportedly used more frequently by the intermediate listeners appeared to be important in distinguishing successful from less successful listeners.

Effects of Strategy Training

Strategies are "steps, plans, insights, and reflections that learners employ to learn more effectively" (Chamot, 1995, p. 13). They are very important in both first and second language listening. But efficient and critical listening is not easily obtained — it requires systematic training. Listening strategy training is aimed at increasing understanding. The research literature (as reported in O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) suggests strategy training does lead to an increase in listening comprehension. Chamot's (1995) recent review of studies on the effects of strategy training on listening comprehension also indicates that strategy training can enhance listeners' comprehension.

CONCLUSION

The studies reviewed all indicate that teaching students listening strategies to develop their own skills in learning the language is both efficient and cost-effective. It can also broaden students' metacognitive knowledge. Given the key role English has in the wider school curriculum, and that English input in the classroom in Singapore is not always adequate for a variety of reasons (Saravanan & Gupta, 1997), the importance of increasing students' awareness about effective strategies for oral communication (listening and speaking) cannot be underestimated. Listening comprehension, like reading comprehension, is a strategic process and needs to be taught by the classroom teacher. Enhancing students' metacognitive awareness is an essential part of teaching listening. Skills-strategy training is thus particularly relevant to classroom practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Raise students' awareness about themselves as listeners/speakers and the importance of planning before listening by:

- teaching students to plan for listening;
- setting up a purpose for listening and prepare students for the listening task in terms of its content area, topics, and discourse features. This means giving students adequate guidance about the features of different genres of discourse;
- encouraging students to use strategies which they can apply to their real-life listening experiences, especially comprehension monitoring strategies to check the accuracy of their comprehension.

Invite students to reflect on strategies they have found to be effective and efficient in listening by:

- assigning them listening journals/diaries to record their learning for the day and having them reflect on what success and failure mean for interactive listening and speaking;
- providing peer-sharing listening and speaking experiences to develop listener confidence and awareness through group or class discussions.

Help students transform strategies into automatic skills by:

- asking them to evaluate their own effectiveness as listeners, the listening tasks and the strategies they use in their comprehension processes;
- encouraging them to consciously use the strategies they find useful from their own experiences.

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