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Improving Performance and Metacognitive Awareness in Listening through Metacognitive Instruction for Chinese Language Learners

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Abstract: This article introduces the use of Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) in Chinese learning to improve Singapore secondary students' Chinese listening ability. The practice aims to promote students' metacognitive awareness using a metacognitive approach through a series of activities centred on the MALQ. The results suggest that the metacognitive approach improved students' listening comprehension ability as well as their metacognitive awareness, indicating the importance of incorporating MALQ-based strategy instruction into regular listening courses on a long-term basis.

Key words: metacognitive awareness, metacognitive instruction, listening comprehension, Singapore secondary students, Chinese study

Reasons for the Innovation

Listening comprehension is a very important part of second (L2) or foreign language learning. The ability to listen well is a prerequisite for language learners to interact and communicate with target language speakers and undertake academic studies for some learners. However, of the four language skills, listening was reported by learners as the most difficult skill to develop (Graham, 2006; Oxford, 1993). It is important therefore that language teachers find new and effective ways to help learners improve their listening abilities. One innovative way is to take a metacognitive approach to teach listening (Author, 2012). Metacognitive instruction uses pedagogical procedures to increase learners' knowledge about themselves as listeners, the tasks and demands of listening, and the strategies they can use to facilitate comprehension (Author, 2008).

Learners' metacognition, which is their ability to think about their thinking and learning, plays an important part in listening comprehension (e.g., Aryadoust, 2015; Author, 2006; Author, 2014; Xu & Huang, 2018). Metacognitive awareness plays a very important role in students' listening performance (Author, 2006, 2014; Zeng, 2012). Learners also become more motivated and confident about developing their listening when they understand more about their own listening processes and exercise control over them (Author, 2016; Cross, 2010).

To measure students' metacognitive awareness for L2 listening accurately and reliably, Author (2006) developed and validated a 21-item Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) to evaluate language learners' knowledge of strategy use amongst other aspects of listening comprehension. The MALQ has been used in many studies to

investigate the relationships between metacognitive awareness and L2 learners' listening performance (e.g., Aryadoust, 2015; Author, 2014; Chon & Shin, 2019; Rahimi & Katal, 2012; Xu & Huang, 2018), and determine learner variables which are important to listening comprehension (Vandergrift & Baker, 2015, 2018).

Other than research, the MALQ can also be used by teachers as a tool to guide and assess students' metacognitive awareness. and "positively influence students' approach to listening tasks, and to increase self-regulated use of comprehension strategies" (Author, 2006: 453). The innovation in practice reported in this article was designed to use the MALQ as a tool to guide Chinese language learners' listening processes in a listening lesson using a metacognitive approach. It aims to address the problem that some Singapore secondary students face in listening comprehension by inquiring into the effectiveness of metacognitive instruction in Chinese listening lessons. To cater to local secondary students' needs in Chinese learning, 11 items out the 21 items of the MALQ were used in classroom instruction, as shown in Table 1.

The Teaching Context

There has been a growing interest in promoting Chinese learning worldwide (Wong, Chai & Gao, 2011). In Singapore's long established bilingual education context, English is the medium of instruction and a school subject. Students of different ethnicities also learn their respective ethnic languages (i.e., Chinese, Malay and Tamil etc.) as a school subject, which is termed locally as Mother Tongue language but may not be a student's first language (L1) (Dixon, 2005). In Singapore's bilingual education environment, the proportion of students using Chinese as a dominant language at home has seen a rapid decline. As shown in the Mother Tongue Languages Review Committee Report (Ministry of Education, 2010), 28% Primary 1 students of Chinese ethnicity spoke English at home in 1991, but the figure rose to 59% in 2010 and this trend was expected to continue (Zhao & Liu, 2010). Anecdotally this appeared to be the case. In an input-poor environment at home it is becoming increasingly difficult for many students to improve their Chinese listening ability. As a result, it is imperative that teachers in schools adopt innovative and effective teaching methods to improve students' listening performance.

This innovation was conducted among 136 Secondary Two students of two classes from two cohorts taught by one teacher in a Singapore secondary school. In each class there were 68 students. These students, aged between 12-14 years old, had been learning Chinese in school for seven years. Among these students, there were 77 male (56.6%) and 59 female (43.4%) students.

Description of the Innovation

Metacognitive awareness can enhance listening comprehension of learners of various age groups, proficiency levels and backgrounds (Author, 2013). The MALQ has been used as a tool to provide metacognitive instruction and improve listeners' metacognitive awareness in listening (Movahed, 2014; Tanewong, 2019; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010; Zeng, 2012). This innovation draws on previous practice of metacognitive instruction and apply it in an original context where Chinese is taught and learnt.

The lesson adopted a task-based listening lesson structure that incorporated metacognitive processes (Author, 2012). The teacher used the MALQ as a checklist to promote students' metacognitive awareness. Selected items from the MALQ were used to guide pre-listening preparation of listening strategies. Figure 1 shows the stages of listening instruction and the underlying metacognitive processes for the listening activities. Table 1 displays the English-Chinese checklist of 11 metacognitive items from the MALQ. The innovation practice was carried out for around one term, i.e., around three months.

Listening activities	Metacognitive processes
<i>Pre-listening activities</i>	
<p>1. Students read the checklist of listening strategies which was adapted from the MALQ carefully.</p> <p>They check the items one by one to indicate that they have read and thought about the items with a pen and tick off if they understand the strategy. Both Chinese and English versions of the checklist are provided for students.</p>	1. Planning and directed attention
<p>2. Teachers and students discuss the checklist.</p> <p>The teacher invites students to ask questions about the items on the checklist and provides explanation and elaboration.</p>	2. Planning
<i>During listening activities</i>	
<p>3. Students listen to the first part of listening materials (See Appendix for the sample material).</p> <p>Once the students complete the listening task, the teacher discusses with the students the answers and explains the appropriate strategies students can use during the listening. Meanwhile, the students also discuss the strategies they use and the problem they encounter.</p> <p>During this process, students verified their initial predictions about the listening and made corrections when necessary. They also decided on what might require special attention.</p>	3. Selective attention, monitoring and evaluation
<p>4. Students complete the second part of the listening materials. Similarly,</p>	4. Selective attention, monitoring and problem solving

Post-listening activities

5. The teacher discusses the answers to the listening tasks with students and further explains the strategies that students can use during listening. The students also engage with the teacher and each other during which process they evaluate their listening process and solve the problem during their listening activities.

Figure 1 Stages of listening instruction and underlying metacognitive processes
(adapted from Author, 2012)

As shown in Figure 1, listening instruction and metacognitive processes involved in each phase are summarised. For example, in the pre-listening stage, students went through the checklist and made preparation for the listening activities. While they listened to the materials, they made use of the strategies indicated in the checklist, such as planning, monitoring and evaluation etc.

Table 1 Checklist of the Metacognitive Awareness Adapted from the MALQ

Stages	Categories of metacognitive awareness	Strategies	Self-check
Prior to listening	Planning-evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have a goal in mind as I listen. 我有一个明确的目标。 	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Before I start to listen, I have a plan in my head for how I am going to listen. 正式听之前，我已经知道要怎么去听这段语料或篇章。 	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Before listening, I think of similar texts that I may have listened to. 在听语料之前，我会思考曾经听过的同类题型有什么特点与注意点。 	
During listening	Directed attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I focus harder on the text when I have trouble understanding. 当遇到较困难的语料时，我会集中注意力去听。 	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When my mind wanders, I recover my concentration right away. 当注意力不集中时，我马上控制自己要专注。 	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I try to get back on track when I lose concentration. 当发现自己失神时，我尽力回过神来。 	
	Mental translation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I translate key words as I listen. 我会把不太熟悉的关键词翻译成英文去理解。 	

Problem-solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I use the general idea of the text to help me guess the meaning of the words that I don't understand. 当听到陌生词汇时，我会借助上下文帮我去理解它或猜测它的意思。 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I use my experience and knowledge to help me guess the meaning of the words that I don't understand. 当听到陌生词汇时，我会借自身的经验帮我去理解它或猜测它的意思。 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When I guess the meaning of a word, I think back to everything else that I have heard, to see if my guess makes sense. 我会想尽一切办法去猜测陌生的词汇。 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As I listen, I quickly adjust my interpretation if I realise that it is not correct. 当发现自己的解读不正确时，我会马上调整。 	

Specifically, before students listened to the materials, the teacher asked them to read the checklist of the metacognitive awareness (see Table 1) carefully and bring about any questions they were not sure about the checklist or the process of listening, which might be discussed among the teacher and the students. If they were clear about the item, they were required to tick it in the self-check column in Table 1. While the students completed the first part of the listening exercises, the teacher discussed with them the answers and clarified their uncertainties about the strategies they used, during which the students might also be engaged in a discussion. After all the exercise were completed, the teacher explained all the answers to the students and provided guidance on the strategy use further. The students were engaged in discussion where necessary.

Reflection and Future Direction

This innovation in practice inquires into the effect of metacognitive instruction on Singapore secondary students' listening performance and metacognitive awareness. The teacher reported that the instruction produced positive effects in that the students improved their listening comprehension and metacognitive awareness. More importantly, it was observed that students' confidence in learning Chinese was greatly boosted after this practice as they realised that with efforts their Chinese listening and even comprehensive ability in Chinese could be improved. This practice also accumulated invaluable experience for Chinese language teachers who aim to improve students' listening ability efficiently using multiple methods.

Due to time and resources constrains, the metacognitive instruction on the basis of the MALQ was only practised for one school term, which is around three months. Future direction can be focused on more systematic and enduring instruction to improve students' listening performance and metacognitive awareness more efficiently. For example, teachers can provide targeted metacognitive instruction according to different listening exercises. During each exercise, sufficient attention should be attached to students' use of different strategies. After the exercise, teachers should give timely feedback for students to rectify their inappropriateness in strategy use and therefore improve their listening performance and

metacognitive awareness more effectively. Once students realise that their Chinese listening is changing for the better and gain improvement, their motivation in Chinese learning will be enhanced and they are more likely to enjoy the learning of Chinese.

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