

An Exploration of Listening Journals in College English Listening Teaching

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Abstract: Listening is an important skill in EFL. The use of metacognitive knowledge plays a pivotal role in students' English learning, and requiring students to keep a listening journal can respond well to students' metacognitive concepts. In the journal, students record their observations, reactions and perceptions during the listening process. Keeping a listening journal can better develop students' independent thinking and independent learning ability, increase students' chances of controlling the listening learning process independently, and ultimately improve students' listening comprehension. Practice has shown that strategy-based listening instruction is more helpful to stimulate students' initiative and motivation, and improve students' listening skills. The author mainly introduces the purpose and practice of letting students keep weekly English listening journals, and after summarizing and analyzing the students' weekly listening journals, she concludes that the weekly English listening journals can effectively help the students to form a deep cognition of their own listening learning process.

Keywords: English Listening Journal; Metacognition; Learning Initiative; Listening Teaching

1. Introduction

Listening is one of the most basic forms of language communication and is the initial perceptual link in the language learning process. According to the research of W. M. Rivers and M. S. Temperly, the experts of foreign language teaching method in the United States, 75% of the information acquired by people comes from listening and speaking, of which 45% comes from listening

and 30% comes from speaking, and the remaining 25% comes from reading and writing. This shows that listening comprehension in the language communication activities occupies an extremely important position. Nowadays, with the strengthening of China's national power and the increase of international communication. The society has put forward higher and higher requirements for college students' listening and speaking ability, and college English listening teaching is undoubtedly becoming more and more important. In recent years, the reform of English listening teaching in China has been booming and fruitful. However, the author finds that the reform focuses on teaching materials and teachers' classroom teaching methods, and involves very little discussion of students' cognitive aspects. Most teachers attach importance to strengthening listening training, and most of them follow the traditional teacher-centered methods in the classroom, playing listening recordings, and focusing on training students' ability to grasp the main ideas and capture detailed information, interspersed with difficult points such as pronunciation recognition, vocabulary, grammar, and detailed information on grammar. In many cases, despite the teachers' efforts, students' listening comprehension still fails to improve. It is true that the traditional teacher's guidance is very important, but listening comprehension is a complex, multi-level thinking comprehension process. It involves language, phonology, vocabulary, non-verbal knowledge and other aspects, relying solely on the teacher's guidance and indoctrination. If students do not have a deeper understanding of their own listening process, they can not spot what their problems are and find out the countermeasures. Linguist [1] pointed out that a learner's perception of his

own learning has a direct impact on his learning process and learning effect, and practice shows that, compared with good students, poor students have a much weaker perception of their own learning status and process.

2. Literature Review

The so-called "listening journal", as the name suggests, is a written record of students' independent listening learning, whose contents mainly include the time of listening learning, the source of self-selected listening materials, the number of listening exercises, the content and purpose of the learning requirements, the record of the answers and accuracy, the analysis of the causes of errors, the psychological and mental state, the strategies used, the effectiveness of the strategies and the evaluation of the listening effect, the problem-solving measures, and the language learning notes, etc [2]. According to Schmidt, a listening journal is "a book in which students record their extensive and intensive listening practices, as well as reflections on their listening experiences" [3]. A listening journal is a book or a set of question in a form in which allow students to report their listening activity outside of class. Through filling in the form, students can reflect their activity in listening and think about the aspect of listening that they think needs improvement. Through the journal, students can reflect and evaluate their listening activity [4].

The purpose of keeping listening journal is to help students monitor and regulate their own learning process, evaluate the effectiveness of their learning and the strategies they use, analyze the reasons for their success or failure, and seek solutions to their problems (Su Liqin, 2008). Goh's [5] study also found that keeping a listening journal is an effective listening learning activity, which encourages students to look back on and think about their "listening process" and consider what they should do to improve their listening. Some researchers used listening journals as a tool to develop students' listening skills and raise students' awareness [6].

According to Huang Zao [7], listening journals plays an important role in improving students' English listening level, specifically in the following aspects: (1). Enhance the students' confidence. The assessment of the traditional

way of listening is more summative-based, and the drawbacks of this evaluation is that it weakens the listening foundation of the relatively weak students' motivation to learn. Vandergrift [8] pointed out that we should not only care about the "result of listening", but also pay more attention to the "process of listening". It has been proved that this assessment method, which pays more attention to the students' listening learning process, protects the students' motivation to learn to a large extent, and they study harder during weekdays and are confident in their future learning, and their listening learning gradually enters a virtuous circle. (2). Help develop good Listening Learning Habits. Faced with the status quo of fewer listening hours and poorer self-consciousness among the students, teachers of English listening in higher vocational schools should focus on cultivating students' good listening habits during limited listening and listening classroom teaching. Classroom teaching focuses on cultivating students' listening learning strategies, teaching students how to listen, i.e., helping students solve the problem of "quality" of listening learning, and listening journal is an effective way to help students realize the accumulation of "quantity" of listening after class. At the initial stage when the teacher assigns the learning task of listening diary, students may only accept it passively. However, behavioral psychology research shows that repetition over 21 days will form a habit; repetition over 90 days will form a stable habit. As one student wrote in the final summary, "Keeping a listening journal every day seems to have become a kind of learning 'inertia', just like eating and sleeping every day, it has become a must-do thing every day". (3). Cultivate students' listening independent learning ability. In their listening journals, students are required to record their mental state and strategy application in listening activities, evaluate the learning effect and the effectiveness of the strategies they use, analyze the reasons for their successes and failures, and seek for solutions to the problems. Fauzanna has carried out an experiment to evaluate the usefulness of a listening journal to improve students' extensive listening practices at an Indonesian university. The findings show that the habit of reflecting on their learning helped students to improve their listening

comprehension, especially with vocabulary and pronunciation. Several other researchers have done similar experiments, and believe that listening journals play an important role in listening teaching and learning and that they are not only a research tool, but also a teaching tool.

It has been proved that the practice of asking students to keep an English listening journals can really help students understand all aspects of their personal learning. It can effectively motivate their learning initiative.

3. Methodology

According to Schmidt [3], listening is “a demanding cognitive task that requires a breadth and depth of exposure.” Considering this, the objective of the activity was to encourage exposure to authentic materials in English that could help students to develop skills required for their academic life, as they are exposed to English only in the classroom. It can also be considered a student-centered activity as it explores topics that interest them. In order to test the feasibility and effectiveness of this method, I tried it in my class. There were 45 students in the class, This study used the listening journal as an assignment and to train students to be self-directed learners by using available sources accessible on the internet. Listening Journal is a post-listening activity consisted of a set of questions that students have to report weekly. Students wrote their opinion of the materials and self-reflection concerning the material. Students also reported which skill needs improvement. and I asked each student to write a weekly listening journal in English, noting down what they felt and thought during the listening process. I gave each student a slip of paper with prompting questions to help them reflect on their personal state of mind, their reactions, and the listening skills and strategies they used during the listening process. After ten weeks of writing, I collected their weekly notes and analyze them.

4. Analysis of Students' Weekly Listening Journals.

O'Malley and Chamot [9] point out that human beings are capable of recognizing their own mental processes, and Flavell [10] calls this cognition "metacognitive knowledge".

Wenden [11] expanded this knowledge to include three aspects of cognition: 1) person knowledge. This includes personal knowledge of how acquisition occurs, as well as understanding of the effects of age, ability, and learning style on the learning process. 2) Task knowledge, i.e., whether students have a clear understanding of the purpose, requirements, and nature of a listening task. 3) Strategic knowledge, i.e., students' awareness of what kinds of skills and strategies are used in the listening process and what their effects are. The following are analysis of students' journals from the three dimensions mentioned above.

4.1 Person Knowledge

In the process of listening. Some of the practices and problems that students found were: 1) they stop to think about the meaning of a word when they hear it. 2) They spell the word out mentally. 3) They translate a word they hear into their mother tongue. 4) they stop and search for the meaning of a word they don't understand in their minds. 5) they miss the next part of the recording when they stop to think about the meaning of a word. 6) they mistake a word for another with a similar pronunciation. 7) they fail to recognize certain words that can be understood in reading material while listening. 8) when hearing a word with familiar pronunciation, it takes a while to respond to the meaning. 9) they understand the meaning of each word in a sentence, but do not understand the meaning of the whole sentence: 10). They try to draw pictures in their mind according to what they hear.

The students also gave reasons for the problems that arose: 1) limited vocabulary, especially for certain technical terms. 2) insufficient knowledge of phonetics, resulting in some alliteration and repetition being indistinguishable. 3) pronouncing words with a local accent affecting comprehension. 4) lack of comprehension of idioms and slangs. 5) poor memory. 6) fast speed of speech of speakers.

Extract 1

“I listened to an English program last night. Though the speed was not very fast, I didn't understand quite well. I heard some words familiar but I couldn't tell their meanings immediately. I must think for some time and

when I knew it, the program already passed a lot. Maybe I were not familiar with the pronunciations of those words because I only read or wrote but seldom listened to or spoke them”.

From this journal extract, it can be seen that the student realized that the fast speed of speech (6) could be an obstacle to listening comprehension. She also pointed out that she was slow to respond to the meaning of a word (8) and needed to stop and think, which led to missing the next part of the session (5). Furthermore, she recognized that the lack of listening and speaking training was the cause of her inability to recognize certain words that were recognizable in the reading material.

4.2 Task Knowledge

Students also identified a variety of factors affecting listening comprehension: 1) unfamiliar sentence lengths and structures; 2) interference from existing personal knowledge and past experiences; 3) interest in certain topics; 4) appropriateness of the timing of the listening sessions; and 5) physical condition (e.g., nervousness, fatigue, etc.). They also identified language input sources that could improve listening comprehension, and gave reasons for this: 1) news broadcasts (the ability to listen to the same news over and over again at different times of the day); 2) English songs (which are interesting and relaxing); 3) BBC and VOA programs with a variety of content; 4) TV programs about learning English; 5) English movies.

Here is an extract from a student's weekly journal.

Extract 2

“Yesterday, we attended a new teacher's lecture, it is hard to follow what he said in the first few minutes because of his strange accent. But after some time his accent is not a problem any more. This makes me think that the accent problem in English listening is just a temporary problem. We can overcome it soon. The most important thing is that the speaker must speak clearly.”

From this journal extract, we can tell that the student is aware of the problem of accent and believes that it can be overcome as long as the speaker pronounces the words clearly. Obviously, this awareness can help build a confidence that will help him overcome the same problem in the future.

4.3 Strategic Knowledge

In the weekly journal, students listed a large number of strategies and methods they had used or found effective in listening comprehension, which are summarized as follows: 1) guessing the meaning of words they don't understand through the context; 2) listening to a topic according to its context; 3) use existing knowledge and common sense to help you understand and judge; 4) ignore words you don't understand; 5) take notes while listening; 6) Outline what you hear in your mind to help you understand; 7) make full use of the subtitles when you watch English movies; 8) listen to materials that interest you in your own time.

This student's weekly journal below records how he improved his listening comprehension by watching movies.

Extract 3

On Thursday, we watched a movie. I enjoyed it very much. What I had done was to focus on the picture, not the Chinese subtitles. I tried to listen hard at first, but when I couldn't understand what was happening, I quickly glanced at the subtitles, and drew back. In this way I could keep up with the plot. I always use this method when watching English TV or movies. I think it is very helpful.

Apparently, the student has developed her own learning method to improve her listening comprehension by watching English movies.

5. Conclusion

The study has attempted to show the effectiveness of extensive listening practice. The study involves 45 students of Guangdong Polytechnic of Science and Technology who has to practice listening from the internet materials and they have to report their learning process in weekly journals. Through the students' English listening journals, we can see that the students have active and conscious awareness of their own learning process. They can point out the difficulties they encountered in listening comprehension and analyze the reasons for the difficulties, as well as point out and analyze the appropriateness of the listening skills and strategies they used. It is encouraging to see that students were not only able to realize, observe and think about the whole process of their own listening comprehension, but also were able to put it

into words in English. In the conversation with the students afterwards, they generally mentioned that it was the teacher's assignment of keeping a weekly English listening journal that made them begin to realize or become more intensely aware of their own problems in the process of listening learning, and made them begin to evaluate these problems and be able to actively search for strategies.

In the study, it was found that both students and the teacher viewed journaling as a useful learning activity. Students were able to reflect on their learning strategies, attitudes, and behaviors during the activity. Keeping a listening journal plays a great role not only as a research tool but more importantly as a tool for teaching second language listening. Therefore, it is of practical significance to study the positive role of listening journals in college English listening teaching. This paper is a theoretical inspiration and a summary of experience, which is a useful attempt for every English teacher and students' English learning. However, it should be noted that this study is a small-scale experiment in a specific context. Given the different levels and backgrounds of the research participants, as well as different learning environments, different teaching environments and different cultural backgrounds may lead to different research results.

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