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ABSTRACT

A survey of 20 university students of English as a Second Language in China revealed lack of understanding of the role of listening in communication. Students believed they had good understanding of English vocabulary but had difficulty understanding a speaker's main ideas. Only a minority agreed that listener feedback affects the speaker's message. This situation is attributed to the Chinese method of language teaching that emphasizes vocabulary development but neglects interpersonal communication. A need for greater emphasis on development of listening skills, particularly on the effect of cultural factors and of high and low context on interaction, is seen. A recommended strategy is to teach theoretical considerations that can enhance understanding of the listening process, focusing on general rather than specific listening skills, listening distractions (factual, semantic, mental, physical), listening distortions (need for inference, personal reflection on meaning and message, listener expectation), criteria affecting listener response (listener purpose, knowledge, skills, attitudes), and active listening techniques (listening to understand and provide feedback, avoiding strong judgments about speaker statements, listening for content and feelings, restatement to ensure understanding). It is noted that listening instruction can be incorporated in distance learning as well as classroom instruction. (Contains 14 references.) (MSE)

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The Need for Listening Theory When Teaching English
as a Second Language: A Case Study in China

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The Need for Listening Theory When Teaching English
as a Second Language: A Case Study in China

This paper describes the need for listening theory when teaching English as a second language. The specific application in the paper is based in China but the main points are relevant wherever English is taught as a second language. The paper is based on a review of literature and a survey of Chinese students who studied English as a second language. The underlying idea posits English vocabulary is adequately stressed but more emphasis is needed with actual communication skills. In this case, awareness of listening dynamics.

Since World War II, there has been a dramatic increase in world trade. This increase has also involved a variety of other developments promoting international interaction. English has become a predominant language in the international community and the teaching of English, to non-native speakers, has become common all over the world.

During the spring term (March-June) 1987, the author was a visiting professor at Northern Jiaotong University in Beijing, The People's Republic of China and taught English as a second language to native Chinese speakers. This opportunity provided him the chance to work with a team of faculty members, teaching the same course, and the chance to research the process of teaching English as a second language.

Since the opening of China in 1979, the learning of English has been emphasized strongly. "China still has a long way to go in making its population fully literate in Chinese, let alone in English. But in terms of both national goals and individual aspirations, English is near the top of the list" (Jacobsen, October 28, 1987, p. 40).

English is usually taught in the latter years of primary school. Many university students have had about eight years of English training before entering the universities. "In the universities, students practice English with a passion that comes from knowing where the future lies." (Jacobsen, October 18, 1987, p. 40).

The teaching of English is done, to a considerable degree, outside of the traditional classroom. "Lessons also are

broadcast on national radio everyday" (Jacobsen, October 28, 1987, p. 40). Thus, the implications for the distant learner in this process are strong. "Nearly two million people are now following satellite T.V. education programs in their spare time, according to the State Education Commission" (China Daily, May 15, 1987, p. 3).

An article entitled "TV series to help kids learn English" described a "new TV series to help Chinese children in primary schools to learn English" (China Daily, May 1, 1987, p. 5). Entitled "Let's Learn English," the program is a response to the shortage of qualified English teachers in China.

The teaching of English in China, in the classroom and with distant learner approaches, has been experiencing problems. A common problem is that students can learn the English vocabulary but have difficulty in communicating and understanding conceptual meanings. "Lack of competent English teachers and under-estimation of the lesson time that should be devoted to verbal comprehension and speaking in English were mainly responsible for students low performance in learning English" (China Daily, May 2, 1987, p. 3).

"The poor English ability of middle school students is a potential obstacle to the country's opening to the outside world" (China Daily, May 2, 1987, p. 3). An official government objective, such as the opening of China, is taken very seriously by the Chinese people. Thus, answers to such problem situations are actively sought.

In teaching English as a second language, the emphasis on the communication process cannot be understated. Dorothy Bainton, chairperson of the pathology department at the University of California at San Francisco, conducts a two week workshop to prepare Chinese health care workers who will be studying in the U.S. Her program emphasizes "even though they may read English quite well, they may have difficulty understanding the spoken language and making themselves understood. And they face the broader problem of conflicting American and Chinese rules about communication and socialization" (Jacobsen, November 4, 1987, p. A49).

During his teaching assignment in China, the author perceived student comprehension of English language vocabulary to be far better than their ability to communicate their ideas and understand the ideas of others. Based upon his experience, he hypothesized their comprehension of factual information is good but their comprehension of main ideas is deficient. Observation of, and discussion with, other teachers evidenced a curriculum which contained no emphasis on the importance of listening skills in the communication process. Thus students were primarily taught words and expressions but were not taught about communicating or interpreting main ideas properly. The latter seemed to be assumed.

A written survey of six questions was administered to an English class of twenty students. These students were freshmen in the teacher preparation program at Northern Jiaotong University. They were requested to respond to six statements (SA

- strongly agree, A - agree, N - neutral, D - disagree, or SD - strongly disagree). The purpose of the survey was to study their perceptions of the role of listening in the communication process. Results of the survey are as follows.

1. I have received alot of practice in the testing of my English listening skills.

SA	A	N	D	SD
20%	30%	5%	35%	10%

2. My English listening skills are good.

SA	A	N	D	SD
	20%	40%	30%	10%

3. Sometimes I understand the words an English speaker is using, but I don't understand his/her main idea or message.

SA	A	N	D	SD
15%	50%	10%	25%	

4. Hearing is the same as listening.

SA	A	N	D	SD
	10%	25%	45%	20%

5. The most common distraction I experience when listening to an English speaker is noise which results in me not being able to hear him/her (such as noise from other students or noise in the hallway).

SA	A	N	D	SD
	35%	45%	20%	

6. When I am listening, the feedback I give to a speaker affects his/her message.

SA	A	N	D	SD
	40%	25%	35%	

The survey responses indicate a lack of understanding of the role of listening. For the purpose of this report, the author is most concerned with questions three, four, and six.

Question three responses show students believe they have a good understanding of English vocabulary but have problems with understanding speaker main ideas. Sixty-five percent agreed (or strong agreed) with this statement compared with 25 percent who disagreed with this statement.

Question four responses relate students have a sufficient understanding there is a difference between hearing and listening. Only ten percent felt there was no difference between hearing and listening.

Question six responses indicate students need instruction on the role of feedback in the listening process. Only 40 percent agreed that listener feedback affects the speaker's message.

The survey results do not reveal a major void in student understanding of the role of listening in human interaction but the need for more emphasis on listening is evident. When linked with the deficiencies described in newspaper/journal accounts of English education in China, a pattern of how English is taught begins to present itself. It is the author's contention this process achieves the basic objective of teaching vocabulary but more emphasis on the communication process, in this case listening, would enhance student understanding considerably. It is worth noting other cross-cultural communication differences also exist within the learning of English.

Cross-cultural communication "occurs when two or more individuals with different cultural backgrounds interact together In most situations intercultural interactants do not share the same language. But languages can be learned and larger communication problems occur in the nonverbal realm" (Andersen, 1986). "Since we are not usually aware of our own nonverbal behavior it becomes extremely difficult to identify and master the nonverbal behavior of another culture. At times we feel uncomfortable in other cultures because we intuitively know some-

thing isn't right" (Andersen, 1987, pp. 2-3). "Because nonverbal behaviors are rarely conscious phenomena, it may be difficult for us to know exactly why we are feeling uncomfortable (Gudykunst and Kim, 1984, p. 149). The cross-cultural obstacles to effective listening exist in a similar manner.

The effect of the cultural backgrounds of interactants on human interaction is a crucial consideration. "Culture is the enduring influence of the social environment on our behavior including our interpersonal communication behaviors" (Andersen, 1987, p. 6). The culture of an individual dictates interpersonal behavior through "control mechanisms--plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call 'programs')--for the governing of behavior" (Geertz, 1973, p. 44). Thus, the processes for presentation of ideas (speaking) and the reception of ideas (listening) will understandably vary from culture to culture.

The implications of high and low context communication processes, across cultures, provides another example of the effect of culture on the listening process. "A high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted parts of the message" (Hall, 1976, p. 91). For instance, people who know each other very well can communicate through unexplicit messages which are not readily understandable to a third party. "In high-context situations or cultures information is integrated from the environment, the context, the situation, and from nonverbal cues

that give the message meaning unavailable in the explicit verbal utterance (Andersen, 1987, p. 22).

Low context messages (and cultures) are just the opposite of high context messages; most of the information is in the explicit code (Hall, 1976). Low context messages must be elaborated, clearly communicated, and highly specific (Andersen, 1987, p. 22). The lowest context cultures are probably Swiss, German, North American (including the U.S.) and Scandinavian (Hall, 1976; Gudykunst & Kim, 1984). These cultures are preoccupied with specifics, details, and precise time schedules at the expense of context (Andersen, 1987, p. 22).

The highest context cultures are found in the Orient. China, Japan, and Korea are very high context cultures (Elliot, Scott, Jensen & McDonough, 1982; Hall, 1976). "Languages are some of the most explicit communication systems but the Chinese language is an implicit high context system" (Andersen, 1987, p. 23). Americans (from a low context culture) will complain that Japanese (from a high context culture) never "get to the point." This is due to a failure to recognize that high context cultures must provide a context and setting and let the point evolve (Hall, 1984).

People in high context cultures expect more than interactants in low context cultures (Hall, 1976). Such expectations assume the other person will "understand unarticulated feelings, subtle gestures and environmental clues that people from low context cultures simply do not process. Worse, both cultural extremes fail to recognize these basic

differences in behavior, communication, and context and are quick to misattribute the causes for their behaviors" (Andersen, 1987, p. 25). Thus, awareness of influences on the listening process can have direct benefits for the Chinese person (high context) learning English (low context) as a second language.

The author suggests, as a minimum, the teaching of theoretical considerations which can enhance understanding of the listening process. Emphasis on general ideas rather than specific skills can be helpful, depending on the learning situation, as awareness is the first step to overcoming listening barriers. Emphasis on listening distractions, listening distortions, criteria affecting listener response, and active listening would provide a relevant awareness of common problems in the listening process.

Four listening distractions detail some basic obstacles we frequently encounter in listening. Factual distractions occur when we listen for facts instead of main ideas. Semantic distractions occur when words or phrases are used differently (when one word has various meanings or one meaning has various words). Mental distractions occur when we have intrapersonal communication while engaged in interpersonal communication (i.e. daydreaming). Physical distractions are merely stimuli in the environment such as noise (Devito, p. 329).

Three bases of listening distortion describe other fundamental considerations which can improve effective listening efforts. First, meaning is not transmitted in oral communication, only aural and visual stimuli are transmitted.

Thus, meanings listeners attach to messages are based on inferences instead of facts. Second, listening is a form of intrapersonal communication. That is, we reflect on the meaning of what is said to us. Third, listener expectations affect what is heard and comprehended. It is helpful to remember that a single message can be interpreted differently depending on the expectations of the listener (Barker, p. 78).

There are four primary criteria which affect listener response to a message. Listener "purpose" for attending to the message given will affect his/her response (i.e. once the purpose is met he/she may not listen anymore). Listener "knowledge of, and interest in, the subject" is based on his/her background and future goals. Listening "skills" involve the ability to follow ideas, recognize inferences, and detect deficiencies in evidence presented. Listener "attitudes" on the subject being presented. Listener "attitudes" on the subject being discussed will affect the likelihood of support or rejection of the main premises. An example of this occurs when we are more easily swayed by views which align our own (Ehninger, et al, pp. 211-212).

Active listening can be suggested as a general approach to effective listening. This approach involves listening to understand and provide feedback, not making strong judgements regarding speaker statements, listening for content (what is said) and feelings (how it is said), and restatement to ensure understanding (Devito, p. 243). Active listening is commonly used in counseling as a means to ensure listener understanding of the speaker's message and to promote effective feedback from the

listener. The same guidelines can be used to aid understanding in everyday interactions.

The ideas presented in this paper are relevant because the learning of a new language, whether or not if it is English, involves considerable emphasis on the listening process. Although a person can learn the words of a new language this does not prepare him/her to interact (both send and receive messages). Such a deficiency increases the likelihood of misunderstanding and ineffective interaction.

English as a second language is frequently taught to distant learners in the form of audio cassettes and written materials. The inclusion of listening instruction would not be difficult with such programs and the desired objectives could be realistically met. The author feels acknowledgment of the ideas presented in this paper can substantially improve the teaching/learning of English as a second language. Specific applications would of course depend on the intended audience and the means used to convey information.

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