Identifying Information Focuses in Listening Comprehension

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The study explains the process of learners' listening comprehension within Halliday's information theory in functional grammar, including the skills of identifying focuses while listening in college English teaching. Identifying information focuses in listening is proved to improve the students' communicative listening ability by the means of a classroom research, in which 87 students were involved.

Keywords: information focus, information unit, process of listening comprehension, college English classroom

Introduction

Now communicative listening ability, as one of the aspects in the applied linguistic research field, is being paid an increasing attention to. However, most learners are still weak in listening comprehension. Halliday (1967) started from meaning and stood for the hearer to analyze the language. Halliday (1967) first put forward the idea of focus and pointed out that the information focus reflected new information. His approach gives us some enlightenment in listening teaching.

This study tries to explain the process of learners' listening comprehension within Halliday's (1967) information theory in functional grammar, and tries to illustrate the fact that identifying information focuses helps learners' listening comprehension.

Theoretical Foundation

Information Unit

In Halliday's (2000) opinion, a text consists of information units. The information unit is what its name implies—a unit of information. Information, in this technical grammatical sense, is the tension between what is already known or predictable and what is new and unpredictable. This is different from the mathematical concept of information, which is the measure of unpredictability. It is the interplay of the new and those not new that generates information in the linguistic sense. Hence, the information unit is a structure made up of two functions—the new and the given.

As for the new and the given information, Valin and Lapolla (2002) explained them clearly to us: It is not that the new information itself has the value of the information but that the relationship between the new and the given makes the information unit have the information value. The given information is the part initiated by the utterance and able to constitute the context needed to understand the utterance.

Tone Group and Information Focus

Halliday (2000) maintained that each information unit was realized as a tone, which may be falling, rising

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or mixed. This tone extends over the whole tone group. Within the tone group, one foot carries the main pitch movement: the main fall or rise, or the change of direction. This feature is known as tonic prominence, and the element having this prominence is said to be carrying information focus (Halliday, 2000). In general sense, information focus can be regarded as what the speaker emphasizes on.

Unmarked information focus. When the information unit consists of a given element accompanied by a new element, that is to say, the unmarked position for the new is at the end of the information unit, which we call unmarked information focus. Now, the end of the new element is marked by tonic prominence.

Marked information focus. It is possible to have the given materials which follow the new; and any accented matter that follows the tonic foot is thereby signaled as being given. We call this phenomenon as marked information focus.

Contrastive information focus. The information focus contains the contrastive relationship between the focus element and the other information of the information unit.

The Psychological Process of Listening Comprehension

Listening is essentially an active process. To understand what we have heard, we need the communicative knowledge of the spoken language—phonological and grammatical patters, as well as lexical items, the ability to predict what is likely to come next, and the contextual clues. It will be helpful to take account of the two main ways of responding to something we have heard:

(1) Interacting: That is, the listener also participates as a speaker, for example, in a conversation or discussion;

(2) Reacting: That is, the listener does or says something as a result of what he/she has heard, but is not involved in an interaction with the speaker. This situation is similar to reading, as the listener is "distanced" from the speaker.

As for the process of listening comprehension, there are different answers. With references to these answers, this study constructs an outline of the process of listening comprehension as in Figure 1.
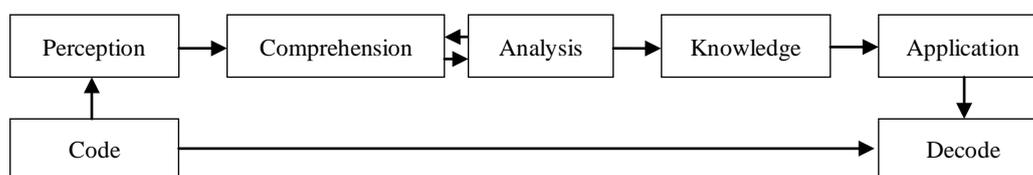

Figure 1. The process of listening comprehension.

From this process, we can define the main task of the listening. Cele-Murcia (1995) said that listening comprehension included both the bottom-up and the up-down processes dealing with the information. These two processes dealing with information included phonological perception, word recognition, grammatical analysis and contextual inference (Rost, 2005). While listening, if listeners manage to include the skills of identifying information focuses, they could gain twice the result with half the effort in the listening comprehension.

The Design of the Listening Course in College English

The classroom is a convenient place for imparting information and for developing many educational skills. From the above-mentioned, we can improve the learners' listening comprehension by teaching them in the classroom how to identify information focuses within the process of the listening comprehension. The skills

can be trained both from phonetics and syntax and vocabulary perspective.

An Outline

According to the textual function, the speaker usually presents the new and given information in such a way that suits most state of the listener's knowledge, so that the speaker can input the new information emphatically to the listener, and expand or repeat the given information to enhance the coherence of the text. A text is made up of clauses. However, almost every clause contains an information focus, which plays an important role in a clause, and is restricted by the intention of the speaker, and the textual context.

In college English, the listening materials are presented either in a monologue or in a dialogue way. The contents cover from formal announcements, discussions or dialogues to informal conversations and stories. For example (the parts underlined are information focuses):

> A: Excuse me. I'm looking for the purchasing manager's office.
> B: Well, go up to the fourth floor. When you come out of the lift, go left. It's the second door on the left. (Go ahead—a communication skill course for Business English: 4.1 B)

While listening, the learner, first of all perceives the language code, then tries to comprehend and analyze the code, after that, he absorbs the identified information focuses into his own knowledge scope and in the end, applies them to solving the problems. Of course, this is done in one moment. However, by decomposing the process of the listening comprehension, we can explain the key procedures in listening comprehension and make clear the activities of identifying information focuses.

Methods of Identifying Information Focuses

Phonetics. Tonic prominence is a common means to realize information focus. Especially in informal conversations, the speaker can place the information focus in any position by the means of tonic prominence. For example (the parts underlined are information focuses):

> I called last week about the computer system for our offices. (Go ahead—a communication skill course for Business English: 2.2 A)
> or: I called last week about the computer system for our office.

Syntax. Structurally, an information unit consists of an obligatory new element plus an optional given. The way this structure is realized is essentially "natural" in two respects: (1) The new is marked by prominence; and (2) The given typically precedes the new. In this situation, the focus is marked. Otherwise, the information focus is unmarked. For example (the parts underlined are information focuses):

> Could you tell me something about your company? (Unmarked) (Go ahead—a communication skill course for Business English: 3.1 C)
> Right. Wednesday the sixteenth. Would the morning suit you? (Marked) (Go ahead—a communication skill course for Business English: 8.3 C)

As for contrastive information focus, Dick (1989) divided it into four types according to its different functions.

Replacement. The speaker thinks that the listener has got some incorrect information, so he/she replaces the information with the other correct one. For example (the parts underlined are information focuses):

> A total of 11.5% of the workforce are professional or technical workers; by that, I mean, people like accountants, engineers and lawyers. (Contrastive) (Go ahead—a communication skill course for Business English: 2.1 D)

Expansion. The speaker thinks that the listener has got incomplete information about what has been told. Therefore, the speaker needs to give the listener some additional remarks. For example (the parts underlined are information focuses):

Well, I do work long hours, if something important comes up, I can be in the office until eight or nine in the evening. (Contrastive) (Go ahead—a communication skill course for Business English: 6.3 B)

Restriction. The speaker thinks that what the listener's thinking about is right on the whole, but that there are still some limitations to the listener's knowledge. Therefore, the speaker tries to make what he/she has said more explicit. For example (the parts underlined are information focuses):

A lot of my work is routine secretarial work. You know, answering the phone, writing letters, that kind of things. (Contrastive) (Go ahead—a communication skill course for Business English: 4.2 D)

Selection. The speaker does not know which piece of the information is correct between the two pieces. In this situation, selective interrogative sentences are often used. For example (the parts underlined are information focuses):

Is that Robert Brown or George Braun? (Contrastive) (Go ahead—a communication skill course for Business English: 2.2 A)

Vocabulary. The properties of vocabulary are exclusive, emphatic and negative. These three properties can be used to identify information focuses. For example (the parts underlined are information focuses):

They have trainee program for people from university. (Exclusive) (Go ahead—a communication skill course for Business English: 11.3 B)
And only 23% said that they spent more on luxury items, like fur coats and jewellery. (Emphatic) (Go ahead—a communication skill course for Business English: 19.2 A)
She never takes the train to the office. (Negative) (Go ahead—a communication skill course for Business English: 6.2 B)

The examples above indicate that information focuses can be identified by the means of a systematical training in the college English classroom.

A Survey Study on Identifying Information Focuses in Listening Comprehension

As a scientific research on language acquisition, the approach should be both qualitative and quantitative. Therefore, this study investigates the effect of learners' abilities to identify information focuses in listening comprehension.

Subjects

The participants are 87 first-year overseas Chinese students of Jinan University, who are from Burma, Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Macao, Mongolia, Malaysia and Viet Nam. All the participants are non-English majors. They were divided into two groups: an experiential group ($N = 43$) and a control group ($N = 44$).

Research

Before the experiment, a pre-test showed that the English proficiency of the two groups was similar. The two groups received identical English instruction on *Go Ahead—A Communication Skill Course for Business English*, except that the experimental group received an extra training on identifying information focuses in listening comprehension. A questionnaire, which covers the learners' learning background, motivations, interests and methods, was also conducted to investigate some extraneous variables. The pre-test and the

pre-training questionnaire, on the other hand, identified the difficulties the students often met with and the strategies they often used in English listening. The training lasted for ten weeks. Each week, the same teacher gave both two groups two periods of English course on Thursday and two periods on Friday. The difference was that in the experimental group, the teacher spent 20 minutes on Thursday and 20 minutes on Friday teaching the students how to identifying information focuses in listening comprehension. In the end, a post-test was given to both groups.

Results

In the pre-test, the mean score of the control group is 77.8182 and that of the experimental group is 77.3488. The results are nearly similar. According to independent samples test in post-test, the mean score of the control group is 76.5682 and that of the experimental group is 81.8837. By means of Levene's test for equality of variances, we get the result: $P = 0.048$, which is less than 0.05. It is concluded that the two variances are not equal.

Conclusions

Information focuses are an important concept in linguistics. It reveals the variation of the different communicative values. At present, however, this theory is only elaborated by linguists and grammarians; it is seldom applied to practice, even less to solving the problem in language acquisition. This study manages to combine information focus theory with practice, that is, to solve the learners' listening comprehension problems. The results deserve further consideration and discussion.

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