Research on the Use of Listening Strategies by Chinese Non-English Major College Students-A Comparison between Skillful and Unskillful Listeners

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Abstract

Based on the researches of listening strategies at home and abroad, this study tries to explore the use of listening strategy by Chinese non-English major college students under the internet autonomous learning environment. The results from the questionnaires and interviews of listening strategies used by different level students have some implications for teachers. Listening strategies play an important role in the process of listening comprehension and skillful listeners tend to use all the listening strategies more frequently than the unskillful ones in their listening activities. So it is necessary for college English teachers to conduct strategy training in students' listening comprehension especially in this new learning environment.

Keywords: Listening strategies, Skillful listeners, Unskillful listeners, Strategy training

1. Research Background

With the development of global trade and international communication, English has become an international language that is widely used in all kinds of fields. Therefore, in China more and more people have realized the importance of English, and the government also put great emphasis on English teaching and learning from compulsory education to high education.

Listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. "Listening comprehension is viewed theoretically as an active process in which individuals focus on selected aspects of aural input, construct meaning from passages, and relate what they hear to existing knowledge (O'Malley et al. 1989: 418)." So language learning depends on listening. The listening skill is not only a rule of language but also acquisition second language skill

(Vandergrift, 1997). It has been estimated that students may receive as much as 90% of their in-school information through listening to instructors and to one another. In addition, the College English Curriculum Requirements in 2004 indicates that the goal of college English teaching is to develop students' ability to use English in an all-round way, especially in listening and speaking. Therefore, it is essential for English teachers to help their students become effective listeners and more attention should be paid to listening comprehension in second language teaching and learning.

In recent years, with the enrollment expansion year by year, students come from different areas and their English levels are very different when they are admitted by universities and colleges. The increasing number of students and their different English levels bring great challenges to Chinese foreign language teachers. Many universities and colleges try to take measures to reform college English teaching mode and methods. In the various teaching reforms, graded teaching mode is getting more and more popular, especially with the help of computers and web. This kind of teaching method follows the principles of providing different guidance for different groups of students and gives them different instructions in accordance with their abilities so as to meet the different requirements of different levels.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Learning Strategies and Listening Strategies

In the past decades, the use of language learning strategies has been one of the hot topics in foreign language learning research. O'Malley et al. (1985), In O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) opinion, language learning strategies fall into three broad categories: meta-cognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social/affective strategies. Nunan (1991) thinks learning strategies are the mental and communicative procedures that learners use in order to learn and use language. Wen Qiufang (2003) defines the term "strategies" as a series of actions which are taken to facilitate accomplishing language learning tasks.

Listening strategies refers to techniques, approaches or actions that students take in their listening process to help their listening comprehension. Since listening strategies are important parts of learning strategies, On the basis of language learning strategies developed by O'Malley and Chamot (1990), which has gained considerable acceptability, listening strategies can also be classified into three categories: meta-cognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social/affective strategies. Meta-cognitive strategies employed in listening comprehension include planning, selective attention, directed attention, self-management, self-monitoring, self-evaluation and problem identification. Cognitive strategies in listening comprehension include prediction, repetition, resourcing, translation, note-taking, auditory representation, key word, transfer, inferencing, selective listening, material selection and elaboration. Social/affective strategies in listening comprehension include interest-raising, self-reinforcement, lowering anxiety, cooperation and clarifying.

2.2 Studies on Listening Strategies

In recent years, many researchers have made great efforts to study the listening strategy training which can improve the listeners' listening ability. Defillipis (1980), selected the

second-term students who study French at the beginning level as the participants. The participants were divided into two groups. He found that there are more similarities than differences of learning strategies use between skillful listeners and unskillful listeners. The experiments conducted by Brown & Palinscar (1982), Thompson & Robin (1996) show that strategy training can promote learners' listening performance and their awareness of using strategies, and O'Malley et al. (1985), Rubin et al. (Rubin, 1994), fail to draw the similar conclusion. Murphy (1985) studied the listening strategy use by university students who study English as a second language in 1985. He found that more skilled listeners use a wider variety of different strategies than unskilled listeners. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) have found that there is a great significant difference of the learning strategies between the effective and ineffective listeners. Vandergrift (2003) conducted an investigation of listening strategy use by seventh-grade students of French and discovered that the more skilled listeners used more meta-cognitive strategies.

In China, Jiang Zukang (1994) conducts an experiment with English majors as subjects to study the correlation between learning strategies and listening comprehension. Wang (2002) conducted a survey about non-English majors' use of listening strategies in China and found significant difference of different level students in the use of meta-cognitive strategies and cognitive strategies in the establishment of profound comprehension. Yang Jianding (2003) investigates the influence of conscious meta-cognitive strategy training on learner's listening performance. Xiao and Zuo (2006) found there are great differences between good listeners and poor listeners in the "autonomous learning class". Zhu Xiaoshen and Deng Juntao (2011) carried out an investigation about the web-based autonomous English listening learning situation of wenzhou University students and found that listening strategy training can help improve the students' autonomous learning ability.

In the above-mentioned studies, it can be seen that language researchers and teachers both at home and abroad have made a lot of studies about foreign language listening learning and teaching, many of which are related to listening strategies. However, with the development of modern technology, recently various web-based language learning systems are provided by many foreign language presses in China. In this study, the author conducts a study about the listening strategies use by different level students in the web-based learning environment, hoping to offer some implications for the future language listening teaching and learning.

3. Research Design

Based on the review of the research on learning strategies and listening strategies of English language learning at home and abroad, the survey is design on the listening strategies use, trying to provide beneficial enlightenment for the improvement of College English listening teaching.

3.1 Participants

The 725 research participants are the second-year non-English majors from Chinese, mathematics, biology and education four different majors in Taishan University in Shandong Province, whose native language is Chinese, covering arts and Science (see Table 1). Their

ages range from 17 to 22 and are under the same English teacher's instruction. they have their English classes in the internet language labs, where Students can make their own proper plans, select suitable exercises and communicate with peers and teachers through the Internet.

Table 1. Basic information of the participants

major	art	374	48%
	science	351	52%
gender	male	312	43%
	female	413	57%
Total number	725		

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 The Listening Strategy Questionnaire

The investigation is carried out through the combination of questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire is divided into two parts. The first part is the personal information and the second part is the questionnaire based on the learning strategy theory of O 'Malley and Chamot (1990), which is designed according to the characteristics of English listening teaching and learning process. The questionnaire consists of 23 items, and each item is rated on a five-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), which are arranged in the order of meta-cognitive strategies (6 items), cognitive strategies (12 items) and social/affective strategies (5 items). The internal consistency of strategy variables is checked by item-total correlations and the alpha. values (>0.5)show that all the items are internally consistent.

3.2.2 Test Paper

The author carefully selected the CET-4 in June, 2013. The author used the subjects' listening test scores to identify the skillful listeners from the unskillful ones. CET-4 is a nationwide standardized proficiency test for college non-English majors when they have finished two-year college English courses in the university, which is organized by High Education Department of Educational Bureau. So the reliability and validity of CET-4 have live up to the requirement of this study.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The listening proficiency test was held in September, 2013 to identify the skillful listeners from the unskillful ones in listening proficiency. According to the test results, the author picked out the subjects from four different majors under the same English teacher's instruction.

After picking out the subjects and classifies them into 2 groups according to their different listening level, the questionnaire was conducted in the following days. Before conducting the questionnaire, the author explained the purpose that she would collect the precise data from the questionnaire in order to study the current listening teaching. The subjects were asked to

perform in class under the teacher's guidance, which could guarantee that all the students concentrate their attention on the questionnaire and answer the questions as seriously as possible. The questionnaire papers were distributed anonymously for the sake of privacy and objectivity. Consequently, 725 questionnaires were collected, in which 723 were valid and used for statistical analysis in this study. Among them, 331 are males and 412 are females. Also, 360 of them are from beginning level class, 363 of them are from advanced level class.

The collected data of the questionnaire were keyed into the computer and were analyzed by the software SPSS 10.0 (Statistics Package for Social Science) which is especially designed for social science statistical analysis. Quantitative data analysis was carried out in the study. The descriptive statistics was employed to find the means and the standard derivation which indicate the overall use frequency of listening strategies by different levels of college non-English majors. independent-sample T-tests were used to find out the difference of listening strategies use by students of different levels.

4. Statistical Description of Listening Strategies Used by by Skillful and Unskillful Listeners

In order to find the differences of the three major listening strategies between skillful and unskillful Listeners, the independent-sample T-test is used and the results are shown in the following tables.

4.1 Differences in the Overall Use of Listening Strategies between Skillful and Unskillful Listeners

Table 2. T-test of the overall use of the categories by skillful and unskillful listeners

Categories	skillful		unskillful		T-value	Sig.(2-tailed)
	M	S.D	M	S.D		
Meta-cognitive strategies	3.10	.324	2.86	.293	3.355	*.001
Cognitive strategies	3.36	.264	3.19	.232	2.907	*.005
Social/affective strategies	3.23	.675	2.97	.523	1.854	.068
Overall strategy use	3.27	.229	3.07	.185	4.214	*.000

*p≤0.01

As can be seen from the table, the means of the overall use of listening strategies by the skillful listeners (mean=3.27) are higher than those of the unskillful listeners (mean=3.07), which shows that skillful listeners tend to use all the three major listening strategies more often than the unskillful ones in their listening activities. In addition, the difference is significant at the level of .000 (t = 4.214, p =.000), which proves that the higher the subjects' listening proficiency level is, the more frequently the listening strategies are applied.

Among all the three categories of listening strategies, the use of meta-cognitive strategies (p=.001) and cognitive strategies (p=.005) are significantly different between the skillful listeners and the unskillful ones. The means of meta-cognitive strategies in both cases are the lowest, although it plays a key role in the autonomous learning environment. Although the

means of social/affective strategy use by skillful listeners (3.23) and unskillful listeners (2.97) show that there does exist some difference between them, the independent-sample T-test shows that no statistically significant difference exists in the use of this category at the 0.01 level.

As shown in the table, the order of the frequencies of the use of these three types of strategies by both groups is: skillful listeners use cognitive strategies most frequently (mean=3.36), social/affective strategies less frequently (mean=3.23) and meta-cognitive strategies least frequently (mean=3.10), unskillful listeners use cognitive strategies most frequently (mean=3.19), social/affective strategies less frequently (mean=2.97) and meta-cognitive strategies least frequently (mean=2.86). There does exist some difference in the use of listening strategies between the two groups, but both of them depend heavily on the cognitive strategies, which may have something to do with their learning experience. The means of meta-cognitive strategies in both cases are the lowest, although it plays a key role in the autonomous learning environment. In all, from the statistics and the analysis, we can draw the conclusion that skillful listeners use all the strategies more frequently than unskillful ones. The result is partly in line with that of O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) research.

4.2 Differences in the Use of Meta-cognitive Strategies between Skillful and Unskillful Listeners

Table 3. T-test of the use of meta-cognitive strategies by skillful and unskillful Listeners

Sub-categories	skillful		unskillful		T-value	Sig.(2-tailed)
	M	S.D	M	S.D		
Planning	3.28	.605	2.86	.585	2.892	*.005
Directed attention	3.15	.709	2.89	.658	1.668	.100
Selective attention	3.00	.795	2.81	.616	1.155	.252
Monitoring	3.12	.695	2.59	.599	3.576	*.001
Self-evaluation	3.15	.630	2.76	.597	2.819	*.006
Self-management	3.03	.707	2.81	.701	1.330	.188

*$p \leq 0.01$

The data in the table indicates that the means of all categories of meta-cognitive strategies are within the range of medium (2.5-3.4). This result indicates that the subjects employ meta-cognitive strategies at a medium frequency level under the autonomous environment, although the means of all meta-cognitive strategies used by skillful listeners are higher than those used by unskillful listeners.

As the T-test shows, the use of planning (p=.005), monitoring (p=.001) and self-evaluation (p=.006) by skillful listeners is significantly different between skillful listeners and unskillful listeners. Among all the strategies, the use of monitoring strategies is the most striking difference. It shows that skillful listeners have stronger consciousness to monitor their listening activity. They can check or correct their listening performance in the course of

listening tasks. The difference in planning strategy use shows that skillful listeners are aware of what needs to be done to accomplish a listening task and can make an appropriate action plan for their listening task. In addition, compared with unskillful listeners, skillful listeners are better at carrying out the evaluation of their listening study in a certain period. In contrast, unskillful listeners sometimes can not make a suitable listening plan. They are not good at taking charge of their listening study and can not evaluate themselves after a period of study.

From the analysis, we can know that skillful listeners are better at the use of meta-cognitive strategies than unskillful listeners, especially at the use of monitoring, planning and self-evaluation. The result is in accord with that of O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) and Kupper's (1989) research. In their study, they found that significant difference exists between effective and ineffective listeners on self-monitoring. In China, Wang Yu (2000) drew the same conclusion on the use of monitoring.

4.3 Differences in the Use of Cognitive Strategies between Skillful and Unskillful Listeners

Table 4. T-test of the use of cognitive strategies by skillful and unskillful listeners

Sub-categories	skillful		unskillful		T-value	Sig.(2-tailed)
	M	S.D	M	S.D		
Prediction	3.64	.743	3.62	.758	.113	.911
Translation	2.69	.863	2.97	.763	-1.499	.138
Note-taking	3.54	.790	3.41	.896	.688	.494
Key word	3.69	.694	3.57	.801	.727	.470
Elaboration	3.33	.955	3.08	.722	1.294	.200
Transfer	3.36	.811	3.11	.774	1.378	.172
Inferencing	3.05	.686	2.57	.647	3.157	*.002
Auditory representation	3.21	.894	2.86	.751	1.792	.077
Resourcing	3.54	.770	3.51	.837	.134	.894
Selective listening	3.05	.686	3.00	.707	.321	.749
Repetition	3.64	.743	3.49	.870	.834	.407
Material selection	3.44	.912	2.91	.705	2.611	*.010

*$p \leq 0.01$

Judging by the means of the sub-categories of strategies, we can know that both the skillful listeners and the unskillful ones employ prediction, key word, resourcing, note-taking and repetition most frequently, which shows that most students can use the titles or the choices given in the listening material to predict the available information that they will listen to, take notes to help them overcome forgetting and make use of key words and dictionary or textbooks to assist their performance in listening tasks. These strategies are often used in their early English learning experience. In addition, repetition strategy is also used frequently, one reason for which may be that the autonomous learning environment makes it convenient for students to replay what they have not understood.

As shown by the independent-sample T-test, the two groups differ at a significant level in using inferencing and material selection strategies. Inferencing is to use available information within the text or conversational context to guess meanings of unfamiliar items associated with listening tasks, to predict outcomes or fill in missing information (Vanergrift, L, 1997). As can be seen from table 4.7, the skillful listeners tend to infer meaning from some non-language information such as background sounds and the tone of the speakers, which can help them infer the feelings of the speakers. The skillful listeners are also more conscious of finding the suitable listening materials to their levels. The autonomous learning environment provides a large quantity of listening materials for them, which makes it easy to choose what they are interested in. Since the skillful students are able to select suitable materials from the large amount of resources, they will achieve greater efficiency in their listening learning.

4.4 Differences in the Use of Social/Affective Strategies between Skillful and Unskillful Listeners

Table 5. T-test of the use of social/affective strategies by skillful and unskillful Listeners

Sub-categories	Skillful		Unskillful		T-value	Sig.(2-tailed)
	M	S.D	M	S.D		
Self-reinforcement	3.21	.801	2.89	.737	1.772	.081
Interest-raising	3.15	.812	2.97	.726	1.022	.310
Lowering anxiety	3.41	.938	3.32	.747	.440	.661
Cooperation	3.15	.779	2.84	.780	1.745	.085
Clarifying	3.23	.777	2.84	.727	2.274	.026

*$p \leq 0.01$

As shown in table 4.8, the means of all the five types of strategies used by skillful listeners are higher than unskillful ones, although there is no significant difference between them. However, the means of each subdivision are all near to 3, which is the medium level. It shows that both of the two groups don't make full use of social/affective strategies in their listening activities.

The data in the table shows that cooperation strategy is least frequently used by both groups, one of the reasons for which may be the traditional Chinese culture. Chinese students would like to learn by themselves, rather than cooperate with others. Another reason may be the autonomous learning environment which makes it possible for the students to learn independently.

5. Pedagogical Implications

From the above analysis and discussion, it can be seen that skillful listeners tend to use all the three major categories of listening strategies more frequently than the unskillful ones in their listening activities. In addition, the difference is statistically significant, which proves that the higher the subjects' listening proficiency level is, the more frequently the listening strategies are applied.it is evident that listening strategies play an important role in the process of

listening comprehension in the autonomous language learning environment.

Since many researchers have drawn the conclusion that strategy training is conductible and fruitful for Chinese students (lv, 2001, Su, 2003), and the problems in listening strategy use by the subjects in the autonomous language learning environment have been found in this study, it is necessary for college English teachers to conduct strategy training in students' listening comprehension especially in this new learning environment. Therefore, the author put forward some suggestions for English listening teaching and learning.

Firstly, the English teachers should explain to the students what strategies they need in their listening performance and identify what listening strategies they are using in their present listening comprehension. What's more, English teachers should also help students to recognize what kind of listening strategies they often use in their listening comprehension and how effective these strategies are. In order to know the students' use of listening strategies, English teachers may ask students to finish questionnaires or have interviews with them about their listening strategy use.

Secondly, English teachers should help students realize the importance of the employment of listening strategies. Teachers may show the close relationship between listening strategy use and listening proficiency to the students, or list the significant difference in the employment of listening strategies between skillful listeners and unskillful listeners, which may help unskillful listeners realize that the failure in their listening performance may partly lie in the inefficient use of the listening strategies. This may spur them to use the listening strategies consciously. In addition, teachers may ask students to list what difficulties and problems they meet in their listening process, then help them to find out how to solve these problems effectively. In this way, students may come to form the awareness of strategy use in their listening activities.

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