

Non-English Majors' Obstacles in Listening and Its Countermeasures in Colleges and Universities of Ethnic Minority Areas

Ronglin Shan

School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan Minzu College, Kangding, Sichuan Province, China

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Abstract: In view of the present situation of English listening teaching for non-English majors in colleges and universities in ethnic minority areas, this paper analyzes the unfavorable factors and obstacles which influence students' English listening comprehension, such as pronunciation, cultural backgrounds, psychological states and listening skills. Then the paper puts forward some effective measures to help students to overcome these problems and increase their comprehension, so as to promote the improvement of students' listening abilities.

1. Introduction

College English teaching is an integral part of higher education, while listening is one of the core courses of College English. Listening, as a form of linguistic activities, occupies a large proportion in human activities. According to the statistics of W. M. Rivers and M. S. Temperly, American foreign language teaching experts, listening accounts for 45% of human communication activities, ranking first in the four language activities of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Wilger pointed out that the most basic ability in all communicative activities is the ability to understand what others are saying. However, due to various reasons, there are some obstacles in college English listening teaching, especially for non-English majors in minority areas. Therefore, English teachers in colleges and universities of ethnic minority areas should pay special attention to listening teaching, actively explore factors influence students' listening comprehension, and seriously study strategies to solve these problems, so as to gradually improve students' listening comprehension abilities.

2. Current Situation of English Listening Teaching in Colleges of Ethnic Areas

2.1 Relatively backward economy and culture in ethnic minority areas

The insufficient investment in education in ethnic minority areas has greatly affected and restricted the development of higher education in ethnic minority areas. Due to poor conditions, most graduate students are reluctant to teach in universities in ethnic areas; college English teachers are mainly undergraduates. In addition, due to the shortage of school funds, teachers have limited opportunities to go out for further study or attend academic conferences. Therefore, teachers' professional qualities are generally low; they have little understanding on the latest research results and the development trends in foreign language education. They cannot apply advanced teaching theories to the practice of listening teaching. Most English teachers still use the old teaching methods and means. The classroom teaching focuses on knowledge imparting and neglects ability training. This is a common disadvantage in college English teaching in minority areas. Many teachers are accustomed to taking the teaching procedure as a simple process of imparting knowledge about foreign language. In listening courses, they just instruct students to listen to the raw materials over and over. They inculcate knowledge but neglect the cultivation of students' communicative competence. Students have fewer opportunities to practice and cannot apply what they have learned, resulting in a serious disconnection between language knowledge and speech ability. As a result, although students have mastered a lot of vocabulary and grammar, their ability to use English in practice is very poor. They cannot express information they hear effectively; their

intercultural communication abilities are not developed. These students are difficult to adapt to the needs of the increasingly extensive international communication. The main reasons are the rigid teaching method of college English listening, the single teaching method and the lack of effective teaching resources available to students.

2.2 The English proficiency of freshmen in ethnic universities is relatively poor.

Some freshmen enrolled in colleges and universities in ethnic minority areas have relatively poor English proficiency. They have many problems in pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, listening, oral English, reading, writing and translation, especially in listening. Some students do not understand simple classroom expressions or daily conversations, which makes it even more difficult for them to cope with the listening comprehension exercises. Most students are not good at communicating and are unwilling to speak English. They also have bad competence on intercultural communication and poor perception on English; they cannot effectively use English expressions they have learned to carry out simple communication.

3. Non-English Majors' Obstacles in Listening Comprehension in Colleges and Universities of Ethnic Minority Areas

Many scholars at home and abroad have discussed factors affecting students' listening abilities. Generally speaking, there are two main types of obstacles: the knowledge barrier and the non-knowledge barrier. Knowledge barriers include phonetics, grammar and cultural background knowledge associated with English. Non-knowledge barriers include emotional factors, cognitive factors and listening comprehension strategies. There are many obstacles in listening comprehension for non-English majors in colleges and universities in ethnic minority areas. The following points are listed.

3.1 Obstacles in pronunciation

In colleges and universities in ethnic minority areas, most non-English majors have phonetic problems. On one hand, they come from different provinces and regions and have local accents. Without formal and systematic voice training, their pronunciations are affected by dialects. The inaccurate pronunciation and inadequate ability of distinguishing pronunciation can lead to poor accuracy in listening comprehension. In addition, they do not master the characteristics and rules of English pronunciation. On the other hand, many students do not pay enough attention to pronunciation; they only focus on grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension exercises. They believe that for English learning, good reading ability is enough. They cannot catch the pronunciation phenomena of stresses, liaisons, weak forms, incomplete blasting, sense-groups and intonations in listening materials. So they cannot accurately understand the meaning of sentences and paragraphs, which will inevitably affect the overall listening comprehension.

3.2 Obstacles in cultural background

Saussure, the originator of linguistics, once defined language as "a system of symbols that integrates sound and meaning as a tool of human communication." Language has the characteristic of arbitrariness; it is a part of culture. One language is a reflection of a certain culture and a tool of cultural communication. Culture breeds language while language develops culture. Therefore, cultural factors must be taken into account in speech comprehension. In the process of listening comprehension, due to the lack of cultural background, students do not understand the differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Even they clearly catch every word and sentence in the material, they cannot truly understand the correct meaning. It can be seen that cultural background and cultural differences have an important impact on listening comprehension. The lack of understanding on cultures of English-speaking countries is an important factor hindering the listening comprehension of non-English majors in colleges and universities in minority areas.

3.3 Mental disorders

For non-English majors in colleges and universities in minority areas, they often encounter some difficulties in listening comprehension due to their poor listening abilities. For example, if some students find that there are too much new words and they cannot grasp the key points, they will feel at a loss and become fear of difficulties, resulting in psychological pressure and tension. Therefore, when listening to materials, they show restlessness and nervousness. Students are unable to concentrate if they are nervous, which inevitably affects listening effect and forms a vicious circle. Gradually, students' interests in listening decline; some students even lost confidence and give up English listening.

3.4 Obstacles in listening skills

A considerable number of non-English majors in colleges and universities in minority areas have misunderstandings in English listening strategies. For example, when practicing listening comprehension, some students focus on words and sentences and are not good at grasping the main idea of the text. When confronted with something they don't understand, students would stop to meditate or give up. As a result, they can only hear fragmented sentences, but do not understand the whole article. Some students need to read the text before or during the listening process, which makes the listening comprehension much easier. But this kind of practice cannot help students to improve their listening abilities effectively.

4. Strategies to Improve Non-English Majors' Listening Comprehension Abilities

In order to solve problems mentioned above and improve the listening comprehension abilities of non-English majors in colleges and universities in minority areas, English teachers should try their best to help students improve their pronunciation, enrich their knowledge on English cultural background, enlarge their vocabulary, help them to overcome psychological barriers, and teach them about the methods and techniques which can improve their listening comprehension abilities. Students should skillfully apply these methods and techniques in the specific listening practices, which will improve the effects of listening comprehension. Therefore, we should pay attention to the following learning strategies.

4.1 Making great efforts to improve students' pronunciation

In order to improve the listening abilities, we must first overcome the pronunciation barrier. Whether the pronunciation is correct or not directly affects the listening comprehension. For instance, if some students can't distinguish the two phonemes /l/ and /n/ clearly; it will be difficult for them to understand light and night in listening. The inaccuracy of pronunciation will inevitably affect the abilities of speech, listening and understanding. In addition to phonemes, there are also some phonetic phenomena affecting pronunciation, such as word stress, strong pronunciation, weak pronunciation, liaison, loss of explosion, differences between British and American pronunciations, assimilation and rhythm. In order to clear up these obstacles in listening comprehension, before the listening practice, teachers should prepare some phonetics exercises and guide students to imitate the pronunciation and intonation of excellent English native speakers. Methods like reading materials aloud, practicing listening exercises and distinguishing sounds can help students to improve their own pronunciation. In addition, teachers should introduce the characteristics and differences of English and American pronunciation, as well as the standard pronunciations, intonations and different tones used by British and American people. Students should listen to VOA and BBC more often and pay attention to differences in pronunciation. Through listening to these materials, students can be familiar with pronunciation features and make great progress in listening.

4.2 Enriching students' cultural background

In the process of listening comprehension, knowledge on cultural background is an indispensable and important factor. Students often feel that familiar materials are easy to understand. This reflects the importance of language knowledge and background knowledge in the process of listening. Most

listening materials for non-English majors are introductions of common sense in English-speaking countries, involving less professional knowledge. Therefore, students should be encouraged to broaden their knowledge scope, learn more about human geography and customs of English-speaking countries, so as to increase their understanding of the multiculturalism of the world. Teachers can find typical texts to help students learn more about the English cultural background, which can help students to overcome the knowledge barriers in listening comprehension to a great extent. The method can also arouse students' interests in learning, cultivates their spirit of learning of active exploration and improve their listening comprehension abilities.

4.3 Helping students to master a certain amounts of words and idioms

College English Syllabus stipulates that the vocabulary of CET-4 test is 4200, of which 2500 words must be used flexibly. Vocabulary is the basis of language using. Vocabulary size directly affects the improvement of listening. Some students have good pronunciation and listening comprehension skills; they can hear every syllable when listening, but they can't understand the meaning of words which they have never learned. Therefore, without corresponding vocabulary, listening performance cannot be improved. Vocabulary barrier is one of the most important problems of non-English majors in colleges and universities in minority areas. Therefore, students should master the vocabulary required by the syllabus. At the same time, they should understand the meaning of some idioms. Some idioms appear frequently in listening materials. If students can understand their meanings, they will make jokes. Knowledge on idioms requires students to accumulate constantly in their daily study.

For example, in the following dialogue,

M: The boy would have been killed if the train hadn't stopped quickly.

W: Yes, it was a narrow escape.

Q: What do we know about the boy?

- A) The boy escaped from the train.
- B) The boy was saved by the train.
- C) The train struck the boy.
- D) The train didn't strike the boy.

Narrow escape is the difficult point in this dialogue. It means "escape from death". Most students only know the meaning of escape, but do not understand the meaning of "narrow escape". As a result, they chose A. If students know the meaning of this idiom, they will choose the correct answer D. Therefore, teachers should adopt various methods to help students enlarge their vocabulary and master a considerable number of idioms, so that students can understand the meaning of listening materials.

4.4 Helping students to overcome psychological barriers and building self-confidence

The Affective Filter Hypothesis put forward by Krashen represents, language acquisition ability can be improved easily if the students' emotional filtering level is low, which means they do not learn in an anxious state. On the contrary, if students are nervous and have no confidence, they will be in a state of frustration, which makes them unwilling to listen. Therefore, English teachers should try their best to help students eliminate anxiety and enhance their self-confidence. Teachers should pay attention to the selection of materials. Materials which are not so difficult should be chosen since they can be understood by students more easily. When students experience the success, they will build up self-confidence and overcome tension and fear. At the same time, teachers should create a relaxed and happy atmosphere in the English class. Stress and anxiety can only inhibit thinking and affect understanding. Therefore, teachers should be friendly and encourage students to listen carefully; they should use easy-to-understand language to simplify difficult topics. Once students are disturbed, teachers should try to slow down or repeat the tape, or stop playing for a while and play some English jokes or songs. In a word, the teacher should use various means to mobilize students' enthusiasm, alleviate their psychological pressures and reduce their anxiety levels, and protect students' self-confidence in listening comprehension. Only through these

measures can students perform well in listening exercise and achieve good comprehension effects.

4.5 Using various listening strategies and cultivating good listening habits

It is very important for English learners to master listening skills, especially these examination-oriented skills. Teachers can constantly guide students to master and practice these skills in daily teaching, so as to improve students' listening abilities quickly. Of course, the acquisition of listening skills is a process of accumulation. As far as the listening communication is concerned, the process of understanding spoken language is an interactive process of guessing, predicting, inferring and summarizing. That is to say, students' listening comprehension ability is composed of these skills. Therefore, students should develop good listening habits.

Prediction and speculation. Before listening to the material, students can quickly go through the options, understand the possible answers and guess the general content of the material. This is much better than solving the problem without any clues. It also helps students to build up self-confidence and achieve twice the result with half the effort. For example, when students see following options, they can know that this is a question about location.

A: Japan B: Here
C: Mexico D: Europe

Place-related issues tend to focus on describing the place where the action occurs. This kind of topic often has one or two keywords to express or imply the answer. The dialogue on this question is:

M: Has George returned from Japan yet?

W: Yes, But he was only here for three days before his company sent him to Mexico.

Q: Where is George now?

The answer is C. The word Japan appears in the dialogue is the disturbance term. The key word plays an important role in choosing the right answer.

In listening practice, teachers can design some introductive questions related to the material to activate students' thinking. In that process, students need to use their logical thinking and common sense to infer the theme, the main points and related details of the listening material. In addition, this method can help students to catch the main clues which can improve the coherence of memory; they need to grasp the focus and the theme of the article according to signal words. The key is not to focus too much on individual words. At the same time, pronunciation, intonation, word meaning, syntax and other knowledge can be used to confirm or modify the original prediction and make further speculation, so as to achieve the purpose of comprehension.

In the process of learning new information, the application of inference skills often involves students' original cognitive structure; students always use their own experience to understand and construct new knowledge and information. Inference in the process of listening means, students need to guess the implicit and unequivocal contents of the text from linguistic clues. According to key words, the grammatical structures of sentences, as well as the mood, pronunciation, intonation and stress used in the dialogue, students can infer the intention and attitude of one party in the dialogue, understand what is being said, and speculate about the identity of speakers and their relationship. They can also infer the time, date, price and the number of people based on linguistic information provided by the context

Students should learn to summarize the main idea of the material. In the process of answering questions, students need to listen to the main information carefully, and learn to summarize the main idea. Important information should be separated from unimportant information. Students do not need to require themselves to understand all details mentioned in the material.

Students should develop good listening habits, which play a vital role in improving students' listening abilities. First of all, students should concentrate on specific information when listening to the material. If students cannot concentrate, the teacher can instruct them to concentrate on their attention. Listening to the breathing is an effective way. The experiment has shown that after the practice of a few minutes for several consecutive days, students can concentrate their attention on the sound of breathing. Adhering to the training, students can develop the good habit of sitting

down and listening attentively. Secondly, we should cultivate the initiative and enthusiasm of students. Students should not passively receive the information while listening to the material, but take the initiative to focus on some specific information. Thirdly, students need to develop the habit of taking notes. Note-taking is an important skill in listening comprehension. Note-taking can combine the listener's attention with the speaker's thinking and synchronize the process of listening and speaking. In the process of listening, we should learn to grasp the key words and language markers, and write down key points as well as important details such as time, places, quantities and names. It is necessary to use abbreviated symbols effectively when recording, so as to accelerate the recording process. Through note-taking, students can memorize the information they heard, master the main points, and make analysis, reasoning and generalization according to the main points; then they can get the general idea of the text. The method can help students to overcome the problem of forgetting after listening, and improve their listening abilities.

5. Conclusions

Listening teaching is a difficult point in college English teaching. It is even more difficult for non-English majors in colleges and universities of ethnic minority areas. These students encounter diversified difficulties in listening. In order to improve their listening abilities, English teachers must first understand obstacles in students' listening process, such as phonetics, cultural backgrounds, psychology factors and skills, and then find out effective training strategies to solve these obstacles. Efficient methods should be applied in the teaching process and be adjusted according to problems in the training. Through creating the suitable language environment and the activate classroom atmosphere, teachers and students can work together and persevere in training. Then students' listening abilities can be greatly improved.

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