

# Employment of Learner-centred Approaches and Metacognitive Strategies in an ESL Listening Class

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## Abstract

**In addition to learners' motives, the efficiency and effectiveness of learning outcomes in ESL listening class depends a lot on teachers' teaching strategies and approaches. This paper has taken one sample listening course in Fujian Commerce College to discuss the merits of the employment of Learner-centred approaches and metacognitive strategies in such teaching context with the hope of enhancing the course outcomes.**

## Keywords

**Learner-centred; Metacognitive Strategies; ESL; Listening.**

## 1. Description of the Teaching Situation

Course name: listening comprehension

Learner's description:

The learner's level: Intermediate

There are 40 students in this class; all of them were freshmen in Fujian Commerce College (Fujian province, China) major in English. Although all students had been learning English since Year 7, most of them had imbalanced developments in L2 learning: except a few advanced students, most students had lower level in speaking and listening. This might due to the reasons such as large-sized class teaching in secondary schools (usually 60 students per class) and teachers' ignorance (since oral English is not taken as a part in College entrance examination, listening is only taken a little part of it). The scheduled workload is specified as follows: 2 consecutive tutorial classes (45 minute/class) + minimum of 6 hours self-study per week; 12 weeks per semester; 2 semesters in total. As the teaching schedule fixed by the Department, one segment is for textbook study and the other segment covers the supplementary material selected by the teacher. Generally, tasked-based teaching was employed in the tutorial classes. And all the tasks used in the classroom were based on the teaching materials ---- textbook and supplementary materials. And the transcripts of the texts were not given to the students except for a few very difficult texts.

Extract from the book content list:

“Lesson 1

I .1. This Is Your Life!

2.What Are Your Ambitions?

II . In Your Own Words

III.1. Study Skills

Learning to Predict

2.Dictation

## Lesson 2

## I .1. Film Editing

## 2. A Vision of the Future

## II .1. American Indians

## 2.New Australians

## III.1. Learning to Predict

## 2.Dictation

Supplementary Reading: American Indians

... ..”

### 1.1. Merits of the Used Methods

Throughout the course, preteaching of the teacher and pre-class self-study were employed.

According to Nunan (1991), “successful listening involves the integration of information encoded in the message itself with broader knowledge of the world”. Therefore, preteaching by the teacher and pre-class self-study by the students are both essential to enlarge the learners knowledge on the relevant topics.

Before the students started to listen to the listening texts, the following work might be done by the teacher or by the students: New vocabulary was taught ---- usually new vocabulary (up to 10 words) would be taught before the listening texts were played. If the new vocabulary was over 10, I would give the students new words/ expressions in advance, asking them to look up the dictionary to do the preparation. Then in the class I would focus on the key words or those they might have difficulties in self-study, e.g. expression involving certain culture reference in the listening text. Furthermore, the pronunciations were taught (by asking students to repeat words/expressions loudly after me) as well, since the students need to recognise them in the input texts. Meanwhile, background information was given in class or assigned to students to collect before class. Before the input texts were played, the topics would be introduced to students briefly, like: “..... the following conversation takes place between a doctor and his patient in a cardiac clinic”. Moreover, since the students might have problems in absorbing large amount of information in a very short time before listening to the input texts, sometimes I would ask them to collect the background information before class, especially for those broad topics involving much information and could not be explained in a short time. Other advance organizers, like warm-up activities were used in class to activate learners’ prior knowledge. For example, group work discussion on the information they were assigned to collect had helped them to review the newly known information and enrich the relative knowledge by exchanging information with fellow learners. All the forms of above advance organizers in the course had successfully facilitate the learners’ listening comprehension. As the topics which input texts and all activities concerned, the general everyday topics in English countries and the necessary relevant knowledge for an English major were also be exposed in different ways.

### 1.2. Problems

However, after the first semester of this course some problems were reflected through students’ learning outcomes and course feedback questionnaire. About 3/4 students claimed that their motivation of promoting English listening comprehension had decreased in different degrees. According to course feedback questionnaire, about 4/5 of the class admitted that they did not meet the self-study minimum time requirement of the course (6 hours per week). And most of those whose self-study time were over 6 hours claimed that they did not think their self-study was efficient enough since there were no monitoring. The improvements of students’ English listening comprehension were uneven: some students’ L2 listening comprehension improvements were subtle while some found themselves had improved a lot in this specific L2

aspect. Some students considered that sometimes the learning period could be frustrated as they could not see the improvements immediately. And a few students found the results of mid-term and final exam did not match their referred improvements in English listening comprehension.

The above three problems may all be caused by the teacher-centred teaching methods which thoroughly used in the course and the ignorance of the role of learners. On one hand, the basic format of teaching methods was that --teacher prescribed tasks/activates then student finished: in the classroom, the teacher carried out the teaching contents based on the textbook and supplementary material with the hope of developing learners' certain skills while learners just followed the planned procedures and finish the tasks/activities; after class, learners were asked to finish listening exercises by themselves and listening to authentic materials (e.g. VOA special) without any feedback. After a period, students might lose their interests and motivation since from their points they had gradually become passive task/activity accomplishes rather than positive learners. On the other hand, since the class size (40 students) is a quite larger than ideal class size for language teaching, there might be diversity in students' L2 level. As a result, employing same tasks for all students in and out of class might not be suitable, since the teacher could not dialogise the learning problems of individual students. However, as the teacher can only consider the average level in class when arranging teaching contents, rest of the class could be compensated through various types of self-study, such as group study.

## 2. Learners-centred Approach

In order to solve the above problems, learners-centred approach should be employed in the course, especially in the out-of-classroom study. This approach is the focusing the needs of the students for improve their listening comprehension instead of the need of the teachers or the course designers. As Nunan (1990) states: "a Learner-centred approach is based on a belief that the learners will bring to the learning situation different beliefs and attitudes about the nature of language and language learning and that these beliefs and attitudes need to be taken into consideration in the selection of content and learning experiences." By applying such an approach, students are considered as the centre of the whole educational process, and the teacher is responsible for facilitating the process in and out of classroom.

To better achieve the objectives of the course, the learners-centred approach can be employed in the following ways: Firstly, a survey to acquire the background information of learners can be launched at the beginning of the course. It may include learners' attitude towards L2 and the course, interested topics of learners and self-evaluation of current L2 listening comprehension level. Secondly, then in the following classes, when designing the teaching plan, the responses of the survey should be taken into consideration. For example, suppose that "western movies" is the most common response to the question of the interested topics in western countries. A relative activity could be planed as follows: firstly, the teacher plays a selected video clip of a conversation from a Hollywood movie in class (about 5 minutes, normal speed, and clear pronunciation without subtitle) then ask several students to replay the conversation. Then play the episode again with the subtitle and correct the mistakes of the students. Thirdly, a warm atmosphere in classroom should be created. According to Csizer and Dornyei (2005), motivation is an important factor in learning achievements. If the classroom atmosphere is warm and friendly, the students will be more relaxed and expressive, and then they may involve themselves more in classroom activities. In addition, successful classroom climate may motivate the students and as their motivation increase, it is more likely that they would involve more in out-of-classroom study and the efficiency of learning may be promoted as well. Fourth, various group work activities should be employed among the study groups in and out of

classroom to encourage the student to involve themselves in L2 listening comprehension as a communicator rather than an eardropper.

According to Nunan (1991), "language exists to fulfill communicative and functional purposes and that these purposes will be reflected in language structures themselves". By using the skills in the real-life situations, students' communicative skills, involving listening comprehension skills, can be improved. Last but not least, optional supplementary listening materials or sources to students can be provided. A wide range of difficulties, topics and forms should be included. e.g. fairy tales in slow speed, BBC online video program. Meanwhile, the evidence of the self-study should be required to provide to the teacher as well, such as transcripts of dictation task or the summary of the news. In the first half semester of the course, facilitating learners to form the L2 listening habit is quite important, as in China learners have much less opportunities to expose in English. In addition, in order to record their progress and self-evaluation of out-of-classroom study, the teacher could assign students to write weekly reflectional journal. The first five journals should be collected before mid-term so that the teacher could adjust teaching plan and methods accordingly since the learners' beliefs and attitudes about the nature of language and language learning may have changed as the ongoing course.

### 3. Application of Metacognitive Strategies

According to Metcalfe & Shimamura, (1994), Metacognition is defined as "cognition about cognition", or "knowing about knowing." It can take many forms and includes knowledge about when and how to use particular strategies for learning or for problem solving.

In a study carried out by Vandergrift to investigate the effect of a strategies-based approach on student awareness of the process of listening in 2003, university students of French found it motivating to learn to understand rapid, authentic texts and responded overwhelmingly in favor of this approach. This study illustrated on the power of predictions for successful listening, the importance of collaboration with a partner for monitoring and the confidence-building role of this approach for enhancing learners' ability to comprehend oral texts. And according to the outcomes of the above study, Vandergrift thinks that such a process approach can help learners learn how to listen guiding them through the stages that seem to characterize real-life listening. Vandergrift (2004) presented the steps in this cycle and the metacognitive strategies underlying each step as follows (Figure 1)

According to this figure, the metacognitive strategies can be applied into the course. form the students study groups to conduct out-of-classroom study. In the third week of the course, help the students to form the study groups (2 - 4 students in one group) based on their listening comprehension levels and motivation of learning. This could be established on the survey at the beginning of the course and the careful classroom observation in the first 2 weeks. By doing this, students can obtain monitoring and evaluations out of classroom which may aid their self-study in a more efficient way. Since the self-study hours are much more than the class hours (1.5 hours per week), the out-of-classroom study group could contribute a lot to their improvements in L2 listening comprehension. Besides, brief weekly self-evaluation reports on certain task may be needed. For example, ask the students to record the times they need to play the audio tape to accomplish a full transcript dictation of a 100-word passage (such dictation tasks appear in every lesson of the textbook) and use different colors of pens for each edition. Then, ask students to evaluate their performance. In order to monitor the learning progress of students and the classroom teaching effects at the first half of the semester 1, the reports should be handed in to the teacher. By doing this, students can identify their own problems and be aware of their improvements. Since there are 40 students in the class, identifying all the problems in listening comprehension of individual students or observing students learning

progress at every stage may be impossible for one single teacher in the limited classroom hours. Based on the above two approaches, exchanging of prior knowledge (e.g., culture information) and problem-solving methods should be encouraged by the teacher. As Vandergrift (2004) argues a consistent use of metacognitive strategies is more effective in improving learners' L2 listening comprehension than work on listening skills alone. Therefore, by applying series of metacognitive strategies into the course, the learners' achievements may be promoted in a more effective way.

<p align="center"><b>Stage of Listening Instruction</b></p>	<p align="center"><b>Related Metacognitive Strategies</b></p>
<p align="center"><i>Planning/predicting stage</i></p> <p>1. Once students know topic and text type, they predict types of information and possible words they may hear.</p>	<p>1. Planning and directed attention</p>
<p align="center"><i>First verification stage</i></p> <p>2. Students verify initial hypotheses, correct as required, and note additional information understood.</p> <p>3. Students compare what they have written with peers, modify as required, establish what needs resolution and decide on details that still need special attention.</p>	<p>2. Monitoring</p> <p>3. Monitoring, planning, and selective attention</p>
<p align="center"><i>Second verification stage</i></p> <p>4. Students verify points of disagreement, make corrections, and write down additional details understood.</p> <p>5. Class discussion in which all contribute to reconstruction of the text's main points and most pertinent details, interspersed with reflections on how students arrived at the meaning of certain words or parts of the text.</p>	<p>4. Monitoring and problem solving</p> <p>5. Monitoring and evaluation</p>
<p align="center"><i>Final verification stage</i></p> <p>6. Students listen for information that they could not decipher earlier in the class discussion.</p>	<p>6. Selective attention and monitoring</p>
<p align="center"><i>Reflection stage</i></p> <p>7. Based on discussion of strategies used to compensate for what was not understood, students write goals for next listening activity.</p>	<p>7. Evaluation</p>

**Figure 1.** Listening Instruction Stages and Related Metacognitive Strategies (Vandergrift, 2004)

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