厦门大学

硕 士 学 位 论 文

Barriers and Solutions to Text Comprehension in College English Listening Test

大学英语听力测试中篇章理解的障碍及对策

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Synopsis

Listening comprehension has ever been called "Cinderella skill in second language learning" (Nunan, 1997: 47). It is really vital yet largely neglected. Listening not only provides input for the learners, but also constitutes the first step of communication. It is the most basic ability in all intercommunications. So with the frequent exchanges between China and other countries in various fields in recent years, listening comprehension is increasingly becoming acknowledged as an important facet of language learning.

Yet, listening is students' common weakness. They get lower marks in the listening part of the test, compared with the reading, writing and translating parts. Students complain that passage understanding is the most difficult section due to their limited vocabulary. Vocabulary, the basis of constituting a language which is essential to producing an infinitely large number of sentences to convey meaning, is really of vital importance and can't be neglected. However, text comprehension in listening is not to test students' understanding of individual words, but to test their textual competence, the ability to interpret the meaning of the text as a whole. Since most passages in listening tests are relatively longer texts, the limited capacity of people's working memory alone makes the text comprehension a tough task. It's not easy for the mind to remember and recall all that listeners have heard successfully. Therefore, it's important that some skills should be applied to text comprehension in listening tests. Students' inferential skill is just a key one. Listeners should be able to make good use of the cohesion devices to infer what they are going to hear (explicit information conveyed by the text) and to make judgments by activating their schemata (implicit information), the background knowledge, to help reconstruct and interpret the meaning of a text. Although in recent years, many researches have been done into listening and text respectively, few dealt with them together. So the thesis intends to carry out the research, investigating some of the difficulties non-English majors encounter in listening text comprehension and trying to explore some possible countermeasures to

improve students' listening ability so that they can better understand listening texts.

This thesis consists of five chapters.

Chapter One deals with the concept of listening comprehension. After an elaboration on its definition, nature and process, an introduction to the current situation of English listening teaching and testing in China is made to point out the importance of listening comprehension in communicative language testing.

Chapter Two focuses on some literature reviews on text and text comprehension. It involves the concept of text, features of the text---cohesion and coherence, schema theory in listening comprehension and listening strategies in text comprehension.

Chapter Three, the core of the thesis, tries to analyze in detail students' barriers to text comprehension in listening testing. On the words level, "unknown" words (words known to students in reading but not in listening) and unknown words' influence on text comprehension are treated respectively. On the text level, barriers mainly center on students' insufficient knowledge on cohesion devices and their inefficient activation of schemata, which are both deemed rather critical for students to apply their inference strategy in the process of listening comprehension.

Chapter Four refers to some surveys to clarify the barriers. A series of tests were taken including both words tests and text comprehension tests. After tests, I had casual interviews with students. Data collected and interviews confirmed the barriers to their text comprehension in listening.

Chapter Five, in response to the above-mentioned barriers, is aimed at working out some feasible solutions such as enlarging students' listening vocabulary, enriching their background knowledge so as to help improve students' correctness in listening text comprehension.

The final part is Conclusion where the main points of the thesis are summed up and the limitations are reflected.

Key Words: listening testing; text comprehension; inferential skill; cohesion devices; schemata

摘　要

　　一直以来，人们把听力理解称作是二语学习技巧中的"灰姑娘"（鲁南　199）。听力技巧实在是十分重要，但在很大程度上却被忽略了。听力不仅为学习者提供了语言输入，而且是语言交际的基础。它是所有人际交往中最基本的能力。因此随着近年来中国与其他各国在不同领域交往的日益频繁，听力理解能力更是被公认为是语言学习中的一项重要技能。

　　然而，听力是学生的普遍弱点。在考试中，与阅读、写作及翻译部分相比，学生在听力部分的得分率偏低。学生们普遍反映篇章理解是最难的部分，他们认为自己的词汇量很有限。词汇对于语言理解的作用确实至关重要，不可忽视。作为构成语言的基本要素，它可以合成无数表达各种意义的句子。但是，篇章测试并不是对单个词汇的测试，而主要是测试学生的语篇能力，即从整体上理解篇章意思的能力。　由于听力测试中篇章理解部分的短文大多较长，而人的工作记忆容量又有限，这使得短文理解的困难加大。大脑难以记住所有听到的信息，这无疑给听者回忆所听内容带来障碍。因此在篇章听力理解中采用一些技巧十分重要。其中，学生的推断技巧就显得非常关键。学生可以通过了解篇章组篇机制的衔接来推断即将听到的信息(显性信息)，也可以通过激发他们大脑中的图式（非显性信息），即听者的背景知识对所听内容做出判断，以帮助重建信息来理解短文。尽管近些年来，许多人在听力和语篇两个方面分别做了研究，但很少有人把这两者结合起来。本文正是从这点考虑，试着从语篇的角度来分析非英语专业大

学生在英语短文听力理解中所遇到的困难，并试图探究一些可能帮助学生提高听力技能的对策，希望他们能更好地理解语篇。

本文由五章组成。

第一章介绍听力理解的概念。在详细论述了听力理解的定义、本质及过程后，简要介绍了中国公共英语听力教学和测试的现状。

第二章集中回顾有关语篇及语篇理解的相关文论。文献涉及语篇的概念，语篇的特征---衔接与连贯，语篇理解的图式理论及语篇理解的听力策略。

第三章是本文的核心部分，详细分析了学生在听力测试的语篇理解中所碰到的障碍。在词汇层面上分别探讨"生"词（学生在阅读中认识而在听力中却不知的词）及生词对语篇理解的影响；在语篇层次上，主要探讨学生在语篇衔接知识上的不足及图式激活的低效对篇章听力理解策略中推断技巧应用的影响及其对篇章理解的影响。

第四章力图通过实际测试来证实学生在语篇听力理解中的障碍。笔者对非英语专业的部分大学生进行了一系列的测试，包括阅读、听力词汇测试及篇章理解测试。测试数据及测试后与学生的交谈证实了学生在语篇听力理解中存在的障碍。

第五章针对上文分析的障碍，力求探讨一些有助于提高学生听力理解效率的方法，如：扩大学生的听力词汇，丰富学生的背景知识。旨在帮助学生提高篇章听力理解的正确率。

文章的结论部分对全文要点做了简要概述，同时指出笔者在实证研究中的不足之处。

关键词：听力测试；篇章理解；推断技巧；衔接；图式

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Chapter One   Listening Comprehension

This chapter is to introduce the topic of listening comprehension in language learning and testing. In order to discuss the barriers that hinder students' listening comprehension and to explore some possible solutions, it is necessary to examine and understand some relevant theories first. Thus the chapter will mainly be concentrated on the definition, the nature, the process of listening comprehension and the current situation of English listening teaching and testing in China.

1.1 Listening Test

Listening testing was first put forward in the early 20th century. From that time up to now, it has gone through a history of about one hundred years. Yet, as a chief channel to measure learners' listening ability, it has been largely neglected in its early stages. Chaudron (1993) points out that "Listening has traditionally been the forgotten skill when it comes to testing." (Mohammed, 2005: 28) It is only by recent decades, when the model of communicative testing which is to measure students' communicative competence and communicative language ability were introduced that people start to realize the importance of learners' second language listening ability and make it an indispensable part of language testing. Nevertheless, "much work remains to be done in both theory and practice" (Morley, 2001:69).

In the past, the language teaching has shifted the emphasis away from "mastery of language use to mastery of language structure." (Brumfit & Johnson, 2000:1). So there was a lack of testing in communicative language.

The communicative language testing has experienced several stages in recent years.

First, Chomsky (1965) introduced the term linguistic competence and linguistic performance. Linguistic competence concerns the tacit knowledge of language structure. Linguistic performance concerns the realization of this knowledge in actual

use. As we can see, Chomsky only refers linguistic competence to underlying grammatical knowledge. (Hymes, 2000: 7, 13)

Hymes expressed his disapproval: Chomskian linguistics with its narrow concept of competence represents a "Garden of Eden view" which dismisses central questions of use by relegating them to the area of performance. (Brumfit & Johnson, 2000: 4) Out of dissatisfaction with Chomsky's notion of competence, Hymes (1972) proposed his communicative competence to expand Chomsky's definition of competence beyond the knowledge of tacit grammatical rules. His communicative competence model consists of two areas of competence: grammatical competence and sociolinguistic competence, that is, "ability for use", including both tacit knowledge and ability for use. (Hymes, 2000: 19)

Canale and Swain (1980) further expanded Hymes' notion of communicative competence to include grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. The Canale and Swain model of communicative competence had a great impact on the field of second language teaching and testing. Forming a more definite picture of the ability to use language communicatively and provided theoretical basis for communicative testing, it was accepted as the main theoretical model for language teaching and testing and it remained unchallenged until Bacheman introduced his communicative language ability mode. (Liu, 2005:37)

The framework proposed by Bachman (1990) is consistent with these earlier definitions of communicative language ability. It consists of three components: language competence, strategic competence and psycho-physiological mechanism. Of these three, the most important is strategic competence, which drastically differs from the Canale and Swain strategic competence. The main function of Bachman's strategic competence is to relate language competence to the language user's knowledge of the world and to the features of the context in which language use takes place. Bachman's strategic competence represents a mechanism responsible for interaction, which the Canale and Swain model lacks. (Bachman, 1990: 84-86)

The above models provide potentially useful framework for the design of language tests. The development of communicative competence theory greatly influences the language teaching and testing, which is marked by a shift in emphasis from linguistic mode to the communicative dimension.

As the first step of communication and the most basic ability in all intercommunications, listening is really very crucial in effective and successful communication. And testing, as an evaluation instrument of students' proficiency in learning and as guidance for teaching, is certainly of great importance and offers an efficient means for further research and development in language acquisition and learning. Therefore, listening testing is no doubt an indispensable part of communicative language testing.

1.2 Listening Comprehension

Listening is an activity of paying attention to and trying to get as much meaning as we can from something we hear (伊秀波, 2003: 307). The first-order goal of listening is comprehension. Comprehension is "the process of understanding an utterance; requires the ability to access the mental lexicon to match the words in the utterance we are listening to with their meanings" (Fromkin & Rodman, 2002: 463). In the course of listening, listeners receive information through the aural channel, process it through a series of steps and derive meaning from sounds and words. They comprehend the message as it is uttered, which is seen as a real-time processing, and build up a schema that is meaningful to them. All this occurs instantly and seems quite simple. Yet the psychological activities involved are rather complex. A more specific definition of listening comprehension will definitely help understand listening comprehension better.

1.2.1 Definition of Listening Comprehension

Before I elaborate on listening comprehension, I'll come to the concept of listening

first.

1.2.1.1 Listening

Despite much theoretical research, a consensus on a definition of listening has not yet been reached. But many linguists do agree that listening is "an invisible mental process" of receiving an oral message.

Brown (1994) gives both narrow and broad definitions:

"What is listening comprehension? In its narrowest definition it is the process by which listeners come to an interpretation for a stream of speech… In its broader definition it also includes the process by which listeners use those interpretations for their intended purpose."

Anderson and Lynch (1995) define the listening process as "the process of receiving, attending to and assigning meaning to aural stimuli". The "receiving and attending to" is also called speech perception and refers to the processes of distinguishing phonemes, constructing these into words, recognizing the features of stress and intonation and combining this information to construct the syntax. The "assigning meaning to the decoded stimuli" involves assigning communicative meaning to the decoded utterances based upon previous knowledge.

Rost (1990) chooses to place the emphasis on the interpretative and inferencing processes:

"Understanding spoken language is essentially an inferential process based on a perception of cues rather than a straightforward matching of sound to meaning. The listener must find relevant links between what is heard and those aspects of context." (Mohammed, 2005: 12-13)

Rost (2005) further summarizes listening as a process of receiving what the speaker actually says (receptive orientation); constructing and representing meaning (constructive orientation); negotiating meaning with the speaker and responding (collaborative orientation) and creating meaning through involvement, imagination and

empathy (transformative orientation). (Rost, 2005: 2-3)

Many people may wonder whether listening and hearing are the same. The answer is no. Listening is different from hearing. The process of listening is an active and intentional one while hearing is a form of perception allowing for reception and conversion of sound waves, a relatively passive process.

1.2.1.2 Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension is originally called aural comprehension or auditory comprehension. Auditory comprehension of a foreign language means recognition control of the signaling elements of the language in communication situation. (Lado, 1961: 206) Listening comprehension is used comparatively later.

Byrnes characterizes listening comprehension as a highly complex problem-solving activity that pertains to the research in psycholinguistics, semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis and cognitive science. (Byrnes, 1994: 317)

James also provides a definition:

"Listening comprehension involves the aural perception of oral signals. ... [it] is not passive. A person can hear something, but not be listening ... it is absolutely necessary for almost any other work with language, especially for speaking and even for writing." (James, 1984:129)

Three points should be noted in this definition. First, listening requires full interpretation of oral sounds. In other words, listeners should be capable of distinguishing the smallest units of sound of phonemes. Second, listening is an active skill, not a passive one. In other words, when a listener is listening to something, he or she is activating several mental processes that let him/her understand what is being said. Last but not least, there is a difference between hearing and listening, which is basically that in order to listen to a given utterance the person has to concentrate on what is being said to be able to interpret it.

Years later, Vogely defines listening comprehension as a "process of constructing