

## 影響英語聽力的焦慮因素

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### 摘要

這篇文章為的是要探究影響英語聽力的因素和聽力可能改進的策略，此文也發現了些在英語教室內培養學生聽力的新方法。

本文提出一些相關文獻探討如下：聽力的定義，聽力的重要性，聽力的本質，了解聽力的策略，幫助聽力，預備活動，台灣現今英語教學的問題，學生心理障礙會影響聽力，文法的知識會影響聽力，文化背景和思考模式影響聽力，教師和學生的角色。

減輕學生焦慮和提供較低壓力的教室情境可使老師幫助學生增進聽力，同樣地，可採用較好的聽力學習方法以營造個快樂、有效的聽力學習環境。

**關鍵字：**英語為外國語的教學



# **Influence of Anxiety Factors on English Listening Comprehension**

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## **Abstract**

The study aims to find the factors influencing English listening comprehension and the strategies to be taken that might improve students' listening comprehension. The study has also sought the new ways of cultivating listening comprehension competence in TEFL classroom.

This paper is to provide a review of related literature on definition of listening, significance of listening, nature of listening comprehension, strategies of listening comprehension, anxiety and listening comprehension, support for listening comprehension, preparatory activities, current problems in English teaching practice in Taiwan, students' psychological obstacles influence their listening capacity, grammar knowledge affects listening comprehension, culture background knowledge and thinking affect listening comprehension, cultivating students' listening skills, and roles of teachers and students.

Reducing student anxiety and providing a less stressful classroom environment might enable teachers to help students improve their listening comprehension. Accordingly, better ways of learning listening can be adopted, and enjoyable and effective listening-learning environment can therefore be developed.

**Keywords: Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)**



## I. Introduction

With Taiwan's entry into the WTO and opening its markets to the outside world, the demand for English speaking proficiency among workers is rising. In recent years, the communicative approach has become more and more widely used in English education in Taiwan and therefore, students' communicative competence has been stressed. The need for competence in listening in English learners is increasingly recognized, so that listening teaching has recently attracted considerable attention.

Anxiety is generally seen as a psychological concept and has been explored by researchers. Spielberger (1966) defines anxiety as "subjective, consciously perceived feeling of apprehension and tension, accompanied by or associated with activation or arousal of the autonomic nervous system." Anxiety can be either facilitating or debilitating. Facilitating anxiety motivates learners to adopt an approach attitude and be willing to confront the new learning task. Debilitating anxiety motivates learners to assume an avoidance attitude and therefore tend to escape from the learning task (Scovel, 1978). The factors of task difficulty affects learners to develop a facilitating or a debilitating anxiety. In addition to task difficulty, factors such as teachers' attitude and evaluation, teacher-students interactions in class, parents' expectation, classmates' attitude, students' own achievement are the potential sources of students' foreign language anxiety.

The traditional grammar-translation method of teaching in Taiwan has been found inadequate to the demands for producing efficient English speakers and listeners. The old approach has been found to be ineffectual; research has stimulated an entirely new conception of teaching English as a foreign language. Central to the new approach is the understanding that there must be a rigorous application of the communicative approach in English classrooms. English must be taught as a tool for communication. It is now widely accepted that students' listening ability must be at the core of teaching practice, and it is the area in which teachers need to concentrate their own efforts to improve their teaching.

From the perspective of foreign language learners, as analyzed by Buck (2001), there are numerous difficulties to be confronted in listening tasks, such as unknown



vocabulary, unfamiliar topics, fast speech rates, and unfamiliar accents. And if, in the interests of authenticity, learners hear the input material only once, they have limited opportunity to make adjustments once the input begins. Poor listening ability also results from many other factors, such as insufficient emphasis on listening by the whole society, immature teaching methodologies, ineffective listening strategies, and students' lack of vocabulary, but the increasingly important one is that anxiety plays a very important role because the anticipation of foreign language use in receiving information can provoke anxiety. Listening comprehension is "highly anxiety-provoking if the discourse is incomprehensible" (Young, 1992, p.28). Therefore, anxiety has gradually been a focus of research in the area of listening comprehension and it is a "variable that must be respected in teaching and accounted for in research" (Young, 1999, p.30).

## **II. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Definition of Listening**

According to Howatt and Dakin (1974), listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This process involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, the speaker's grammar and vocabulary, and comprehension of meaning. An able listener is capable of doing these four things simultaneously. Thomlison's (1984) definition of listening includes "active listening," which goes beyond comprehending as understanding the message content, to comprehension as an act of empathetic understanding of the speaker. Furthermore, Gordon (1985) argues that empathy is essential to listening and contends that it is more than a polite attempt to identify a speaker's perspectives. Rather, more importantly, empathetic understanding expands to "egocentric prosocial behavior". (p.26). Thus, the listener altruistically acknowledges concern for the speaker's welfare and interests.

Ronald and Roskelly (1985) define listening as an active process requiring the same skills of prediction, hypothesizing, checking, revising, and generalizing that writing and reading demands; and these authors present specific exercises to make students active listeners who are aware of the "inner voice" one hears when writing.



(p.184).

## **2.2 Significance of Listening**

Listening is the first language mode that children acquire. It provides the foundation for all aspects of language and cognitive development, and it plays a life-long role in the process of communication. A study by Wilt (1950) found that people listen 45% of the time they spend communicating. This study is still widely cited (e.g., Martin, 1987; Strother, 1987). Wilt found that 30% of communication time was spent speaking, 16% reading, and 9% writing. That finding confirmed what Rankin discovered in 1928, that people spent 70% of their waking time communicating and that three-fourths of this time was spent listening and speaking.

Listening is the fundamental language skill. It is the medium through which people gain a large portion of their education, their information, their understanding of the world and human affairs, their ideals, sense of values, and their appreciation. In this day of mass communication, much of it oral, it is of vital importance that students are taught to listen effectively and critically.

Language input is the most essential condition of language acquisition. As an input skill, listening plays a crucial role in students' language development. Krashen (1985) argues that people acquire language by understanding the linguistic information they hear. Thus language acquisition is achieved mainly through receiving understandable input and listening ability is the critical component in achieving understandable language input. Given the importance of listening in language learning and teaching, it is essential for language teachers to help students become effective listeners. In the communicative approach to language teaching, this means modeling listening strategies and providing listening practice in authentic situation, precisely those that learners are likely to encounter when they use the language outside the classroom. Therefore, we should establish "listening-first" as fundamental in foreign language teaching.

## **2.3 Nature of Listening Comprehension**

According to Wang (2003), the most important in the five aspects of overall



English competence he suggests as listening, speaking, reading, writing, writing and translation. It deserves particular attention. Educators must actively explore the nature and process of listening comprehension and study the theory and methodology of listening comprehension in order to improve listening teaching outcomes and make students recognize that listening comprehension is the crucial aspect of English learning.

From the point of view of constructivist linguistics, foreign language teaching should focus on language form and structure, thus, listening teaching is undertaken in each of the four aspects of language form. When students are taught to understand a passage of text, teachers first let them discriminate between the pronunciation of vowels and consonants, then understand vocabulary, sentences and discourses. The goal of this listening teaching model from the “bottom-up” are to help students understand the meaning of vocabulary by discriminating sounds, to understand sentence meaning, and to monitor and control the meaning of discourses by understanding sentence meaning.

Since the 1970s, with the development of functional language theory, there has been an emphasis on the research of language function in society. Functional linguistic experts recognize language as a communicative tool, but not an isolated structure system. Consequently, the teaching of listening is not simply intended to make students hear a sound, a word or a sentence, rather, the goal is to cultivate students’ abilities to understand speakers’ intentions accurately and communicate with each other effectively.

#### **2.4 Strategies of Listening Comprehension**

Listening strategies are techniques or activities that contribute directly to the comprehension and recall of listening input. Listening strategies can be classified by how the listener processes the input.

Top-down strategies are listener based; the listener taps into background knowledge of the topic, the situation or context, the type of text, and the language. This background knowledge activates a set of expectations that help the listener to interpret what is heard and anticipate what will come next. Top-down strategies include :



- listening for the main idea
- predicting
- drawing inferences
- summarizing

Bottom-up strategies are text based in which the listener relies on the language in the message, that is, the combination of sounds, words, and grammar that creates meaning. Bottom-up strategies include:

- listening for specific details
- recognizing cognates
- recognizing word-order patterns

Listening comprehension tends to be an interactive, interpretive process in which listeners use prior knowledge and linguistic knowledge in understanding messages. Listeners use metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies to facilitate comprehension and to make their learning more effective. Metacognitive strategies are important because they regulate and direct the language learning process. Research shows that skilled listeners use more metacognitive strategies than their less-skilled counterparts. The use of cognitive strategies helps students to manipulate learning materials and apply specific techniques to a listening task. Socio-affective strategies describe the techniques listeners use to collaborate with others, to verify understanding or to lower anxiety.

### **2.5 Anxiety and Listening Comprehension**

In research on the affective dimension of second language learning, the importance of language anxiety has emerged. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) propose that foreign language anxiety is a distinct variable composed of three components, the most relevant of which is test anxiety. Their conception received empirical support from the work of MacIntyre and Gardner (1989), who demonstrate through factor analysis that foreign language anxiety is separable from general anxiety, and that it is negatively correlated with achievement in the foreign language. In a later study (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993), the researchers find negative correlations with a whole range of



achievement measures, and even more so with self-assessments of proficiency, leading them to conclude that “[t] the best single correlate of achievement is Language Anxiety” (p.183).

Young (1986) found that anxiety played less of a role in an informal, practice version of the Oral Proficiency Interview. More recently, Mills, et al. (2006) reported that their students, especially the male students, put less effort into completing a low-stakes proficiency test than in a formal final test. Similarly, In’nami (2006) found test anxiety did not affect the performance of his Japanese students on a low-stakes listening test. However, Elkhafaifi (2005) and Mills, et al. (2006) obtained evidence that learners’ anxiety varies according to their level of ability in foreign language listening.

When asked to suggest how their listening anxiety could be reduced, about a third of the students’ responses focused on input-related factors, such as making the input more informal and ungraded, selecting familiar and meaningful topics, and using known vocabulary. Some authors have proposed other ways of reducing listening test anxiety, for example, by teaching listening strategies and letting students have more practice (Elkhafaifi, 2005). However, little empirical research has been done to test whether these suggestions are effective or not. Arnold (2000) explored a method of reducing anxiety about a listening examination involving two stages: relaxation and visualization. Although relaxation practice may have some effect, it would not normally be considered appropriate as part of the administration of a formal test.

## **2.6 Support for Listening Comprehension**

Although research on reducing listening anxiety as such is limited, there is a broader literature on providing various forms of support for learners as they undertake listening comprehension tasks, so that they can be “turn in” (Underwood, 1989, p.30) before the task begins, and so they have more opportunities both to crack the linguistic code and to process the content of the input. Such support may result in reduced anxiety in assessment contexts. In the language testing literature, there are studies on the effects of allowing the test-takers to preview the test questions and to hear the input





material more than once; these can be seen as forms of support which are incorporated into the test design. Less work has been done on pre-listening activities to familiarize learners with the aspects of the input such as the topic or key lexical items. Let us now look in turn at the various forms of support that were included in the present study.

### III. Preparatory Activities

Although some authors argue that pre-listening activities have positive effects, there is little research regarding the effectiveness of classroom activities designed to improve performance on a specific listening comprehension task. Several studies (Markham & Latham, 1987; Long, 1990; Schmidt-Rinehart, 1994) have shown that learners more easily understand oral texts that are familiar, particularly those that are related to their own national, cultural, or religious backgrounds. In Taiwan, Chiang and Dunkel (1992) and Teng (1996) found that Chinese learners performed better on input material about Confucianism and the Dragon Boat festival than on passages about such American topics as the Amish and Thanksgiving Day. It was found that providing more advanced students with background knowledge enhanced learners' comprehension, but its effect was less marked for lower level students.

There is some evidence on the effects of pre-reading activities that may be applicable to EFL listening as well. Graves (1986) found that the learners needed multiple encounters with the words in different contexts and opportunities to process them actively if the vocabulary instruction were to have any effect on reading comprehension. In addition, a study by Stahl, et al. (1989) showed that vocabulary and background knowledge were independent sources of difficulty in understanding a written text. Adequate pre-teaching of vocabulary could assist students to comprehend the text at a propositional level, whereas the acquiring of background knowledge contributed to a more global understanding of the text. More recently, Hsieh (1999) investigated the effects of prior vocabulary instruction and cultural background knowledge activation on Chinese college students' EFL reading comprehension. She found that giving vocabulary instruction alone increased only the students' vocabulary



test scores, whereas providing background knowledge improved both the vocabulary and reading comprehension scores. However, the students performed the best when they were given both vocabulary instruction and background knowledge of the culture.

Therefore, the indications are that providing background knowledge of a written text is more effective than teaching vocabulary in enhancing learners' reading comprehension, and some investigation is needed to see if these findings can be generalized to EFL listening comprehension.

#### **IV. Current Problems in English Teaching Practice in Taiwan**

Since the beginning of English teaching in Taiwan, the Grammar-Translation method has held dominant ways in college English teaching. Traditionally, teachers of English focused on passing on knowledge; their attention was on written examination scores and they paid much less attention to cultivating students' listening and speaking abilities. In this kind of regime students tended to rely excessively on their teachers and, by comparison with European students, they would be considered very passive learners. Although Chinese students have often learned significant amounts of grammar, and memorized many English words, they have commonly been unable to apply their knowledge to real life. Generally, it is difficult to make themselves understand in spoken conversation; conversely, understanding what is said to them is often a challenge.

Currently, in the early stage of college English teaching, there are problems in listening teaching that may have their origins in high school where few students have been the recipients of listening teaching. Consequently, students find it difficult to adapt to college English teaching. All too often, these students are unable to understand what is taught in listening classes because they do not understand the spoken content of the lessons. Frequently, such students lose all confidence as second language practitioners.

While listening, students are struggling to grasp each word and the meaning of every sentence. When the listening task is completed, they are disappointed to find they have been unable to understand. Although they might hear every word, they are often



unclear about speakers' intension. The stress of the situation frequently results in the students' forgetting the first sentence when they hear the second one, totally disrupting their efforts to gain meaning. Thus, the goal of developing an integrated language capacity is to achieve teaching that will affect students' listening comprehension and influence students' psychological well-being.

#### **4.1 Students' Psychological Obstacles influence their Listening Capacity**

In Taiwan, a long history of reverence for written text, and this attitude has influenced the official assessment processes. Thus, students generally pay less attention to developing listening comprehension because they recognize it gains a lower percentage of marks on examinations, while reading and writing are highly rewarded. Students understand they will gain high scores only if they master the prescribed knowledge of grammar and writing. Furthermore, listening comprehension seems to the students to have little practical value. Consequently these psychological factors have a direct impact on students' willingness and commitment to listening instruction.

Many Taiwanese students lack confidence in their oral English language capability and they frequently have a self-defeating and defensive attitude to their engagement in it. In the listening classroom, teachers need students' active participation, but having so many students who lack confidence and who feel nervous and anxious are in the classroom. Students are reluctant to answer questions and will not risk being laughed at by their peers. Thus, it is unsurprising that students who are under pressure for a considerable period of time are often stressed and depressed.

#### **4.2 Grammar Knowledge Affects Listening Comprehension**

Language knowledge is the foundation of learning English. If students' knowledge of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary is insufficient, it is probable that their English listening comprehension will be negatively affected by lack of language knowledge.

However, the most basic outward shell of language is pronunciation and intonation. Therefore, the first step of listening comprehension is learning how to identify and



select sound signals according to pronunciation; thus, pronunciation knowledge must be developed. When students' pronunciation knowledge is inadequate, their capacity to discriminate will be weak and will affect listening comprehension.

The challenges of listening poses particular demands because there are many sentence types that are complex and different from home language. If the students are unable to distinguish the main clause from a subordinate clause and are unable to understand their relationships, despite understanding the meaning of every word in the sentence, understanding is unlikely to occur with accuracy. Thus lack of grammatical knowledge can reduce English listening levels.

### **4.3 Cultural Background Knowledge and Thinking Affect Listening**

#### **Comprehension**

Language is rather like a mirror that reflects the national culture of its speakers. The American linguist Sapir (1921: 60-90) maintains that, "Language cannot exist without culture...Culture can be explained as what the society thinks and does, and the language is the expression of the ideas of the society." Consequently, the marriage between language and culture is inseparable; language is the carrier of culture and the capsule that holds a way of thinking.

Language carries knowledge and cultural information and it reflects the substantial and particular ways of thinking of that people. The culture is embedded in even the simplest act of language; it is an inseparable part of the way in which we live our lives and the way we use language. Therefore, the student with no background knowledge of culture in English is likely to understand Anglophone modes of thinking as expressed in English language. Kramsch (1993) maintains that every time we speak we perform a cultural act. Consequently, an emphasis in modern language teaching on cultural knowledge as a basis for language learning. An important requirement, then, for learning spoken English, is the acquisition of cultural knowledge. Thus if students' pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and cultural knowledge are to prosper, they must be grounded in a sound of the society in which the language is based.



#### 4.4 Cultivating Students' Listening Skills

Cultivating students' listening skills is one of the most difficult tasks for any ESL teacher. This is because successful listening skills are acquired over time and with lots of practice. The demands of the task are often frustrating for students because there are no precise rules, as in grammar teaching. However, there are quite specific ways of improving listening skills, but these are difficult to quantify. Teachers must develop students' micro skills of listening comprehension.

For beginners, the most important listening skill is discrimination in English pronunciation, intonation and language flow. They need to acquire the crucial skill of identifying the main information. When students acquire basic discrimination, they can select and analyze the meaning of what they hear and grasp the main content. In the teaching process teachers should cultivate students' ability to select main information and instruct students to control the general meaning of listening materials on the whole. In class, for example, teachers can ask students to listen to the general meaning of passage, and to sum up key points and main information.

The ability to guess the meaning of words is also an important listening micro skill. Listening comprehension does not mean understanding every word, but some words do play a crucial part in listening comprehension. It is a normal phenomenon not to understand every word that is uttered. However, students may guess the meaning of new words on the basis of the topic being discussed and gain some understanding of the probable linguistic items on the basis of the context of discourses, the grammatical structure and the background knowledge of the topic.

#### 4.5 Roles of Teachers and Students

Changing the curriculum demanded considerable changes in attitude from both teachers and learners. Teachers were no longer able to take their previously dominant positions as the privileged speakers at the front of the class; neither could they continue to consider themselves as the holders of all wisdom. And students could not shelter behind the quiet façade of their previous roles as the passive receivers of information.

Teachers have to change and shift their roles in the classroom from information



providers to facilitators, shifting from ‘teaching knowledge-based’ to ‘supervising students learning-based’, from ‘a protagonist’ on the stage, to becoming ‘a director’ behind the scenes. Teachers were no longer the only source of information, but acted as mentors who helped students to actively interpret and organize the information they were given, fitting it into prior knowledge. Students became active participants in learning and were encouraged to be explorers and creators of language, rather than passive recipients of it (Brown, 1991).

## V. Conclusion

In order to help students enhance listening proficiency and improve the current situation of English listening classes, some suggestions were made to reduce listening anxiety as follows.

- (1) Students should build confidence of improving listening proficiency.
- (2) Students should learn to use listening strategies properly to enhance listening proficiency.
- (3) Students should try their best to reduce the fear of negative evaluation, and treat their weakness objectively.
- (4) Students should practice a lot.
- (5) A harmonious and relaxed atmosphere should be created in listening classes

Anxiety is not the only factor that influences listening comprehension. Lack of phonetic knowledge, small vocabulary, poor memory, and low interest also hinder their English listening comprehension.

English listening competence is a complex skill that needs conscious development. Guiding students through the process of listening provides them with the knowledge from which they can successfully complete a listening task; it also motivates them and puts them in control of their learning. Listening comprehension levels do influence the capacity for improvement in other language skills. Improving Taiwanese students’ ability as English speakers is a demanding process, and there are still many factors, intellectual and non-intellectual, subjective and objective, influencing language



acquisition that need to be considered and further explored.

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