EFL Listening Instruction
--Theory and Practice---

Pearl Chang & Cynthia Lu
English Education Resource Center, MOE, Taiwan

Abstract
Based on a survey by the English Education Resource Center in June, 2012, findings indicated most of English teachers lacked the pedagogical knowledge and skills necessary for listening teaching. As a result, EERC decided to activate an action project program in which the lead teachers of EERC did action research in their classrooms. Their devotion brought about the exemplary of listening teaching in senior high. The non-experimental research here is trying to clarify the theory of listening, producing strategies and skills to deal with barriers that can hinder the teaching of English listening, which will become modeling guidelines for listening teaching beneficial to in-service teachers.
**Introduction**

Among the four skills in English language learning, listening plays the most important role in communication in real life: listening accounts for 40-50% of communicating, with speaking at 25-30%, reading at 11-16%, and writing at 9% (Mendelsohn, 1994). Nevertheless, listening has been put in the dark box in the English classroom. In other words, listening teaching is thought about and taught poorly in many EFL programs, even though it is used at such high frequency outside the classroom. Before putting English teachers in front of the wall/war in listening teaching, teachers need to go back to review the subject knowledge about the process of listening comprehension.

I. **Approaches in Listening Teaching**

Listening comprehension is regarded as an active process. Each listener needs to select their individual aspects of aural input, then form their understanding of the passage and associate what they hear with their prior/background knowledge. Through this process, listeners are able to produce answers and reactions for communication.

I.1 **Bottom-up Approach**

The bottom-up approach acknowledges listening is a process of decoding sounds, from the smallest meaningful units to complex texts, inclusive of the main
four processing levels as follows: a) phonemes, b) individual words, c) syntactic level followed by an analysis of the semantic content, and at last, d) literal understanding.

1.2 **Top-down Approach**

The top-down approach employs background knowledge in comprehending the meaning of the message. Listeners employ their background knowledge of the context and situation to interpret what they hear. They make use of the knowledge of the topic at hand, speakers, and their personal correlation with the situation to enhance their understanding. It emphasizes the way various kinds of knowledge are used to help understand the message coming from the ears, but it is not arranged into any fixed order because all the forms of prior knowledge interact and influence each other.

1.3 **Interactive Approach**

Interactive theory shows another way to overcome the shortcomings of bottom-up and top-down approaches to listening comprehension. It emphasizes the importance of acoustic input, suggesting that listening comprehension is a process of interaction among the acoustic inputs, different types of linguistic knowledge, details of the context and general world knowledge and so forth (Gilakjani and Ahmadi, 2011). English teachers in their classroom instruction can now combine both bottom-up and top-down approaches to help students work on their ability in listening comprehension (LC), making complex and simultaneous processing and interpretation
much easier.

After looking at certain concepts of LC, we would like to figure out how to have a listening curriculum embedded in daily instruction in regular class or specific class. Intensive listening and extensive listening are the two approaches that teachers might use with their students at different stages.

### I.4 Intensive Listening and Extensive listening

In intensive listening instruction, students are required to listen to a text several times, or teachers can divide the text into paragraphs and sentences to focus on each one. Alternatively, in extensive listening instruction, students won’t be asked to understand every sentence and every word. On the contrary, students are encouraged to grasp the general picture of the message. The main goal of extensive listening instruction is to help format the habits to understand the content as the priority. So to speak, intensive listening is for building basic learning skills while extensive listening is to functionalize overall listening ability.

### 1.5 Controlled Process and Automatic Process

Most people might have the bias that spoken text and written text share almost the same features in their linguistic system. As a matter of fact, there are some differences between them. One of the significant points of spoken text is that people do not usually speak in sentences, instead using a lot of short phrase or clauses put
together in a rather loose way, especially in informal situations. In addition, the vocabulary and the grammar tend to be far more colloquial and much less formal. That means many words and expressions that are used in speech, seldom or never occur in written text. Moreover, speech takes place in real time, so the text is heard only once, and then it is gone. It is almost impossible for a listener to rehear a piece of speech while readers are able to go back to the text to clarify their understanding.

“Speakers generally speak very quickly: three words a second is quite normal so that to understand speakers at this speed, the listening processes must be almost entirely automatic (Buck, 2010, p.6)”. In L1, learners rarely have problems processing information when speech rates get faster, while second language learners will not have sufficient time to process the information even in terms of lexical and grammatical function because, for second language learners, their language processing will be only partly automatic. Just like driving a car, at the first stage, the whole process is controlled and the drivers pay their attention to everything they need to do, but after a while things become a little more automatic and then, drivers are able to drive a car without thinking to think about it very much. Eventually, they are able to automatically control everything.

With a clear mind about the importance of information processing in listening comprehension, we English teachers are trying to find out ways to help learners in
II. Pedagogical Implication in Listening Instruction

Before going into the pedagogical implication, materials that teachers select for their learners influence greatly the tasks and approaches they are going to use in the classroom. Followed up the stage of material selection, tasks and approaches are the other two significant elements that powerfully affect the success of learning and teaching.

2.1 Listening Materials

Our study “The Current State of English Listening Instruction in Taiwanese Senior High Schools” reports that selection of listening materials ranks third in difficulty when English teachers do listening instruction and it also gets the third place for things that these teachers feel are a necessary part of the in-service program. This section deals with listening materials, hoping to give English teachers a general idea of what listening texts should be like and why and how they have to be dealt with.

**Authentic materials**

What are authentic materials?

Authentic materials are what most experts often recommend for language
teaching. In her book *Teaching Language in Context*, Omaggio-Hadley indicates two definitions of “authentic materials” concerning listening. The first was promoted by Geddes and White in 1978; they clarify the differences between two types of authentic discourse—*unmodified authentic discourse* and *simulated authentic discourse*. The former is “a genuine act of communication”, while the latter refers to language “produced for pedagogical purposes but which exhibits features that have a high probability of occurrence in genuine acts of communication” (p.190). From their definition, it seems to imply that doing English listening instruction is separated from the real world. So Omaggio-Hadley offers another definition made by Rogers and Medley in 1988, trying to contextualize listening texts in terms of culture and the targeted real life.¹ Both of these definitions provide English teachers the justification to employ authentic materials as listening texts in listening instruction.

As for what authentic materials are, in Gebhard’s list of authentic materials, the item “authentic listening/viewing Materials” is related to our topic. It provides more examples for English teachers to take for reference: TV commercials, quiz shows, cartoons, news clips, comedy shows, movies, soap operas, professionally audio-taped short stories and novels, radio ads, songs, documentaries, and sales pitches (Oura,

---

¹ Rogers and Medley refer to authentic materials as “language samples—both oral and written—that reflect a naturalness of form and an appropriateness of cultural and situational context that would be found in the language as used by native speakers” (Omaggio-Hadley, p.189-190).
Since the aim of English listening instruction is to train the learners to get acquainted to what real English is and to be an active listener, it is necessary for instructors to use authentic materials in language teaching. The most significant characteristics of authentic materials lies in the topicality and relevance to the learners themselves and to the real world.

Brinton claims that authentic materials could tightly connect “the direct relationship between the language classroom and the outside world” (Oura, p.68); students could be thus reinforced by offering them “a valuable source of language input”, instead of “being exposed only to the language presented by the text and the teacher.”

Low achievers might also benefit from authentic materials in the English listening course. As Huang does research on how to enhance low achievers’ listening ability, she finds listening materials relevant to learners’ life experiences help improve their listening performance. This is consistent with Beebe’s claim (1985) that “relevant material is essential to progress in listening comprehension (Huang, p.87). In addition, learners’ familiarity with the topic would help them get more interested in

---

2 In fact, Gebhard classifies authentic materials into four categories: (1) authentic listening/viewing materials, (2) authentic visual materials, (3) authentic printed materials, and (4) realia (Oura, p.67-68).
learning listening. This is also supported by Huang’s research, which agrees with Rost’s first principle on designing listening tasks—“Choose input to increase learners’ motivation.”

Based on the previous discussion, instructors need to select abundant authentic materials to have learners practice listening. Gilakjani and Ahmadi even indicate that “[s]tudents need to listen to different levels of English in order to be exposed to natural, lively, rich language” (p.983).

To modify or not to modify?

After learning the definition of authentic materials and its features, this section deals with the myth regarding authentic materials. That is, whether English instructors have to modify authentic materials?

Early discussion on English listening authentic materials indeed holds a negative tone. Omaggio-Hadley collects such discussion to show authentic materials were hard to accept in English classrooms in the 1980s. It is difficult for teachers to integrate these materials in the curriculum. What’s worse, those unedited, non-pedagogical materials are not well-designed for beginners and so can frustrate them and be anxiety-producing (p.188-189).

However, van Duzer’s research justifies authentic materials in the listening

---

3 Huang suggests that “listening materials (topics, input) relevant to learners’ goals and interests help them increase self-worth (Rost, 2002)” (p.87).
course. She claims that “[a]uthenticity should be evident both in language and in task” (p.4). In the linguistic aspect, because “[t]he language should reflect real discourse . . . it does not need to be constantly modified or simplified to make it easier for the level of the listener.” She suggests what instructors have to modify should not be the language itself but the difficulty of the tasks. In other word, van Duzer addresses that the success of using authentic materials in listening courses does not depend on the materials themselves but on instructors’ ability to design the listening activities. As long as instructors know that “[l]evel of difficulty can be controlled by the selection of the task,” even low achievers could practice listening by taking advantage of those authentic materials.

As a matter of fact, Bozorgian cites Field’s points to support van Duzer’s idea. With respect to the readiness of English learners, Field suggests that “listeners [including beginner, elementary, and intermediate level learners] should be carefully briefed so that they feel comfortable about being exposed to listening texts where they may have problems to understand the message” (Bozorgian, p.2). As for the task, Field’s thought is that “instructors should grade the difficulty of tasks to fit to the comprehension level of the listeners rather than grading the text so that listeners would be able to achieve it.” (Bozorgian, p.2). From Field’s viewpoint, it could be inferred that instructors’ competence in designing the listening tasks decides whether
authentic materials are successfully integrated in the curriculum.

2.2 What has to be taken into account when selecting listening materials?

Instructors would select the most suitable listening materials for their learners. And indeed, there are some factors that they have to pay attention to. In Chen’s “Barriers to acquiring listening strategies for EFL learners and their pedagogical implications”, she classifies her students’ listening barriers into several categories. Material barriers is one of the categories. If students realize their listening difficulties lie in the material itself, then we as instructors could take these difficulties as principles to select the listening materials. According to Chen’s study, students’ material barriers include five aspects: (1) rate of speech, (2) clarity of voice, (3) accents, (4) length of sentences or texts, (5) text genre, and (6) topic. In addition to these six factors, instructors have to take their learners’ English level into consideration as well.

If instructors prefer using the listening course books designed by the publishers, here Gilakjani and Ahmadi offer several suggestions concerning listening textbooks (p.985-986):

(1) Listening course books had better introduce some basic theories on listening training. Instructors can thus learn these theories and other essential
information and improve their listening instruction.

(2) Listening course books must be student-centered and they have to be designed systematically, especially focusing on how to utilize listening strategies and offer sufficient practice opportunities for learners.

(3) Each discourse designed in listening course books has to be processed in a holistic way. And the designed exercises would get learners involved into more detailed comprehension. In other words, the appropriate listening textbooks would help instructors teach students first from the top-down process to the bottom-up process, and then return back by using the top-down process again; such complete training would provide learners with a chance for deep learning in listening.

(4) The activities in the listening course books should be integrated with the 3-phase strategy: pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening. Each phase of listening activity has its own purpose, which would be respectively depicted specifically in the section of “listening activities.”

Despite Gilakjani and Ahmadi’s useful and concrete suggestions on selecting proper listening course books, it is instructors who must have the ability to design their own listening curriculum that meets their students’ needs.
2.3. What makes a text easier to listen to?

Gerard Sharpling from the Centre for Applied Linguistics, Warwick University offers one useful piece of information for instructors. The difficulty of the listening texts lie in several factors such as the un/designed texts, the numbers of the speakers, and the interpersonal relationship. Here are the listening materials ranging from the easiest (first on the list) to listen to the hardest to listen to (last on the list):

(1) a scripted talk given by one speaker;

(2) an unscripted talk given by one speaker;

(3) a scripted dialogue between two speakers;

(4) an unscripted dialogue between two speakers;

(5) a scripted or unscripted conversation between three or more people.

Besides, Sharpling also indicates that there are six conditions that can make listening easier:

(1) there is only one speaker (e.g. the News, a lecture, etc);

(2) the text is scripted;

(3) the speaker is using standard English pronunciation, or RP;

---

The information is from Gerard Sharpling’s “Listening Materials.”

Sharpling clarifies that this statement does not mean that “speaking with an accent is in any way ‘wrong’ or ‘incorrect’.”
(4) one has some **prior knowledge about what the speaker will say** before he/she listens;

(5) one is **interested in the topic**;

(6) one **knows some of the vocabulary that will be used**.

After learners get sufficient training for listening, learners could further develop their listening skills with texts incorporating the following elements:

(1) a regional accent is used;

(2) there is more than one speaker;

(3) learners do not know about the topic or subject in advance;

(4) the speakers seem to speak quickly.

Sharpling’s suggestions help instructors know more about the elements influencing the application of listening materials. Instructors need to apply such knowledge to listening instruction. According to the above discussion, the success of listening instruction depends on the instructors’ ability of curriculum design. As long as instructors familiarize themselves with how to select appropriate listening texts to meet their learners’ English level and how to use them in listening classes, their learners will learn to develop their listening ability more effectively.

2.4 Tasks and Approaches

Listening comprehension plays a vital role in language learning. When
designing listening tasks, instructors have to consider how to enable learners to be more conscious of their listening comprehension. Rost claims that “[i]f language instructors can successfully incorporate explicit noticing steps into tasks, learners can then accelerate their learning and make breakthroughs in listening ability” (p.21-22). Thus, it is necessary for instructors to design activities that enhance language awareness. The section here is mainly about English listening instruction. It will be discussed from two perspectives: one is the importance of teaching listening strategies, and the other is from the design of listening tasks.

III. **Listening activities**

Listening comprehension plays a vital role in language learning. When designing listening tasks, instructors have to consider how to enable learners to be more conscious of their listening comprehension. Rost claims that “[i]f language instructors can successfully incorporate explicit noticing steps into tasks, learners can then accelerate their learning and make breakthroughs in listening ability” (p.21-22). Thus, it is necessary for instructors to design activities that enhance language awareness. The section here is mainly about English listening instruction. It will be discussed from two perspectives: one is the importance of teaching listening strategies, and the other is from the design of listening tasks.
3.1 The necessity of teaching listening strategies

A number of listening specialists have argued that listening strategies can and should be taught (Field, p.115). Listening is an active process. It involves the processes of top-down and bottom-up listening. Active listeners can adequately manipulate the top-down and bottom-up listening processing skills when listening. Hence, van Duzer points out that the listening tasks had better offer “opportunities to develop both top-down and bottom-up processing skills” and encourage learners to develop their listening strategies.

From Rost’s study on English listening instruction, he outlines five fundamental listening strategies that successful L2 listeners tend to adopt when they encounter some uncertainty (p.21):

a) predicting—using real expectations to generate predictions about what the speakers will say and what might happen;

b) guessing—making inferences about what the speakers might have said or might have meant;

c) selecting—focusing on key words, trying to select targeted information that is adequate to complete a given task;

d) clarifying—monitoring one’s level of understanding and identifying questions that can be asked to supplement partial understanding or correct misunderstanding,
and revising one's representation of meaning;

e) responding—reflecting or attempting to formulate an opinion, to interact with the speaker, to personalize the content, focus on what was understood; attempt to talk about the input or conversation in a comfortable way.

Therefore, if instructors incorporate these strategies directly into the listening tasks, it will help learners gain control over the listening process. In this way, learners, more aware of language features, will become more active in a listener role.

3.2 What does one complete listening task look like?

Instructors have to have well-designed English listening tasks for learners to practice. One complete listening task contains three phases—pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening parts. The sequencing of these three sections has been “a mainstay in the teaching of listening comprehension” (Holden, p.260). The goals of the three sections are not similar; therefore, learners will acquire different practices in each of these three phases. The following examines each section of a listening practice.

Pre-listening activity

Of the three phases of listening practice sequencing, the pre-listening part is the most important. Rost indicates that “[e]ffective listening tasks often involve an explicit ‘pre-listening’ step, some activity that the learner does prior to listening to the
main input in order to increase readiness” (p.20). Motivation and prior knowledge are the two main factors for the instructors to keep in mind when they design pre-listening activities. When creating listening activities at this stage, teachers need to add elements “to ensure successful learning experiences that will encourage wanting to learn the language” (Rost, p.19). Learners’ curiosity will thus be aroused and they will have the motivation to make a commitment to overcome obstacles and sustain progress.

Prior knowledge is the other factor that learners most depend on when they do listening. According to the review of English listening instruction done by Gilakjani and Ahmadi, there are two primary goals for pre-listening activities: the first one is “to help to activate students’ prior knowledge, build up their expectations for the coming information”, and the other is “to provide the necessary context for the specific listening task” (p.98).

Advance Organizers. An advance organizer is often regarded as the most effective strategy related to prior knowledge. The concept of advance organizers was firstly popularized by the psychologist David Ausubel (1968). He defined them in the following way: “[A]dvance organizers are designed to bridge the gap between what the learner already knows and what he needs to know before he can successfully learn the task at hand.” Since then, lots of studies have researched advance organizers and
tried to adapt them for instructional application. Mayer (2010) indicates that an advance organizer is “presented material that introduces the learner to what they will be learning, thus allowing the learner to utilize relevant prior knowledge.”

Applied in English listening instruction, an advance organizer is a power tool for retention as well. “Giving students a diagram before listening to a passage leads to better retention of material, recall was enhanced for conceptual information in the lesson” (Mayer, 2003). Listening comprehension requires short- and long-term memory. With the help of advance organizers, learners may learn English listening more easily. Therefore, it is necessary for instructors to incorporate this tool into English listening lessons.

Functioning as scaffolding instruments, advance organizers are categorized into four types—expository advance organizers, narrative advance organizers, and graphic advance organizers, as well as skimming as a form of advance organizer. Here is a general description for each type of advance organizers:

a) Expository advance organizers

In either written or verbal form, these advance organizers describe the new content students will be exposed to, especially for information that may be difficult to understand (Schoene and Shelter).

b) Narrative advance organizers
A narrative advance organizer takes the form of a story. This kind of advance organizer helps students connect what they are about to learn to prior knowledge and focus on what is important (Schoene and Shelter).

c) Graphic advance organizers

Graphic advance organizers can be effectively used as advance organizers. Intended to develop learners’ active thinking, graphic advance organizers could be utilized to teaching listening comprehension as well (Schoene and Shelter; Lewier, p.57).

d) Skimming as a form of advance organizer

Skimming can help students become familiar with some of the patterns of information that they will soon learn more in depth. Skimming through lists of facts, photos, or maps might stimulate learners develop their active thinking. As they activate their thinking during the pre-listening activity, instructors “may help their EFL learners work on new vocabulary or other language area” (Lewier, p.57; Schoene and Shelter; Princess Anne Middle School instructional strategies training).

So it is highly recommended that instructors employ these four types of advance organizers as the instructional tools in the pre-listening phase. Lewier even indicates that “if the advance organizer technique is presented properly, the motivation of EFL students would be lifted because this technique draws upon the
emotional involvement necessary for learning to take place” (p.60).

An advance organizer could maximize the listening effect; however, the instructors should not view it as the sole means of instruction (Daniel, 2005). Learners’ English listening proficiency, as well as their background knowledge, have to be taken into consideration while instructors design the advance organizers used for listening comprehension instruction. Otherwise, this originally effective learning instrument could become a heavy burden for EFL learners.

In addition to advance organizers, there are various other pre-listening activities. Holden makes up a checklist of pre-listening activities for instructors to take as reference. Here is the checklist (p.261-262):

| a) Use Visual or Environmental Clues | Strategies: activate background knowledge, infer, predict, selectively attend, provide context, associate |
| b) Brainstorm words and phrases you might hear | Strategies: direct attention, predict, activate background knowledge, selectively attend, infer, associate |
| c) Focus on Key Vocabulary | Strategies: scan, selectively attend, infer, evaluate, activate background knowledge, group, contextualize |
| d) Think of a Synonym (or antonym) | Strategies: brainstorm, activate background knowledge, infer, substitute, paraphrase, associate |
| e) Use the Vocabulary/ Rehearse | Strategies: activate background knowledge, plan and organize, use the language, infer, contextualize, predict, cooperate, send & receive info, repeat, practice |
| f) Personalize the Information | Strategies: selectively attend, activate background knowledge, contextualize, and personalize |
| g) Think Ahead | Strategies: activate background knowledge, contextualize, predict, use mental imagery, use the language |
| h) Relate the situation to your own experience | Strategies: use mental imagery, contextualize, personalize, use the language |
While-listening activity

The purposes of while-listening activities are listed as follows: “to focus students’ comprehension of the speakers’ language and ideas; to focus students’ attention on such things as the speaker’s organizational patterns; to encourage students’ critical reactions and personal responses to the speaker’s ideas and use of language” (Gilakjani and Ahmadi, p.982). Listening strategies are clearly significant at this stage, so instructors had better include strategy-training elements. Here are the while-listening activities (Holden, p.262-264):

a) Ask yourself questions
   *Strategies: self monitor, clarification, direct attention, verify predictions, ask questions, predict*

b) Use grammar as a guide
   *Strategies: activate grammar knowledge, predict, direct attention, selectively attend, deduce, group and classify, use linguistic clues, analyse expressions*

c) Listening for groups of words
   *Strategies: activate background knowledge, predict, direct attention, selectively attend, group, infer, deduce, analyse expressions, use linguistic clues*

d) Control the input
   *Strategies: direct attention, selectively attend, self monitor, ask questions, confirm understanding, self -management, conversational management*

e) Listen for emphasis/stress
   *Strategies: direct attention, selectively attend, use grammar as a guide, deduce, repeat, recognize formula or pattern*

f) Listen for the intonation pattern
Strategies: activate prior knowledge, direct attention, predict, selectively attend, infer, use grammar as a guide, repeat, recognize formula or pattern

g) Re-confirm your purpose
   Strategies: direct attention, activate background knowledge, selectively attend, infer, use grammar as a guide, repeat, recognize formula or pattern

i) Think ahead
   Strategies: direct attention, activate background knowledge, predict, infer, monitor, confirm

j) Substitute
   Strategies: direct attention, activate background knowledge, selectively attend, monitor, deduce, problem solving, use grammar as a guide

k) Identify signaling phrases and discourse markers used to show the end of the speaking turn or shifts in topic.
   Strategies: direct attention, selectively attend, predict, infer, analyze phrases, recognize formulas & patterns

l) Shadow
   Strategies: direct attention, selectively attend, and remember information, repeat, use the language, monitor

m) Take notes
   Strategies: direct attention, selectively attend, remember information, highlight, summarize, evaluate

n) Confirm and clarify your understanding
   Strategies: ask questions, remember information, problem solving, use the language, evaluate, monitor

Post-listening activity

The post-listening stage is as important as the pre-listening stage. The activities conducted here should help listeners “to evaluate success in carrying out the task and to integrate listening with the other language skills” (van Duzer). This is also the best moment for instructors to encourage their learners to do extensive listening outside of the classroom whenever possible. Holden lists some post-listening activities learners could employ (p.264-265):

   a) Confirm your Predictions
      Strategies: ask questions, remember information, evaluate, monitor, predict, compare & contrast, ask for confirmation

   b) Paraphrase
Holden indicates that “listening should be presented to learners, particularly beginners, as a cyclical rather than as a linear process” (265). “The listening lesson
should be constructed with careful step by step planning ... from simple to more complex as the student gains in language proficiency” (Gilakjani and Ahmadi, p.984).

The sequencing of pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening is to ensure learners develop more control over the listening process. Clear given directions as to “what to listen for, where to listen, when to listen, and how to listen” are required as the listening task progresses. Instructors must clearly know the purpose of each listening task. When doing one practice, learners merely complete one mission at a time. They will thus concentrate on what instructors want them to do when listening. As learners learn how to adequately adjust themselves during the listening process they will gradually become skilled, active listeners.

IV. Listening Comprehension Problems

For English instructors, it is not enough to merely learn the characteristics of the listening process. When designing a learner-centered listening lesson plan, instructors have to take into consideration listening comprehension problems that their learners might encounter. Compared to other language skills, recognizing the target learners’ listening obstacles is the first and foremost step in listening instruction. Composed of the findings from four research papers, this section highlights listening comprehension problems that learners might have, hoping to offer instructors a
general picture of their students’ barriers to listening.

4.1 Early analysis of listeners’ difficulties by Mary Underwood

Mary Underwood’s analysis of listening comprehension problems has a place in the research on EFL listening instruction. In Osada’s review of listening comprehension research, Underwood (1989) points out seven potential causes leading to the major listening comprehension obstacles (p.62-63):

1. listeners’ lack of control over the speed rate of the speakers,
2. listeners cannot get words repeated,
3. listeners have limited vocabulary,
4. listeners fail to recognize the “signals”,
5. listeners lack contextual knowledge,
6. listeners are unable to concentrate, and
7. listeners might have established learning habits.

Later research related to EFL listening teaching or listening acquisition would refer to this early study; Yiching Chen’s research is an example which provides a more systematic and more complete illustration on EFL listening difficulties.

4.2 Meta-cognitive research on listeners’ meta-cognitive

Unlike Underwood’s research which merely focuses on listeners’ own learning conditions, Chen’s study is more meta-cognitive—trying to find out how her students
apply listening strategies in the listening process. She classifies learners’ listening barriers into seven categories including learners’ affections, learning habits, information processing, English proficiency, strategic usage, belief, and the materials they use.

(1) **Affective barriers**: Some human emotions negatively influence the learners’ language acquisition. These include anxiety, distress, frustration, and resistance, all of which might sometimes “distract learners from learning the target strategies” (p.10).

(2) **Habitudinal barriers**: Some learners get accustomed to using their former listening habits. Chen found these happening with her students: listening for every spoken word, relying on Chinese subtitles, and non-purposeful listening. “Although not all of the former listening habits disadvantaged comprehension, some did draw learners away from activating the potential strategies in the comprehension process” (p.10).

(3) **Information processing barriers**: From observing her students’ performance, Chen concludes 6 types relating to this category — *a*. learners have trouble recognizing the pronunciation and the meaning of the spoken words; *b*. learners fail to process spoken input efficiently; *c*. learners have difficulties in

---

6 There were sixty-four EFL learners, aged 19 to 21, participating in the study. These respondents were fourth level students in a five-year program in a junior college in Taiwan.
“retaining perceived input for further processing”; d. learners get distracted easily while trying to apply strategies in listening; e. learners’ difficulties with “contextualizing the input, activating related schemata, or simply lack of cultural awareness” may lead to misinterpretation of the perceived input; f. issues such as fatigue cause problems with the spoken word process (p.11-12).

(4) **English proficiency barriers**: Limited English vocabulary, poor grammar, and the listening skills or overall language skills are all be factors leading to learners’ difficulties in utilizing listening strategies appropriately (p.13).

(5) **Strategic barriers**: Chen identifies five types of attitudes that learners have toward the usage of listening strategies— a. they forget to activate strategies while listening; b. they regard strategies as extra burdens to information processing; c. they are challenged by the complex nature of the strategy; d. they have problems conducting the proper strategies; e. they are still unable to comprehend the text after applying strategies (p.13-14).

(6) **Belief barriers**: Two learners’ beliefs are found to prevent them from exploring listening strategies— a. they will not apply strategies until other language skills (i.e. vocabulary or grammar) are acquired; b. they attend to every word or demand full comprehension of text (p.14-15).

(7) **Material barriers**: Listening materials are one of the factors affecting
listeners to grasp the key points in the listening process. These barriers include difficult level of materials, the spoken features of the materials (i.e. rate of speech, clarity of voice, and accents), length of sentences or texts, text genre, topics, and modalities (p.15-17).

Most EFL experts encourage instructors to utilize meta-cognitive methods in listening instruction in order to effectively enhance learners’ listening ability; their focus is merely on how effective or successful these learners will become after learning the listening strategies. Few tell the readers what would happen if these learners still fail to get better at listening, not to mention how instructors could help them in this sort of situation. Chen uses a meta-cognitive view to examine the effectiveness of these learners using listening strategies so that we can further understand what learners might do next and what we instructors could do next, which is the value of her study in the field of listening instruction.

4.3 A panorama of L2 listening difficulties by CASL, UMD

If one is interested in exploring each topic dealing with EFL listening difficulties and would like to read as the abstracts of many research papers as possible, Center for Advanced Study of Language, University of Maryland provide a great report, “What makes listening difficult?: Factors affecting second language comprehension” conducted by Bloomfield and her other five colleagues. This huge report published in
June, 2010 reviews almost all the research on L2 listening comprehension by comparing and contrasting the roles of the factors influencing L2 listening comprehension examined in over 400 research papers. It not only collects the key elements to L2 listening comprehension, the resources that are useful for instructors and learners; it also anticipates the possible directions that EFL researchers could take in future study.

The report summarizes the scientific literature from three aspects which affect L2 listening comprehension: (1) characteristics of the listener, (2) characteristics of the passage, and (3) characteristics of test-taking conditions. The following is just the excerpts from the report focusing on these three areas.

**Characteristics of the listener**

In terms of characteristics of the listeners, the report concludes that there are three factors beneficial to listeners: greater L2 proficiency, greater working memory capacity, and use of meta-cognitive strategies, while anxiety is a factor that can become an obstacle to the listening process (p.17).

**Characteristics of the passage**

The conclusions from the report are all based on the examination of the research collection by Bloomfield’s team. They list the factors influencing L2 listening comprehension in four levels (p.68):
(1) Factors beneficial to listeners—

a. Greater redundancy\(^7\);

b. Use of discourse markers;

c. Positioning item-relevant information near the beginning or at the end of a passage decreases difficulty;

d. Disfluencies\(^8\) such as filled and silent pauses.

(2) Factors possibly beneficial to listeners—

a. Simplifying syntactic structure;

b. Greater reference to concrete entities/objects;

c. Greater overall coherence\(^9\).

(3) Factors difficult for listeners—

a. Greater information density\(^10\);

b. Need for pragmatic information, including for example, understanding implied meaning, indirect text, idioms, and culturally specific information;

---

\(^7\) Here the report offers one definition for “redundancy”: “When information is re-presented through exact repetition, elaboration, or other methods” (p.23).

\(^8\) Disfluencies could give both L1 listeners and L2 listeners more convenient assistance. To the former, disfluencies may “convey additional information about the speaker’s intentions” (p.57), while to the latter, they can “provide additional processing time, or act as cues about upcoming information in the message” (p.59).

\(^9\) Bloomfield’s team recognizes the function that the coherence of the listening passage plays in the listening process and points out the possible situation that L2 listeners might have in terms of the coherent passage (p.46). The “overall coherence” factor is categorized into the “possibly beneficial” column because there was only one study dealing with the topic and the term is ill-defined (p.106).

\(^10\) “More information-packed passages are more difficult to comprehend” (p.31).
c. Unfamiliar accents;

d. Noise or distortion;

e. Faster speech rates.

(4) Factors possibly difficult for listeners—

a. Overall length¹¹;

b. Syntactic features, such as negatives;

Characteristics of the test-taking conditions

Bloomfield’s team also considers listening comprehension tests. They analyze how L2 listeners are affected when they take listening comprehension tests. The factors concerning the topic can be divided into three aspects (p.78):

(1) Factor beneficial to listeners—Multiple hearings.

(2) Factor possibly beneficial to listeners—

Note-taking, but only when listeners can decide when to take notes.

(3) Factor difficult for listeners—Shorter time limits.

After reading through the whole report conducted by Bloomfield’s team, instructors can understand what their learners face, and thus help them develop their listening ability.

¹¹ The report addresses that the studies concerning overall length “have typically confounded passage length with other factors” (p.101). Hence, these studies have little evidence showing the ‘overall length’ factor could affect L2 listening comprehension.
V. Low and High Achievers Require Listening Instruction

Learners of different English proficiencies have different listening comprehension problems. Apart from the general listening comprehension problems discussed in the previous parts, there are other aspects directly related to listeners’ listening competence. Listening strategies is one of them. It is meta-cognitive to explore the ways in which listeners with different listening competence utilize those listening strategies. Here we just highlight the concept that high achievers’ frequency and effectiveness in employing listening strategies is far better than low achievers’.

Kayaoğlu and Özbay (2009) offer a complete description on the usage of listening strategies by these listeners with different English levels (p.100):

*In general, high ability listeners used a wider range of cognitive and meta-cognitive tactics which interacted efficiently to facilitate comprehension. In contrast, low ability listeners used mostly translation, repetition, note taking, key word and only low-level comprehension monitoring strategies. The interaction of strategies when one segment of the input was being processed shows that although individual strategies were useful, successful comprehension also depended on whether the listeners were able to combine various mental strategies in a way that could truly enhance comprehension.*

Kayaoğlu and Özbay’s suggest that, instructors, in addition to formal instruction of L2 listening subskills (i.e. sounds, stress, grammatical rules), need to teach their learners some listening strategies and help them become more aware of using those strategies. However, these all have to be done with instructors’ frequently positive feedback for “[t]he instructor encouragement assists the listeners to build up
with listening bricks to form a good listening comprehension ability” (p.5).

Understanding the learners’ possible difficulties in the process of learning English listening greatly assists instructors to effectively do listening instruction. Their learners can consequently be diagnosed immediately and receive appropriate remedial action from their instructors, which will allow them to experience success so that they will keep on learning English listening.
Reference


doi:10.5402/2012/734085


affecting EFL learners’ English listening comprehension and the strategies for improvement. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 2*(5), 977-988.


