The Application of Metacognitive Strategies to EFL Listening Instruction—A Study on Metacognitive Strategy-centered Instructional Model in Listening Classroom

Rong ZHAO¹, * and Wei XUE²

¹School of Foreign Languages, Xidian University, Xi’an, China
²School of Foreign Studies, Xi’an University, Xi’an, China

*Corresponding author

Keywords: Listening comprehension, Metacognitive strategies, Metacognitive knowledge, Strategy training.

Abstract. This dissertation reports a tentative study for solving a problem of how to improve the efficiency of foreign language listening teaching so as to improve college students’ listening proficiency, from the viewpoint of the metacognitive strategy-centered training. It has combined the research results in cognitive psychology and learning strategies; and then established a metacognitive strategy-centered instructional model in foreign language listening classroom, which means to improve listening teaching efficiency by promoting students’ metacognitive awareness and instructing students to use metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive strategies in foreign language listening classroom, so as to lead to the improvement in students’ listening performance.

Introduction

Listening is described as an active process in which listeners select and interpret information that comes from auditory and visual clues in order to define what is going on and what the speakers are trying to express[1]. After investigating the current situation and trend of college FL/SL listening instruction, we may find that there still exist some problems which cause the effect of listening instruction far from satisfactory. Researchers [2] in the field of FL/SL learning believe that it is necessary to teach students learning strategies, and that good native language learning skills can contribute foreign language learning. As a result, many strategy training in listening classroom are usually carried out as follows: (1) teachers first present listening strategies, then (2) provide examples and practice strategy use; and finally (3) evaluate the use of these listening strategies. As an instruction, it is too vague. It has been proved that the relationship between strategies and comprehension are not simple and straightforward. Successful second language listening comprehension is ‘not simply a matter of knowing what strategy to use, but the listener must also know how to use it successfully and orchestrate its use with other strategies.

So what is needed is to tackle the questions of how to implement an effective strategy training, what constitutes a careful and complete explanation of a listening strategy and how could teachers’ training be metacognitive instead of mechanistic?

The Importance of Metacognitive Strategies in EFL Listening Instruction

According to O’Malley and Chamot [3], learning strategies have been differentiated into three categories depending on the level or type of processing involved: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social and effective strategies, among which two types of learning strategies that second language learners regularly report using are metacognitive strategies and cognitive strategies. They also posit that metacognitive strategies involve thinking about learning process, planning for learning, monitoring of comprehension or production while it is taking place, and self-evaluation of learning after the language activity is completed. In the field of FL/SL learning, evidence points to the important role of metacognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies [4] are employed to monitor, oversee, regulate, or self-direct the cognitive progress; they involve self-management, self-evaluation, and knowledge about cognitive process.
Listening comprehension involves very complex steps among which each step is under the control of metacognition and metacognitive strategies. And vice versa, the process of sound information provides metacognitive system feedback information. Therefore, the whole process is further regulated. With this regulated process repeated, the strategies for processing sound information will be improved gradually and then the listening comprehension ability is thus increased.

In listening instruction, metacognitive strategy is important in that metacognitive strategies are higher order executive skills that may entail monitoring, regulating or instructing the success of listening activity and process. These metacognitive strategies like planning, monitoring, evaluating and compensating, involve an ability to consciously use metacognitive knowledge to plan, arrange, monitor, regulate and evaluate the learning process, and involve the consideration of FL listening comprehension and learning process. Once listeners have a good command of metacognitive strategies, they are able to assess the situation, to plan for, to select appropriate strategies, to sequence them, to coordinate them, to monitor or assess their effectiveness and to revise the plan when necessary.

Therefore in listening strategy instruction, it is not enough only to have knowledge on the definition and characteristics of learning strategy. The key point is how learners decide when and where and how to use appropriate strategies. Whereas these are where metacognitive strategies lie in.

The Application of Metacognitive Strategies—A Metacognitive Strategy-centered Instructional Model in Listening Classroom

Based on the combination and inspiration of these researchers’ opinions along with the theoretical studies on FL/SL listening comprehension, the author of this dissertation proposes a metacognitive strategy-centered instructional model in college listening classroom, which develops an innovative metacognitive framework on the basis of cognitive theory, using “the teacher’s focus being on how the learner learns, rather than on how the teacher teaches”. This model consists of before-class preparatory work, in-class instruction and after-class instruction.

Before-Class Preparatory Work

Before-class preparatory work not only serves as the basis and premise for teachers’ further instruction, but also provides authoritative data proof for the latter testament to the metacognitive strategy-centered instructional model. Generally speaking, three major tasks should be fulfilled by teachers:

1. Grasp students’ listening proficiency; and
2. assess students’ current use of metacognitive strategies; and
3. choose appropriate textbook

In-class Instruction Methods and Procedures

As a matter of fact, in-class instruction is the major body of the metacognitive strategy-centered instructional model, during which the concrete methods and procedures will be demonstrated in detail.

Pre-listening Stage

Pre-listening is the preparation stage for while-listening. It equips students with learning purpose, high motivation, anticipation as well as necessary cognitive skills. At this stage, teachers mainly take three steps to help learners get prepared for the while-listening. In the concrete and specific teaching process, teachers’ major tasks involve giving students introduction to the new teaching model; promoting students’ metacognitive awareness to increase their application of metacognitive strategies; systematically explaining and demonstrating metacognitive strategies and finally attaching importance to the planning strategy so as for students to make plan and predictions for the coming listening tasks. The concrete steps are as follows
While-listening Stage

With proper and full preparation at pre-listening stage, students can smoothly move on to while-listening stage which should be a stage at which listening is accompanied by carefully designed activities and experience the pleasure of success.

At this stage, teachers’ major tasks are guiding students to use metacognitive strategies (planning, monitoring, evaluating and compensating strategies) and metacognitive knowledge (mainly cognitive strategies) in practical listening. In the process of listening, students should learn to continuously monitor their comprehension, and make decisions on the strategies being used and to be used in view of the concrete situations. These include monitoring whether the strategies being used are correct or not: if correct, students then have to decide what strategies should be used next in the light of the prediction; if not correct, then they have to determine what strategies should be chosen instead so as to compensate for the errors having been made. Furthermore, during listening, students also have to make evaluation and collect feedback at times to series of factors, including the effect of strategy use and the process of listening comprehension. Then they have to make prompt analyses and sum up experience so as to apply relevant and appropriate compensating strategies. To be specific, teachers’ major tasks in this stage are:

1) Organizing and providing students with concrete and systematic listening training and the practice of the application of metacognitive strategies and various cognitive strategies. When using certain metacognitive strategies, teachers can use think-aloud method to serve as expert models, showing students how to use these metacognitive strategies when working on the listening tasks. For example, let students see and hear how they plan for, monitor, and evaluate their listening tasks, how they compensate for errors during comprehending and how they approach the problems their students came across when listening.

2) Functioning as “monitors” and instructors in practical listening and training processes. That is to say, teachers have to intently observe students’ performance on the use of metacognitive and cognitive strategies. This is not an easy job because teachers cannot observe what the students are thinking when they are listening to the tapes. Therefore, teachers have to monitor their students through observation and guess. Of course, this will unavoidably cause certain deviation. But as time goes on when teachers become more familiar with their students and have more chances to monitor their students in listening classroom, they can accordingly have a correct judgement. In addition to the observation, some other methods, like asking students questions concerning the content or main points of the listening tasks, or checking answers to the questions printed below each listening item, are also available.

On the whole, while–listening is not only a stage to encourage listeners to demonstrate their comprehension and to make their problems plain to teachers rather than hide them, but also a stage for teachers to teach and help learners to build up their listening skills and strategies so as to increase listeners’ chances of success in listening tasks.

Post-listening Stage

Post-listening is a stage of making feedback and summing up experiences. At this stage, teachers should mainly instruct students how to use self-monitoring strategy and self-evaluating strategy to check, monitor, evaluate, make feedback and sum up experience to the activities in the pre-listening and while-listening stages.

1. Self-monitoring strategy:

Self-monitoring at this stage is a process of finding mistakes and correcting them accordingly. Teachers can encourage their students to write down the problems and difficulties they came across when listening. Here, a checklist designed by the author herself may be of some help.

Self-monitoring checklist

1). Did you consciously regulate or focus your attention on listening?
2). In the process of listening, did you pay selective attention to the information needed in the tasks?
3). In the process of listening, did you put what you heard with what you had known?
4). In the process of listening, did you take the advantage of background knowledge, context or other clues to get inference?
5). In the process of listening, did you test and verify your inference?
6). Have you ever considered whether or not your understanding of the materials was logical in content and meaning?

2. Self-evaluating strategy

Self-evaluating strategy in this stage is used on the one hand to check whether students have understood the listening materials and how much they understood, and whether the strategies students used in the process of listening are proper or not; and on the other hand to evaluate if students have made some progress after being trained for a certain period of time. Another checklist is provided below.

Self-evaluating checklist
1). How much can you understand the material? (all of it, half, less than half)
2). What are your major problems?
3). Have your made any process in listening comprehension since last month?
4). Have you reached the goal you made?
5). What will you do in order to improve your listening proficiency?
6). Have the strategies you used appropriate?

After-class Instruction

After-class listening practice cannot be neglected, instead it should be considered of great importance as a supplementary part for the in-class instruction. On the one hand, teachers can recommend their students proper listening materials and assign certain listening tasks related to the in-class instruction and suitable for strategy practice as their homework, so as to ensure the continuity between students’ after-class practice and teachers’ in-class instruction. Teachers’ after-class instruction, on the other hand, is mainly incarnated by regularly monitoring and checking students’ performance on the strategies that they practiced with after class, and by collecting students’ feedback to the problems they came across when listening with strategies. In this way, teachers can not only guide their students purposefully but also take appropriate measures to regulate and modify their teaching plan and teaching procedure.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we should reiterate the main premise of the present study: the teaching of metacognitive strategy should become an integral part of EFL listening instruction. Using metacognitive strategies during listening process puts listeners in a position of power and control. This dissertation makes an attempt to adopt a metacognitive strategy-centered instructional model with a cognitive perspective in EFL listening classroom and to make the training not only necessary and important in theory but also touchable, concrete and feasible in practice.

Acknowledgement

This research was financially supported by The 13th Five-Year Plan of Education Science in Shaanxi Province (Project No. SGH17H232 and Project No. SGH17H050).

References

