The Application of Metacognitive Strategy to College Students' Autonomous English Listening

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Abstract

Listening, which plays a vital part in foreign language learning, is a very important ability for language learners. But non-English majors in colleges have poor listening abilities, so the author carries out research on them. Metacognitive strategy is a higher-order executive skill which involves an ability of consciously using metacognitive knowledge to plan, monitor and evaluate the learning process among all the leaning strategies. In the paper, the author puts metacognitive strategy training into the non-English majors' listening classes in colleges, for the purpose of helping them cultivate the capacity of using metacognitive strategies, improve their listening achievements and get into the habit of listening autonomously.

Subject Areas

Language Education

Keywords

Metacognitive Strategy, Strategy Training, Autonomous Listening

1. Introduction

According to an American foreign language teaching expert Rivers W.M., 75% of the information that people get comes from listening and speaking, and in communicative activities listening reaches to 45% [1]. However, the process of listening comprehension is not only a process of decoding language information, but also a combination of decoding and reconstructing. To accomplish this complicated cognitive process successfully, the process of listening comprehension must be monitored. If there are any problems occurring while listening, imme-

diate measures should be taken. Therefore, having a good command of metacognitive strategies is a necessity to language learners. Metacognitive strategy is the higher level strategy, including planning, monitoring and evaluation strategies, with which learners can plan, monitor and evaluate throughout the learning process of listening. It is helpful for learners to listen effectively if they have a full understanding of metacognitive strategy theories and then they can conduct metacognitive strategy training spontaneously while listening.

Among the definitions and clarifications of metacognitive strategies, the most famous ones are put forward by O'Malley & Chamot and Oxford respectively. Oxford pointed out that metacognitive strategy is the key to learn a language successfully [2]. O'Malley & Chamot said metacognitive strategy is the higher level strategy, including thinking before the learning process, planning for learning, then monitoring of comprehension or production while it is taking place, and finally self-evaluation after completing the learning activities [3].

It was not until 1980s that researchers paid attention to metacognitive strategies. The purpose of metacognitive strategy training is to help learners to choose effective learning strategies, to find out proper ways of learning, to improve learners' learning effectiveness, and to help them build up both their autonomous learning ability and self-managing ability [4].

On the basis of O'Malley & Chamot's metacognitive strategy training mode, this paper applies metacognitive strategy learning to the listening classes of non-English majors in colleges. Students will learn to use these strategies not only in their listening, but also in their lifetime learning to foster their learning autonomy.

2. Metacognitive Strategy Training in Listening Classes

The author conducts metacognitive strategy training to two classes of non-English majors in listening classes from March to June in 2021. The teaching model follows three phases: pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening. The following are the procedures of metacognitive strategy training.

2.1. Arouse Students' Metacognitive Awareness

Before training, it is of great importance to arouse students' metacognitive awareness, due to the fact that metacognitive strategy training is based on metacognitive knowledge. In college English listening, metacognitive knowledge refers to students' knowledge about their own listening ability, their listening tasks and their listening strategies. So the training in this term centers on these three aspects.

Firstly, students are asked to finish a questionnaire about metacognitive strategies, a questionnaire about autonomous listening ability and a listening proficiency test, which help them to reflect upon their listening abilities and strategies. The author is also able to have a better understanding of the students.

Secondly, the purposes in listening classes are to make students distinguish be-

tween words, combine linguistic clues with non-linguistic clues, predict through background knowledge and contexts and so on. Making students be aware of these tasks can help students make better plans for English listening.

Thirdly, there are three steps to arouse students' metacognitive awareness about their listening tasks and strategy usage. The first step is that the author teaches them theories of metacognitive strategies, including how to employ metacognitive strategies in particular tasks, and why it is essential to use metacognitive strategies in English listening. The second step is to train students to complete tasks by means of strategies. And the last step is to make students evaluate their listening performance as well as how well they have applied their strategies.

The above three points correlate with each other, and lay a good foundation in the application of metacognitive strategies in college English listening.

2.2. Pre-Listening

Pre-listening strategies refer to plan and organize before listening to get well prepared for the listening tasks. In other words, students should establish learning objectives and make good preparations by using planning strategy. In the listening classes of the two classes, the author directs the students to make preparations for listening from the following several points.

1) At the beginning of the term, the author asks the students to determine reasonable listening objectives and plans. In a whole, the students need to set up long-term and short-term objectives. Requirements for College English Teaching are a good model for students to follow in setting up long-term objectives. As to short-term objectives, students should decide according to their own requirements. Once the objectives are decided, the students need to carry them out strictly as planned. If the author finds their plans or objectives are improper, she'll help them to modify in time. Meanwhile, the author monitors their implementation.

2) The author provides them with background knowledge as well as language knowledge related to the listening materials. And before listening, the author explains to them new words, difficult grammatical points and some particular syntactical structures, and encourages them to make dialogues or read extensive materials about the texts after class, for the purpose of making good preparations for listening.

3) The author emphasizes that the students practice their ability of predicting. It is important for them to predict what they are going to listen in terms of the background knowledge and the questions given. While listening, they can verify their prediction.

4) The author teaches the students to focus their attention selectively. The students are asked to read through the four options of each question before listening, try to catch the main points of the listening materials for the first time of listening, and skip over some words or grammar they don't know and continue to listen till the end.

Take passage two of lesson 10-Pets (‖) (College English Focus Listening, Book

3, P. 56) as an example, the preparing tasks before listening classes are that the author introduces them background knowledge and asks them to go to the library or surf the internet to find information about animals or pets. Students knowing such words like "caged, taming, protection, ecosystem" can help them have a rough command of the material. Before listening, the teacher gives them the following questions to discuss:

a) Do you keep pets? Why or why not?

b) In your opinion, what animals can be good as pets?

c) How do you treat your pets if you have some? And how do most people?

d) Have you ever heard of blood sports? Can you guess what blood sports are? What are the effects of such kind of sports?

During class discussion, the students talk about the above questions so that they have a clear idea of what they are going to hear. And the questions, the background knowledge and the key words will make the students have expectations over the listening materials. And they'll listen more effectively later.

In a word, pre-listening strategies, which are to help students to make preparations for what they are going to hear, play an important role in metacognitive strategy training.

2.3. While-Listening

Monitoring strategy is one of the most important metacognitive strategies. While listening, the students conduct monitoring strategy, including monitoring comprehension of the listening materials, monitoring the application of learning strategies, and monitoring their attention.

1) Focus their attention selectively. Students should concentrate on the main information according to the key words and background knowledge. The author asks the students to read through the questions before listening. Then for the first time of listening, the author asks them to listen to the main ideas and logic relations of the materials, and then do roughly the exercises. For the second time of listening, the author asks them to listen carefully against the questions and try to finish them. And for the third time of listening, the author checks the answers for them and explains to them some important or difficult language points to let them have a full comprehension of the materials.

2) Figure out the contextual relations about the listening articles. The author asks them to grasp the linking methods of articles to know the main ideas and logic relations of the materials. For example, token words should be noticed. They include "at first", "secondly", "and then", "at last" and so on, which signify sequence; "but", "however", "though" and so on, which signify transition; "indeed", "in fact", "that is" and so on, which signify emphasis; and "so that", "as a result" and so on, which signify causes and results. By noticing those token words, students will have a better understanding of the materials they listen.

3) Take notes while listening. The teacher requires the students to take notes appropriate to themselves and also write down clearly the whole structure of the

listening materials. Chart abbreviations, tree diagrams, signs, and Chinese can be used for reference.

4) Monitor their attention. In the course of listening, few of the students don't stop to think over some words or grammatical points they don't know. The author directs them to concentrate on their listening, give up some unknown words or sentences, and follow the speakers. At the same time, the author emphasizes the importance of focusing selectively, and suggests noticing the first sentence of each paragraph to catch the main information.

Let me still take passage two of lesson 10-Pets (‖) (College English Focus Listening, Book 3, P. 56) as an example. By means of preparations before listening, the students have already known the key words and background knowledge of the passage. Then they come to listen to it: How do people treat animals?

While listening, the author directs the students to check their predictions before listening as well as monitor their comprehension of the passage. For the first time of listening, the author asks the students to catch the main idea of the passage and answer the questions in exercise 1. For the second time of listening, the author asks the students to notice the details and the developmental sequence of the passage and then finish exercise 2. For the third time of listening, the author asks the students to check the answers and explains to them difficult points. Every listening practice should be added with metacognitive strategy training so that the students can finally learn to use the strategies spontaneously and become autonomous learners.

2.4. Post-Listening

Evaluation strategy after listening, which is retrospection of the previous learning activities, directs students to self-evaluate. Self-evaluation is that students evaluate whether they have achieved their goals or whether they have applied listening strategies properly. Students need to answer the following questions: 1) What have I completed? 2) What strategies have I employed? 3) How have I used them? 4) What are the outcomes? 5) What else do I need to do? All of the five questions help students to evaluate their listening performance and evaluate their listening process. If the students are able to conduct self-evaluation seriously and accurately, they'll learn their listening ability, which helps them make proper plans next time. In the author's opinion, there are three steps in post-listening.

a) The author asks the students to retell what they hear and answer the five questions above. Meanwhile, the students are also asked to tell their ways of comprehending the listening materials as well as what they can't listen clearly.

b) The author organizes the students to make group discussion, make them learn from each other about the strategies they use, and ask each other the five questions. The author is also involved in their discussion about what strategies they use in some specific contents or how to solve problems they meet.

c) The author lets the students summarize and evaluate their listening processes, find out their shortcomings, and tell her what strategies they have used. Then the

author gives them suggestions about their application of metacognitive strategies.

Take passage two of lesson 16: Accidents and Disasters (College English Focus Listening, Book 3, P. 91) as an example. After listening, the author gives the students some questions to evaluate themselves. The students may discuss with each other about the following questions.

1) What would you do if you were the young driver?

2) What would you do if you were the old driver?

3) Who do you think should be criticized in the story, the young or the old driver? Why?

4) What strategies have you used?

5) How well do you use the strategies?

6) What are the effects of the strategies you use?

7) What improvements do you need to do?

By discussing and answering these questions, the students look back upon what they hear, reflect and evaluate the listening strategies they use and also learn their listening ability. During answering the questions, the students find some existing problems, make adjustments towards them in time, and thus are well prepared for the objectives and plans next time. The discussions between the students may help them strengthen their metacognitive awareness, and gradually cultivate their capacity of listening autonomously.

3. Discussion

At the end of the term, the author makes qualitative analysis of students' interviews and diaries. The author asks the randomly chosen ten students of the classes to hand in their diaries in which they keep their learning procedures and self-evaluation about their learning. The author also interviews them.

The author learns that most of the students make detailed plans for listening. For instance, some students make plans to solve the problems they meet in listening tasks, and some plan to listen to English news or see English movies every day to overcome their pronunciation problems by imitating foreigners' intonation and tone in them. And most of the students learn to monitor their listening processes, predict what they are going to hear by using background knowledge or the teacher's explanation in class, focus their attention on listening, and also take notes of important information while listening.

When the author interviews the same ten students about the effects of metacognitive strategy training, all of them think of it to be of great help to them. One interviewee says, "Your listening classes with metacognitive strategy training can arouse my metacognitive awareness. Before listening, I learn to make preparations for what I am going to hear by using planning strategy. And while listening, I'll try to monitor the whole listening process by using monitoring strategy in case I use some improper strategies which will hinder my listening. After the listening tasks finish, I'll conduct self-evaluation so that some good experience will be used for reference in my later listening tasks". When asked in which aspects metacognitive strategy training can be helpful to them, most of the students think it can help

them develop their autonomous listening ability. Another interviewee says, "In our previous listening classes, the teacher turns on the tape recorder for us to listen, and afterwards check answers. After receiving metacognitive strategy training for a semester, however, I have changed my mind. The listening classes should be student-centered. We should be responsible for our study, decide what we are going to listen, and finish the listening tasks independently while the teacher should be viewed as the director. I am delighted that I've made great progress in my English listening. As to me, metacognitive strategy training is the most helpful method I obtain in listening classes".

By means of interviews and diaries, the author knows most of the students seriously think about or grope for their own listening study. In a word, all of these materials help the author to know how well they have got mastery of metacognitive strategy.

Through collecting data of the research, the author makes analysis and discussions. The author concludes that after the training with metacognitive strategies students make great progress in all of the following three aspects: the application of metacognitive strategies, the ability of listening autonomously, and the ability of listening. The author also knows that the students can apply metacognitive strategies much better than before and they have developed their autonomous listening ability.

4. Conclusions

The outcomes are evidence to prove the research results by Thompson and Ji Kangli (2005): metacognitive training can improve students' listening ability [5] [6]. Actually, it can not only help improve students' listening performance, but also change their original learning attitudes to develop their autonomous listening ability [6]. Drawing on the experience of Wenden's experiment in 1991, the author combines metacognitive strategy training with listening study [7].

According to the statistics obtained from the sixteen-week research, the author analyzes that training students with metacognitive strategy can strengthen students' metacognitive awareness, develop their autonomous listening ability as well as their listening achievements.

After training, most of the students in the experimental class realize that it is of great importance to use metacognitive strategies. They learn to make their own plans before listening tasks begin, monitor their listening processes and find remedies at once when necessary, and evaluate the listening outcomes seriously after the tasks have been finished. As a result, they become interested in English listening, which is helpful to improve their listening achievements and cultivate their autonomous listening ability.

5. Limitations

The study with the small sample can't represent all the other students with other contexts. The subjects chosen in the research are the students of the two classes,

who can't represent all the other non-English majors in colleges. The sample should be enlarged and the outcomes of the research should be spread and verified again so that the affected factors could be controlled to the minimum and the validity would be maximized.

There are individualistic differences because of ignorance of the other two kinds of learning strategies: cognitive and affective strategies. In this experiment, the experimental class is trained with metacognitive strategies only. There will be better results if researchers afterwards design training with all of the three kinds of learning strategies: cognitive strategy, metacognitive strategies and affective strategy.

The purpose of metacognitive strategy training is to make the students be responsible for their learning, so the students should be given more opportunities to practice metacognitive strategies.

The time length of the research is a little shorter. The training doesn't last long enough to make the students practice repeatedly about metacognitive strategies. So whether the students have fully mastered metacognitive strategies should be verified longer and further. Accordingly, metacognitive strategy training should always be integrated into listening classes.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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