



An Action Research Plan for Developing and Implementing The Students' Listening Comprehension Skills

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Abstract

This is a proposal for an action research plan designed to find out how to improve students' listening comprehension skills, enhance their performance and help to promote better learning. This plan is focused on the minority students who major in English in our University. Listening comprehension is one of the most difficult courses for them. As their teacher, the author would like to conduct an action research in her classroom teaching in order to make some changes in her teaching, to assist the students to become active listeners, and to improve their overall listening comprehension skills.

Keywords: Action research, Listening comprehension, Minority students

1. Introduction

Listening is the basic language skill in language learning. However, students always think it is difficult to listen well. To foster the students' listening comprehension skills and prepare them as active listeners in language learning is a big challenge. Scholars and researchers have done a lot of research to help students to acquire the skills. However, we cannot rely on some methodologies completely. We might see that apart from the methodologies, we also need to know that we face individual student differences: their learning styles, their backgrounds, and their cultures in teaching. In different classrooms, teachers have to adopt different teaching methods to be with their own students. Action research offers an opportunity for classroom teachers to do the research by themselves, improve their teaching, and make adjustments when necessary. This paper intends to propose an action research plan and attempts to inquire into the educational situation, understand the students' skills and their situation better and act to improve both. (Kanu, Stansky & Carson, 1993).

2. Problem statement

I am an EFL teacher in a Nationalities University in China. My students are in the first and second year of University. They major in English. I teach the course called "Listening Comprehension". The aim of the course is to train the aural skills of the students so that they understand English. According to the curriculum, I use a set of text-books "Step by Step" with tapes attached, published by Shanghai Huadong Normal University in China. I also use other authentic teaching aids, such as movies on tape and BBC and VOA (Special English for Learners) on radio, etc. in my listening comprehension course.

During more than twenty years of teaching, I have found that it is very difficult for my students to understand English through listening. In language learning, when we talk about five basic skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, we always put "listening" at the beginning of them. That is because listening is the most important skill of the five and also the basic way of receiving language input. As we know we can speak sensibly only if we understand what is said. In fact, people cannot talk if they cannot hear other people's talk. That simply means there is not enough language input and there is no output. No deaf person can speak clearly because he cannot hear clearly. So listening skills are one of the basics of learning languages and acquiring them is very important in language learning. Moreover, with the development of high technology, we more and more rely on our ears to get information. There is no doubt that the speed of getting information is faster through listening than reading. Thus, it is crucial to improve the level of listening comprehension of my students.

Usually, in the lab, the students feel at a loss when listening to some new text. Over 50% of the students could not understand the meaning of the material after I play the tape for the first time. Expecting them to understand the material, I often give them some instructions and to play the tape again, at least three times. Still, at least 20% of students might not understand it. And then, I sometimes have to stop the tape to explain the difficult or unfamiliar words and occasionally explain material sentence by sentence through the whole text. So, this is a serious problem because some

students cannot understand the whole text after listening to it three times in class. Furthermore, the students might gradually lose their self-confidence. They are afraid to go to the lab to listen to English again. When they are face to face with English speaking people, they have little confidence in their listening comprehension abilities. Therefore, they may not understand them because they have to battle the psychological suggestion that they could not understand spoken English.

Some courses might be the reason hindering the students from understanding spoken English. First, our students begin to learn English by the way of reading, instead of listening. Most students are from different minority areas. In some schools, there are no language labs to train their listening skills. Listening activities are not common for the students. When they come to university, they cannot adjust their study habits very quickly. They still rely on their eyes instead of their ears to learn English. In fact, reading is different from listening, like writing is different from speech. The biggest difference is that speech consists of sounds. Listeners must know the sound system; otherwise, they cannot understand speech. Moreover, writing uses different language. Written English consists of neat, correct sentences, while speech does not.

Second, the materials on the tape are usually read by English speaking people. There are different accents, difficult idioms and unfamiliar language chunks in their speaking. This is another difficulty. For our students, their English teachers are usually local people. So the students may not be used to the accents of the foreign people. It is hard for them to understand native speakers.

Third, when English-speaking people speak English, they usually speak at a normal speed. It is too fast for our students to follow. When listening, the students cannot choose a comfortable listening speed, they have to keep pace with the speaker's thinking process. So sometimes they have not even got the meaning of the first sentence, before the second sentence has already passed. Their results show that they have missed the whole passage.

Finally, the contents of the tape are not always familiar with our students. Some of them are not relevant to our students. Our students may lack the background knowledge about foreign countries and cultures. So sometimes they cannot understand the material or they may misunderstand the meaning of it.

Therefore, I am researching the problems of our students' listening comprehension and intend to find out what can be done to help them improve their listening skills. With the results of this research, the department will be able to implement a plan to develop the students' listening skills. So I would like to do some interventions to see whether I can improve their abilities in listening comprehension.

3. Research questions

What is the initial listening ability?

How do the new tapes affect the acquisition of listening skills?

What do the students do in developing their own listening skills?

How do they become active listeners?

4. Review of literature

Geoffrey E Mills states "Action research has the potential to be a powerful agent of educational change. Action research helps to develop teachers and administrators with professional attitudes that embrace action, progress, and reform rather than stability and mediocrity" (p. v). In the article of "An overview of the methodological Approach of Action Research," Rory O'Brien defines action research as "learning by doing" – a group of people identifies a problem, does something to resolve it, sees how successful their efforts were, and, if not satisfied, tries again (p. 28). According to Carson, Kanu, and Stanski, "Action research is, therefore, an attempt to inquire into our educational situations, understand them better and act to improve them" (p. 1). These theories gave me ideas about why and how to do my action research to improve the students' listening comprehension skills in my class.

An additional literature review assisted me in planning my interventions. One study talks about the theory of listening comprehension and practice. According to the author, the purpose of listening is to get a reasonable understanding of what the speaker said, not the "correct" understanding (Brouwer, 2002). Another study found that listeners constructed meaning from the oral input by drawing upon their prior knowledge of the world and of the target language (Byrnes, 1984; Nagle & Sanders, 1986). Ming Yee Carissa Young did a piece of action research and found that the use of the cognitive strategies Inference and Elaboration were the most salient to many of the listeners, especially when they did not know the topic of the spoken message before listening (pp. 35-53). Brouwer stresses that listening is many things, most often taking place in an interactive process where listening and speaking take place simultaneously (2002). In his study, Wang (2006) summarizes that applying action research in teaching English listening helps teachers to find problems in their teaching systematically and resolve them accordingly, and consequently improve the teaching of English listening effectively.

5. Research Plan

5.1 Intervention

First, I would like to require my students to listen to English attentively in and out of class and give them assignments to listen to the radio or tapes after class and make morning reports on what they heard on the previous day. Second, I would require them read foreign newspapers, esp. the latest news and other various articles wherever they can find them in order to enlarge their knowledge and get familiar with different cultures. Third, I would arrange the recorded materials at the speed of 100 words per minute to be used at the beginning of the course to attempt to provide them with an easy transition to be a successful listener. Finally, I would discuss and adopt some skills and strategies in listening to adequately prepare their confidence in listening to English.

5.2 Data collection

The first research question is: What is the initial listening ability? I would collect data by:

requiring students to do a pre-test,
checking their College Entrance Examination scores,
interviewing students to ask open-ended questions.

The second research question is: How do the new tapes affect the acquisition of listening skills? I would like to collect the data by:

requiring students to do a pre-test on previous materials,
observing the students' own reflection on process,
requiring students to do a post-test on new materials.

The third research question is: What do the students do in developing their own listening skills? I would like to collect the data by:

requiring students to listen to English after class, such as news, short stories, songs and etc., and keep journals,
requiring students to do extracurricular reading, including foreign newspapers and periodicals,
requiring them to make a report on the radio news in class.

The final research question is: How do they become active listeners? I would like to collect the data by:

observing students' activities in class and keeping journals,
requiring other teachers to observe the students in my class and their own classes and to keep journals,
checking students' scores in my class and other classes,
requiring students to do a post-test.

Those pre-tests are chosen from CanTEST (Canadian Test of English for Scholars and Trainees). The post-tests are taken from TEM (Test in English Major – Grade Four).

5.3 Statement of Resource

Equipment for recording and a technician to make a perfect recording are needed. Foreign teachers are needed to record the listening materials we require. We need time both for the researchers and cooperating teachers. The CanTEST and The TEM (Grade Four) are needed.

5.4 Membership

Two teachers who teach Listening Comprehension, Miss Li and I, will share the tasks in this study. I will focus on Class One and Miss Li will focus on Class Two. Another two teachers, Ms. Zhang and Mr. Wang, who teach Intensive English and Extensive English in the same grade, will be invited to be our critics in the action research. They will observe the students in listening classes and their own classes and keep journals.

5.5 Negotiations

“Because action research is carried out in real-world circumstances, and involves close and open communication among the people involved, the researchers must pay close attention to ethical considerations in the conduct of their work” (Rory O'Brien 1998). So my action research plan will be presented to the Dean with the intent of getting approval, seeking support and financial aid. It will also be made known among all the teachers in the department in teachers' meetings to seek understanding and collaboration. Finally, consent forms will be signed and collected from participants in the study.

5.6 Analysis and interpretations of data

After compiling the results of pre-tests, post-tests, interviews, and journals, we, researchers and critics, will sit down together to compare, analyze and evaluate initial data collected to the data from the end of the study. We will review what we have learned and draw conclusions about we think the data mean. We will then decide whether to do more research or to determine which steps to take next. Finally, we will prepare a report of the study, including follow-up action. This report will be presented to the Dean with the hope that our department will be able to implement a plan to develop the students' listening comprehension skills.

5.7 Timeline

Phrase I (July – August) Identify area of focus, review related literature, develop research questions, prepare the paper work of the action research and invite two foreign teachers to record new materials for the listening comprehension course.

Phrase II (September – October) Collect initial data from pre-test and interview students. Use new tapes in classes, observe the whole class and evaluate present practices.

Phrase III (October – November) Modify the teacher's input in class, continue practice and collect data.

Phrase IV (December – January) Collect data from post-test, compare and evaluate initial data collected to the subsequent data. Prepare a report of the study, including follow-up action.

6. Conclusion

This study has developed an action research plan, only the initial step of this enquiry. "Stephen Kemmis has developed a simple model of the cyclical nature of the typical action research process. Each cycle has four steps: plan, act, observe, reflect" (Rory O'Brien, 1998). In the plan, the author aims at exploring possibilities for applying action research in her teaching practice in order to improve teaching practice in listening in the classroom, and furthermore to develop and implement the students' listening comprehension skills.

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