Non-English Majors' Listening Teaching based on Lexical Chunks Theory and Schema Theory

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Abstract

English listening is seen as a vital means of linguistic input for Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, which lays a solid foundation for English learning and communication with English speakers. Besides, with increasing of scores of the listening part in the newly-reformed CET-4 and CET-6 (CET refers to college English test in China and both tests are the evaluation criteria of non-English majors' English proficiency), it is urgent to improve non-English majors' listening abilities in language teaching. However, students find listening to English stressful and painful and it is hard for them to process information quickly enough when listening. Meanwhile, their listening abilities cannot be improved effectively by the traditional English listening teaching methods. Researchers at home and abroad have discussed listening strategies, but seldom study the combination of lexical chunks theory and schema theory in improving non-English majors' listening. Therefore, this research first proposes a lexical chunks schema-oriented listening teaching method which can effectively improve non-English majors' listening abilities and then conducts an empirical study to verify its effectiveness. As the lexical chunks schema-oriented listening teaching method suggests, activities about memorization, recognition and reconstruction of lexical chunks, activation of the existed schema and building up new schema should be carried out in pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening in the listening class.

Keywords: lexical chunks schema-oriented listening teaching method, non-English majors, memorization, recognition, reconstruction, activation, building up

1. Introduction

Listening, as a vital input activity, has a great impact on English speaking and plays an indispensable role in communication with English speakers. Students with poor listening competence usually have great trouble in communicating with English speakers. Chinese non-English majors' English teaching has always put too much emphasis on students' scores of reading and writing instead of their communicative abilities in the past decades, but now increasing scores of listening parts in the newly-reformed CET-4 and CET-6 asks for students' strong listening competence as well as the innovation of teachers' listening teaching methods. Compared with reading, writing and speaking, listening is the part that students feel most painful, for it requires effective listening learning methods and lasting efforts and courage with which students practice listening, fail in listening comprehension and fight to listen again. Although listening teaching has been paid more attention than before, the results are far from satisfactory. Most teachers in colleges still regard listening as a passive receptive process in which teachers explain meanings and usage of some words and phrases, then ask students to listen and finally teachers check answers, while students passively receive the incoming information. It is obvious that the traditional listening class is teacher-centered and students feel bored with listening as receivers. Gradually they lose all interest in the listening class, not to mention improving their listening abilities. Therefore, it is of significance to find a more effective way to improve students' listening competence and thus this study proposes a lexical chunks schema-oriented listening method which is effective in facilitating students' listening proficiency. Then an experiment is done to verify the effectiveness of the proposed method.

2. The Proposed Lexical Chunks Schema-oriented Listening Teaching Method

Lexical chunks theory and schema theory are reviewed and functions of lexical chunks and schema are explored in the following. Moreover, how lexical chunks and schema function together in improving students' listening

abilities is discussed and a lexical chunks schema-oriented listening teaching method in listening class is proposed by the author.

2.1 Lexical Chunks in Improving Listening Abilities

Amid different definitions of lexical chunks, Nattinger and Decarrio's (1992) is the most widely-accepted one in which lexical chunks are defined as lexical phrases of varying length with special discourse functions, as multi-word lexical phenomena that exist somewhere between the traditional poles of lexicon and syntax and as conventionalized form that occur more frequently and have more idiomatically determined meaning than language that is put together each time. Put simply, lexical chunks which are fixed or semi-fixed frequently-used syntactical structures with discourse functions are stored and generated as a whole in the process of language learning. The Classification of lexical chunks by Nattinger and Decarrio (1992) falls into four types, namely poly words, institutional expression, sentence builders and phrasal constraints. As combinations of grammar, meaning and context, lexical chunks offer the theoretical basis to lexical chunks listening teaching method. One sentence as follows is taken as an example to explore the role of lexical chunks in the process of listening. "For instance, your parents do have their own unique experiences that may make their advice helpful and having participated in a great deal of your personal history." If poly word "for instance", institutional expression "do have" and "make helpful" and phrasal constraints "unique experiences", "personal history", "participate in" and " a great deal" are stored as prefabricated structures by listeners, the process of listening to this sentence will go smoothly. It means that ready-made lexical chunks can enhance students' listening comprehension speed. What's more, memorization and recognition of the existed lexical chunks and reconstruction of new lexical chunks in the listening class help students grasp the main information and speed up information-processing when listening. In communication, since one utterance is produced within seconds, listening comprehension is decided by the short-term memory of listeners. Carrolls (2000) poses that three dimensions of memory are sensory memory, short-term memory and long-term memory. On the basis of dimensions of memory, the listening process can be described in this way. At first, information is presented in sensory memory for two seconds. Then Information –processing occurs in short-term memory for ten to twenty seconds and finally the newly-input information is stored in long-term memory. After repeated training of memorization, recognition and reconstruction of lexical chunks in listening class, students could immediately identify them without analyzing each word in sentences. In other words, lexical chunks enlarge the information-processing in short-term memory. However, it is not sufficient to memorize, recognize and reconstruct lexical chunks in some contexts. Combined with schema, lexical chunks are memorized, recognized and reconstructed to improve students' listening competence effectively.

2.2 Schema in Improving Listening Abilities

Brown and Yule (1983:247) put forward that schema is high-level complex (even conventional and habitual) knowledge structure, functioning as scaffolding in the organization and interpretation of experience. In traditional eyes, Listening process is bottom-up process or top-down process. Bottom-up process stresses on sounds, words and grammatical structures, while top-down process focuses on understanding texts. In view of schema theory, listening process is described as the interactive one, which is neither exclusively bottom-up process nor exclusively top-down process. To achieve successful listening, it is necessary for students to associate their existed background knowledge with the incoming information of listening materials, which shows interaction is involved in listening process. Students who do not have adequate schema find it hard to accomplish successful listening comprehension. In the interactive listening process, the existed schema is activated and new schema is constructed. However, not only is listening related to the profound background knowledge schema provides, but also lexical chunks play a key role in it. Accordingly, a lexical chunks schema-oriented listening teaching is proposed by the author, aiming at improving students' listening scores and facilitating students' listening abilities.

2.3 Proposed Lexical Chunks Schema-oriented Listening Teaching Method

Mary Underwood (1989) poses that good listening teaching model includes pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening. On the basis of this theory, the lexical chunks schema-oriented listening teaching method is designed by the author, in order to improve students' listening scores and listening abilities.

2.3.1 Pre-listening Stage

Warming-up activities are conducted in pre-listening stage in order to make students familiarize with lexical chunks of listening materials, as well as activate their existed schema and build up new schema, thereby arousing students' interest in listening and improving their listening proficiency. Students recognize, memorize and reconstruct lexical chunks. Meanwhile their existed schema is activated and the new schema is established. As

for teachers, they design such warming-up activities as group-discussion, recitation, brainstorming, semantic mapping and guessing. In group-discussion, students are divided into groups to discuss the topic of listening materials so as to activate their existed schema and lexical chunks. Speaking of brainstorming, it is one kind of discussions initiated by teachers to talk about students' experiences and ideas associated with titles of listening materials. After the brainstorming, some students come to draw a map of lexical chunks under the schema on the blackboard, while other students make supplements. Then students move to read through listening comprehension questions and circle the lexical chunks, trying best to activate the existed schema and build up new schema. In addition, teachers can arrange contests about reciting lexical chunks, which are conducive for memorization and reconstruction of lexical chunks in the listening process. In the pre-listening stage, teachers act as instructors who help extend the lexical chunks and schema, while students benefit from the above-mentioned activities.

2.3.2 While-listening Stage

In the while-listening stage, several activities can be carried out in order to help students achieve successful listening. First, in class students are asked to listen to a short passage three times and write down lexical chunks as many as possible. Second, replacement exercises of lexical chunks are implemented in the listening class in which students first write down the lexical chunks they heard and then associate other lexical chunks with similar meanings to replace the original ones. Third, after practicing writing down lexical chunks, students listen to the same material and write down its main information, which means students take notes when listening. Fourth, based on the schema theory, students are trained to make prediction, association and inferences. In other words, students can predict what the speaker will say according to their existed schema. By associating information students get from listening materials with their existed lexical chunks and schema, students are able to revise and reconstruct their existed lexical chunks and schema and finally build up new schema, thereby inferring the listening information successfully. As to teachers, they need to provide the well-designed or well-selected Interesting listenable monologues, dialogues, passages, news, speeches and short videos for students. When students have problems in taking down complete information, teachers assist them in writing lexical chunks in forms of abbreviation, signals and diagrams.

2.3.3 Post-listening Stage

What distinguishes the lexical chunks schema-oriented listening teaching method from traditional listening teaching methods is that it not only pays attention to pre-listening stage and while-listening stage, but also attaches importance to post-listening stage. The following post-listening activities are advised by the author. First, students are required to repeat sentences, make sentences and reconstruct dialogues and passages with the help of the lexical chunks they had written in the while-listening stage. After reconstruction of sentences, students are supposed to identify lexical chunks. If any lexical chunk is forgotten or omitted, other students make supplements. Second, after listening, students are asked to retell the story, while teachers assist students by providing cues and reminders related to lexical chunks and schema. Third, other consolidation activities such as note-checking, role-play, debate, speeches and summarizing can also be carried out in the post-listening stage so as to reinforce newly-input lexical chunks and new schema. Fourth, after-class assignments about memorization, recognition and reconstruction of lexical chunks as well as reconstruction of schema help students store lexical chunks and schema in long-term memory and retrieve immediately when necessary.

What is the ultimate objective of pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening in lexical chunks schema-oriented listening teaching method is to improve students' listening competence and achieve listening comprehension. In order to verify the validity of the proposed method, an experiment is done by the author.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Participants

The research is carried out among 96 freshmen who are non-English majors from 2 classes in China West Normal University. A pre-test is taken at the beginning of the research and the test paper is the listening part of the CET 4 of June 2012. All 96 students take the pre-test. According to analysis of results of the pre-test, the listening proficiency of the two classes doesn't make much difference. Therefore, the author takes one class as the experimental class (EC), and another one as the control class (CC). There are 48 students in each class. The two classes are taught by the author herself, with the same teaching materials and the same amount of lessons. The lexical chunks schema-oriented listening teaching method is implemented in EC, while traditional listening teaching method is used in CC.

3.2 Instruments

In the research, pre-test and post-test are put into use. To ensure the reliability and validity, the listening part of CET-4 June 2012 is taken as the pre-test paper and the listening part of CET-4 December 2012 is taken as the post-test paper. Listening part consists of 8 short conversations, 2 long conversations, 3 passages and 1 compound dictation. The full mark is 35 according to hundred mark system. The final scores of post-test suggest students' improvement in listening proficiency.

3.3 Research Procedure

At the beginning of the research, students in EC and CC take the pre-test. Under the similar teaching circumstances, the author begins to implement the lexical chunks schema-oriented listening teaching method in EC and the traditional method in CC within 12 weeks. There are two periods of listening class each week, 40 minutes per period. Teaching material is from unit 1 to unit 10 in New College English listening Course 1(Second Edition). The teaching plan is designed as follows.

Table 1. Teaching plan in EC

Week	Activity
1	Introducing concepts of lexical chunks and schema in listening class; conducting recognition of lexical chunks and schema and replacement exercises in while-listening; conducting note-checking in post-listening
2	Recitation of lexical chunks and schema in pre-listening; replacement exercises and making prediction, association and inference in while-listening; note-checking and story- retelling in post-listening
3	Brainstorming and semantic mapping in pre-listening; replacement exercises and making prediction, association and inference in while-listening; note-checking and group discussion in post-listening
4	Group discussion in pre-listening; replacement exercises and making prediction, association and inference in while-listening; note-checking and speeches in post-listening
5	Guessing and prediction in pre-listening; replacement exercises and making prediction, association and inference in while-listening; note-checking and retelling in post-listening
6	Reinforcing of recitation of lexical chunks and schema in pre-listening; replacement exercises and make prediction, association and inference in while-listening; note-checking and debate in post-listening
7	Brainstorming and semantic mapping in pre-listening; replacement exercises and make prediction, association and inference in while-listening; note-checking and retelling in post-listening
8	Group discussion in pre-listening; replacement exercises and making prediction, association and inference in while-listening; note-checking and role-play in post-listening
9	Guessing and prediction in pre-listening; replacement exercises and making prediction, association and inference in while-listening; note-checking and memorization contest in post-listening
10	Reinforcing of recitation of lexical chunks and schema in pre-listening; replacement exercises and making prediction, association and inference in while-listening; note-checking and story- retelling in post-listening
11	Summarization and full-discussion in pre-listening; replacement exercises and making prediction, association and inference in while-listening; note-checking and summarization in post-listening
12	Posttest

4. Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data are collected from pre-test and post-test. In the pre-test, 96 test papers are distributed and collected with the effectiveness rate of test-paper is 100%. In the 12th week, 96 students take the post-test and the effectiveness rate of the test-paper is 100%. The collected data are analyzed by SPSS17.0. Two independent-sample t-tests are used to examine whether there is significant difference of results between EC and CC before and after the experiment, and two paired-samples t-tests are used to examine whether there is statistical significance of application of

lexical chunks schema-oriented listening teaching method in EC and of application of traditional listening teaching method in CC.

Table 2. T-tests of Pre-test scores and Post-test scores in EC and CC

	Pretest	Posttest	T	p
CC(n=48)	17.40±2.30	17.67±2.60	1.908	0.063
EC(n=48)	16.79±2.71	19.77±2.53	27.243	0.000**
T	1.176	4.017		
P	0.243	0.000**		

As shown in Table 2, the results of t-test of pretest scores of EC and CC indicate that there is no difference between EC and CC (T=1.176, P=0.243>0.05), which means there is no difference before the experiment. The results of t-test of posttest scores of EC and CC indicate that there is remarkable difference between EC and CC (T=4.017, P<0.05), which shows that there is significant difference after the experiment of application of lexical chunks schema-oriented listening teaching method in EC. The results of t-test of pretest scores and posttest scores in CC indicate that there is no difference between pretest scores and posttest scores in CC (T=1.908, P=0.063>0.05), which means there is no statistical significance. The results of t-test of pretest scores and posttest scores in EC indicates that there is remarkable difference between pretest scores and posttest scores in EC (T=27.243, P<0.05), which shows that conducting this experiment is statistically significant to facilitate non-English majors' listening proficiency. Moreover, it is obvious that schema-oriented listening teaching method is of great help in improving students' listening scores and abilities.

5. Implications

This research proposes that the lexical chunks schema-oriented listening teaching method is an effective way to make students do better in listening comprehension and proves this view by conducting an experiment among 96 freshmen who are non-English majors in China West Normal University. The implications of this research are summed up as follows. First, students are aware of the importance of lexical chunks and schema in the listening process. Second, the proposed lexical chunks schema listening teaching method works well in the experimental class. The proposed method is demonstrated effectively by the means of the statistical analysis, which provides a new way for teachers to prepare the listening class in which students are not the passive receivers or the tape recorders but the active listeners and speakers. Third, as the results of scores of pretest and posttest of CC and EC show, memorization, recognition and reconstruction of lexical chunks and activation and reconstruction of schema can improve students' scores in CET-4 listening part and facilitate their listening competence. Fourth, it is feasible to implement lexical chunks schema-oriented listening teaching approach in non-English majors' listening class. Many activities can be conducted in the pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening. Students not only have abundant knowledge of lexical chunks and schema, but also are trained to memorize, recognize, reinforce and build up new ones. In doing so, their listening abilities are on the rise as the research goes. Simultaneously, implementing the lexical chunks schema-oriented listening teaching method in the classroom involves a change in the teacher's mindset. Activities consistent with this method must be directed toward raising students' awareness of the lexical chunks and schema in the nature of language. Seen from the comparative experiment, imparting the knowledge of lexical chunks and schema has been proved to be an effective way and students in the experimental class are delighted to make use of this method in class and after class, which means this method has produced a far-reaching effect on non-English majors' listening learning. By implementing the lexical chunks schema-oriented listening teaching method, students benefit a lot when they have got satisfactory marks in their listening comprehension and improved their listening competence. Therefore, it is highly recommended by the author that lexical chunks schema-oriented listening teaching method should be applied in a larger scale such as in junior English listening class, senior English listening class, vocational college English listening class and English majors' listening class in China. For the next research, the author can study English majors' listening by means of lexical chunks schema-oriented listening teaching method. .

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