Retrospects and Introspects of Researches on Listening Strategies at Home and Abroad

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Abstract

Listening strategies refer to thoughts or activities that language learners often use in the process of listening. Listening strategies are the vital branches of learning strategies, and as researches of learning strategies become a specialized research field, researches of listening strategies have spread to the aspects of meta-cognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, socialized and affective strategies, strategy-training, strategy-guiding, strategy-instruction etc. In recent years, with the continuous efforts of scholars at home and abroad, researches of listening strategies tend to be more elaborate in depth and length, which reflects on research contents, research fields, research methods, research subjects etc. In this paper, the authors have mainly made researches on the research status quo of English listening strategies at home and abroad and have given reflections on the research deficiencies. It is expected that we could improve both the learners' listening proficiency and the strategy-instruction in EFL classrooms at home and abroad.

Keywords: English listening strategies, strategy-training, strategy-instruction, research status quo

1. Background Introduction

1.1 Studies on Language Learning Strategies at Home and Abroad

In the journal "Method of Inference in Foreign Language Study" of Aaron Carton (1966), he held the viewpoint that learners showed different characteristics on the abilities of adept inference and reasonable inference, which opened the door to studies on learning strategies. Later, Aaron Carton (1971) published papers to detailedly discuss the inference clues containing intralingual clue, interlingual clue and extra-lingual clue. He thought language learning was a process of solving problems, and then learners could bring previous knowledge and experiences into this process (Qian, 2004). In 1972, Selinker (1972, pp. 209-231) differentiated language learning strategies and language pragmatic strategies; in 1975, Rubin officially started the prologue of inquiring language learning strategies. On the basis of the journal "What the Good Learner Can Teach Us?". During the same period, Naiman and others (1975) carried out studies on successful language learners, Stern (1975, pp. 304-318) listed the most ten frequently-used strategies by good language learners, later on, from which he generalized and summarized into four efficient learning strategies, they are active planning strategy, academic strategy, social strategy and affective strategy. From 1974 to 1975, Naiman & Stern etc. cooperated on a large-scale research into language learning strategies; in 1978, they cooperated to publish the classic book "The Good Language Learner" (amended in 1996).

Wong-Fillmore (1979) proposed that learning strategy was much more like a social psychological identity management, and did not have too much direct contact with language learning itself, but behind these social strategies, cognitive strategies played the actual role. O'Malley & Chamot (1990) argued that in the second language learning, learners would use several learning strategies: meta-cognitive strategies (planning, self-discipline, management, etc.), cognitive strategies (all strategies that can help learners to understand, such as the use of previous learned knowledge), socialized and affective strategies (such as questioning and self-esteem).

In the 80s and 90s of 20th century, many monographs (Wenden & Rubin, 1987; Oxford, 1990; O'Malley, & Chamot, 1990; Wenden, 1991; Cohen, 1998 etc.) on language learning strategies were published abroad. Studies on language learning strategies have agreements of the scholars from then on (Jiang, 2014). Schramm (2001)

took the "audio thinking" as a research method on language learning strategies, enriching the research angle of view on learning strategies. Hereafter, studies of language learning strategies have been greatly developed on the breadth and depth, research hotspots cover more aspects of this field.

In ancient China, the character "Ce" and the character "Lue" exist independently. Shi (2001, p. 588) argued that the "Ce" has the meanings of whipping, response, ploting etc; the "Lue" has the meanings of cruising, statutes, planning etc. Due to their same meaning of plotting, so they are merged by the identical word "strategy", denoting the stratagem and means. When the word "strategy" is used for learning, it refers to ways of intention-choosing activities that learners consciously regulate and control their own learning content, learning time, learning sequence, learning steps, and learning methods according to their own learning status, the complexity of learning objects.

Although there was no certain learning strategies, but it never lacked relevant theories about leaning stategies. Confucius once proposed "learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous", through the dialectical relationship between learning and thinking. Confucius expounded the importance of learning strategies, "When you know a thing, to hold that you know it; and when you do not know a thing, to allow that you do not know it; this is knowledge." They are requirements for one person who understand their own understandings of the knowledge, the universe and themselves, reflecting the emphasis on metacognitive strategies. The motto "After learning that one knows his deficiency, and after teaching one discovers his confusion, insufficient knowledge can cause self-examination; knowing trapped can cause self-improvement" in the Note of Learning embodies the roles of metacognitive strategies in the teaching process.

Compared with studies at abroad, although the related studies in China start in the late ten years, the momentum of development is rapid. Domestic scholars not only have made a comprehensive and objective evaluation to the related foreign theories, enriching and developing the learning strategy theory, but also have many beneficial attempts and discussions in terms of those studies on learning strategies' functions in prompting and upgrading the language skills of students. Wu (1994), Zhuang & Shu (1994), Qin (1996), Zhang (1998) etc. introduced the significance, methods, themes, classifications and results of the related studies at abroad. Researchers also surveyed and described methods of foreign language learning strategies, such as Wang & Yuan (1992) surveyed students' ways of learning foreign language in our country, Wen (1995) had case analysis of learning methods of successful and unsuccessful people in the process of learning English etc. Some scholars also discussed the relationship between learning strategies and language learning and the relationship between learning strategies and learning performance (Wu, 1993; Wen, 1995 & 1996; Ma, 1997). Wang (1998) described present research status quo of vocabulary memorization strategies which belonged to second language learning strategies; Zhang (1998) studied the relationship between foreign language learning motivation and strategy use, it was concluded that strong learning motivation could lead to the extensive use of learning strategies (quoted from Wang, 2000).

Learning strategies have played an important role in the research field of second language acquisition. No agreement on what are the exact learning strategies has been reached in the present academic circle. On the basis of the existing documentation, opinions about the definition of learning strategies by different scholars at home and abroad: (1) view the learning strategies as the concrete means and techniques (Mayer, 1988); (2) view the learning strategies as the procedures and steps of learning (Rigney, 1978); (3) view the learning strategies as the implicit system of learning rules (Duffy, 1982); (4) view the learning strategies as the learning process of students (Nisbert, 1986). (quoted from Yaofang Shi as a secondary source, 2001). Above-mentioned opinions have disclosed the characteristics of learning strategies from different angles; have combined with opinions of different scholars at home and abroad, learning strategies refer to the procedures, rules, means, techniques and have adjusted manners of efficient learning in the learning activities. Both the implicit ruling systems and the explicit operating procedures belong to learning strategies.

1.2 Studies on English Listening Strategies at Home and Abroad

Listening strategy research is boomingly developed on the basis of learning strategy research. Foreign scholars Mendelsohn (1995), MacIntyre & Noels (1996) and Cohen (1998) suggested that in the second language classroom of listening courses, listening strategies teaching should be adopted while the fact that listening strategies could improve the learners' listening proficiency was ascertained (Cheng, 2009). Listening strategies are an important part of language learning strategies; and listening strategy research in China began to develop in the early 1990s, later the articles of listening strategy research published on the authoritative journals had emerged (Wang & Yuan, 1992; Jiang, 1994; Wen, 1995; Liu, 1996; Wang, 2000 etc.). Entering the 21st century, researches on English listening strategies are increasing; in this paper, based on studies of English listening strategies at home and abroad, the author reviews the development phase of domestic related researches, the

research status and the developing tendency. At the same time, the authors reflect on deficiencies of previous researches in order to cause attentions of English teachers and listening strategy researchers, and to enlighten English listening teaching in China.

Foreign English listening strategy researches are mainly to explore the significance, classifications and methods of listening learning strategies, relevant factors affecting listening comprehension, and the relationship between language levels and listening strategy use and training, training learners to use listening strategies. For example, DeFillipis (1980) discovered that among junior French students, in the course of the second semester, the "proficiency" group and the "unskilled" group have more similarities than differences in using listening comprehension strategies. Murphy (1985) made a research on the medium level of ESL undergraduate students, found that the "high level" students focused more on "personality", reasoning, assuming and self-description than the "low level" students and tended to use "wide-type distribution" strategy, but the latter tended to use textual strategy. O'Malley et al. (1989) made a contrast between the "efficient" group and the "inefficient" group and concluded that students of the "efficient" group students were better at using self-monitoring, exploitation and reasoning strategies than those of the "inefficient" group.

Laviosa (1991) conducted a case study on a high level of five Italian students, found that although each subject employed very different listening comprehension strategies, the various listening comprehension strategies that they used were closely related. Rost & Ross (1991) had a survey on various levels of second language students, primary level and intermediate/advanced group, observed that students of the primary level were apt to use the general questioning strategy; students of the higher levels were inclined to use leading reasoning strategy and continuous signal strategy. Vandergrift (1992) studied on French students with the primary level group and intermediate level group, realized that students of the primary level mainly used pointing, transfer and reasoning and other cognitive strategies, students of the intermediate level were adept at employing pointing, reasoning and other cognitive strategies, but the latter group were more adept at using metacognitive strategies.

Bacon (1992) and Vogely (1995) also had different types of listening strategies on EFL students. But foreign scholars' researches still existed the following problems: 1) the number of participants is not big enough; 2) the grouping of the subjects has no clear scientific evidences; 3) the definitions of some variables are at the risk of "cyclical" mistakes; 4) the use of introspection and reflection method is still with strong subjectivity; 5) some studies fail to successfully answer whether listening comprehension strategies are suitable for specific problems, namely: in what specific cases where listening comprehension strategies are most appropriate and effective?

2. Development Stages of Researches at Home and Abroad on Listening Strategies

Listening strategy researching in western countries actually has a history of nearly 30 years. Since the 1960s, with the development of modern cognitive psychology, people have learned that the mankind's cognitive activities are including extremely complex thinking and the problem-solving process. So, the learners' implicit thinking process and the learning process have become the focus of the study. Gradually, since the 1970s, psychologists and educators have realized the significance of the researching on learning strategies, namely, paying attention to listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, at the same time, not ignoring learning methods, strategies, and even advanced skills of learning and training. A well-systemed researching with more specification of listening comprehension strategies originated in the learning strategy research, and rose and the prospered as the second language acquisition, experimental psychological linguistics and other disciplines developed, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was an unprecedented research climax about listening strategies, since then the researching on listening strategies has been developing healthily and circularly.

Listening strategy research in China started in the 1990s and had the rapid development in the late 1990s. Take how Kang (Kang, 2011) divided the schema theory as the sample, the authors summarized that the development of domestic researches on listening strategies could be roughly divided into three stages: the stage of theory introduction from 1994 to 1999, the stage of coexisting of theory introduction and application from 2000 to 2008, the stage of theory application from 2009 to present. At the beginning, scholars introduced and translated foreign works and managed to analyze the feasibility and perspectives of listening strategy research in China, combined with the status quo in our education field to survey and analyze the Chinese teachers' and students' listening strategy use, laying the deep theory foundation for following empirical researches. Then, gradually they had applied listening strategy use to the second language teaching, studying the correlation between learners' listening strategy use and their age, sex, and listening styles, the relationship between listening strategy use and English performance, strategy training effects, listening strategy use and other knowledge. Nowadays, empirical and material researches on listening strategies account for the main body, with the development of science and technology, a variety of poly-disciplinary, cross-disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and mutually-infiltrated

disciplinary researches on listening strategies and researches based on the second language listening corpus come into being.

3. The Research Status Quo of Listening Strategies at Home and Abroad

3.1 Research Contents

Western listening strategy researching is based on learning strategy theory framework; many scholars simply treat listening strategies as learning strategies, and also divide them into three categories: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social/affective strategies. Research contents mainly contain the usage conditions of students' English listening strategies, listening strategy training, also some studies concentrate on different listening comprehension strategies of different levels of students, listening materials applied in the experiment are widely used, covering video, audio and visual materials. Moreover, the types of listening in different studies are very diverse and complete, incorporating the interactional listening and the transactional listening, interactional listening strategies of second language academic background (interactive listening strategies in L2 academic setting) researching reinforces (Lynch, 1995), cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies primarily account for the studies of listening strategy types. Research contents have been involved in strategy use, discourse, tasks and the relationship between respective aspect and the background researching. In the studies, extraneous variables are also the hotspots, in terms of second language listening strategies, the experiment equipment and the environment, and other general external variables are relatively easy to control, but the subjects' personal mood involved with the external variables, such as emotion, memory is difficult to control. Under this condition, Hawthorne effect is easy to produce (Brown, 1988).

In China, according to Zhang & Zhu (2002), listening strategy research was roughly divided into two categories: descriptive studies (Wang, 2000; Wang & Miao, 2003) and intervening studies. In contrast with descriptive strategy researches, intervening strategy researches (Li, 2007; Tang, 2009 etc.) are much less, but there have been many significant discoveries. These research results provide a certain reference for the future English listening teaching in the process of how to carry on the strategy training. Yang (2012) expounds the listening strategy research from the two aspects of the relationship between listening strategies and listening comprehension and listening training skills. As far as the relationship between listening strategies and listening comprehension is concerned, scholars tend to think that the use of listening strategies has a positive effect on listening comprehension, and they carry out experiments to prove their hypotheses (Wang, 2000; Su, 2003; Ji & He, 2004; Chang & Li, 2009 etc.). There are also scholars who suggest or have already started putting listening strategies into classroom teaching. In regard to researches on the bonds of listening strategies and classroom teaching (Lou, 2004; Lin, 2010) find that the listening strategy training for students, teaching students how to practice listening not only all can actually improve effects of listening teaching and students' listening proficiencies, but also make students' autonomous learning abilities improved. For the improvement of listening training skills, domestic scholars (Lu, 2006) summarize the following aspects: (1) cultivating students' micro skills of adjusting pronunciation and intonation; (2) developing the students' memory skills, predicting skills, associating skills and logical reasoning skills and other cognitive skills; (3) training the planning strategy, the monitoring strategy (the attention strategy) and the adjusting strategy and other metacognitive skills. But most researches in this aspect are given priority to non-material researches, changes to the materials research should be done in the future.

3.2 Research Methods

Listening strategy is a kind of inner thinking activity, it's hard to identify through direct observation. For researchers in the western countries, the current listening strategy researching is generally directed by the learners' self-description, specific methods mainly include oral reports, keeping a diary, questionnaire surveys and the computer automatic tracking. Oral reports mainly cover self-report, interview, audio etc. Self-report is to let learners conduct observations and descriptions about the process of listening and listening strategies. Interview is like this: students with the help of their hearing video recall and describe the hearing process. Audio thinking is to let students dictate the ideas while they are completing listening tasks, this method can not only reveal the thinking process of listening comprehension, but also contribute to study the learners' emotion and motivation. Diaries and logs, as a learner's personal experience, record the most direct information, conducing to cultivate learners' hearing process and listening strategies of metacognitive awareness. Oxford's questionnaire design "the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning", SILL for short is of the highest utilization among all the strategy questionnaires. The volume with a total of fifty questions summarizes the six aspects from memory, cognitiveness, compensation, metacognitiveness, emotional control, socialization. It is used to test language learning strategies including listening strategies and adopts a standardized measure. The measure is divided into

five grades: Never true of me, Usually not true of me, Some-what true of me, Usually true of me, Always true of me. This grading can instruct learners to control their own learning behavior to corresponding answer.

Computer automatic tracking, with the application of computer technology in language study, is mainly used for the employment of learners' language processing program under the machine environment, language learning procedures and the strategies used in other related resources. It has the following advantages: firstly, it has little interference to the learners' subjective data and the data collecting process and the collected data are more objective, can be carried out in the condition that the students do not know what they are really doing; secondly, it can effectively reduce the influence of artificial factors, making the information more accurate and reliable. Western scholars in the process of doing listening strategy researching mainly use the introspective method and retrospective method. Regarding to the introspective method, the experimenter records the subjects' thinking activity process while listening on the spot (Bacon, 1992). Nevertheless, the introspective method and retrospective method have also some certain subjectivity. The analytical methods the western scholars use in the listening strategy researching mainly have two kinds, one is descriptive statistical method (Butler, 1985), the other is a inferential statistical methods, in recent years, foreign scholars tend to use a combination of both.

Many domestic experts and scholars (Shu, 1995; Gao, 1999; Wang, 2000) have elucidated, in accordance with their standards, research methods of listening strategies can be separated into two kinds: material researches and non-material researches, material researches/empirical studies characterize in a systematic, designed material collection and analysis, including quantitative researches, qualitative researches and the incorporation of the quantitative and qualitative researches. Main forms of quantitative researches contain experimental researches, questionnaires and surveys; main forms of qualitative researches include ethnography, project presentations etc.; non-material researches/non-empirical studies mean the researches not based on systematically-collected materials, taking in personal feelings, personal experiences, operational descriptions (concrete operational descriptions and evaluations on outlines, teaching methods, testing methods and so on) and theoretical reflections (Yang, 2012). In the course of literature review, the author discovers that studies of domestic listening strategies mostly take non-material research methods (Zhang, 1998; Luo & Bai, 2005; Huang, 2006; Yin, 2015; Zhao & Sang, 2016), the material researches (Wang & Yuan, 1992; He, 2005; Gao, 2007; Gong, 2008; Zhu, 2010) are complementary to the non-material researches. Meanwhile, Gao (1999) considers that for researches with the combination of various methods, choices of research methods base on the main research methods. If the discourse analysis is given priority to statistical numbers, the research pertains to quantitative researches; if the discourse analysis lays special emphasis on the detailed text analysis, the research pertains to the qualitative researches.

Concurrently, this paper refers to the commonly-used method in the study (Li, 2013) of second language, they are two big kinds of the empirical study and the speculative (specification) study. Empirical studies reveal the conclusion mainly by means of the experimental studies and data collection, from individual to general, summing up the nature and the development law of things (Chen, 2008). Speculative studies refer to studies not using the data or using the data but not describing data collection methods, data characteristics and data analysis procedures, etc. Speculative research papers (Deng & Zhang, 2004; Li, 2011) are demonstrated through opinion expressing, exposition, second-hand data interpretation, as well as the method of historical review.

3.3 Research Subjects

In the process of literature review, the author discovers that research subjects both at home and abroad can be grouped into the following six classes: (1) graduate students (including masteral students, doctoral students); (2) undergraduate students not majoring in English; (3) undergraduate students majoring in English; (4) vocational college students; (5) middle school students; (6) primary school students. Foreign scholars' research subjects mainly come from the students who speak English as a second language (ESL students). However, in China, the majority of research subjects are undergraduate students majoring in English and undergraduate students not majoring in English, reasons for this phenomenon are: most researchers in this field are in-service teachers in colleges and universities; it is easy for these researchers to get the first-hand materials of the undergraduate and graduate students. And it is more conducive to guide the teaching practice. The articles on subjects of graduate students and middle school students are relatively less, the articles on subjects of elementary school students have not been found in the literature review. Thus it can be seen that subjects of domestic researches on listening strategies are concentrated on undergraduate students. In addition, there are many researchers beginning to pay close attention to strategy use differences among different learners (He & Bao, 2006).

Besides the condition that Su (2003) chooses high school students as subjects, subjects of most empirical researches are adult learners, from which the sample covers different-level English learners of all kinds of people,

high school teachers, university teachers, vocational students, undergraduates, graduate students and so on. Undergraduate students not majoring in English as samples and undergraduate students majoring in English account for the most parts as samples, the melting groups of graduate students not majoring in English, college English teachers and undergraduate students not majoring in English are also covered as partial samples.

4. Introspects We Can Learn from Foreign Researches on Listening Strategies

Researches on English listening strategies in our country have achieved remarkable results, but there are still some problems, for the research contents, the research methods, research subjects. A dozen of articles are about the questionnaires and surveys on commonly-used listening strategies of various ages, grades, professions, colleges. However, the criteria of the questionnaires are the same, even the analysis data tools are mostly based on SPSS. In the process of analyzing statistics, low-score groups tend to overestimate their certain strategy use, material researches also have disadvantages, lacking random sampling or lacking pre-test scores in the experimental design and the small sample, research results and findings fail to play a substantial role in listening strategy teaching in our country. Listening strategy researches mainly centralize on the comparison of two low-level strategies, the memorization strategy and the cognitive strategy, the research depth is not enough. The comparative studies of interlingual listening strategies are much rarer. Throughout the researches on strategy training, the training time is relatively short. But the complete grasping and flexible application of the strategies is a long-term and systematic project, the long-term outcomes remain needing the further validation. Gui (1992) insists that "The strategy use is likely to be the results of language abilities' advancement, rather than strategy leads to the language abilities' advancement". This is consistent with Griffith's point of view in the proceedings (Griffith, 2008, p. 83) of his own edition.

Oxford (1986) argued that learning strategies could be identified, quantified, accordingly, the language learning strategy scale (hereafter referring to the "strategy scale") was compiled, and the strategy scale was used to evaluate the levels language learning strategies. Dornyei thinks that the most commonly-used strategy scale (SILL, Oxford, 1990) has serious defects in the design. Although English listening strategy researches often adopt the empirical approaches, but quantitative researches are given priority to empirical researches based on the material data. Discourse analysis, ethnography, personal accounts, project presentation, interactive analysis of qualitative research methods better reflecting the learners' cognitive process seldom appear in the previous literature review. Listening strategy researches often adopt the synchronic methods, to some extent, the synchronic methods can reflect the present situation of the learners' listening strategy use, but listening learning strategies influence by age, learning styles, learning motivation, so the same learner may adopt the different strategies at different time or at different places, it is bound to use the diachronic methods in studying listening strategies. Case study, diachronic study, dynamic observation method tracking the same subject, introspective method and retrospective method better deserve researchers' recommendation and adoption.

The empirical studies with a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods have increasingly become the main stream method of listening strategy research, but the current studies are mostly quantitative ones based on data materials. English listening strategy researching is the research field closely connected with human brain and human mind, but scientific researches in the laboratory, such as ERP experiments and eye movement experiments applied in educational psychology do not appear in the studies of domestic listening strategy. The current research methods of natural sciences are more and more popular with its objectivity and repeatability, so the combination of natural sciences research methods and language-study research methods should be paid due attention to. The oneness of research subjects embodies in the studies of strategy use, the articles about the metacognitive strategies and cognitive strategies account for the majority. Secondly, the oneness of research subjects also embodies in research participants; the research subjects of listening strategies in China are given priority to undergraduates. Few of research results on listening strategies can be applied to the practice. English classes are set from the third grade in elementary schools in our country, but listening strategy researches on students in elementary school are not given due concern. In addition, there are some special groups in China, they have living experiences in English-speaking countries in primary schools, these students' listening and speaking abilities in English are relatively high. Comparing these students' listening strategies with our domestic students of the same age may also get some enlightenment. Moreover, researches of listening strategies on vocational college students and graduate students also need to strengthen.

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