

## *Original Paper*

# A Review of the Theories and Principles of Teaching Listening and Their Guidance in Senior High English Lessons in Mainland China

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### **Abstract**

*Though the least emphasized, Listening is used much more frequently than any other language skill, though. In 2007, English textbook in senior high school undertook a reform towards a student-focused classroom; listening, considered as a passive language skill traditionally, also step into the spotlight of new analysis and application.*

*This article endeavors to review several important listening comprehension theories and figure out their significance in teaching listening in high school of China. It reviews the importance of listening in language comprehension, the psychological processes of listening, the principles for listening comprehension in the classroom, and the intended communicative outcomes of listening. It also examines the listening comprehension part in the textbook of Senior High English in China with New Senior English for China Book 1 (2011) as an example, to find out proportion of listening and its role in the composition of the textbook, and to provide a few suggestions of teaching listening in high schools.*

*Listening is no longer a neglected and underestimated language skill; on the contrary, together with other language skills, listening is a key component in teaching and learning, which requires teachers' consideration of students' needs to make it into an attractive form.*

### **Keywords**

*teaching listening, mainland China, New Senior English for China*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 *Listening in Language Comprehension*

The process of acquiring a language is a question that puzzles scholars of linguistics and arouses dissensions in academia. In the past several decades, theories of language comprehension have recognized the primacy of listening in the comprehension processes, retention of information in mind, and the acquisition of second language competence (Peterson, 2012). Consciously or unconsciously, listening takes up a majority of language input in one's daily life and it usually happens before speaking in second language acquisition. Listening should precede speaking in that premature production of L2 forces students to turn to L1 knowledge and thus results in negative transfer (Peterson, 2012).

Listening comprehension is not a passive process of simply receiving the incoming data; it creates meaning in a multilevel and interactive way. According to Anderson (1985), there are three stages of listening comprehension: perceptual processing, parsing, and utilization. First, listeners use her linguistic knowledge to recognize the meaningful units in the flow, and then store these units in short-term memory, and finally match the units with their extant knowledge to accomplish comprehension. Beginners will pay more attention to linguistic details, while for listeners with higher language proficiency, the processes gradually become simultaneous and automatic and they will put more effort in the comprehension of the context.

### 1.2 *The Bottom-Up Processing and Top-Down Listening Processing*

The bottom-up processing means that listening comprehension is based on the processing and sequencing of linguistic elements—sounds, words, clauses, and text, to arrive at the whole meaning of the input. Learners are required to pay attention to every exact detail of the input in order to achieve successful comprehension. Based on the incoming data, the meaning of the message is constructed from bottom to top (Morley, 2012).

The top-down facet of listening, on the other hand, refers to the involvement of background knowledge in facilitating comprehension (Richards, 2008). Listeners should be able to bring prior information and combine real-world knowledge to understand the information they hear and to make predictions of the coming one.

This two listening processings can help teachers find out in which link do students fail the listening comprehension. Minimal pairs, accents, intonation, pronunciation of the language may influence listeners' comprehension of the text. The listeners' background knowledge and personal experience may also be relevant factors. If a listener has never been to a bank or do not have a repertoire and some knowledge about banking, he or she can hardly understand a conversation happening in such a context. The bottom-up processing and the top-down processing, in fact, imply two important directions and foci for the teaching of listening: the training of basic linguistic elements and structures, and teaching listening in a meaningful context.

### *1.3 Principles of Listening Comprehension in the Classroom*

For students who learn a target language but do not have the language environment, e.g., students who study English in China, listening in the classroom is their main source of language input since most of the students do not have the opportunity, equipment or time to practice listening of a foreign language. Peterson suggests (2012) six principles for listening comprehension in the classroom:

1. Increase the amount of listening time in the class.
2. Listen before other activities to prepare them for speaking, reading or writing.
3. Include both global and selective listening, the former for grasping from the top level, the latter for catching details and increase accuracy.
4. Activate top-level skills at every proficiency level to evoke students' background knowledge.
5. Work towards automaticity in the bottom-up processing.
6. Develop conscious listening strategies.

When teachers design the procedure of a class, they can refer to the six principles to think about when to insert listening part and how to integrate listening with other language skills on the basis of teaching materials.

### *1.4 Communicative Outcomes with Listening*

Under the influence of Communicative Language Teaching, learning a foreign language is not simply practicing the language skills and memorizing words and structure, and the goal of teaching has changed from an emphasis on forms to a learning-by-doing cultivation. Teachers can devise tasks in which students can achieve certain outcomes by utilizing the language, e.g., to design a poster calling for environmental protection, or to compose a skit and present it in front of the class. Morley (2012) lists six kinds of outcomes that teachers can refer to if they want to increase the amount of listening or incorporate listening into their classes:

1. Listening and performing actions and operations
2. Listening and transferring information
3. Listening and solving problems
4. Listening, evaluating, and manipulating information
5. Interactive listening and speaking: negotiating meaning through questioning and answering
6. Listening for enjoyment, pleasure, and sociability

The six outcomes indicate six kinds of activities that teachers can apply in teaching various aspects of a second or foreign language, which is not confined to listening skills. It could be used under a Task-Based Language Teaching or a Communicative Language Teaching context as well.

### *1.5 Problems of Teaching Listening in Senior High English Classroom in China*

English Teaching underwent a reform in the past decade, and in 2007, *New Senior English for China* published by People's Education Press, is introduced to most classrooms in China, and ever since then it has become the mainstream, or the most widely-used textbook in China. The new teaching syllabus and the textbooks focus on students—increasing the autonomy of students, satisfying their

psychological and emotional needs and activating their intellectual potentials and development, in addition to learning the language itself.

However, some problems also come to the surface with the gradual application of the new textbooks in the classroom. Although few quantitative researches are done concerning listening in the classroom, Ju and Xu conducted a survey about listening of senior high English in 2009. Students generally are not aware of the importance of listening and think of it simply as a means to the end. From the facet of students, some problems of teaching listening can also be seen:

1. The frequency of listening practice is relatively low in the classroom. Nearly 50% students say that once in a week they have listening practices in the classroom (Ju & Xu, 2009). Listening is downplayed by many teachers within a hurried and tight teaching schedule or syllabus. It is obviously not sufficient for a sturdy and balanced development of language skills.

2. The motive of practicing listening is examination-driven. Listening takes up a large proportion of the English College Entrance Examination which is nearly a must for a majority of students in China if they want to enter university or college. In the same survey, up to 67% students think that they practice listening only because it is part of various kinds of English exams (Ju & Xu, 2009). If examinations or tests are removed or no longer necessary to assess students' language proficiency, it can be foreseen that students will not have the incentive to improve their language skills, especially to enhance their listening capability. Furthermore, students do not have a strong impression of teachers' listening instruction. Though most teachers include instruction of listening strategies and skills in listening practices, students usually do not have a strong feeling towards the listening parts or the teachers' instruction, which can be attributed to the numbness caused by examination-focused teaching of listening.

3. The listening material in the textbooks is insipid. 43% students think that the listening materials of the textbooks can be more interesting if anything could be done to improve the quality of teaching listening in the classroom (Ju & Xu, 2009). However, at the same time many students think the degree of difficulty of listening in the textbook can be lowered. It can be discovered that both the topics and contents of the selected materials and the language proficiency of students contributes to students' "anesthesia" of listening in the classroom. There is also a dilemma that the language level of most high school students is so limited that they fail to reach an ideal comprehension of authentic listening material which is more attractive yet challenging to them.

Many English teachers in China are also concerned about the topic of teaching listening in classroom. A majority of studies try to solve the problem from a certain scopes of linguistic theories. Zheng (2008) and Dai (2010) suggest a task-based listening class with diverse materials to enrich the teaching process. Zhou (2011) points out that cultural background is the prerequisite of successful listening comprehension from the view of Schema Theory. From the perspective of teaching, the problems can be summed up as follows:

1. A lack of pre-listening activities. Some teachers regard listening as an exercise and thus separate it from other parts of activities, which makes students feel that listening is a test rather than a way of learning, and thus they may be discouraged and lose their interest if they cannot get across the information in listening. Teachers should design a good lead-in or a small pre-listening activity to attract students' interest and prepare them for the incoming listening.
  2. Little attention is paid to the listening process and the background knowledge of students. The teacher is not simply a player of the listening material and students recorders of what they hear. Teachers should design proper listening activities and reckon problems that students may encounter in the listening process. Chinese students are not born in an English-speaking environment, and the listening practices—with a cover of a foreign language—sounds isolated from their real-life knowledge. Teachers should bridge the gap between the listening information and the background knowledge of the students.
  3. Disconnection between listening and other language skills. Listening is the primacy of language comprehension but it is often not integrated with other skills and activities in the classroom. It gives students an illusion that listening is only an auxiliary and passive language skill. Teachers should organize integrated and context-based activities that maximize the effects of practicing the skills.
- Identifying the problems appeared in both teaching and learning of listening helps the teacher concentrate and target problems in designing the teaching procedure, if he or she looks back at the textbook again.

## 2. Analysis of the Listening Parts in *New Senior High English for China*

The textbook consists of two parts. The first part is the Student's Book, which is the body of the textbook and includes five units; the second one is the Work Book that provides exercises to review language points and consolidate language skills.

This Student's Book (Book 1) is the first module for high school students in China. Every module contains five units of different topics and can be used for half a semester. Each unit of Book 1 focuses on disparate functions and structures (see Table 1):

**Table 1. The Organization of Student's Book One of *New Senior English for China***

Units	Topics	Functional items	Structure	Reading	Writing
1. Friendship	Friends and friendships International relationships	Agreement and disagreement	Direct Speech and Indirect Speech (I): statements and questions	Anne's best friend A letter from Xiaodong Friendship in Hawaii	Persuasive writing: letter of advice
2. English around the	English language and its development	Difficulties in language	Direct Speech and Indirect Speech	The road to modern English	Factual writing:

world	Different kinds of English	communication	(II): requests and commands	Standard English and dialects The oxford English Dictionary	poster
3. Travel journal	Travelling Describing a journey	Talking about future plans Good wishes Farewells	The Present Continuous Tense: expressing futurity	Journey down the Mekong A night in the mountains The end of our journey	Personal recount: email
4. Earthquakes	Basic knowledge about earthquakes How to protect oneself and help others in disasters	Talking about past experiences Expressing thanks	The Attributive Clause (I) ( <i>that, which, who, whose</i> )	A night the earth didn't sleep A letter of invitation The story of an eyewitness	Recount: newspaper article
5. Nelson Mandela—a modern hero	The qualities of a great person The lives of some great people	Asking for opinions Giving opinions	The Attributive Clause (II) ( <i>where, when, why, prep. + which/whom</i> )	Elias' story The rest of Elias' story Two ideas about Bill Gates	Description of a famous person

*Source:* Research Center of Teaching Materials and Curriculum and Research and Development Center of English Teaching Materials and Curriculum. *New Senior English for China: Teacher's Book 1*. Beijing: People's Education Press, 2013. Print.

Each unit is composed of nine parts that have clear objectives of their own and are able to be organized according to teachers' and students' needs.

#### 1. Warming up

This part serves as a lead-in to the topic to attract and mobilize students' attention and interest taking the form of questionnaires, small discussions, situational listening etc.

#### 2. Pre-reading

This part usually consists of several questions closely relevant to the topic and the content of the next part. Some of the pre-reading questions are combined with pictures. The teacher can ask students to answer the questions or elicit group discussion. The teacher can also direct students to the objective or goal of this lesson, and design some pre-task or post-task activities based on the pre-reading questions or student's answers in the class.

#### 3. Reading

The next section provides the major reading material of the unit which includes key vocabulary and structures. The length of the article grows from around 400 words to around 600, from Unit One to Unit Five.

#### 4. Comprehension

This section contains diverse forms of activities to check students' comprehension of the passage in reading section, ranging from typical exercises such as matching, oral/written questions, blanks, and True or False questions, to more flexible ones like discussion, pair work, and mind map. In order to fulfill these exercises, students practice their skill of skimming and scanning, extract and figure out the gist, the author's attitude, and the detail of the passage. Students can also express their own opinions in some open tasks or open questions.

#### 5. Learning about language

This part is form-focused, with exercises of useful words, expressions, and structures that have appeared in the previous reading section. Contrary to traditional grammar instruction that the teacher explain the structure first and then drill the students, It adapts what Ellis calls consciousness-raising (CR) tasks which are designed to direct students to find out the particular grammatical features by themselves through inductive and deductive procedure (Nunan, 2004).

#### 6. Using language

This part is composed of comprehensive exercises with an integration of forms and functions but focuses on the four skills of language learning. A majority of the exercises integrate at least two skills, e.g., listening and writing, reading and speaking, or listening, speaking and writing. It broadens the content of the unit and enlarges students' vocabulary by including considerable amount of reading and listening materials related to the topic of the unit. Moreover, some listening materials serve as good models for oral communication, which prepares students for the speaking exercises. Some passages or listening exercises also provide examples or outlines for writing practices. The integration of different skills fully exploits the content and function of the materials, which is easy for the teacher to devise pedagogical tasks.

#### 7. Summing up

This section help students reflect and summarize what they have learned in the unit, which includes, but not limited to, useful verbs, expressions, grammar items, functional outcome, humanistic appreciation, and spiritual gains. Teachers can help students sum up key language points and content by referring to the tables provided in this section. By self-reflection, students can increase their autonomy of and responsibility for learning.

#### 8. Learning Tip

The Learning Tip offers brief and friendly advices to students such as how to memorize vocabulary, how to use handy resources to learn English, or possible activities outside classroom.

#### 9. Reading for fun

This section usually provides some poems, jokes, and quotes, etc. to evoke students' interest. Teacher can also take advantage of this part to make the class more lively and diverse.

The Work Book behind the Student's Book offers language training, communicative activities, projects, and self-evaluation for learners to wrap up the language points and language skills in the unit. There are

ten sections in each unit:

**The structure of the workbook**

1. Listening
2. Talking
3. Using words and expressions
4. Using structures
5. Listening task
6. Reading task
7. Speaking task
8. Writing task
9. Project
10. Checking yourself

The third and fourth sections are similar to “Using language” in the Student’s Book but are more intensive and more concentrated on form, so as to drill students and help them review the vocabulary, expressions, and structures.

The listening and reading practices aim to increase the amount of comprehensible input as well as to improve the two language skills. As mentioned before, it also models for speaking and writing activities in which students are able to imitate the example and utilize their creativity after they have mastered the structures and functions of the language points. In addition, students are required to complete different forms of challenging tasks by mobilizing the skills and their competent linguistic knowledge, in hope that students can develop their language skills and consolidate their language knowledge through practices and applications.

The Project section encourages students to do research or field work outside classroom, e.g., promoting environmental protection in English, if the condition of the school permits.

The self-evaluation part helps students evaluate their performance, gains, problems and solutions in their learning process by questions. It requires students to fill in the blank in English and if necessary, they can use Chinese as well, which provides a good way for teachers to collect feedback, find out the existing problems, to solve them and to improve the coming instruction as soon as possible.

The whole textbook (student’s book and work book) contains three listening activities: one in Using Language and the other two, Listening and Listening Task, in the Work Book. Other listening material includes the recital of the reading passages and the vocabulary in the Student’s Book. Here the focus is the listening activities in Using Language, Listening, and Listening Task. The three sections take up the majority of listening of the textbook and share a certain patterns:

1. Listening is often the first language skill being practiced. As can be seen from the structure of workbook above, listening activities are the primary ones in the sequencing of exercises; in the Using Language of the student’s books, though sometimes reading part (with tape recording) takes the first place, listening comes first in most situations. In fact, the importance of listening is implied in the



organization of the materials, and it is undoubtedly crucial.

2. Other language skills and listening are synthesized. The listening activities are not only practicing the top-down and bottom-up processing and a disposable exercise—it is combined with at least one other language skills, such as “Listen again and answer the questions in pairs”, “Before you listen, discuss these questions with your partner”, or a writing exercise following listening practices.

3. A suggestive listening skill or strategy is included in the instruction of listening. Most of the listening instruction offers advice or guides to students in a subtle manner and students may not beware of its importance or intake it without noticing it. The instructions usually appear such as “Before you listen, read the exercises below and try to predict what the listening is about”, “Read the statements and then listen to the whole text”, or “Before you listen to the tape, look at the picture and discuss the questions with your partner”. The instruction can teach students some listening skills like reading the exercises first to have a prediction of the listening content, which is also very useful in activating the top-down processing and mobilizing the background knowledge of students.

After the analysis of the position of listening, next comes the content and form of the listening text itself. According to the topic and theme of the units, different genres of listening texts are provided, such as conversation, speech, monologue, report, news and story. Conversations, monologues, and stories are the most frequently seen in the listening part. Conversations are usually tailored to the students’ language proficiency and are restricted to the topic of the unit, which cannot be considered authentic at all. Ur (2011) points out that informal spoken discourse has several distinguishable features—short chunks, slurred pronunciation, colloquial vocabulary, ungrammatical utterances, noise, redundancy, and non-repetition. The text below is an excerpt of a listening script taken from Unit Three, and though it contains some oral marks such as “Really?”, “Well”, “Yeah”, and abbreviations, it does not fit in the characteristics of listening:

#### JOURNEY DOWN THE MEKONG

##### CHATTING WITH A GIRL

*The next day the travelers see a girl (G) walking along the road. Wang Kun (WK) speaks to her.*

WK: Hello!

G: Hello! Are you travelers?

WK: Yes. We’re traveling along the Mekong Rive. We’ve been all through China and now we’re going to follow the river through Laos.

G: I’m Laotian. The Mekong’s our most important river. Did you know that it appears on our national flag?

WK: Really?

G: Yes. We use the river for washing, fishing and transporting things around the country. We’d be lost without it. It’s better than a road.

WK: Well, no wonder I’ve seen boats going up and down—they’re transporting goods and people.

G: Yeah. We call it “the sea of Laos” although we’re not near the sea. It’s because the water is as useful

to us as the sea.

.....

(Source: *New Senior English for China: Teacher's Book 1* (p. 79). Beijing: People's Education Press, 2013. Print.)

The content of the listening text is confined to the topic of the correspondent unit, and there are few ungrammatical utterances and noises, which can hardly be considered authentic compared to that in real life. However, this kind of listening text can be modeled into a conversation task for students and inspire further output from students.

### 3. Advices for Improving Listening Instruction in the Classroom

After reviewing a certain important theory of listening comprehension and analyzing the problems of teaching English listening in China, here are a few suggestions in hope that they can improve the instruction of listening teaching in the classroom and benefit the students:

1. Students should have an idea about what kind of text they are going to hear and what purpose or objective they are going to achieve. Rather than throwing listening practices to student without any preparation and making them feel like a test, teachers can try to direct student to understand the purpose of listening.
2. Listening can be used in the pre-task. Teachers usually go straight to the task after lead-in or warming up, but they can also take listening into consideration after the lead-in part. Interesting and related listening material can be used and served as background knowledge for students. In this way, the amount of listening increases and the students' awareness and motive of listening rise as well.
3. After listening, teachers can elicit response from students to answer the listening questions instead of giving the answers and letting students check by themselves. In this way, students can participate in the process of finding the correct answers by comparing with those of the classmates', rather than receiving passively from the teachers. Listening is not an end in itself.
4. Listening can be combined with other skills in a task. As mentioned before, listening can serve in the pre-task and it can also lead to integration with speaking, writing, and reading. For example, students can first listen to a conversation about a man complaining of his new cell phone to a friend, and after the listening practice, teachers can teach students how to write a complaint letter.
5. Listening material should be various and suitable to the level of students. Students usually find the listening in the textbook or exercise book boring, yet teachers cannot satisfy each student's interest. Teachers can choose listening material that is close to students' life and interests, or that has resonance to students' needs so that students are willing to learn. The listening material can be outside the textbook where the material in it is usually limited, constrained around the unit, and inauthentic. It is also worth noticing that 100% authentic material is too difficult for most senior high school students in China, and teachers must select the material that fits the purpose of listening, and a certain tweaking of the material is sometimes necessary; otherwise students may feel frustrated and loose their interest to

learn. Teachers can show some funny video clips within or slightly beyond student's level if the listening is strongly related to the task or topic of the lesson. However, if it is for movie appreciation, for example, the teacher can only point out some key language points or cultural information to students, making use of material effectively.

#### 4. Conclusion

Listening has been rising from an underestimated role to a prime position in language teaching in the past several decades. It is also the period when English education in China has undergone a rapid development and reform. Though the examination-focused mode of teaching will still go on in the future, the teaching and learning in China are also turning to a student-focused trend, and put more weight on how to change listening, a relatively passive input in many people's opinion, to an active style and encourage students to take part in it is now on the table of discussion. Teachers should take into account the needs and interests of students, select proper listening texts and plan it into a student-focused procedure, to help students learn by themselves, and learn in a meaningful way.

There are certain limitations that need to be considered. First, the review mainly concentrates on the most widely-recognized and popular theories and principles about listening comprehension, and some other useful and enlightening ones are not included. Second, since the textbook is not used in every high school in China, some analysis of the book or suggestions may not and cannot solve the particular problems of teachers using different textbooks. It is hoped that this paper can still offer incisive insight for teaching listening in high schools of China.

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