

Taiwanese high school EFL teachers' perceptions of their listening instruction

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In 2015 an English listening test was included in the Taiwan College Entrance Examination. This paper reports on a small-scale study looking at the related pedagogical practices of senior high school teachers in Taiwan. First, the paper provides an overview of the second language listening pedagogy research literature, which indicates that strategies instruction has been found to outperform a comprehension-based approach (where learners listen then answer comprehension questions) both in terms of listening comprehension and development of learner affective characteristics, such as confidence and motivation. The paper then reports on the study which gathered data from Taiwanese teachers through a questionnaire and interviews to investigate their perceptions of their listening instruction. The results of the study suggest; 1) the common use of a comprehension-based approach; 2) that teachers commonly encounter affective problems among their learners, and; 3) that teachers often have a rather rudimentary knowledge of how to remediate their learners' comprehension and affective difficulties. The study provides useful initial insights into the state of listening instruction in Taiwan high schools, and suggests a possible need for strategies instruction.

Keywords: second language listening; listening instruction; listening strategies; Taiwan

Introduction

The study reported here investigates Taiwanese senior high school teachers' current approaches to teaching listening comprehension. This is important because there has been little research into how listening is taught in Taiwanese schools and because of the introduction of an English listening test in the Taiwan College Entrance Examination in 2015. The topic is approached through the perceptions of practising teachers and findings are expected to inform the re-design of the English curriculum to better accommodate preparation for the new test.

Relevant literature

In fluent listening, top-down and bottom-up processes operate in an effective, balanced manner (Vandergrift, 2004). However, second language (L2) listeners often lack such harmonious processing, mainly due to their linguistic deficiencies (Buck, 1995). This often leads to comprehension breakdowns (Field, 2008), along with other difficulties such as feeling anxious and generally lacking control when listening (Goh, 2000; Graham, 2006). To counter such problems, many theorists have advocated instruction

aimed at fostering L2 listener strategy use (Field, 2008; Graham, 2011; Vandergrift, 2007). Indeed, studies of adolescent and young adult learners have outlined the benefits of such instruction (Graham & Macaro, 2008; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010; Yeldham & Gruba, 2014).

Strategies instruction aims at providing listeners with options to address their comprehension difficulties. Strategies are deliberate procedures, used by individuals to compensate for their actual or expected comprehension breakdowns (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008; Field, 2008). They include cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Common top-down cognitive strategies are guessing, inferring and predicting meaning, while bottom-up cognitive strategies include listening out for stressed syllables which tend to indicate the onset of English words within the morass of connected speech, and utilizing key words and discourse markers. Metacognitive strategies help listeners co-ordinate their strategy use and listening performance before (planning), during (monitoring) and after (evaluating) their listening (Goh, 2005; Vandergrift, 2003).

Besides improving learners' processing, strategies instruction also aims to improve various other learner characteristics. For example, according to Rost (2006) learners' improved strategy use, and associated feelings of greater autonomy, decrease anxiety, and instil a feeling of control over their listening, thus boosting their confidence. These factors are then reasoned to enhance the learners' motivation to both continue listening in times of difficulty and also to increase the frequency of their out-of-class listening (Graham, 2011; Rost, 2006).

Indeed, a number of well-designed experimental studies have shown how strategies instruction can lead to significant gains in listeners' comprehension, along with gains in other person-related areas. Note that the control groups in these studies were not taught strategies, and their teachers employed a comprehension-based approach where the listening texts were used as a springboard for comprehension exercises. In one of these studies, Graham and Macaro (2008) showed the effectiveness of a direct approach to strategies instruction, where strategies were taught directly and then practiced using regular class texts, with listeners improving their comprehension and their self-efficacy (in terms of their feeling of control over the listening process). Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) also showed the advantages stemming from a metacognitive approach to strategies instruction, where the strategies practice was embedded in the regular class texts. In that study, listeners improved their comprehension, developed an ability to better coordinate their strategies, and generally demonstrated gains in their metacognitive knowledge. Another study, by Thompson and Rubin (1996), demonstrated how a metacognitive approach not only improved the learners' listening comprehension, but also motivated them to listen to more challenging texts outside of class.

Some qualitative longitudinal studies have also detailed how learners' listening skills benefit from strategies courses. In Mareschal's (2007) study of eight Canadian learners of French, taught through a metacognitive approach, data from verbal reports and interviews showed how the learners increased their top-down strategies to compensate for bottom-up weaknesses and also used inferences more judiciously. The learners also improved their bottom-up processing as they identified key words better and reduced their use of translation. In addition, their levels of confidence, concentration, and motivation to learn how to listen, also increased.

Chen (2009) used learners' reflective journals to study 31 lower-intermediate Taiwanese university learners who were directly taught various cognitive and metacognitive strategies for two hours a week over 14 weeks. Chen found these learners

adopted a wider range of metacognitive strategies than before the study and increased their use of top-down strategies, which Chen found improved their listening comprehension. Consequently, the learners also gained in confidence through the course. Yeldham and Gruba (2014) examined the progress of four lower-intermediate freshman Taiwanese learners who, for one hour a week over 21 weeks, received explicit listening strategies instruction, with these strategies also practiced when they listened to the regular class texts. The results showed how the learners' processing improved in terms of using top-down and bottom-up strategies more interactively. This progress in their strategy use was also accompanied by a number of person-related developments, including improved confidence, greater motivation and an increased self-efficacy.

Alongside this body of research, two longitudinal studies by Graham, Santos, and Vanderplank (2008, 2011) have chronicled how a comprehension-based approach, where learners listen to texts and then answer comprehension questions, leads to minimal learner development. In the research, lower-intermediate learners of French in their final year of high school in England were taught listening for six months, one hour a week, but without being taught strategies. Pre- and post-instruction verbal reports and interviews were used to examine the progress of two learners by Graham et al. (2008), and a further 15 learners by Graham et al. (2011). The research found that while some of these 17 learners developed their strategy use to some extent, the researchers' main conclusion in both studies was that their participants' often inadequate strategic approaches did not change much over time, that the learners continued to feel through the study that they lacked control over their listening, and that they maintained a sense of powerlessness over how to improve their listening problems.

The previous research, thus, points to the effectiveness of a strategies approach to instruction over a comprehension-based one. In fact, a number of listening researchers, such as Mendelsohn (1994), have described the latter approach as merely testing disguised as teaching, while Field (2000) has argued that for poor listeners such an approach usually only serves to reinforce their sense of failure.

Against this backdrop we investigated English listening instruction in Taiwan high schools and were guided by the following research questions:

1. What are senior high school teachers' perceptions of how they teach listening in class?
2. What challenges do these teachers perceive they encounter in relation to listening instruction?

Method

The study employed a questionnaire distributed to teachers in various high schools in northern Taiwan, followed by semi-structured interviews consisting of a reduced number of questions for deeper probing of key points emerging from the individuals' questionnaire responses. It must be pointed out for clarity that all data is from teachers' self-reports. This use of perceptual rather than observational data provides participants with a relatively non-threatening environment thus increasing the likelihood of participation. Such data fulfils our purpose of gaining an initial view of the situation but will require follow up with observational methods in a later study to verify the findings.

Participants

Thirty six senior high school teachers responded to the questionnaire. They were recruited through opportunity sampling; some were associates of the first author of this

paper or colleagues of these associates, and others responded to the questionnaire after it was sent to their school. Most participants were from high schools in Taoyuan (18) and Taipei (14), and they consisted of 28 female and 8 male teachers. These respondents were evenly divided between private and public high schools, were generally experienced teachers (30 of them had been teaching for 6 years or longer) and taught, in approximately evenly numbers, students from years 10, 11 and 12. Five of the questionnaire respondents also agreed to be interviewed. They are reasonably representative of the spread of teachers in the questionnaire data (Table 1).

Table 1. Details of the five interviewees

Pseudonym	School location	Years of teaching	Grade commonly taught
Jenny	Taipei	Over 20 years	12
Phil	Taipei	6-10 years	12
Kate	Yilan	6-10 years	11
Carol	Keelung	6-10 years	12
Linda	Taipei	0-5 years	11

The questionnaire

The questionnaire used in the study was purposely designed to be short because too many questions may have discouraged teachers from responding, a view supported by Dörnyei (2010). It was presented to participants in both English and Chinese to facilitate their understanding of the questions. Based on Dörnyei (2010), it had previously been piloted with four other senior high school teachers, leading to refinements in its design and the clarity of its questions. In the questionnaire, following questions eliciting demographic information, the following four open-ended questions were asked:

1. How do you normally teach English listening?
2. Are there any other things you teach your learners to support/help improve their listening ability? If so, what?
3. If your learners did poorly in their listening, how/what would you usually teach them to help them improve?
4. What challenges do you encounter in listening instruction?

The interviews

The interviews (each lasting approximately 30 minutes) were conducted by the first author, in Chinese. First the researcher refreshed the interviewees' memory of their questionnaire answers. Then, within the framework of the above questions, the teachers' practices were explored in more depth. Supplementary questions were asked based mainly on respondents' own questionnaire answers in a style similar to that suggested by Patton (2002). All the interviews were recorded for later analysis.

Analysis

The interview recordings were translated and transcribed. Then the data from interviews and questionnaires were combined into a single data set. The data set was sorted and categorized into emergent themes broadly relevant to the research questions. As suggested by Creswell (2012) an additional round of analysis was then performed to further refine and aggregate these various themes.

Results

In this section, the results are organized according to the two research questions, with participants' interview and questionnaire data organized together under sub-themes to address those questions. Data taken from interviews is tagged with the pseudonym of the interviewee. Data taken from the anonymous questionnaires is tagged with a sequential teacher number (e.g. T1).

Research Question 1. What are senior high school teachers' perceptions of how they teach listening in class?

Results relating to this question fall into two categories: the teachers' major approaches to instruction, and how they remediate struggling learners.

Teachers' major approaches to instruction

The participants' explanations of their main approach to teaching revolved around a comprehension-based approach. Two-thirds of the teachers stated that they commonly used this approach, of which there were two main versions, one expanded, one contracted.

Twelve of the 36 teachers claimed to use the expanded version in various forms. Typically, they first used pre-listening exercises to stimulate their learners' schematic knowledge and help scaffold their listening. Such exercises included: previewing difficult vocabulary from the text; previewing the multiple choice (MC) comprehension questions the learners would later answer; having the learners brainstorm ideas about the topic; or having them answer questions about the topic. One interviewee, for example, verified that the purpose of such pre-listening exercises was to help scaffold his listening:

Phil: I normally ask students several questions related to the listening topic in order to help students comprehend the recording better. Also, it is important to provide sufficient time for students to get ready for listening.

In the extended approach, after the pre-listening exercises, teachers said the listening text was then played, often twice, followed by the comprehension questions. This was commonly followed by providing the learners with the correct answers to these questions. Questionnaire respondent T4 outlined her version of this approach:

T4: In the pre-listening stage, I review critical vocabulary with the students. Then, in the listening stage, I play the recording. In the post-listening stage, I check answers with the students and play the recording again for them to clarify any unclear or confusing parts.

The contracted version of the comprehension-based approach, used by 13 of the 36 teachers, dispensed with the pre-listening activities and simply gave the learners

listening test practice. Typical descriptions of this shorter version are shown in the following teacher responses:

- T24: I normally give students listening tests in class. After finishing the test, I check the answers with students, and give them the transcript along with explanations about each question and answer.
- T31: I usually assess students' listening ability through tests. After testing, I replay the listening text once for students to identify the uncertain parts.

Aside from these test-oriented comprehension-based approaches, of the remaining 11 teachers, 5 said they commonly had the learners write summaries of listening texts and/or take dictations, three said they taught their students how to take notes while listening, and four explained that they simply had their learners listen to texts to get used to English speech. To make the texts more interesting these four teachers said they sometimes used video clips or songs. A key point from the results is that none of the instructors mentioned teaching their learners listening strategies.

Teachers' methods for remediating struggling learners

Teachers' comments on how they remediated poorly-performing learners in their classes are shown in Table 2 in descending order of popularity. Note that two teachers did not respond, and that some teachers included more than one remediation method in their answer.

Table 2. Teachers' remediation methods

Remediation method	Total number
Advise learners to listen more often outside class (4), with some teachers adding to this advice that learners listen to easier texts to gradually build up their ability (3)	7
Alert the learners to a range of listening resources, such as English learning websites	6
Increase the number of times a text is repeated in class	6
Enhance language skills: increase vocabulary knowledge (4), improve speaking ability (2)	6
Train the learners to use bottom-up strategies	5
Improve the learners' understanding of English at the phonemic or phonological level	4
Encourage the learners by telling them they are capable of succeeding in listening and to keep trying	3

According to the literature (Field, 2008; Graham & Macaro, 2008), methods 5 and 6 seem the most useful for addressing learner difficulties. However, besides method 7 "encourage the learners", these two methods were the least popular among the teachers. Some of the teachers outlined how they taught bottom-up strategies, for example:

T3: I taught students how to listen to the key words and train their listening by using dictations.

T20: I taught students how to listen to the key words, and also listen carefully to the beginning of the sentences.

In relation to improving learners' phonological skills, one instructor spoke of teaching the learners phonics if they had problems connecting words with sounds. Other teachers pointed out that they heightened learners' phonological awareness in tandem with increasing their vocabulary, for example:

Jenny: For those students who did poorly in listening, and sometimes had no sense of pronunciation and intonation, and had limited vocabulary, I asked them to watch some films and repeat the captions.

Apart from the focus on bottom-up strategies and phonology, the other methods used to remediate poor listeners seem rather rudimentary.

Research Question 2. What challenges do the teachers perceive they encounter in relation to listening instruction?

Besides logistical problems such as having to deal with multilevel classes and feeling that there was insufficient time to teach listening in the tight schedule, the two most relevant problems teachers mentioned were 1) affect-related problems among the learners, and 2) lack of teacher knowledge about how to teach listening and deal with learners' problems.

Learners' affect-related problems

Teachers often pointed to learners' difficulties in various affect-related areas, particularly those of exhibiting anxiety when listening and demonstrating low motivation to learn. Teachers' comments such as the following were common:

T10: Apart from the school having poor listening equipment ... students lack motivation in learning listening.

T2: Students' listening proficiency is low and they are unwilling to learn English.

T19: The students are not very motivated to work hard on their own after they leave school and go home.

These factors were often linked with students lacking confidence in their ability, and also in feeling a sense of powerlessness over their listening, for example:

Kate: [Their problem is] a lack of confidence and fear to listen, or even the confidence to accept what they have actually understood [from a text] is correct.

T20: Students are afraid of listening to English, and they also reject practicing it. They will tell me they cannot understand the listening text even before they start listening to it.

T16: Students don't see much improvement in their listening right away, and it is the reason why they will give up.

T21: Some students will give up due to [a feeling of] helplessness.

Lack of instructor knowledge about how to teach listening

A number of points were made by teachers in their responses in the interviews and questionnaires about their lack of knowledge of how to teach listening. One interviewee, for example, explained:

Phil: First, I am not familiar with connected speech ... Second, I am not sure whether students should pay one hundred percent concentration or just relax while they are listening.

Some other teachers explained the dilemma of having a limited teaching repertoire, or of not knowing how to overcome their students' lack of motivation:

T12: If I teach listening without giving the students tests, they will ignore the listening class. However, if I teach listening through tests, it will bore the students.

T14: It's difficult to engage the students because listening is viewed as a receptive skill... Some students have no interest in learning language or have no language instinct, so it is hard to assist them in learning English .

Other teachers additionally claimed that part of this difficulty in teaching their learners came from finding it hard to discern their problems. One teacher felt that part of this problem stemmed from a lack of awareness of the listening process by the learners themselves:

T31: I am not sure whether students understand the content of the listening or not. Also, they tell me nothing about their listening problems, and I think it's because they don't know what their problems are. Therefore, it is hard for me to solve their listening problems when they don't tell me what these are.

Discussion and Conclusion

The above results, based on teachers' self-reports of how they teach listening suggest that a comprehension-based, test-oriented approach dominates among the Taiwan high school teachers examined in the study. Within this approach, some teachers additionally mentioned they activate learners' schematic knowledge to help scaffold their learners' listening, but the main thrust of the approach appears to be having learners listen to texts and then answer multiple choice (MC) comprehension questions.

In contrast to such a comprehension-based approach, however, the existing research-based literature on L2 listening pedagogy strongly suggests that a process-based approach focusing on teaching listening strategies, is more effective for helping learners develop their listening proficiency (Chen, 2009; Field, 2000, 2008; Graham & Macaro, 2008; Graham et al., 2008, 2011; Mareschal, 2007; Mendelsohn, 1994; Vandergrift, 2003, 2007; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010; Yeldham & Gruba, 2014). Some teachers might counter this view by arguing that the primary purpose of their listening instruction is to prepare students for their college entrance exam listening test, where competence answering MC questions is the main requirement. However, a key objective of high school listening instruction is also to prepare learners for real-life listening contexts, with the comprehension test used only to tap into such abilities. Even when MC testing is the means used to assess learner progress in a comparison study,

strategies instruction has been shown to outperform comprehension-based teaching (e.g., Paulauskas, 1994; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010).

The second result from the study is that many of the learners appeared to lack motivation in the classroom and confidence in their listening. This may have been largely a function of the often monotonous test-oriented approach that was apparently employed by their teachers. The results also showed how teachers seemed to lack awareness of how to remedy such affect-related problems. While the listening research literature (as discussed earlier) indicates that teaching an array of strategies improves listening, much of it has also shown that the approach can substantially boost learners' affective characteristics, in particular those of confidence and motivation. It is not possible to verify such results in the current study because no teachers mentioned teaching listening strategies to any great extent.

The current exploratory study was small-scale using a relatively small number of teachers from a limited range of locations; and it relied solely on the perceptions of its participants. Nevertheless, it has been a useful way of gaining initial insights into the state of listening instruction in Taiwan high schools. As it stands, the findings, when compared with the literature, suggest that teachers in Taiwanese high schools need to be trained to adopt a more process-based, strategies approach to teaching listening. The next step would be to conduct a large-scale study building on those findings and extending the methodology to triangulate learners' perceptions against observations of classroom practice.

Notes

1. Some other, generally smaller-scale experimental studies have supported these findings (e.g., Paulauskas, 1994) and some have failed to show significant comprehension gains by the strategies group over the control group (e.g., Ozeki, 2000). However, no studies have found the control group to outperform the strategies group, indicating on balance, the superiority of strategies instruction.

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