

On the Obstacles of College News Listening and some Implications

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Abstract

In English news listening, we can here the latest news. Listening to it often not only can improve the students' listening ability, but also can broaden the students' horizon. But there are many difficulties in the students' listening process. In this thesis the author try to discuss the difficulties the students meet and give some suggestions to the teachers and the students.

Keywords

College English news listening; Obstacles; Listening strategies.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, as technology advances, trade and exchanges between countries increase, it is becoming more and more important to understand spoken English in many situations, such as face-to-face, on the telephone, in the business meetings, lectures, speeches, television, and so on.

Among the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), English learners often complain that listening is one of the most difficult skills to acquire, and in listening teaching class, most of the teachers regard the English news as an indispensable part, whether you are an English major, or a non-English major. As it is said in English Teaching Syllabus of Advanced University's English Majors: "English majors should listen to and understand Special English of VOA (the second level), then they can listen to Standard English of VOA or BBC (the fourth or sixth level), at last, they can achieve the level of Grade Eight, which means, when the students listen to the journalist's live report news on politics, economy, cultural education or technology etc, they are able to understand it." [1] From this; people can know that it is very important to listen to the English news.

English news broadcasting which reflects the new tendency of the world is a kind of renewing language material that one can easily get. It has generous content, standard speed, and standard word usage. Understanding the English well, it is not only a kind of training or an examination for English majors' listening levels, but also an important way for English learners to study English and know the world's tendency. However, English news is a special style; it is not easy for students to master its listening skills, especially for the freshmen and sophomores, because the difficulty of English news is far away from the difficulty of normal listening materials, which are used in high school. Therefore, when listening to English news originally, students will feel anxious and frustrate, if they are not given correct instruction, their enthusiasm will be decreased. This will also not be good for improving the students' listening levels.

As to this kind of phenomena, English teachers should give students proper instructions, according to the peculiarity of English news and the real circumstances of the students, to help the students to pull through.

2. Difficulties of English News Listening

The difficulty of listening to English news is that English news is different from other listening materials; it is a kind of “written language for reading aloud” [2], its style has its own features and contains many factors which are not good for listening comprehension. To solve these difficulties, first, the students should be familiar with the lingual characteristics of English news broadcasting, then the students need to have wide knowledge, steady phonetic knowledge, and definite abilities, like stenography, speed-reading.

2.1. Inverted Pyramid Style

“Inverted Pyramid Style, which can also be called Flashback law, comes into being in the middle of 19th century in America, and then is widely used all over the world. Its characteristic is that people arrange all kinds of facts in the news according to the digressive order of importance.” [3] That is, in the first paragraph (news lead), the reporter tells people the most important fact, or gives an answer to an question, to which is paid great attention; the less important information is after the news lead, to supply the detailed information gradually; and the least important information is put at the end. Thus, it forms an “anticlimactic” construction, just like an “Inverted Pyramid”. Usually, there are “six news factors”, composed of five “wh-” and one “h-” (who, what, when, where, why, how).

Now, a piece of news is provided for the comprehension of the “Inverted Pyramid Style”.

“The space shuttle Discovery made a rare night landing at the Kennedy Space Center early on Thursday. The night landing, the eleventh in the center’s ninety-four shuttle missions, ended a ten-day mission to outfit the orbiting international space station. Although the spacecraft created a sonic boom that could be heard along much of Florida’s eastern seaboard, witnesses on the ground could not see the orbiter until it was over the runway lights. Scattered showers off the Florida coast had threatened to postpone the shuttle’s return, but forecasters gave the green light when the decided no rain would fall within forty-eight kilometers of the space center.” [4]

The first sentence of this piece of news is the news lead; it mainly elaborates the rare night landing of the space shuttle Discovery. In the news lead, there are answers to these questions: “who (Discovery), when (Thursday), what (landing), and where (Kennedy Space Center)”. The latter description is detailed introductions and complementary explanations, to make the listeners know more about the landing of the spacecraft.

Nevertheless, when students are listening to English news, as they don’t know the framework of the news fully, or their minds don’t make a good preparation for listening, students will always neglect the news lead of the first sentence. Because of skipping the important information, students will feel that it is difficult to go on listening.

2.2. Poor Linguistic Ability

2.2.1. Poor Phonetic Knowledge

Many students memorize thousands of words and a lot of grammar, they can also understand written articles well, but they even hardly understand the Special English. What’s the reason of this kind of phenomenon?

The reason is that many English learners don’t get enough sound training through the process of study. They are not able to distinguish all kinds of speech changes (Sound Linking, Loss of Plosion, Strong and Weak Forms and Assimilation etc) and basic phonetic knowledge (Word Stress, Sentence Stress, Intonation, and the Tone Group). They are unaccustomed with the standard speech, intonation, speed and the Tone Group. The reason is that these things are different from their own ways of reading. Just like in the following sentence “Many people mistakenly believe that old age is a time of increased illness and loneliness. In fact, people do

not suddenly change.” In the tape’s reading “is” and “a” are Sound Linking, the pronunciation of “s” is a Weak Form. In “do not”, because of Weak Form of “do”, it’s hard to hear it clearly. So if students have poor phonetic knowledge, it is impossible for them to know “is” and “do” accurately. Sometimes students can’t recognize every phonetic unit well, so that they had a false listening. For example, in a piece of news, there is a sentence “there are still seven American hostages being held in Lebanon by different political groups, in which “seven” was read so quickly and “n” was pronounced so weakly that many students heard “several” instead of “seven”.

Another example, in the sentence “Officials say it is an act of self-defense”, because of Sound Linking, students mistakenly heard “active” instead of “an act of”.

2.2.2. Lacking a large scale of vocabulary

The prominent feature of English news is the vocabulary. As news report is involved in various social affairs like politics, economy, culture, military, and science etc. It usually needs a large-scale of vocabulary. According to VOA’s Magazine-Voice, the vocabulary of Special English, which is in common use, is about 1500 words, and the vocabulary of Standard English is about more than 4000 words.

In the vocabulary of English news, there are many proper nouns, including people’s name (George Walker Bush and Tony Blair), government office’s name (the White House, No.10 Downing Street and Pentagon), country’s name, especially the capitals (Israel, Afghanistan, Seoul, Rome), and there are also proper nouns about organization, religion, media, arms, and acronyms (WHO-the World Health Organization, EEC-the European Economic Community, OPEC-the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries).

In addition, the reporter wants to make his article lively, he always uses some new words or some reduced forms (space sickness, crib death, and beatnik).

But for the students, they usually learn the articles which are composed of simple basic words, and most of them know less about the proper nouns and new words. When students come across these words during the listening process, their minds will be interrupted by those unfamiliar words, and can’t be coherent. As the vocabulary is a big obstacle to listen to English news, it is difficult for most of the students to do the English news listening well.

2.3. Deficient Schema Preparation and Background Information

2.3.1. Lacking Schema Preparation

Schema is a philosophical conception, raised by Konda. In the 20th century, with the generation and development of Modern Cognitive Philosophy, the concept of “schema” got fuller definition. Pearson regarded schema as “the vision or the association in one’s mind which is produced when people listen to or read something.” Cook described schema as “the knowledge previously stored in one’s mind.” Schema is the basic material of cognition and the necessary part of understanding all kinds of information. Therefore, depending on the “schema”, the listener can receive and understand the information, and forecast the theme of the conversation.

Most of the students, when listening to English news, their minds will become vacant; they don’t know how to deal with the news. The reason is that, usually the construction of schema the students accumulate is about the material which is closely related to daily life. But the listening materials of English news are involved with different aspects of western society, like economy politics, culture, military etc. Students are short of the knowledge of schema which is related to these materials, thus, it is difficult for them to master the main points of listening materials. It is also a big obstacle for listening comprehension.

2.3.2. Lacking Background Information

In teaching practices, there are always two phenomena: one is that, when students are asked to tell the main idea of English news, they always consider the background information as the

reality of the news; the other is, when the teacher asks “why did this matter happen?” the students feel confused. This shows that students don’t have enough recognition about the background information and its position in English news listening.

In the book *Writing Theory and Practice of News Broadcasting*: “the background information refers to the related facts of the explanations of the news.” So the background information is not the reality of the news, its function is to explain the news.

The English reporters are always native speakers, they are very familiar with western customs, cultures and historical backgrounds, and because they think that everyone knows these backgrounds. But in fact, to people who’re not very familiar with the western society and culture, especially English learners, it is difficult for them to understand the listening materials, if the writer doesn’t tell them the necessary background information.

For example: there is such a sentence “It provides 800 telephone service.” [5] In a piece of news, this introduced the telephone net of America. According to the literal meaning, people know that this sentence means “this net supply people 800 telephone services.” In grammar, this meaning is right, but in fact, it is completely wrong. Because in America, when people want to have a long distance call for free, they need to dial 800. So the meaning of the sentence is “this net provides 800 telephone services for free.” Students don’t know this background information, thus, they understand the news mistakenly.

Another example, in America, after the report of the pop of the White House, Treasury Secretary deals with the matter by himself. [6] Listening to this, students or listeners feel surprised. They don’t know the background information that “American Treasury Secretary” is responsible for the president’s safety, so they feel strange.

2.4. Psychological Obstacle

In the process of studying foreign language, students can’t create a linguistic atmosphere to practise it just like their mother tongue, and the chance of practicing foreign language is small. So it is easy for the students to feel anxious and fearful while they are listening.

Usually, the scared psychology widely consists in the process of student’s listening. Its main reflection is that the mind is much nervous and the attention is not focused on. While there is a test or a quiz, the students will become very nervous. If one feels nervous, the reason is that some students are eager to win, this kind of mind increases students’ pressure and makes them feel intense; or because of insufficient preparation, some students are afraid of being asked a question. These two situations result in vacancy of one’s mind, which influences the continuity and the accuracy of listening. If one doesn’t focus his attention on listening, maybe this is because he has listened to the material for a long time; or the listening material is too difficult, this will made students feel very tired.

All of these problems would have a bad effect on students’ normal studying and training; sometimes the problems will let the students have no confidence with themselves.

3. Solutions of English News Listening

From the foregoing writings, people know if students want to understand English news well, they must find good ways to solve those difficulties. English news is different from other listening materials. It not only requires the listeners to know the development of important affairs all over the world and be familiar with names of famous people and popular areas, but also asks the listeners to get the information and memorize it quickly, then reappear the information, so English news can be called a “live” book. Because through the process of English news listening, people can know about the developing tendency of modern English news and countries all over the world, especially the social actuality, cultures, customs and geographical scenery of Britain and America.

Since people have known the importance and the difficulties of English news listening, in the following, some useful methods are offered to help students understanding the news well.

3.1. Mastering the News Structure and Understanding the News Lead

Most English news reports use the “Inverted Pyramid Style”. That is, the reporters arrange the order of news according to the importance of the news reality. The most important sentence usually is put at the beginning of the report, which is called “news lead”.

To most of the student, when beginning to listen to the news, they should get the news lead quickly and accurately, this is vital. At the beginning, if students know the news lead, it means that the students get the outline and the heart of the news, which makes a good preparation for the full and accurate listening comprehension.

Usually, the news lead tells the listener the matter (what), time (when), place (where), character (who) and the reason and manner of the matter (why and how), that is “the six factors of news (five “wh-” and one “h-”). But not all the news lead includes these six factors, because the emphasis of each news is different. For example:

“The NATO Alliance has offered new proposals to the Warsaw Alliance at their talks on joint and balanced force reductions in Europe.”

WHO: The NATO Alliance

WHAT: New proposals on joint and balanced force reductions in Europe

WHERE: at their talks with the Warsaw Alliance

In a word, the news lead is the elite of the whole piece of news. While students are listening to the news carefully, they should get all the related information of the lead. Only in this way, can the students have an understanding of the outline of the whole news; and then on the basis of this, students can understand the news accurately. So in daily training, students should take the news lead into account.

3.2. Improving Student's Linguistic Ability

3.2.1. Knowing the Phonetic Difference and Overcoming the Phonetic Obstacle

Students need to practice English news listening more, if they want to have a good understanding of the news. But if students have learnt some basic phonetic knowledge well, this will help them to do well in the listening. Because without the instruction of theory, the listening practice will turn to be in vain, on the contrary, if students practice listening with good instruction of the theory, they will find that it is available for them to understand the listening well.

In China, English education always follows the phonology of RP (Received Pronunciation) that is the British teaching system. BBC always uses this phonology-RP. There is also another kind of phonology of GA (General America), which is the “Mandarin” of America, the American radio broadcaster often uses GA. RP and GA are quite different from each other, for example:

	RP	GA
Fast	/fa:st/	/fæst/
Tomato	/tə'ma:təu/	/tə'meitəu/
Either	/aiðə /	/ iðə/

Students should pay great attention to these phonetic differences, especially when they are listening to English news.

As to the phonetic knowledge like Stress, Sound Linking, Intonation etc, students usually don't give enough attention to them. After a long time, a false acoustical impression is formed in their

minds----they can easily understand a sentence, but while listening, they are not able to understand the same sentence. Thus, in order to understand the English news well, teachers should teach the students some basic knowledge of phonetics to help them correcting the false pronunciation, so that the students can form a good habit of right speech, intonation and pronunciation. There is another thing students need to remember, that is, they should insist on practising everyday in order to overcome the obstacle.

3.2.2. Memorizing the News Vocabulary

English news, which corresponds to oral English, is a kind of popular written language. The main characteristic of English news is its vocabulary. As the news report is the newest message, its content is involved with all kinds of social affairs. Therefore, most of its vocabulary is concerned with politics, economy, military, science and technology and nature.

If students want to understand English news well, they have to pay great attention to words which appear frequently, then classify these words into groups like words in common use, phrases and proper nouns, etc. Students should accumulate these words to enlarge their vocabulary, if they want to improve their listening abilities. This also helps students to listen to the news without the teacher's instruction. In addition, students ought to learn more words by heart, such as country's name, main city's name and famous people's name, and abbreviations of organizations should be memorized.

Take proper nouns for an example, some students don't think the proper nouns are English words, so they don't want to memorize them. But in order to improve their listening, it is not appropriate for them to do like this. Because many proper nouns appear frequently in the news, if students are not familiar with these words, it will be difficult for them to understand the English news. Here is a piece of news:

"Another American has been kidnapped in West Beirut. Fifty-three year old Frank Reed was abducted by four gun men this morning. Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility, accusing Reed of being a spy. The pro-Iranian group already holds at least three other Americans and three Frenchmen."

There are about forty or fifty words, including proper nouns like "Beirut, Islamic Jihad Iranian American" etc, and words such as "abduct, claim responsibility, accused of", are all words or phrases that are commonly used in English news. If students don't know these words, it will be difficult for them to understand the news.

3.3. Having Generous Background Information

In China, Great Britain and America, the cultural tradition and customs are quite different. As the Chinese students are influenced deeply by their own countries' culture and their mother tongue, they usually analyze and understand English sentences with "Chinese-style mind". As a result, for lacking of sensibility for the difference between English culture and Chinese culture, students can't understand the actual meaning and the real main purpose of the information.

Therefore, "it is very helpful for students' listening to know a great number of background information." [7] This view has also been proved by the research of Chiang, Dunkel and Schmidt-Rinehart. If students don't know the background information of western world, like the social systems, local conditions and social customs, thinking modes and value ideas, there will be a big "stumbling block" in the listening comprehension. For example, the following sentence: The congress which assembled Monday for its last session is full of what they call "Lame Ducks" [8]. "Lame duck" refers to lame duck, which can't fly. In America, after the presidential election, the new president and officials feel very happy, but the former president and government officials all become disappointed, because they fail in the election. If the listener doesn't know the allusion of "Lame Ducks", they would not understand the sentence well.

There is another example:

“The path to November is uphill all the way.”

Here, “November” refers to “the presidential election to be held in November”. If students don’t know what “November” refers to, it is impossible for them to understand the sentence.

As background information has a close relation to English news listening, it is important for students to know more about western countries. Students can make use of many ways to accumulate background information, like reading Chinese and English newspapers and magazines, listening to radio programs (VOA and BBC), and watching TV programs of CCTV, etc.

3.4. Encouraging Students to Use the Strategy of Guessing

Guessing is a positive psychological activity before or after the listening process. One, who is good at listening, likes to guess something actively, he makes use of his reserved background knowledge and the hints which the passage provides, and he can easily get the meaning of the language. From this, people learn, guessing needs to be on the basis of concrete information, just like the rule of discourse, the structure of grammar and the key words etc. In English news teaching, teachers can instruct students guess from the following aspects:

3.4.1. Guessing from the News Lead

It is known to all that the news lead is the beginning of the news; it is the generalization and the summary of the whole passage. Usually, the news lead tells students “who, when, where and what”, it provides clues for guessing. So when good listeners are listening, they can guess the content of the following passage subconsciously.

3.4.2. Guessing from the Key Words

There are about two types of circumstances, one is that the listeners are familiar with the key words; the other is that the listeners don’t know the key words at all. The first kind of situation provides great evidence for guessing; the other one is possible to block the guessing. For example, from the phrase “death rate”, listeners is able to conclude that the following passage is related to numbers, so they have enough preparations and make their attentions to be focused on numbers; if it is necessary, they will write the numbers down. But if “death rate” is replaced by “mortality rate”, some students will feel confused and make their attentions focused on the word “mortality”, thus, they stop guessing. However, excellent listeners will focus their attentions on at once, and go on guessing through the word “rate” and the context. Therefore, teachers can let the excellent listeners tell the students some useful experience, which is good for students’ guessing.

3.4.3. Guessing from Discourse Marker

Discourse marker implies the change of the discourse and the relation between sentences, just as Transition, Transits, Causal relation, Supposition, they provide evidence for guessing. Usually they represent the adverb phrases and the short sentences, such as “however, therefore, earlier this month”, etc.

In addition, “the discourse marker of oral language usually has stop, high pitch, expression and posture, and intonation is also used to represent some information. In speaking, the new information often uses the higher intonation, but the known ones use the lower intonation. Of course, there is an exception, the higher intonation can be used to show that the speaker changes the discourse, or a new discourse begins, it can also show emphasis or contrast; the lower intonation can be used to indicate that the listeners ignore something.”

3.5. Intensive Listening, Extensive Listening, and Stenography

“Intensive listening means, people have to listen many times to have a good understanding of the whole news, so that listeners are able to recite or write the news completely.” Listeners can choose appropriate materials to listen, no matter how many times they will listen to the news. The listeners’ purposes are to understand every word, every sentence, and then write them

down. If there is any difficulty, listeners should try their best to make it clear, at last, they can understand the whole message.

"Extensive listening means listening everyday to get the information, know the general idea, in this way, listeners can improve their listening abilities." [9] Listeners are able to do a lot of extensive listening; they can try to listen to different kinds of materials with different intonation of different areas. Through this, listeners can broaden their sight and memorize many new words.

The radio stations broadcast many pieces of news in a short time, and the speed is very fast. With so many messages, one can't remember them at all, so students need to learn the simple stenography to let the information reappear in their heads. The students may make use of the abbreviations, for example, k.g.(kilogram), p.m.(post meridiem), i.e.(that is to say), e.g. (for instance). In addition, students can use their own ways to do the stenography, they can use "...to represent "thus, therefore", use "---to stand for "result from", use "|" to represent "growth, increase", use "~"to stand for "variation", and "<"to represent "much less than" etc.

When doing the extensive listening, students should be good at making use of the context to guess the main points of the news, not focusing their attention on the phrases or sentences which they can't understand completely. After listening, they can make use of stenography to memory the listening material. Extensive listening play an important role in improving one's listening ability, with this improvement, extensive reading will show its significance. But at the same time, students should not ignore the importance of intensive listening. In a word, students should make use of both intensive listening and extensive listening.

3.6. Listening to English News from the Easy to the Difficult

Now, teachers often use Special English and Standard English of VOA and BBC. Special English is designed for English learners in Non-English-speaking countries. The speed of Special English is slow, the radio broadcaster read about 90 words every minute, and the content and the sentence structure is simple. Understanding the Special English is the basis of understanding the Standard English. Because in Standard English, the radio broadcaster will read 140 words every minute, the required vocabulary is more than 4000 words, the sentence is long and has complicated structures, the content is vivid, but there are too many difficult words.

As the saying goes, "All buildings are built on the basis of the lands." Only people have learnt the Special English well, can they have the chance to improve their Standard English. In order to have a good basis, from the practice of special English, students can try to repeat the news sentence by sentence, so that they will be familiar with the sound, intonation and structure of the news. At the same time, they can practice their sensibility, and their ability of oral power of expression and reaction, as they make full use of their ears, heads, and mouths.

At the beginning, students may feel it very difficult to do practice like this, so they can use some accessory methods, which is, before listening, students can read newspapers like China Daily, Beijing Review, China Today etc. The reason is that, some serious international affairs will also appear in foreign channels of all countries all over the world at the same time. Having known the content and some words, students can get the theme as soon as they listen to the news, thus, they can understand the news well.

In addition, students can ask themselves to dictate a piece of news or two pieces of news every week. This is a good way to improve their listening ability. Since if one doesn't understand news, he won't write it down; if he doesn't listen to news correctly, he will not write the news correctly.

3.7. Having Good Psychological Quality

Students should have a good habit of listening and practicing, they have to know their purposes for listening---to get some important message from the news. They should know themselves,

do not pretend to be good at everything, and they had better try their best to have good psychological quality.

Everyone knows, "We are our own enemy." In the process of listening to English news, many people are not confident of themselves, they think it's so hard to listen to English news that they can't do the listening well; they are defeated by themselves without beginning.

When one comes across a book, he only knows few words, he would be afraid of reading the book. Because he isn't confident of himself, he thinks that he would not understand the book. But if he believes in himself, one day he will understand the book well.

That's the matter to everyone, confidence is very important, especially to the students. When students are listening to the English news, if they believe in themselves, they will indeed do well.

As we all know "What the mind can conceive, it can achieve."**4.Conclusion**

As a kind of linguistic activity, listening plays an important role in people's communication. According to the estimation in the book --- A Practical Guide to the Teaching of English, people can know that, in their communication, "listening" occupies 45 percent, "speaking" occupies 30 percent, "reading" occupies 10 percent, and "writing" occupies 9 percent. With this datum, people can learn that "listening" plays an important role in their lives.

In daily life, as long as English learners turn on the radio, they can hear English news broadcasting (CIR, BBC, and VOA); if they turn on the television, they will watch some English programs; if people surf on the net, they can see live English news report. Through radio, newspaper, television and Internet, people have a good environment for English learning. English news broadcasting provides good opportunities for English learners. If people make good use of the broadcasting, there will be another effective way for English study. Because learners can know many original and native materials through the news broadcasting, this is useful to develop their English skills.

But through the second part of this passage, students can learn that, it is not easy for them to do English news listening well, because there are so many obstacles. English news has its own features, but students are not very familiar with them. And the students don't have basic knowledge, which is need for listening: their phonetic knowledge is poor, and they don't have enough vocabulary. The most difficult to be solved is that students are not confident of themselves.

Students can learn some useful ways to solve these difficulties from this article. Maybe there are other good ways for English news listening, which are not referred here, but students can also make use of them. The reason is that, to the same problem, different people have different methods to solve them.

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