A Probe into College English Listening Instruction in Independent Colleges in Response to CET-4 Reform

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Abstract—This thesis paper aims to explore several approaches adopted in college English listening instruction in independent colleges in order to adapt to the reform of listening comprehension in CET (College English test)-4. As is known to all, listening is one of the most difficult skills when it comes to learning English for students and also one of the most important parts when it comes to college English instruction. Therefore, this thesis tries to analyze the reform of CET-4 starting from June 2016, the students’ listening ability and the current listening instruction in independent colleges. Also, based on problems students face while listening, the author puts forward some teaching strategies including improving students’ basic knowledge of English, selecting suitable listening materials, varying teaching methods in class, helping students acquire listening skills and help students to give up wrong belief, with an aim to improve students’ listening ability and have a better performance in CET-4.

Keywords—independent colleges; listening ability; college English listening instruction, CET-4 reform

I. INTRODUCTION

According to College English Curriculum Requirements, which is issued by the Ministry of Education in 2007, the objective of College English is to develop students’ ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future studies and careers as well as social interactions they will be able to communicate effectively, and at the same time enhance their ability to study independently and improve their general cultural awareness so as to meet the needs of China’s social development and international exchanges [3].

The requirements for undergraduate college English teaching are set at three levels, that is, basic requirements, intermediate requirements and advanced requirements. The basic requirements are the minimum level that all non-English majors have to reach before graduation. In terms of listening, at basic level, students should be able to follow classroom instructions, everyday conversations, and lectures on general topics conducted in English. They should be able to understand English radio and TV programs spoken at a speed of about 130 to 150 words per minute, grasping the main ideas and key points. They are expected to be able to employ basic listening strategies to facilitate comprehension [3].

II. THE REFORM OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION IN CET-4

A student’s English competency is usually evaluated in terms of listening, speaking, reading and writing. CET-4, which has been widely accepted in China, serves to assess college students’ proficiency in English. It is said that most college students in China want to pass the exam to prove their English ability, which may help to sharpen their competitive edge when hunting for a job in the future.

Listening comprehension is included in CET-4, accounting for 35% of the whole test. The questions used to be presented in the form of eight short conversations, two long conversations, three passages and a compound dictation. However, since June 2016, in order to let students pay more attention to pragmatic English, listening comprehension in CET-4 has undergone a reform, with questions presented similar to TOEFL or IELTS while the whole value remains unchanged. It is now made up of three parts, namely three English news reports, two long conversations and three passages. All the questions are given in the form of multiple choices with the value of passage understanding increased.

News report listening is a newly added type of questions, which accounts for 7%. Each news report is about 130 to 200 words followed by two or three questions, aiming to draw students’ attention to pragmatic English and enhance their cross-cultural communicative skills. As a matter of fact, news report listening, to some extent, is a form of passage listening. It also has different characteristics from passage understanding. To begin with, news report is always written in inverted Pyramid structure, that is, the information is arranged in descending order of importance. The most important material is placed at the beginning of the story and less important material follows, allowing listeners to catch the lead and know most of the important information. Moreover, as a standard discourse material, news report often contains many monosyllables, contractions and proper names together with incomplete plosions, reductions and liaisons. Plus, news report covers a large range of topics, including politics, economy, culture, man-made or natural disasters, religious and social events, etc.
III. Analysis of the Current English Listening Learning and Teaching in Independent Colleges

A. Analysis of listening ability of students in independent colleges

As a new force of Chinese higher education, independent colleges have attracted more and more attention from people around the country. Whether an independent college is good or bad lies largely in its teaching quality. Students’ English competency is one of the criteria to assess teaching quality. On average, students in independent colleges do not have a good command of English. As we know, Chinese English education has long been hampered by an exam-oriented attitude. High school teachers and students often pursue results in exams and English classes tend to focus on vocabulary, grammar, and sentence patterns, putting less emphasis on listening. What’s worse, due to the educational gap between regions, some of the students need not to include listening comprehension in the college entrance examination, so they have never received any professional training of listening [6]. It’s apparent that students have weak listening ability and they may easily distract their attention while listening. Besides, they often depend too much on teachers and lack the initiative to study on their own, making their listening even worse.

B. Analysis of the current English listening instruction in independent colleges

Many independent colleges have appeared to meet the demand to transform Chinese structure of higher education. But there are no corresponding teaching materials for them to use. They have to use the same teaching materials as public colleges. These materials are too difficult for students in independent colleges to understand, thus making them feel frustrated in study [7]. Moreover, teachers tend to carry out listening training in a very traditional way, involving playing the recording, checking the answers and replaying the recording, which cannot hold the attention of the students. Accordingly, independent colleges should adjust themselves in college English listening classes in order to improve students’ performance in CET-4.

IV. How to Conduct College English Listening Instruction in Independent Colleges

A. Improve students’ basic knowledge of English

1) Improve students’ phonetic knowledge: Phonetic knowledge is especially important if students want to improve listening comprehension. Setter and Jenkins ever pointed out that the mutual effect between pronunciation and listening cannot be underestimated [5]. However, it is commonly seen that many students in independent colleges are poor at pronunciation. They may not be clear about the big difference between English and Chinese in voice systems. At the same time, college English teaching, a course for non-English majors, does not cover a systematic instruction of pronunciation. These two factors definitely lead to students’ poor performance in listening practice.

As a result, English teachers should teach students how to pronounce each word correctly and help students to find out there are many elisions, reductions, liaisons and incomplete plosions in English words and sentences. Taking liaisons as an example. When a word ends in a consonant sound and is followed by a word that starts with a vowel sound, the speaker should push that consonant sound forward and connect it to the vowel in the next sound. When a word ends in a consonant sound and the following word begins with the same or similar consonant sound, the speaker will only pronounce that sound once by lengthening or holding the sound instead of saying the consonant sounds twice [8]. Pronunciation differences between British and American English should be analyzed as well because the listening materials may be spoken by British or American. Students should be required to listen to a lot of recordings, try to imitate the pronunciation of native speakers and develop a good habit of reading out loud. With the development of technology, apps such as Wechat can also be applied in listening instruction as a supplement of regular class. On official accounts teachers can post phonetic exercises for students to practice and students can send back their feedbacks directly to teachers, making possible timely communication between teachers and students. Without doubt, all these training should be conducted step by step throughout the whole English learning process [2].

2) Enlarge students’ vocabularies: Limited vocabularies may be the biggest reason which can account for why students cannot fully understand what they hear. Some students in independent colleges say that due to the exam-oriented education system in China, teachers paid most of their attention to the scores and students only immersed themselves with thousands of exams and practices during high school years and they did not memorize new words very often. If they did, they only recited news words in its written form with little attention to the “sound” form. Even if they know the words by eyes, they fail to recognize the words immediately while listening. For instance, they can recognize the word “flew” or “flown”, but they may not recognize them while listening. And if there are many unfamiliar words in a given message, it will be hard for them to understand it. Consequently, teachers should tell students to accumulate vocabularies not only by eyes but also by ears. As for English idioms and slangs, which appear in listening materials, teachers should ask students to master the meaning and usage of them. Only gaining a large vocabulary can students improve their listening ability.

3) Familiarize students with English grammar: Due to the effect of communicative teaching method in recent years, many students do not attach much importance to grammar during high school years. This is also the same case with students in independent colleges. Grammar, the basic logic of a language, may not be the most important thing in learning English, but it plays a certain part in listening comprehension. It will help students to recognize the sentence structure and the tones of the speakers. While listening we become a passive information receiver and we don’t have any idea about what will come up next. If we don’t know that language organizational structures well, how can we understand or fully
understand the given message [8]? English is our second language and its grammatical structures are new or even strange to students. Consequently, teachers should help conduct a systematical instruction of important grammar in class and ask students to practice a lot after class.

4) Help students to get more background knowledge: Listening comprehension requires listeners to construct a context in a very short time and it is a test of listeners’ basic knowledge of a language, background knowledge and logical ability [4]. We can see that listening materials may deal with any topic, including science, culture, economy, politics, religions, art and so on. If we know some background knowledge, it will help us better understand the listening materials. Among all, cultural knowledge is the most important because differences in culture may cause misunderstanding not only in listening but also in other aspects of English language [8]. Thus, teachers should equip students with more knowledge of humanities, customs and histories in English-speaking countries. They should ask students to read English newspapers and magazines as many as possible to broaden their horizons, so that they can do better predictions and meaning interpretations.

B. Select Suitable listening materials

According to the input hypothesis put forward by Stephan Krashen, the acquisition of second-language relies on the enough comprehensive input materials that language learners are exposed to [7]. In order to let students get enough input, a large quantity of listening materials should be guaranteed and English environment should be created in class. Teachers should speak English as much as possible and students should do a lot of listening practices in-class and out-of-class. Krashen also said that input materials must be interesting and relevant. The more interesting and relevant the input material is, the easier the learners obtain language acquisition unconsciously. Thus, listening materials should be chosen appropriately from the given books based on the English level of independent college students so as to arouse their interests. Clips of famous movies and TV dramas and English songs of their generation will be favored as well. In addition, some listening materials and exercises should be aimed at CET-4. For instance, news spoken at a slow speed from VOA, BBC, ABC and CNN should be included in listening class. In these ways we can relieve students’ stress and enhance their listening capacity.

C. Adopt various teaching methods in listening

English teachers always use a fixed and traditional way when conducting listening instruction, namely, playing recording, a few simple explanations and then giving out the right answers, which makes the class so dull and students’ interest killed. As a result, various teaching methods should be adopted based on different listening materials. For instance, if the listening material is a story, teachers can put forward some questions, ask students to answer the questions and then require them to retell the whole story based on these questions, thus helping students acquire their speaking ability. Plus, students are allowed to discuss with their classmates, so that their stress will be relieved in class. Oral English activities such as presentation, speech contest should be organized, allowing students to improve their listening capacity when other students are speaking. In these ways, students will be more active in participating in listening exercises and activities.

D. Help students acquire some listening skills

David W. Carroll ever said that the more predictable the information is, the more we can understand it based on semantics, syntax, background knowledge and personal experience [1]. In real listening class, teachers should try their best to cultivate students’ predicting ability to improve their performance in listening. Before listening, students should calm themselves down, go over the choices quickly, predict what questions may be asked and what topic of the listening material will be. For example, there is a question followed by four choices: A) The man has sent the order to the woman by mistake; B) Some of the telephone systems don’t work properly; C) Some of the packs do not contain any manuals; D) The quality of the goods is not up to the standard. From the key words or phrases order, packs, goods, mistake, don’t work, not up to the standard, we can predict this question may be what is wrong with those goods. Besides, while listening, students should be fully focused and listen attentively to the first sentence, which tells us the topic of the whole listening material. Then they should take notes by using some symbols or contractions they are familiar with in order not to miss the important information. What should be written down includes the main topic, the main plot, main characters, time, places and numbers. Students should also pay attention to conjunctions such as whereas, unfortunately, unexpectedly, instead, yet, however, though, rather than, as a result, consequently, eventually, now that, according to, ordinal numbers such as firstly, secondly, finally, and also adjectives such as major, unique and significant. The sentences following these words may be the answers to the questions. In a word, students should receive a regular training so that they can get better performance.

E. Help students to get rid of some wrong belief

Students often hold the opinion that they have to know the meaning of every single word if they want to understand the whole listening. So, if they come across a new word while listening, they usually stop for a while to think, which definitely affects the whole listening process. They will miss the rest of the listening materials since their minds are busy figuring out what have gone and then making them more and more nervous. But the truth is that no matter what language we learn, we cannot fully understand each word all the time, because there often appear new words every time you listen. The right approach to deal with it is that we can definitely comprehend the given message based on the key words, prior background knowledge, and linguistic context [8]. In other words, we don’t need to manage to know the meaning of every single word. Thus, students should learn to just let those new words go while listening. After listening, they should find out what the new words are and try to recite them so as to enlarge their vocabulary as well.

V. Conclusion

To conclude, listening instruction is an integral and important part of college English teaching. The reform of CET-
4 has put higher requirements for students’ listening abilities. In order to meet these high demands, the listening class in independent colleges should be accordingly reformed. With the common efforts of students and teachers, students’ listening ability and performance in CET-4 will be greatly improved.

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