

Effective Approaches to Teaching Listening: Chinese EFL Teachers' Perspectives

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This study examines the approaches considered effective by EFL teachers in solving their learners' major listening difficulties. In-depth semi-structured interviews were adopted to probe into 10 Chinese EFL teachers' beliefs about what they perceived to be effective methods that would assist their students in dealing with their listening difficulties. In the interview, the teachers were asked to identify the main sources of their students' listening difficulties, discuss their preferred approaches to helping their students deal with their listening problems, and describe instructional procedures that would enhance their students' overall listening abilities. The results show that in general these teachers share a preference for a bottom-up approach to teaching L2 listening, stressing the importance of giving priority to developing their students lower level skills such as coping with fast speed and recognizing words in speech. However, differences in opinions are identified among the teachers, especially regarding the degree of importance attached to the teaching of listening strategies. Overall, the results seem to lend support to the argument that enhancing EFL learners' bottom-up processing competence is perhaps the first thing that needs to be addressed to help EFL learners build a solid linguistic foundation before they move on to learning the more advanced listening skills.

Key words: L2 listening, L2 listening difficulties, bottom-up approach, top-down approach

INTRODUCTION

Once regarded as a solely passive activity, the listening skill in language learning was rarely seen as worthy of serious research or pedagogical attention. Despite the recognition that listening plays a critically important role in both language learning, communication, academic pursuit and current English curriculum (Rost, 2002; Vandergrift, 2004), it remains the least researched and understood of all four language skills (e.g., Nation & Newton, 2009) and “such neglect is surprising” (Hedge, 2003, p. 228).

Among the relatively smaller amount of work done on L2 listening, different views have been voiced regarding two important process types involved in listening, namely bottom-up processing and top-down processing, in terms of their role in successful listening comprehension and the relevant importance attached to them in the teaching of L2 listening. *Bottom-up processing* involves “perceiving and parsing the speech stream at increasingly larger levels beginning with auditory-phonetic, phonemic, syllabic, lexical, syntactic, semantic, propositional, pragmatic and interpretive” (Field, 2003, p. 326). In the bottom-up part of the listening process, listeners use their knowledge of the language and their ability to process acoustic signals to make sense of the aural discourse (Rost, 2002). *Top-down processing* is often viewed in opposition to bottom-up processing (Lynch & Mendelsohn, 2002). In top-down processing, listeners infer meaning from contextual clues and from making links between the spoken message and various types of prior knowledge which listeners possess (Hedge, 2003).

Although it has been pointed out that a key factor in successful listening is the individual's ability to *integrate* information gathered from the two processes (Buck, 2001; Lynch & Mendelsohn, 2002; Rost, 2002), a number of researchers claim that effective listeners are better able to engage in top-down processing to assist their comprehension of the aural input whereas ineffective listeners rely heavily on bottom-up processing and are deficient in top-down processing skills (e.g., Sadighi & Zare, 2006; Shohamy & Inbar, 1991). For instance, after testing 235 learners for both detailed and global understanding of academic material, Hansen and Jensen (1994) found “... that low proficiency students rely heavily on bottom-up

processing skills” (p. 265). Similarly, in a study exploring the effect of text and question type on listening comprehension, Shohamy and Inbar (1991) also concluded that less-skilled listeners performed much better on “local questions”, which required the listeners to locate details and facts, than “global questions”, which required the listener to synthesize information, draw conclusions, make inferences and so on (p. 29).

However, contradictory evidence has been reported by other studies suggesting that less-skilled listeners actually draw heavily upon contextual and co-textual information to form hypotheses (not necessarily correct ones) of what is heard (e.g., Long, 1990; Macaro, Graham, & Vanderplank, 2007); in other words, less-skilled listeners frequently resort what they believe to be top-down cues to assist their comprehension of the aural input. For example, in a retrospection study of Chinese EFL test-takers performing a multiple-choice task, Wu (1998) reported that lower-proficiency listeners made constant use of nonlinguistic knowledge (top-down processing) to compensate for gaps in their linguistic knowledge (bottom-up processing), although the compensatory effect of nonlinguistic knowledge was not always facilitating in terms of the comprehension outcome.

Do skilled listeners make use of bottom-up processing to comprehend aural information? This seems to be the case. In an extensive investigation involving the analysis of answers given by 20,000 Hong Kong examination candidates to different types of listening questions, Tsui and Fullilove (1998) found that it was the ability to accurately identify local information in the aural texts that distinguished skilled listeners from less-skilled ones. They therefore concluded that bottom-up processing seemed to be more important than top-down processing in discriminating candidates’ listening performance, and that skilled listeners seemed to be more able to utilize their linguistic knowledge as compared to the less skilled listeners.

According to Vandergrift (2004), “an awareness of both top-down and bottom-up processes and their relative contribution to comprehension in different contexts and at different levels of language proficiency is fundamental to a theoretically grounded pedagogy of L2 listening comprehension” (p. 5). Empirical studies investigating the association between processing types and learner listening

proficiency, as was enumerated above, have yielded mixed findings: while some studies report that less-skilled listeners are deficient in top-down processing skills, others contradict this view, citing evidence that what less-skilled listeners lack most is bottom-up processing capacity. Despite the divergent opinions voiced in the academia, one established view concerning weak L2 listeners, nonetheless, is that they tend to favor a bottom-up approach to listening (Field, 2004; Vandergrift, 2004). This assumption about weak L2 listeners and the widely held belief that teaching top-down processing skills would compensate for the decoding problems faced by poor listeners have led to the current trend of teaching listening that has in general “favored the development of top-down processes at the expense of developing bottom-up processes” (Vandergrift, 2004, p. 5).

One major strand of research reflecting a top-down approach of teaching L2 listening that has received considerable, if not most, research attention during the past two decades is strategy-based instruction. This line of research has been guided by the underlying belief that transplanting what high proficiency learners are doing to poor ones can make the latter better listeners (e.g., Mendelsohn, 1994; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Although some researchers (e.g., Cross, 2009) have cautiously pointed out the importance of catering for strategies involved in bottom-up processes such as using prosody to discriminate each proposition, strategy-related studies in general featured “an unchallenged assumption that top-down processes are what teachers should be advocating in preference to bottom-up processes” (Macaro et al., 2007, p. 185).

Recently, however, the effectiveness of strategy-based instruction in enhancing weak listeners' comprehension competence has been questioned (Renandya, 2012). Firstly, the exact nature of the association between reported strategy use and proficiency reported, particularly the issue of causality, is still unresolved (e.g., Bremner, 1998). In other words, the findings showing that listening strategies are correlated with proficiency should not be taken to mean that the two variables are causally related; the increased use of strategies might just be a sign of a growing proficiency. Secondly, among the experimental studies which have tried to establish a causal relationship between strategy instruction and proficiency improvement, the results are mixed (e.g., Ozeki, 2000; Paulauskas, 1994; Thompson & Rubin, 1996).

Besides, of the few studies that have produced positive results in favor of the strategy-based instruction, the evidence is not particularly convincing as the experimental effects have tended to be small (e.g., Macaro et al, 2007; Rubin et al., 2007), indicating therefore a somewhat limited pedagogical value (e.g., Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010).

Given the rather limited empirical evidence documenting the success of strategy-based instruction, especially where low-proficiency EFL learners are concerned, and the heavy burden strategy training places on teachers, the effectiveness of a top-down approach to teaching listening has been increasingly challenged. Renandya and Farrell (2011) and Ridgway (2000), for instance, maintain that strategy-instruction should not replace basic language teaching. They propose extensive listening approaches to teaching listening in which frequent practice with meaningful language is given more emphasis in listening instruction. Similarly, Field (2003) points out that writers on second-language listening have perhaps concentrated overmuch on high-level understanding and argues that people should not lose sight of “the primacy of the signal” as research indicates that “many high-level breakdowns of communication originate in low-level errors” (p. 325). From a pedagogical perspective, researchers (e.g., Swan, 2008; Wilson, 2003) have also cautioned against the tendency to undervalue the importance of promoting students’ bottom-up skills in that the aim of language teaching is to help learners rely *less* on contextual guesswork and more on following what is actually produced by the speaker. This view is empirically supported by Zeng (2007), who examined Chinese learners’ listening difficulties and suggested that “listening practices in word recognition, phonological rules, rhythmic groupings, tone placements, intonation rises and falls, and in discriminating differences in word order and grammatical form should be put in priority for low-intermediate listeners in listening classrooms” (p. 89).

Thus, more research is needed to find out whether we should employ instructional approaches that favor the development of bottom-up or top-down skills, especially for lower proficiency learners of English, for whom comprehending spoken English can be quite challenging. Since classroom teachers’ uniquely intimate understanding of their own classroom circumstances can provide

valuable first-hand insights into what works and what doesn't in the classroom, the current study seeks to elicit the views of a group of experienced EFL teachers to help answer the following research question: What approaches do teachers believe to be effective in helping Chinese EFL learners cope with their major listening difficulties?

THE STUDY

The study reported in this paper forms part of a larger study examining L2 listening comprehension difficulties from learner and practitioner perspectives (Wang, 2010). The major aim of the larger study was to identify and compare students' and teachers' perceptions of the factors that may impede learners' listening comprehension. To address the research questions, a 38-item questionnaire (Appendix A) was developed following a comprehensive review of L2 listening literature (e.g., Goh 1999, 2000; Graham, 2006; Hasan, 2000; Rubin, 1994; Zeng, 2007), which identified five categories of L2 listening difficulties. These five categories are described briefly below:

- 1) Text factor: difficulties related to the textual features of the listening material, such as text type, lexical density and access to visual cues;
- 2) Processing factor: variables associated with processing the ephemeral listening input, such as missing the subsequent information while trying to understand the previous words and forgetting what is heard;
- 3) Listener factor: variables internal to listening comprehension, such as anxiety, interest and frequency of engaging in listening practice;
- 4) Task factor: variables associated with the type of questions that listeners are supposed to answer, such as multiple-choice questions and blank-filling questions; and
- 5) External environment factor: variables related to the EFL learning environment, such as the amount of listening materials available to students and the adequacy of in-class listening instruction.

Participants responded to a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire (1 = “strongly disagree” and 5 = “strongly agree”). The questionnaires administered to the students and teachers were identical except for the reference of persons. For instance, the first person pronoun in the student version (e.g., “I”, “me”) was converted to third person pronoun (e.g., “my students”, “them”) in the teacher version. Table 1 below presents the top 10 responses provided by the students and the teachers. What is worth noting here is that all the top ten responses are related to Text- or Processing-related variables, confirming earlier studies (e.g., Goh, 2000; Zeng, 2007) that language related variables (e.g., speed, vocabulary load, complex grammatical structures) are the major causes of L2 listening difficulties

TABLE 1
Top Ten Items Perceived to Be the Most Difficult by Teachers and Students

Ranking order	Student perception (N=301)		Teacher perception (N=30)	
	Variable	Mean	Variable	Mean
1	complex sentences	3.81	speed	3.83
2	phonetic variations	3.78	complex sentences	3.57
3	missing the subsequent information	3.69	missing the subsequent information	3.53
4	speaker accent	3.68	long sentences	3.50
5	news broadcast	3.59	news broadcast	3.50
6	long sentences	3.53	speaker accent	3.47
7	background noise	3.47	background noise	3.47
8	catching the details	3.42	word recognition	3.30
9	fast speed	3.38	new words	3.30
10	new words	3.37	phonetic variations	3.30

In light of the findings presented above, the current study examines teachers' perception about their preferred teaching approaches that they considered useful in helping their students overcome the listening difficulties.

Methodology

According to Goetz and Lecompte (1984), the interview medium is uniquely suited to eliciting data that “represent the world view of the participants being investigated” (p. 57). In addition, interviews can uncover the “richness and complexity” of the participants’ thinking, experiences and beliefs and draw out responses that cannot be captured by simply adopting quantitative research methods (Maynard, 2002, p. 48). Therefore, in-depth interviews were employed to gain deeper insights into the participants’ beliefs and perceptions about their teaching approaches in the current study. It’s worth noting that while teachers’ actual practices may not fully reflect their beliefs (Kane, Sandretto & Heath, 2002), there is evidence to suggest that ESL teachers’ actual instructional practices could be on a whole quite consistent with their instructional beliefs (Johnson, 1992).

Participants

The main research (Wang, 2010), from which the current study is derived, examined students’ and teachers’ perceptions of L2 learners’ listening difficulties by surveying the target population from three Chinese universities located in Xi’an, Shaanxi Province. To maximize direct comparison between students’ and teachers’ views, ten teachers from the same three colleges were invited to participate in the interviews reported here. The criteria for selecting these informants were three-fold: firstly, all the teachers had experience conducting independent listening courses, rather than the type of listening lessons affiliated to other courses, such as Intensive Reading; secondly, all teachers enjoyed reputation for offering effective listening lessons from their students’ reports as well as scores; lastly, half of the teachers had overseas training experience, and the other half did not. The last criterion was included to find out if overseas training had any effects on teachers’ pedagogical preferences.

In general, these teachers’ experience in teaching English listening to Chinese undergraduates ranged from two to ten years. Six of the interviewees had a Master’s degree in either English literature or applied linguistics. Half of them had

received in-service training abroad for roughly one year. All the interviewees signed a consent form, which provided them with details of the purpose of the study. Detailed information of the teachers is presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Background Information of the Interviewees

	Name	Years of teaching L2 listening	Gender	Student population	Highest academic degree/major	Overses training experience	Typical class size
1	Lingcai	7	F	Non-English majors	MA/English literature	None	40-50
2	Xiangdi	9	M	Both English majors and non-English majors	MA/English translation	10 months	40-50
3	Xiahong	10	F	Both English majors and non-English majors	MA/ Applied Linguistics	10 months	40-50
4	Minqiu	5	M	Non-English majors	MA/Applied Linguistics	10 months	40-50
5	Yuchen	2	F	Non-English majors	MA/Translation	None	40-50
6	Qinzhen	10	F	Non-English majors	MA/English Translation	10 months	40-50
7	Jigeng	7	F	Non-English majors	BA/English language and Culture	None	50-60
8	Leixia	8	M	Non-English majors	BA/English language and Culture	None	50-60
9	Juntong	6	M	Non-English majors	BA/English language and Culture	None	50-60
10	Guorui	8	M	Non-English majors	BA/English language and Culture	10 months	40-50

Note: To protect participants' privacy, pseudonyms are used in this study.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews in the form of descriptive and open-ended questions were conducted to elicit participants' opinions of their preferred approaches to teaching L2 listening. The interview questions centered around the teachers' context of English teaching, their perceptions of students' major listening difficulties, the approaches that they believed to be effective in helping solve their students' major listening difficulties. The major interview prompts can be found in Appendix B. Each interview was conducted in Chinese and audiotaped with the participants' permission. A typical interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, but some lasted up to 60 minutes.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were examined by means of analytic induction (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) and constant comparison (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Several preliminary readings were conducted to gain an overall view of the data. The transcripts were then analyzed in detail and a list of salient and recurring themes or patterns was compiled. To ensure intra-rater reliability, the first author went through a second round of categorization and coding from scratch about one month later. In addition, another researcher in the field of L2 listening was invited to act as an independent coder. Following Young (1997), the intra-rater reliability and the inter-rater reliability were both above 0.85.

As an additional check, "member validation" (Richards, 2003) was adopted. The themes that emerged from careful data analysis were summarized and emailed to the participants to ensure valid interpretation of their responses and comments. Apart from two teachers who made small revisions of the wording of their responses, all interviewees affirmed that the researcher's interpretation of the data was representative of their opinions.

Results and Discussion

As described earlier, the major listening difficulties reported by teachers had to do with Text and Processing factors. Among all the variables examined in these two categories, the challenges posed by unfamiliar lexical terms, complicated syntactical structures, fast speed, recognizing words in connected speech (e.g., phonetic variations) and attention problems (e.g., missing the subsequent information when thinking about meaning) were especially stressed by these practitioners (detailed information can be found in Wang, 2010). During the interviews, teachers elaborated on the approaches they believed to be effective in coping with these variables perceived by the participants to have the greatest impact on L2 listening comprehension.

Preferred Approaches to Coping with Text-Related Variables

Approaches suggested by teachers to solving text-related difficulties can be divided into the following three categories: vocabulary instruction, topic preparation, speech rate reduction and repeated listening.

Vocabulary instruction

Recognizing the negative effect exerted by unknown lexical terms on L2 listening comprehension, all the interviewees mentioned that offering instruction on the new/key words in the listening materials would augment their students' comprehension of the L2 spoken text. Oftentimes, these teachers would either directly teach on the difficult lexical terms during pre-listening activities or ask students to preview the unfamiliar words before attending lessons. The following excerpt is typical of such practices:

I often teach my students some words and phrases that they might feel difficult before playing the material for them ... I will talk about some words—words that might be difficult for the majority of the students. So

when listening to the passage, students' comprehension would not be impeded by these terms. (Xiahong)

The effect of vocabulary instruction on language learners' listening comprehension has been investigated by a number of researchers (e.g., Berne, 1995; Chang & Read, 2006). One clear finding from previous research is that vocabulary teaching during pre-listening activities has a positive psychological impact on learners (Chang & Read, 2006, 2007); however, its effect on enhancing learner listening comprehension is limited and in some cases counterproductive, especially when lower-proficiency students are concerned (Berne, 1995; Chang, 2006). For instance, Chang and Read (2007) found that after being exposed to the key words found in the listening materials, lower-proficiency students' attention was often drawn to local cues involving those pre-taught words and consequently failed to catch the overall picture of the spoken text.

The available empirical evidence then seems to suggest that greater care should be taken regarding the selection of pre-taught words and the optimal time to make the words accessible to students. Accordingly, pre-lesson vocabulary preparation, in contrast to in-class vocabulary instruction, seems to be a better choice as it not only allows students more time to familiarize themselves with the vocabulary included in the listening material but also leave more time directly allocated for the listening activities (Field, 2008).

Topic preparation

According to Field (2008), establishing a context of the listening materials in the classroom setting serves as an important means to compensate for the limitations associated with the use of audio materials in typical listening lessons where visual cues available in real-life encounters are absent. All the teachers in this study showed awareness of the facilitative role played by knowledge of the content subject and discussed how they provided such information to their students before exposing them to the spoken text. Below is a typical example:

I often tell my students what is going to be discussed in the coming week, and they are encouraged to search for relevant information. With such preparation, I think the listening texts will be easier to comprehend.
(Yuchen)

Earlier studies looking into the relationship between topic preparation and L2 listening performance confirm a positive link between topic-orientation in advance and the comprehension results (Markham & Latham, 1987; Long, 1990). However, a more recent study done by Chang (2006) reveals that there exists a linguistic threshold for L2 listeners to attain before they can utilize the available background knowledge for better comprehension, especially when L2 listeners aim to comprehend and extract the details of the listening passage. This finding indicates that for lower-proficiency students, other forms of listening support should probably be combined with providing contextual knowledge to enhance their listening comprehension. Reducing the speech rate and repeated listening were two important means emphasized by the teachers interviewed in the current study, as discussed below.

Slowing down the material mechanically

Firmly believing that fast speed was a major cause of L2 listening comprehension breakdown, especially for lower-proficiency students, the teachers described how the advances of new technology enabled them to promote their students' listening comprehension by reducing the speech rate of the listening material. Typical is the following observation:

Now we have the digital equipment to adjust the speed of the listening materials. For the same piece of listening material, we can have slower and faster versions by using this equipment. Starting from a slower version can help listeners follow the text and thus enhance their comprehension.
(Leixia)

The teachers' choice of reducing the speed of the listening passage to aid learner comprehension encouragingly corresponds with the numerous research findings which support a negative association between fast speed and listening comprehension (Griffiths, 1992; Hasan, 2000; Renandya & Farrell, 2011). For lower proficiency learners, the faster the speed the more difficult it becomes for them to comprehend spoken text. Thus, slowing down the speed is one way teachers can do to make the materials more comprehensible.

Repeated listening

Repetition was especially stressed by all teachers as an effective as well as common strategy employed in their L2 listening lessons. According to these teachers, repeated listening to the input material could help make the information more comprehensible to the learners. Usually, the repetition took place in conjunction with paused play, especially when the sentences were long. The following description is typical of such a practice:

I just ask my students to listen to the materials many times, maybe three times. If they still fail to understand... I play the tape paragraph by paragraph and sometimes even sentence by sentence. Although some listening passages are quite difficult to understand, chances are that students understand some parts... So when they listen again, they can focus on the other parts that they fail to understand earlier. (Minqiu)

Repetition has always been an important strategy in second language learning and teaching since it provides more processing time and clarifies the relationship of syntactic forms (Hatch, 1983). Field (2008), for instance, points out that replaying the recording not only allows attention to be given to the forms of language, but also enables the learner to build increasingly on the information that is extracted.

Preferred Approaches to Coping with Processing Factor

As mentioned above, processing variables constitute another major source of L2 listening problems. Difficulties related to word segmentation and recognition skills as well as attention were especially stressed by the participants in this study. During the interviews, the teachers elaborated on five approaches, namely pronunciation instruction, focused activities on phonetic variations, aural-written verification, repeated listening and dictation to enhance their students' word discrimination skills, the development of which was deemed essential to tackle the attention/working memory problems commonly associated with L2 listening.

Pronunciation instruction

Incorrect pronunciation is widely considered a factor that contributes to many L2 listeners' inability to recognize known words (e.g., Liu, 2003). Teachers in this study believed that oftentimes students could not recognize the spoken form of certain words because they pronounced those words in a substantially different manner from the speakers in the listening passage. The instructional activity suggested by teachers to address this problem was to integrate the process of listening practice, pronunciation practice, reading (aloud) and teacher correction. Below is one example:

Sometimes I ask my students to read short text involving words that Chinese students often pronounce wrongly and then correct their pronunciation. Students can then realize that their pronunciation is incorrect. I often remind them to imitate the speaker while listening... I ask them to imitate the speakers after listening. (Jigeng)

Focused practice on phonetic variations

The importance of familiarizing students with English phonetic variations was especially highlighted by the teachers, who believed such speech phenomena to be

one of the major reasons contributing to students' failure to recognize some known words in the listening materials. The common strategy adopted by teachers was to sensitize students to such phenomena, as was illustrated by the following remark:

I often point out the phenomena involving phonetic variations such as assimilation for my students. To raise their awareness, I would highlight the parts by having them carry out repeated listening. (Juntong)

However, it was pointed out by a few teachers that all of the spoken texts included in the textbook used in most Chinese colleges were prepared passages read out by native English speakers with predetermined scripts, which limited the occurrence of phonetic variations. They thus suggested the need to supplement authentic listening materials abundant with these speech features of English for focused practice.

To familiarize my students with these phonetic phenomena, I sometimes expose them to focused practice. I think this can help my students to recognize these phenomena more easily. However, since we have to cover the content of the textbook, we don't have much time for such practice. (Lingcai)

According to Brown (1995), word recognition problems are often related to the way English sounds are squashed closely together or stretched in speech. The influence of neighboring words in fast speech can be so great as to make an individual word unrecognizable (Cauldwell, 1996). In addition, L2 listeners tend to segment on the basis of their L1 segmentation procedures (Cutler, 2001); as a result, the learners whose L1 is based on different rhythms and tones are likely to have greater problems in this respect.

If this assumption is correct, Chinese EFL learners appear to operate under an unfavorable English language learning circumstance in that Mandarin, as a syllable-timed language, is rhythmically very different from English, which is a stress-timed language (Platt et al., 1984). English learners with Chinese background

might not have been used to hearing speech in which some syllables are given more stress than others; rather, they might expect to hear every word, including the words that the speakers deliberately produce with less emphasis (Goh, 1999). Thus, instructional activities that sensitize the students to segmentation cues, as suggested by the teachers in this study, can be devised to help learners recognize lexical boundaries in normal speech. With repeated practice, learners can develop fluency and automaticity in this important aspect of listening.

Aural-written verification

Resorting to transcripts of the listening materials was advocated by some of the teacher interviewees as a necessary step to help learners comprehend aural text. Typically, these teachers would direct students' attention to the difficult parts that they failed to decipher earlier. These teachers believed that noticing the discrepancies between what students heard and what was actually said would be extremely helpful in familiarizing them with the sound system of the target language. The following statement is representative of such a view:

I would ask my students to listen to the material many times, carry out some group discussions about what they have heard...If students still fail to understand, I will show them the transcripts of the materials. Focusing on the difficult parts involving phonetic variations is especially useful to familiarize students' ear to English sound. (Xiahong)

The use of transcript advocated by teacher interviewees has been confirmed empirically by Mareschal (2007), who found that aural-written verification practice was particularly valuable for the low-proficiency group to develop their auditory discrimination and for high-proficiency students to refine word recognition skills. Taking a pedagogical angle, Field (2008) also maintains that checking against written transcript after several hearings of the listening materials is a valuable activity in that it allows learners, on an individual basis, to clarify sections of the recording which they have not so far succeeded in decoding. Moreover, such

practice can enable learners to notice, for instance, the presence of the weak forms of function words which they would otherwise have missed.

Dictation

Dictation is an activity in which the learners receive some spoken input, hold this in their working memory, and then write what they heard. This writing is affected by the learner's listening skills, command of the target language, and ability to retain what they have heard in their memory (Field, 2008). Although often associated with more traditional teaching methods (Oller & Streiff, 1975), dictation remains a valuable teaching technique, and variations on dictation such as dictogloss and running dictation are very popular with learners and teachers (Field, 2008; Nation & Newton, 2009; Wilson, 2003).

Empirical evidence has been provided in support of the effect of dictation in enhancing L2 listening comprehension ability. For instance, Kiany and Shiramiry (2002) found that frequent dictation had a significant effect on the listening comprehension ability of their EFL learners. They contend that dictation a) compelled the subjects to listen more attentively to decode the foreign speech, b) helped strengthen learner memory, and c) familiarized students with native speaker English.

The majority of the teachers in the present study held a similar view regarding dictation. They believed that the use of dictation could promote students' consciousness about their gaps in perception. One example is as follows:

Doing dictation is helpful for students to grasp the main idea of the listening passage and the details in particular since students have to focus on every word being said... they can be more aware of the parts that they fail to catch. (Leixia)

Repeated listening

Teachers in this study viewed repeated listening as an effective means to help

their students deal with text-related variables such as fast speed and syntactically complex sentences. Here, repeated listening was suggested by the teachers as an important method to familiarize students with the intonation patterns of English, which they believed could facilitate their automatic processing of the aural information as the speech signal unfolds in time. The following comment represents such an opinion:

I think repeated listening is very important. During the process, students can be more familiar with English phonetic rules and phonetic variations. After some time, students can listen more quickly and accurately. So I think repeated listening is very important. (Jigeng)

Strategy-based instruction

The feasibility of teaching listening strategies to students as a way of enhancing their overall listening comprehension ability was also brought up by several teachers during the interviews. Interestingly, only the five teacher participants who had had overseas training experience anchored their discussion of the pros and cons of strategy-instruction in the latest theory in applied linguistics, whereas the other five either demonstrated scanty knowledge of what listening strategies were or wrongly equated listening strategies with test-taking strategies. The following discussion focused on the views expressed by the teachers who had received formal training on teaching listening strategies and thus had clearer understanding of what listening strategies referred to.

Among the five teachers, Xiahong, a recent graduate of a teacher training programme abroad, believed in the power of teaching strategies and was eager to try it out in her own teaching context:

I used to feel that it would take quite a long time of practice for language learners to improve their listening comprehension skill. Sometimes, the process was so slow that students tended to give up before tangible progress could be seen. As the teaching of listening strategies has the

potential to speed up the process, I do want to have a try after I come back teaching. (Xiahong)

Minqiu, who had spent one year overseas, was also convinced of the possibility of teaching listening strategies to facilitate students' listening comprehension. However, he expressed uncertainties as to how to actually implement the teaching of listening strategies in classroom context:

I think teaching listening strategies will be useful if we relate them to actual practice. But I just do not know how to teach certain specific strategies, such as cognitive, meta-cognitive and socio-affective ones...which ones to teach, how to teach them and how much time we should spend on these strategies. I'm not sure whether we should mention the term strategies to students specifically or just integrate them in everyday teaching--this is also something that I do not know about. (Minqiu)

In addition, Minqiu also pointed out that for lower-proficiency students, the bulk of instructional time should be allocated to engaging them in listening activities, rather than encouraging an overdependence on strategies.

You know, when students are told, for instance, that they should guess the meaning from the context, they may guess in various ways. Besides, if we spend too much time on strategies, we will definitely have less time for listening practice. For lower-proficiency students who do not often practice listening after class, this might not be very good... So for this group of students, I think the focus should be on listening practice. (Minqiu)

This opinion was echoed by Xiangdi and Qinzhen who talked about the necessity of teaching listening strategies according to students' proficiency level. They suggested that for students who had weak linguistic background or who had considerable difficulty in word recognition, the focus of listening instruction should

be on training students' bottom-up perception skills, although they would not refrain from mentioning these strategies to students. The opinion is represented by the following remark:

I think both listening practice and strategy instruction are important, but linguistic proficiency should be given priority...strategy knowledge will be of no use if the students have not reached a certain level of linguistic proficiency. Strategy use is based on linguistic foundation. For instance, the strategy of guessing meaning of unknown words should be based on understanding of the context. If the linguistic proficiency is too low and students can understand little, strategy use such as "evaluating hypothesis" will be meaningless. (Qinzhen)

Guorui, on the other hand, expressed quite firm belief against teaching listening strategies and believed that training students L2 perception skills was the key to achieving observable progress in listening:

I think my students' major problems lie in their poor "decoding skills"... Students need to be able to recognize the words in spoken form, for instance, from doing dictation and checking against the transcript...How can they think about strategies when they are still struggling with decoding what is said by the speaker... Strategy might be of some use for the reading skill as students have time to read again and again. But in listening, everything goes so fast that students won't be able to utilize the strategies. Anyway, the whole idea of teaching strategies does not sound very sensible to me.

The lack of agreement regarding the effect of strategy-based instruction among teachers is of little surprise in that conflicting views also exist in the L2 listening literature (Field, 2000; Ridgway, 2000). Some researchers fully embrace the notion of strategy-based instruction in compensating for linguistic weaknesses (Hasan, 2000; Rubin, 1994) while others maintain that there is little point in training

learners in listening strategies given the fact that the here-and-now nature of listening can render strategy use unrealistic and inapplicable (Renandya, 2012; Renandya & Farrell, 2011; Ridgway, 2000; Swan, 2008). Different opinions have also been voiced with respect to the proportion of instructional time allocated to the teaching of strategies—whether to make it the focus of the listening lesson or a supplement of it, and the manner of how it should be taught—whether it should be integrated into the listening lesson or to be taught separately (Macaro et al, 2007). McDonough (2006) in particular expresses valid concerns that strategy training may take valuable time away from the actual language teaching in the classroom. Obviously, further research is needed to resolve this issue.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Before drawing definite conclusions, there are a couple of limitations worth highlighting. Firstly, the respondents seemed to be concerned mostly with what has been described as one-way listening skills, which perhaps reflected the kind of listening activities common in the EFL classrooms in China. While one-way listening has a valuable role to play in listening, it does not “capture the richness and dynamics of listening as it occurs in our everyday interactions” (Nation & Newton, 2009, p.40). Thus, future research efforts should also attempt to uncover classroom practitioners' beliefs concerning how best can two-way listening skills be more systematically planned and taught. Secondly, effective approaches proposed by the interviewees in the current study were merely a reflection of personal beliefs. Intervention studies that investigate the effectiveness of these proposed approaches can be conducted to provide stronger empirical evidence as to whether a systematic training that focuses more on helping lower proficiency learners develop automaticity of bottom-up processing skills might in fact facilitate the development of their listening skills.

CONCLUSION

The findings derived from the interviews in this study show that teachers in general share similar opinions towards what constitutes effective approaches to helping EFL learners deal with their listening comprehension difficulties (i.e., Text factor and Processing factor), which primarily reflect a bottom-up orientation.

Specifically, vocabulary instruction, topic preparation, slowing down the rate of speech mechanically and repeated listening are deemed to be effective approaches to facilitating learner comprehension of the L2 spoken text. What is worth noting is that although empirical studies in general support the benefits of the above-mentioned approaches in facilitating L2 listening comprehension, there is also evidence that weak listeners, hampered by deficiency in their linguistic knowledge, particularly lexical gaps, need a combination of different forms of listening support to achieve comprehension.

In terms of helping listeners develop better processing skills when engaged in L2 listening events, pronunciation instruction, focused activity to familiarize learners with the intonation patterns of English, repeated listening, dictation, aural-written verification after multiple-listening are believed to be useful in the classroom. These approaches are arguably, at least from the perspectives of the teachers in this study, quite effective in helping students develop word recognition and segmentation skills. Interestingly, repeated listening is reported by participants to be particularly helpful in dealing with both text-related and processing-related listening difficulties. This belief corresponds to Chang and Read's (2006) position that repeated listening cannot only facilitate one-time comprehension of certain listening materials, but also help students become better listeners in the long run by habituating them to the rhythms and intonation patterns of the target language, which is essential for the development of listening comprehension fluency (see also Renandya, 2011).

Strategy-based approach is the only proposal that has sparked divergent views among teachers regarding its effect on listening comprehension, especially where low-proficiency students are concerned. The results of the present study show that although practitioners differ quite considerably in terms of their conceptualization of listening strategies and their belief in the effectiveness of strategy-based

instruction, the majority of them who have received formal training in this aspect support the argument that learners need to be proficient in basic bottom-up processing skills before we teach them listening strategies.

To sum up, cognizant of their students' major L2 listening comprehension problems, teachers interviewed in this study suggest solutions to these problems that highlight the development of students' bottom-up processing competence, with the underlying rationale that EFL learners, who have limited access to target language use in daily life, need to achieve a level of automaticity that facilitates more fluent and faster processing of spoken language. Once this level of automaticity is achieved, we can expect our L2 listeners to be "... more capable of dealing with unusual topics, meanings and words" (Field, 2009, p. 14). Although this study focuses on a specific group of students and teachers, its findings have implications for wider contexts, particularly in those situations where students mainly learn a language through formal classroom instruction and have limited access to authentic language use.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire

Instructions

Dear Students,

Thank you for participating in this survey. It will take you about 30 minutes to finish all the questions. Your valuable input is greatly appreciated.

The aim of this study is to find out the major sources of your listening comprehension problems (影响听力理解的因素). The survey consists of two parts. Part I collects your basic demographic information. As this is an anonymous survey, your personal information will not be disclosed to any third party. Part II asks you to think about the factors that affect your listening comprehension in English. Your responses to the questions will become an important source of information for us to understand the ways in which listening skills can be most beneficially taught in the classroom.

Thank you again for your time and cooperation.

Part I: General Information

Directions: Please fill in the blanks with the relevant answer(s). Note: Please answer ALL questions.

1. Name _____ (optional)
2. Gender (Male/Female) _____
3. You have been learning English for ____ years ____ months (e.g., 5 years, 6 months).
4. Your major is _____.
 A. English language-related B. Not English language-related
5. You are in Grade _____.
 A. One B. Two C. Three D. Four
6. In general, what do you think about the teaching of English in your college?

 1= Very Unsatisfactory 2= Unsatisfactory 3= Moderately Satisfactory
 4= Satisfactory 5= Very Satisfactory
7. Please rank the following four skills in order of difficulty:
 Listening: _____ Speaking: _____ Reading: _____
 Writing: _____
 1= very difficult 2= difficult 3= moderately difficult 4= least difficult
8. How would you rate your ability in the following four skills? Please put a tick (√) in the relevant box.

	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent
Reading					
Writing					
Listening					
Speaking					

9. Your score for the English subject in College Entrance Exam is _____.

10. Your overall score for CET 4 (大学英语四级考试) is _____.
Your score for the listening section of CET4 is _____.

Part II: Sources of Listening Difficulty

Directions: Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statements. Put a tick (√) in the relevant box. The underlined parts are followed by Chinese translation for your better comprehension of the items. Note: Please answer ALL questions.

- 1= Strongly Disagree 4= Agree
2= Disagree 5= Strongly Agree
3= Somewhat Agree

	Sources of my listening difficulty	1	2	3	4	5
1	Listening materials are difficult to understand because the speaker speaks fast.					
2	I often get nervous when listening to English.					
3	The listening materials are difficult to understand because there are many <u>idiomatic expressions</u> (习惯用法).					
4	It's hard for me to understand English conversations.					
5	I quickly forget what I heard.					
6	I'm unable to recognize phonetic variations such as <u>reduced forms, assimilation and elision, etc</u> (略读, 连读, 吞音等).					
7	I have difficulty grouping the words I heard into meaningful units.					
8	I am not able to understand English spoken texts because I <u>seldom practiced listening before entering college</u> .					
9	The listening passage is difficult when the sentences are long.					
10	I feel it is difficult to answer <u>blank-filling questions</u> (填空题).					
11	The spoken text is difficult to understand when I am not interested in the topic.					
12	It's hard for me to understand the listening passage because of the fast speed.					
13	I have difficulty understanding the listening materials because I am not taught good <u>listening strategies</u> (听力策略) such as <u>predicting</u> (预测文章内容); <u>activating background knowledge</u> (利用背景知识推测文章含义).					

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14	Although I know the words, I'm not able to recognize them in the listening passage.					
15	I find it difficult to understand speech which is full of <u>hesitation and pauses</u> (停顿).					
16	Listening passages are difficult to understand because I do not often practice listening to English.					
17	I have difficulty understanding the listening materials because I don't pronounce English words correctly.					
18	I can recognize the words but I can't understand the deeper meaning of the text.					
19	I often miss the <u>subsequent information</u> (后面的信息) when trying to understand the <u>previous words</u> (前面的单词) in the spoken text.					
20	I often <u>get frustrated</u> (有挫败感) when listening to English.					
21	I feel it is difficult to answer <u>questions in multiple-choice form</u> (多项选择题).					
22	The listening passage is difficult because there are many new words.					
23	I feel it is difficult for me to figure out the main idea of the listening passage.					
24	The listening passage is difficult when the sentences are complex.					
25	I can't understand the listening passage because of the poor quality of the tape.					
26	Understanding listening materials is difficult because I can't use rhythmical features such as <u>stress, intonation</u> (重音, 语调) to determine <u>word boundaries</u> (词与词之间的界限) in the listening passage.					
27	The listening materials are difficult because I don't have enough background knowledge.					
28	I have difficulty understanding listening passages because <u>I have limited access to listening resources</u> (我能接触到的听力资源有限).					
29	I feel it is difficult for me to catch the details of the listening passage.					
30	I have difficulty understanding the listening materials when the speaker speaks with accent.					
31	I feel it is difficult to understand listening materials because we don't have enough lessons on English listening.					

32	I am not able to recognize the meaning of <u>set collocations</u> (固定短语搭配) in the spoken text.				
33	I have difficulty understanding the listening materials because of my poor knowledge of strategy use such as <u>inferring unfamiliar words from the contexts</u> (利用上下文推测生词的含义).				
34	I have difficulty understanding the listening materials because I <u>can't concentrate on listening</u> (I get distracted easily) (无法集中精神, 经常走神).				
35	It's difficult for me to understand when there is <u>background noise</u> (背景噪音) in the listening materials.				
36	<u>Listening comprehension</u> (听力理解) is difficult for me because I was not taught how to take notes quickly.				
37	I find it difficult to understand the meaning of the spoken text without seeing the speakers' body language.				
38	I feel it is difficult for me to understand English news broadcast.				

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

1. How long have you been teaching English for Chinese college students? What do you think about your students' listening comprehension proficiency?
2. What do you think are the five most important sources of lower-proficiency students' listening problems? Please elaborate on them.
3. What do you think are the five most important sources of higher-proficiency students' listening problems? Please elaborate on them.
4. How do you deal with these problems in class?
5. Do you think the approaches you have adopted to help you students handle their listening problems efficient or successful? Why?
6. What kind of practices or activities do you suggest your students do after class? Why do you think these activities useful?
7. Please list three things that you did to improve your own listening comprehension ability of a foreign language.