

Developing primary school students' listening skills

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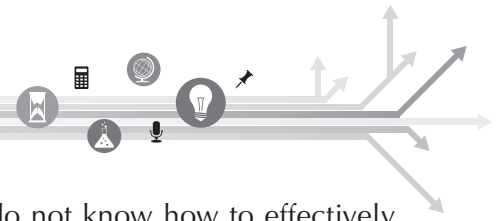
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In Hong Kong primary school English language classrooms, reading and writing skills are playing dominant roles. Listening skills, however, have long been overlooked. This goes contrary to what second language research has reviewed to us that language input from listening is the foundation of language acquisition as Feyten's study (1991) points out that there are positive correlations between listening ability and overall second language proficiency. This may explain why listening skills account for a significant portion of some Hong Kong public examinations, such as the TSA and the Pre-Secondary One Hong Kong Attainment Test (Pre-S1 HKAT). Yet, listening is actually hard work. Students need to integrate their understanding of sounds, vocabulary, grammar, intonation and context of utterance when making immediate interpretation during listening. Teachers from Tai Po Methodist School have been trying to identify some of the listening problems among their students and have come up with a number of ways to tackle them.

Understanding students' attitudes towards English language listening and identifying students' listening problems

Teachers in Tai Po Methodist School started school-based English language curriculum development five years ago focusing primarily on reading, writing and speaking. Having the knowledge that language learning should be integrative, they tried to put more emphasis on improving students' listening skills in 2011. A questionnaire survey was conducted to understand students' attitudes and beliefs about listening skills and students' performance in TSA listening assessments was analyzed. The data collected shed light on students' conception of listening, their daily exposure to real-life listening materials, their experience of learning listening skills and their weaknesses in the area.

The survey shows 31% of P.4 students thought that listening skills are innate. That means students believe that if they are born with good ears, they can listen better. Teachers believe that students having this deficiency conception may not be willing to make efforts in boosting their listening skills as Dunkel (1991) mentions that a negative listening self-concept may influence L2 students' listening comprehension adversely. Also it was found that 43% of their students do not watch English CD, DVD, or TV at home. This figure implies that most students do not have enough exposure to authentic English in daily life. This situation has already exerted negative impact on students' listening competence. Teachers found that student performance has been less satisfactory in TSA listening assessments regarding real-life genres like radio programs, news reports, and weather reports in TSA listening examinations.



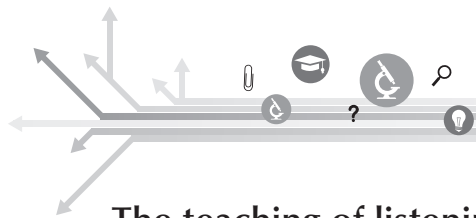
In terms of listening skills, 59% of the students reported that they do not know how to effectively use the preparation time before listening practice at school, even though that they have been given enough time to prepare for each listening practice. Most interestingly, 67% of students disagreed with the idea that they can learn some skills to improve their listening skills. The findings suggest that many students do not realize that there are strategies they can acquire to boost their listening skills before, during and after their listening. However, a body of research, including O'Malley and Chamot (1990), has validated that meta-cognitive strategies help language learners to oversee the language learning process, and cognitive strategies directly support learners to comprehend and recall listening input.

The data collected pointed to a need for revamping the school-based listening curriculum in Tai Po Methodist School in which developing students' listening skills, nurturing their appropriate concepts and attitudes of listening and broadening teachers' pedagogy on listening have been major considerations.

Developing a school-based listening curriculum

Teachers together then looked for some principles of developing their school-based listening curriculum. Considering students' limited exposure to various types of listening contexts, it is agreed that substantial awareness of the various genres of listening, ranging from telephone conversation, to presentations by school guests, to radio programs, is needed to help students activate their schema, their knowledge of the world, for listening. Long (1989) highlights the essential role of **background knowledge** in enhancing L2 listening comprehension. In each specific listening context, second language learners need **content knowledge** and **process knowledge** for more thorough understanding. For example, when listening to radio programs, content knowledge of expressions like *stay tuned*, *commercial breaks*, *this week's best hits* are essential. When listening to presentations and talks in school, second language learners need to possess the process knowledge that the school head would greet the guest of honor before he starts his presentation and uses phrases like '*honourable guests*', '*invite*', '*my honour*', '*the purpose of my speech*'.

Another practical and necessary principle that teachers agreed to put in the school-based curriculum is spoken vocabulary and phrases. English teachers know that there are certain phrases and vocabulary used frequently in spoken language yet they have not been given enough attention in local textbooks. Understanding expressions like '*Are you kidding?*', '*by the way*', '*It sounds*' '*Bingo*', '*Probably*', '*Certainly*', '*Sure*' would help students make right judgment about speakers' intention and meaning. The exposure to these spoken phrases is especially crucial to students who lack substantial exposure to authentic English in their daily life as indicated in the listening questionnaire study.



The teaching of listening skills in listening lessons

Having deeper understanding of students' misconceptions and belief and considerable knowledge of what students need to boost their listening skills, teachers in Tai Po Methodist School began to realize that their listening lessons should go beyond just playing the CD and checking answers. Different kinds of listening skills have to be incorporated into the pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening stage in listening lessons.

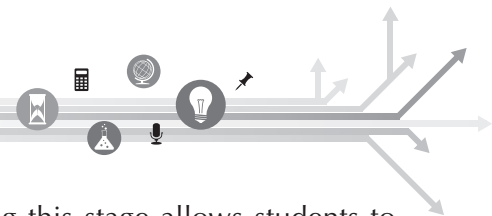
For the **pre-listening stage**, the teachers agreed there should be more focus on helping students to understand the context of different listening genres. Based on Long's L2 research (1989) that listeners using their background knowledge make better recognition of a topic and better prediction, Tai Po Methodist teachers make sure the context of listening is especially clear to students. This means before each listening task, students would be given chances to have understanding of *who are talking, why they are talking, where they are talking, the words and phrases they would probably use, the different stages of their talk and the relations between the speakers*. Teachers found that the related information helped students to make more sensible meaning of listening materials. Also, reading aloud questions and stems before listening, discussion among students to predict content of listening, and using mind-maps and gap-filling exercises to activate students' related vocabulary of a topic are also useful pre-listening tools to help students to make more precise prediction of listening texts.

Also, to boost KS1 students' self-concept of listening, teachers often make use of multimedia materials from u-tube in the pre-listening stage. Teacher found that colorful cartoons, interesting videos and melodic songs are effective visual and audio cues to activate students' prior knowledge of different listening genres, lower their fear of misinterpreting information and raise students' confidence in listening. In fact, L2 research (Rubin, 1990) indicates that visual support can significantly improve students' listening comprehension.

During the **while-listening stage**, teachers noticed daily training on listening to minimal pairs, telling differences between amount of money and telephone numbers using "*Bingo games*", identifying causes and effects, matching pictures and listening text using games like "*Draw what I say*", telling emotional differences between different intonations are concrete strategies to enhance listening comprehension.

Students' short term memory also intervenes students' ability to recall and process information as Call (1985) states that memory span for a second language input is shorter than for native language input. Having this concept in mind, teachers adopt the practice of checking answers right after a small related section, rather than a whole unit on listening. It is more beneficial to students whose memory of the second language is still very limited. In addition, teachers found that teaching strategies like "*Circle Message*" (*Students in groups whisper a sentence to one another*) and "*Chained memory*" (*Students in groups recall a previous member's idea and add another idea*) stretch students' memory span for retaining English phrases.





During the **post-listening stage**, teachers found using scripts during this stage allows students to visualize language appearing in listening input. This helps to reduce listeners' anxiety as listeners are able to use another sense, their eye sight, to feel the words and to verify their hearing. Actually teachers noticed that the more students could verify from the script, the more confident they would be about their listening skills. In addition, allowing students to discuss answers would necessitate students to negotiate what they have heard and this would lead them to become more focused when they are given another chance to listen to the recording again. Also, to identify students who cannot comprehend a listening text, teachers found that having students put up their hands when they hear the right phrase or word in the post-listening stage is highly effective. This way, students have chances to tell their teacher where they think the key phrases/words are and the teacher can give them timely and useful feedback.

In this presentation, teachers from Tai Po Methodist School will share with participants real listening classroom practices in which there is an integration of research theories, examination requirements and understanding of student needs. Teachers will also share with participants their understanding of the students' problems of listening, their analysis of different listening genres and a study into the related vocabulary and phrases students have to learn for the different listening genres. Participants should be able to see how the school teachers used different tactics to enhance KS1 and KS2 students' listening skills through videos, student work and school-based teaching and learning materials.

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