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How to Use Optimal Input in the Teaching of Listening Comprehension

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Abstract

The promulgation of the English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 edition) has changed the goal of English curriculum from "comprehensive language application ability" to core competency-oriented goal. In this context, the vocabulary requirement of the new curriculum has increased by 25%. With the increasing demand for vocabulary, students face greater difficulty in understanding listening materials. At present, English listening teaching in some schools is still boring and superficial, resulting in listening learning difficulties, quality fragmentation and other problems. At the same time, Krashen's Optimal Input theory gradually came into the view of Chinese scholars. This theory emphasizes the importance of the quality and quantity of language input in language acquisition, providing important guiding principles for listening teaching. Based on this, the study mainly explains the application methods of Optimal Input in listening teaching and its potential impact on students' listening comprehension through theoretical analysis and literature review, aiming to explore a more effective way to enhance learners' listening comprehension and thereby improving their core competencies.

Keywords

Listening Comprehension; Optimal Input; English Listening Teaching

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

In the context of New English Curriculum Reform, especially the promulgation of the English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 edition), the goal of English curriculum has been changed from "comprehensive language application ability" to the goal of core competencies. In the practice of English teaching, scholars have always emphasized the importance of cultivating students' basic skills, including listening, speaking, reading and writing. Among these, listening serves as the foundation for learners to learn and apply English knowledge. It not only helps students improve their pronunciation but also enables them to better perceive

foreign cultures and improve their spoken language. English listening encompasses knowledge at the phonetic level, grammatical level, and lexical level, among others. For students to learn and accumulate English knowledge and master English skills, listening practice should serve as the foundation (Liao, 2025).

Under this background, English listening, as an essential part of English teaching, is receiving unprecedented attention and challenges. Included in one of the language knowledge, English listening plays an important role in developing students' comprehensive English ability. Listening learning always runs through the whole process of English learning.

Therefore, it is of great importance for teachers to develop their teaching methods to help students have a good command of language knowledge. Teachers can utilize Optimal Input as a way to help students accumulate more vocabulary and improve students' listening level.

1.2. Purpose and Significance of the Study

1.2.1. Purpose of the Study

Despite the challenges confronting English listening teaching nowadays, it is generally accepted that Optimal Input plays a supportive role in enhancing students' listening comprehension. English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 Edition, Revised in 2020) also sets higher requirements for listening skill in terms of quantity and quality. Nowadays, there are still a lot of teachers that use the traditional listening teaching methods, and there are many areas that need to be improved. Based on the collation and collection of domestic and foreign literature, this study finds that Optimal Input theory contributes to the improvement of learners' listening comprehension through increasing the number and variety of listening tasks. Thus, the thesis mainly focuses on Optimal Input to improve students' listening comprehension. As such, the research aims to provide a possible solution about how to improve English listening teaching with the help of Optimal Input to English learning, which will hopefully contribute to the improvement of students' core competencies.

1.2.2. Significance of the Study

According to Vandergrift (1999), listening is an important component of language learning, which plays a decisive role in second language learning and promotes the development of other language skills. Therefore, listening teaching has received more and more attention in China.

Firstly, from the theoretical perspective, this study takes input hypothesis, interaction hypothesis and multimodal theory as the theoretical basis. It expands the scope of research on the combination of optimal input theory and listening teaching and provides possible research directions and suggestions for theoretical research related to optimal input and listening teaching and learning. Moreover, the

application of optimal input theory to the teaching of listening comprehension enriches research content of the correlation between optimal input and listening skill. At the same time, it also provides a new perspective for the study of combination of optimal input and listening.

Secondly, from the practical perspective, this study is based on the operation under the situation of the current junior/senior high school English class. Therefore, the study may provide some implications for English listening teaching, which may improve the learning efficiency of students' listening comprehension. It can also provide a new model of listening teaching for teachers to guide students to improve listening comprehension in a meaningful way. Through reading articles with the same theme, students can promote their vocabulary memory and expand their vocabulary.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Optimal Input

Optimal input was initially proposed by linguist Krashen within his second language acquisition theory in the 1980s. Optimal input refers to the linguistic material that learners of a second or foreign language are exposed to, which should possess the following characteristics, including comprehensibility, compelling and relevant, and enough quantity. That is to say, firstly, the linguistic material should be slightly above the learners' current level of proficiency, allowing them to understand most of the content while being exposed to new language structures. Secondly, the material should capture the learner's attention by being engaging and relevant to their interests and needs, thereby motivating them to learn. Thirdly, learners require a large amount of linguistic input to ensure they have sufficient language samples for learning and internalization.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Krashen began developing his second language acquisition theory, emphasizing the distinction between language acquisition and language learning. He argued that language acquisition occurs naturally through exposure to and comprehension of language input that is slightly beyond the learner's current level ("i+1"). In the 1980s, Krashen further developed his input hypothesis, stating that learners can naturally acquire language by being exposed to large amounts of comprehensible input. He stressed that the input should be understandable and sufficiently interesting to capture the learner's attention.

2.2. Relevant Researches

2.2.1. Research on Optimal Input in the Teaching of Listening Comprehension Home

Wen Qiufang proposed the "Input-Output Integration" theory in 2012, which emphasizes the integration of input, output, and interaction to optimize language learning outcomes, including listening comprehension. In 2010, Liu Runqing and

others explored the design of meaningful and challenging interactive listening tasks to promote optimal input and improve listening skills. Yang Jianding and others found that strategy training, such as prediction, inference, note taking, etc., significantly enhances listening comprehension abilities. Chen Jiliang and others investigated the effects of simplified input and authentic materials on listening comprehension, concluding that combining appropriately simplified input with authentic materials yields better results. Wang Lei demonstrated that visual aids such as videos, images, and subtitles improve listening comprehension outcomes. Domestic research highlights the complexity of listening comprehension, involving linguistic knowledge, cognitive processes, metacognitive strategies, and cultural awareness. Effective listening instruction should balance input modification, strategy training, scaffolding, and interactive output practices.

2.2.2. Research on Optimal Input in the Teaching of Listening Comprehension Abroad

Extensive research has been conducted worldwide to validate Krashen's theory that optimal input should be comprehensible, interesting and relevant ("i+1" level). Krashen proposed that learners need to be exposed to comprehensible input slightly above their current level (i+1) to facilitate language acquisition. Extensive research has validated this theory's application in listening comprehension. Long argued that meaning negotiation during interaction promotes comprehensible input, thereby enhancing listening comprehension. Studies have explored how dialogues, questions, and other interactive methods impact listening skills. Research abroad emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input, interaction, strategy training, learner factors, and technology in listening comprehension.

2.3. Theoretical Basis

2.3.1. Input Hypothesis

The Input Hypothesis is regarded as one of the five hypotheses in Krashen's Monitor Theory, which states that language acquisition will occur only when the learner's input material is slightly higher than his current level of comprehension, and the learner will develop towards the next level on the basis of comprehensible input. There are four basic principles for language input: comprehensible, fun and relevance, not grammatical formality, and sufficient input.

Krashen's interpretation of comprehensible language input gives a straightforward formula "i+1". "I" refers to the actual language level of the second language learner, while "1" refers to the language input, sightly higher than the actual level of the learner. The input include vocabulary that most learners are familiar with and vocabulary information for the next level.

Krashen elaborates the process of language material absorption and acceptance in the input hypothesis. He advocates that the focus of second language teaching is to provide learners with appropriate and understandable language input to further

promote the development of language acquisition. Specifically, the input hypothesis has the following characteristics: comprehensibility, interesting and relevance, not grammatically sequenced, and sufficient input (Jiang, 2023).

2.3.2. Interaction Hypothesis

The interaction hypothesis is an important theory in the field of second language acquisition that emphasizes the importance of interaction in the language learning process. It suggests that language learning does not solely depend on comprehensible input but also relies on learners' understanding and production of language during communicative interactions. Specifically, when learners encounter comprehension difficulties while communicating with others, interactional modifications make the input more comprehensible, thereby promoting language acquisition.

Michael Long is the primary proponent of the interaction hypothesis. He first introduced this theory in 1983 and continued to refine and develop it through subsequent research.

In the 1980s, Long proposed the Interaction Hypothesis through his research on second language acquisition. He argued that the key to language acquisition lies in the interaction between learners and native speakers or other learners, particularly when "negative feedback" occurs during interactions, which significantly enhances learning outcomes. During the 1990s and 2000s, Long and other researchers further explored various aspects if the interaction hypothesis, including types of interaction, feedback mechanisms, and the specific impact of interaction on language acquisition.

2.3.3. Multimodal Theory

Multimodal teaching method refers to the application of the multimodal theory to teaching and learning which is based on the multimodal discourse analysis theory. New London Group (1996) first proposed the multimodal reading and writing ability. It believes that the multimodal literacy includes cultural, visual, auditory, spatial, gestural, network technology, and information literacy, in addition to traditional literacy ability. It advocates the development of students' multimodal reading and writing ability, which advocates the use of pictures, the Internet, role-playing and other multiple ways and multiple teaching tools to fully mobilize students' multiple senses to participate in language learning together.

The multimodal approach is a teaching method proposed by Stein in 2000, which is in line with the concept of "multiliteracy". Stein (2000) argues that each set of interactions in the classroom is multimodal and that instruction and assessment should be based on the modal characteristics of the environment. In other words, teachers should use a variety of modal resources in the classroom to fully engage the students' sensory organs to acquire, transmit, and receive knowledge (Ye, 2023).

2.4. The Causes of Difficulty of Learners' Listening Comprehension

2.4.1. In Terms of Language Knowledge

First of all, limited vocabulary. With a limited vocabulary, learners find it difficult to recognize and remember the words in the listening materials within a short period, resulting in obstacles to understanding. Secondly, weak phonetic awareness. Learners are unable to accurately distinguish and remember pronunciations, and are unfamiliar with phonetic phenomena such as liaison, weak forms, and stress. For example, if they can't tell the difference between the pronunciations of "ship" and "sheep", they will easily get confused during listening. Thirdly, weak grammar knowledge. That is to say, they are not familiar with complex sentence patterns and special grammatical phenomena. When learners hear long and difficult sentences or sentences with nested structures, it is difficult for them to sort out the sentence structure and logical relationships.

2.4.2. In Terms of Cultural Background

To begin with, lack of knowledge of the target language culture. Without an understanding of the cultural, historical, social and other background knowledge of English-speaking countries, it is difficult for learners to understand idioms, slang, allusions and other contents related to culture. For example, if they don't know about Thanksgiving in the West, it will be hard for them to understand the content about celebration activities in relevant listening materials. What's more, interference of cultural differences. There are differences in values, ways of thinking, communication habits and other aspects among different cultures, which can lead to misunderstandings. For example, the difference between the direct expression in the West and the implicit expression in the East may cause learners to misinterpret the speaker's intention.

2.4.3. In Terms of Listening Skills

Firstly, lack of prediction ability. Learners don't know how to predict the listening content according to the questions and known information before listening, resulting in no goals and directions during listening and being unable to grasp the key points. Secondly, improper note-taking methods. Learners don't know how to record key information while listening, or they may record too much, which affects the understanding of the overall content, or record too little, which fails to assist in recollection and understanding. Thirdly, insufficient inferential ability. Learners are unable to make reasonable inferences based on what they hear, such as inferring the speaker's identity, intention, attitude, etc., which affects the in-depth understanding of the listening materials.

2.4.4. In Terms of Psychology and Physiology

On the one hand, in terms of psychological factors, emotions such as excessive

nervousness, anxiety, and lack of confidence will distract attention and affect the listening effect. For example, due to nervousness during an exam, they may not be able to hear the content clearly. On the other hand, in terms of physiological factors, physiological problems such as hearing loss, or being physically tired and in a poor state, will make it difficult to clearly receive and process sound information.

2.4.5. In Terms of Environment

The first one is about noise interference. A noisy surrounding environment, such as a bustling street or construction noise near the classroom, will mask the sound of the listening materials, making it difficult for learners to hear clearly. At the same time, lack of language environment is also an crucial factors that affect learners' listening comprehension. The lack of a real and natural language environment and fewer opportunities to be exposed to the target language make it difficult for learners to get familiar with different accents, speaking speeds and expression methods (Zhang, 2004).

3. Problem solutions

3.1. Selecting Appropriate Listening Materials

In the teaching of listening comprehension, selecting appropriate listening materials is a crucial part of optimization input strategy.

Firstly, the difficulty level of the materials should be moderate. Materials that are too difficult are likely to make students feel frustrated and lose confidence. For example, listening content full of technical terms and complex sentence structures will be difficult for students to understand. On the other hand, materials that are too easy cannot play a role in improving students' listening ability and fail to arouse their interest. We teachers should, according to the actual level of students, gradually progress from easy to difficult, enabling students to accept challenges within their capacity and gain a sense of accomplishment.

Secondly, the content should be rich, diverse and interesting. Rich and diverse content can broaden students' knowledge. For instance, it can cover different fields such as history, culture, science and technology, and art, allowing students to be exposed to various topics and language expressions. Interesting materials can attract students' attention and enhance their enthusiasm and participation. For example, we can choose stories with strong fun and humorous dialogues.

Furthermore, the speaking speed of the materials should be in line with students' levels. If the speed is too fast, students will not be able to keep up and it will be difficult for them to understand the content. If the speed is too slow, it is not conducive for students to adapt to the real language communication environment. We can start the training with materials of a slower speed, and gradually increase the speed as students' abilities improve.

Finally, authenticity is also very important. Select listening materials that are close

to real life and in real scenarios, such as news broadcasts, movie clips, and daily conversations, so that students can get familiar with the application of language in real contexts and improve their ability to understand and use the language in actual life.

3.2. Making Input Comprehensible

In the teaching of listening comprehension, making the input easy to understand is an important optimization input strategy, which can be elaborated from the following aspects.

To begin with, language simplification. Teachers can use simple and clear vocabulary and sentence patterns, and avoid overly rare or complex expressions. For example, for students at the primary level, try to use common basic vocabulary such as “big”, “small”, “happy”, etc., instead of “gigantic”, “minuscule”, “joyful”. In terms of sentence patterns, use simple sentences more often and use fewer long and difficult sentences with multiple modifiers or complex structures, which is convenient for students to quickly understand the listening content.

Secondly, background knowledge preparation. Before starting the listening material, teachers can introduce relevant background knowledge to help students establish a foundation for understanding. For example, before listening to the listening content about Christmas, first explain the origin, traditional customs, etc. of Christmas. After students have a basic understanding of the theme, they can better understand various related information such as activities and decorations mentioned in the listening, reducing the difficulty of understanding.

What’s more, repetition and emphasis. Appropriately repeat and emphasize important information or parts that are difficult to understand. For example, mention key information such as time, place, and events several times in the listening, or emphasize the key content by changing the tone of voice or slowing down the speaking speed, so that students can more easily capture the key information and understand the main idea of the listening.

In addition, use of visual aids. Combine visual aids such as pictures, charts, and videos to help students understand the listening content. For example, when listening to the listening that describes animals, display the pictures of the corresponding animals at the same time. Students can more intuitively match the descriptions they hear with the actual images, enhancing the understanding effect.

Finally, establish connections. Guide students to establish connections between the listening content and their existing knowledge and experiences. For example, when listening to the listening about traveling, let students recall their own travel experiences. In this way, students can more easily understand the content in the listening about travel preparations, feelings about scenic spots, etc., making the abstract language information more concrete and perceptible, and improving the efficiency and accuracy of understanding.

3.3. Encouraging Active Listening

In the teaching of listening comprehension, encouraging active listening is an extremely important optimization input strategy, which is mainly reflected in the following aspects.

First of all, cultivate prediction ability. Encourage students to predict the listening content based on the questions, pictures, or known information before starting to listen. For example, before listening to a conversation about animals, let students think about which animals might be mentioned and what the characteristics of these animals are. This enables students to listen with anticipation and goals, improves their concentration, and makes them more actively involved in the listening process.

Secondly, guide note-taking. Teach students to take brief notes while listening and record key information such as numbers, names, and the main points of events. For instance, when listening to a short passage introducing a historical event, students can record the time, place, main characters, and the development context of the event. Note-taking not only helps students focus their attention but also assists in understanding and recalling after listening, deepening their impression of the listening content.

What's more, emphasize understanding of intentions. Let students not just listen to individual words or sentences but strive to understand the speaker's intentions and attitudes. For example, when listening to a conversation between friends, students should judge whether the speaker is complaining, making suggestions, or sharing joy. This can enhance students' ability to understand the language at a deeper level and prompt them to think actively instead of passively receiving information.

Furthermore, carry out diverse activities. Encourage active listening by designing various listening activities, such as discussions, role-playing, filling in the blanks, and answering questions after listening. Taking the discussion activity as an example, students need to accurately understand the listening content in order to express their opinions, which will make them listen more attentively. Diverse activities increase the fun and interactivity of learning and stimulate students' enthusiasm for actively participating in listening.

Last but not least, cultivate self-monitoring. Teach students to conduct self-monitoring during the listening process. If they find that they don't understand a certain part, they should adjust their strategies in a timely manner, such as concentrating their attention and making guesses based on the context. This self-monitoring ability enables students to manage their listening process more actively, improve listening efficiency, and continuously enhance their listening comprehension level.

3.4. Integrating Listening with Other Skills

In the teaching of listening comprehension, integrating listening with other skills is an effective optimization input strategy, which can be viewed from the following

aspects.

At first, integration with speaking skills. Listening and speaking are closely related. After listening exercises, teachers can organize students to conduct oral discussions or role-playing activities. For example, after listening to a business negotiation dialogue, teachers can let students imitate the roles to practice the dialogue and recreate the negotiation scene. This can not only deepen their understanding of the listening content but also improve their oral expression ability, enabling students to transform the language knowledge they have heard into practical oral application, and training the fluency and accuracy of their speaking.

Then, integration with reading skills. Students can be first asked to read short articles or materials related to the listening theme to activate their existing knowledge reserves and background information, laying a foundation for listening comprehension. For instance, before listening to the content about environmental protection, teachers invite students to read a report on environmental issues. After listening, ask students to compare the similarities and differences between the reading materials and the listening content, deepening their understanding of the theme while enhancing their comprehensive understanding ability of reading and listening.

Furthermore, integration with writing skills. After the listening is over, teachers can assign some writing tasks. For example, after listening to a story-based listening material, teachers ask students to continue writing the story or summarize the content according to what they have heard. This can help students sort out the listening information, strengthen their grasp of details, and at the same time improve their writing ability, enabling students to learn to organize and express the information obtained from listening with appropriate language, promoting the internalization and output of the language.

Fourthly, integration with translation skills. For students with a certain foundation, after listening comprehension, they can be asked to try translating the key content or sentences they have heard. For example, after listening to an English listening material introducing traditional Chinese culture, teachers can invite students to translate the relevant content into Chinese, or vice versa. This can not only test students' understanding of the listening content but also improve their translation ability and enhance their understanding and application of different language expression methods.

Lastly, comprehensive skill training. Teachers can design some comprehensive learning activities to fully integrate multiple skills. For example, we teachers can organize a project-based learning activity with a specific theme (such as campus life). Students first collect relevant information through listening, then read supplementary materials, and then conduct group discussions (oral expression). Finally, they jointly write a report (writing) and present it. Such activities can enable students to more comprehensively improve their comprehensive language ability

through the interactive application of different skills, and deepen their understanding and application of the listening content.

4. Conclusion

Based on the , this study combined with the English listening learning to analyze the feasibility of applying optimal input theory to the teaching of listening comprehension. It is found that the application of optimal input theory to the teaching of learners' listening comprehension is conducive to improving students' listening comprehension, learning interest and confidence.

Optimal input theory has an important impact and revelation on the teaching of learners' listening comprehension. Teachers should attach more importance to students' learning needs and learning efficiency, help them solve problems in the process of listening and improve their listening strategies. By stimulating students' intrinsic motivation and enthusiasm, creating a good teaching atmosphere and carrying out diversified teaching activities, students can have a better learning environment and they will be more willing to learn English listening, which can be an effective way to help them overcome the difficulties they may encounter in listening comprehension. This thesis can benefit listening teaching and provide some useful insights and suggestions for teachers.

However, there are some limitations in this study including time constraints, limited study conditions and lack of data analysis. Therefore, empirical study will be conducted in the future, employing quantitative as well as qualitative research methods in order to present more comprehensive and persuasive findings.

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