An Empirical Study on College English Listening-Speaking Multilevel Matching

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Abstract

English listening and speaking are two important and even vital skills in social communication. In English teaching field, these two skills are viewed as the most difficult to master among all the five basic skills. To reach the requirements our society demands for college students on language, college English education has been under revolution for many years in order to find an effective way in improving listening and speaking skills. In the study, the author intends to establish a positive correlationship between listening and speaking and furthermore, a more detailed multilevel matching relationship is planned to be established. The purpose of doing so is to find an effective way in English teaching and learning.

Keywords: The Input- Output Hypothesis; correlationship; multilevel matching

1. Background & Hypotheses

The rapid development of the world calls for mastery of foreign languages, especially good communicative skills. Listening and speaking, as important tools in communication, tend to be focused on by more and more scholars and language researchers.

The relationship between listening and speaking could be explained by Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1983). Based on the view that language is the means of communication, The Input Hypothesis suits the current language learning and teaching requirement, that is the purpose of language learning is to communicate in the target language. The Input Hypothesis claims that language input is absolutely necessary, and it must be comprehensible (Krashen, 1985). The best way to learn a second language is to have adequate and comprehensible input, and furthermore, the input should be a little beyond the students' current language level. Take the learner's current language competence level as "i", then the input should better be "i+1". In other words, the input is indispensable for language learning, and in order to acquire language more effectively, the learner should be given enough comprehensible input and challenged with more difficult language level to make progress.

Based on the Input-Output Hypothesis, the author puts forward two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Listening and speaking abilities are positively correlated. In detail, different levels of listening ability match to certain levels of speaking ability, as we can see in the following diagram:

Listening level		Speaking Level
Word level	$\longrightarrow$	Word level or below
Sentence level	$\longrightarrow$	Sentence level or below
Paragraph level	$\longrightarrow$	Paragraph level or below

Hypothesis 2: With the improvement in the level of listening input and enough speaking practice at the right level, students' speaking ability improves simultaneously and it even can be close to their listening ability.

Word   (word+phrase) $\longrightarrow$ Phrase   (phrase+sentence)

Sentence (sentence+paragraph) $\longrightarrow$ Paragraph (paragraph+passage)

The study lasts 12 months, on the aim of demonstrating the positive correlationship between listening and speaking, establishing multilevel matching relationship between listening and speaking skills. All the 30 subjects are non-English majors from The Northwestern Polytechnical University, who were enrolled in 2017 with an even number of their school numbers. The listening and oral tests were carried out at intervals, like Listening test 1- Oral test 1-Listening test 2-Oral test 2…To follow the "comprehensible input" in Input Hypothesis, most of the listening materials were adopted from the textbook the subjects use. The author firstly divides listening ability into three levels as "word",

"sentence", "paragraph", and then tries to find the multilevel matching to speaking ability. From the classroom observation, tests and ratings, the author got the conclusion that there is a multilevel matching between listening and speaking ability. On the basis of this result, the author concluded that listening and speaking ability could be improved on different levels in different periods. By having comprehensible listening input and practicing at the right level, students' speaking ability could be improved effectively and it even can be close to their listening ability.

The study is significant in language teaching. The author puts forwards suggestions from both teachers' and students' perspectives. From teachers' perspective, students' listening ability should be tested previously, on which the teaching schedule can be made. This kind of teaching methodology can improve students' listening and speaking ability simultaneously, so that effective teaching could be realized. From students' perspective, the inner relationship between listening and speaking could be correctly understood, and they can have their own learning plan according to their present level.

2.   Methods

2.1 Subjects

From September, 2017 to September, 2018, 30 non-English major students who were enrolled in The Northwestern Polytechnical University in 2017 participated in this research. According to their pre-school test (the one held at the beginning of the college life, to classify students into different language levels, which has high similarity to CET-4 and the validity and reliability has been proved high), 15 students belong to normal level (the score is below 63) and 15 belong to advanced level (the score is above 64), and no one belongs to the excellent level (the top 400 among 3500 students). All data was collected in normal class time so to avoid any unnecessary negative effects on participants' performance. The instructor of the participants, female, has been teaching for more than 5 years in this university.

2.2 Instruments

Since the aim of language test is to assess test takers' language ability, especially the listening test is such a broad range of integrative skills, the test form should be carefully designed and examined. Multiple-choice, be regarded as the most popular test format, has almost completed test takers' reliability and the marking is simple, more rapid and effective. It has been a widespread testing form for many years and existed in almost any kind of written test. But the right item test takers get may not because of right comprehension but of eliminating wrong items. The scores get in multiple-choice may be suspected for that test takers may just guess the right item. Especially in listening test, it offers answers prior to the listening material. Besides, in real life communication, we do not exchange our

information by offering 4 choices, so it's not authentic in communicative tests.

Compound dictation can provide reliability and validity through the large number of items and specific situations. As Oller (1979) claimed that compound dictation required learners' ability to use all systems of the language in conjunction with knowledge of the world, context, etc. to predict what will be said and after the message has been uttered，short term memory could check whether it fits what has been predicted.

The instruments in listening test include 6 times of sentence dictation, 2 times of paragraph diction and answering questions and 2 CET-4 listening comprehension tests . For dictation is the main tool in this listening ability test, all the listening materials were read three times by a tape-recorder at the speed of 115 WPM (word per minute), and the syllabus per minute (SPM) is 154, which is the standard set in accordance with CET-4 Section C Dictation Part in Listening Comprehension.

In paragraph tests, two kinds of discourses are given. One is a dialogue longer than that in part one of CET-4, the other is an argumentative paragraph. The topics are different and close to students' real life. Both of the two paragraphs are from New Horizontal English (I, II), which is the textbook participants use in listening class. After listening to each paragraph, 5 questions are given and subjects can give their answers according to what they heard.

College English Test (CET) administrated by China's Ministry of Education, as a criterion-related norm-referenced test, plays as an official tool to assess students' language proficiency level. After a three-year Sino-British cooperative project of validation study, the CET has been proved a test with high validity and reliability. The listening comprehension part in College English Test Band-4 in December, 2016 and in June, 2017 was adopted in this study.

College English Test-Spoken English Test, as a proficiency, integrative, criterion-referenced and subjective test, has been held since 1999. The validity and reliability CET-SET has been tested and proved high (Wu, 2003). The oral test in this study would follow the designing principles of CET-SET:

(1) offering authentic communicative situation;

(2) creating authentic communicative contextualized surroundings;

(3) embodying inter-activeness of language communication;

(4) testing the information exchanging rather than language form.

The authenticity is concerned to be the most important factor in evaluating an oral test. All the topics we select in this oral test are chosen from New Horizontal English, which is used as the textbook of their speaking class and which is regarded as interesting resource in speaking class.

2.3 Procedure

The research was carried out in September, 2017 and lasted to September, 2018. At the beginning of the study, all the subjects have been chosen randomly from one instructor, and they were willing to participate in the study. Listening tests and oral tests were carried out simultaneously. The listening tests were held every other week, during which, there was an oral test. All the tests were held in the normal class time in order to avoid the influence from changing environment. The listening tests were checked and scored all by the author personally, while in oral test, in order to heighten the reliability, another teacher and one postgraduate student majored in English were invited to score the subjects. The scoring criteria were distinguished in listening and speaking, and in order to tell the different level of subjects' speaking ability, two scoring criteria were adopted.

We can divide the research procedure into 6 steps:

Step 1: Design 10 listening tests (two sets of simple sentence dictation, two sets of compound sentence dictation and two sets of complex sentence dictation). The purpose of doing so is to test the subjects' listening ability. The test contents should be reliable and can tell the test takers' real listening ability. A pilot study is needed to prove its reliability.

Step 2: Design 10 oral tests (two sets of speech delivery, two sets of dialogues, three sets of questions & answers, and three pictures for subjects to describe). As what we have mentioned all the test contents should be authentic and interesting, so all the topics are adopted from the textbooks.

Step 3: Set scoring criteria. In communicative test, scoring criteria is obviously different from that in other written tests. Especially in this study, the purpose is to find the multilevel matching between listening and speaking, the scoring criteria become more important. We have listening test scoring and oral test scoring respectively, besides, in oral tests we prepared two sets of scoring criteria so to make the results more detailed.

Step 4: Select 30 students as the research subjects. They are all chosen from one instructor so to avoid the influence of different teaching style and teaching schedule. They can represent the gender distribution and levels of the population.

Step 5: Hold a listening test at the first week of the new semester, every other week a listening test is carried out and among them is an oral test. We can show them in the linear order as: Simple Sentence Dictation 1- Speech Delivery 1- Simple Sentence Dictation 2- Speech Delivery 2- Compound Sentence 1- Dialogue 1-…

Step 6: All the data was carefully collected and the related oral tests were rechecked and transcribed. The results were classified and analyzed.

2.4 Data Collection

The study lasted for about one year, and all the data was collected in the normal class time. There were 10 times of listening tests, among which, two CET-4 tests were involved. The tests were carried out every other week regularly and all the scores were recorded and the total score was 170.

The data of oral tests were collected regularly. Every other week, there was two-hour speaking class time; the tests were carried out at the beginning or the ending of every class. And an impressive score was given on spot every time. Besides, we used the rating scale of Table 5 to measure in detail what extent a subject's speaking level was, which was expected to match their listening ability. There were 10 oral tests in total and the scores reached to 100.

3.   Results

3.1 Correlation between listening and speaking

The correlation between listening and speaking ability has been proved by some researchers. After doing a case study, Zhao Xiujie (2007: 50) proved that"the listening ability has an inherent relation to the speaking ability. The difference between our study and Zhao's is that the number of subjects and instruments. In Zhao's study, only 4 subjects were involved while we had 30 subjects. The instruments we used were CET-4 and rules adopted from CET-SET. And our purpose was to prove what kind of correlation type it is (positive/negative), rather than the direct or indirect effect.

After a long-term study for 1 year, now we have subjects' listening tests scores and oral tests scores in the research process.
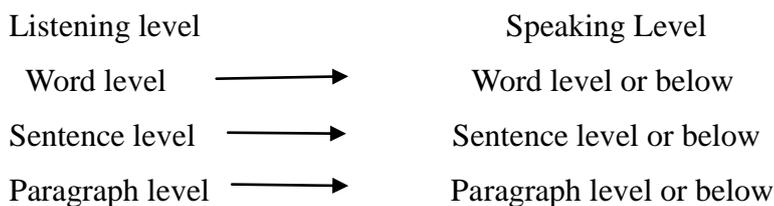
Correlations

		VAR00001	VAR00002
VAR00001	Pearson Correlation	1	.547**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002
	N	30	30
VAR00002	Pearson Correlation	.547**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	
	N	30	30

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

We can see the result is .547 which means the correlation is significant and obvious (Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.) From the result of the SPSS above, we can get the conclusion that listening and speaking ability is closely related and in the positive correlation type. Good listening ability lays a solid foundation for speaking ability. And our hypothesis "Listening and speaking abilities are correlated; it's a positive correlationship." has been proved correct.

After we got the definite answer to hypothesis "Listening and speaking abilities are positively correlated."we'd like to prove that in detail "different level of listening ability matches to certain level of speaking ability"which could be explained more vividly in the following diagram:

Listening level	Speaking Level
Word level ⟶	Word level or below
Sentence level ⟶	Sentence level or below
Paragraph level ⟶	Paragraph level or below

We can explain it in word as: If student A can only understand words or phrases, his spoken output is limited to certain words or phrases. If student B can reach a higher level in listening, which means sentence level here, then his speaking ability matches to or is a little lower than his listening level. Those whose listening ability is as high as paragraph or passage level, their speaking ability must be higher than those whose listening ability is limited in sentence level.

As we have the listening test scores and oral test scores of the 30 subjects for the whole year, and the listening tests were designed especially for different levels, like words, phrases and paragraphs, we can divide the subjects according to their performance in the listening test into 3 different levels by using Standard Deviation (SD).

After calculating in Excel spreadsheet, the SD we got in total listening tests was 15.70093, the Mean was 101.65, then we can pick out 6 subjects (S1, 8, 9, 10, 18, 30), who were above the standard level, and 4 subjects (S5, 7, 26, 28) below. To further identify whether these subjects were in the word level or passage level, the same method was adopted in calculating the SD in simple sentence dictation, and we found S5 and S7 were both the lowest in total listening scores and simple sentence dictations. So we confirmed that S5 and S7 were below the simple sentence level, which means these two subjects were below sentence level, they may be in phrase level or only word level. Then we took two CET-4 tests results to check how many students were above the standard listening level. After the same calculation, S1, S8, S9, S10, S18 and S30 were all above the standard. That means these 6 subjects were above sentence level.
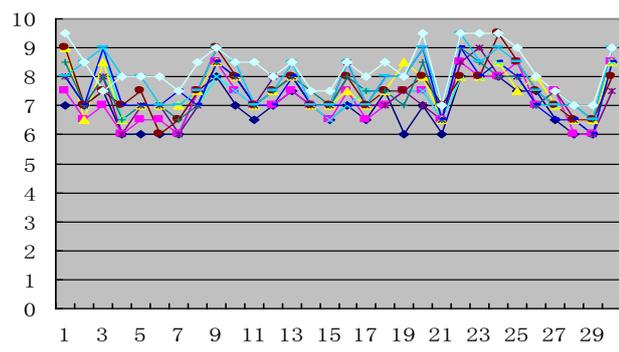
From the diagrams we can see that most of the subjects' listening scores are becoming higher by comparing the starting point with the ending point, which means that by doing right-level listening practice, the listening ability could be improved step by step effectively. From the Simple Sentence Dictation 1 as the beginning point to CET-4 as the ending point, after 10 times listening tests, most of the subjects' listening scores are higher than that of the first time.

As what we have proved that there is a multilevel matching relationship between listening and speaking ability, from the diagrams above we found that subjects' listening ability has been improved, and then is there any change in their speaking ability? Does it change simultaneously?

We planned to demonstrate that with the improvement in the level of listening input and enough speaking practice at the right level, students' speaking ability improves simultaneously even can be close to their listening ability. But from the diagram we can only say that some of the subjects' speaking ability improved but for most, their speaking ability kept stable. The reason why we can't see the change obviously is because "enough speaking practice at the right level" is required while in this study, only every other week can the subjects have two hours to practice speaking. The required quantity is not reached, so the result is acceptable. But on the basis of our first hypothesis, the improvement in speaking ability is possible and determined. Because we have proved the multilevel matching relationship between listening and speaking, we can predict that if enough speaking practice at the right level is done, the obvious improvement in speaking ability is achievable. Because the multilevel matching means when a subject's listening level is at word level, his/her speaking level is word level or below, then when the subject's listening level is improved to sentence level, the speaking level should try to match to that in listening level; but without enough speaking practice as that in Output Hypothesis says "It offers authentic situation for learners to test their existing knowledge and to self-correct any error they found during the output process so to improve their language level", improvement in speaking ability cannot be achieved.

4. Meanings & Implications

4.1 Meanings

There is a practical meaning of this study in teaching and learning.

For a long time, our language teaching has been under different directions. From the "reading and writing first" to "listening and speaking first", from the teacher-centered to student-centered, we are struggling for a more effective way in teaching. Since the importance of listening and speaking has been highlighted, what our teachers can do is to establish a reasonable and effective teaching process so that all our language learners could improve their listening and speaking skills. The practical meaning of this study is to realize this goal, as the study has been proved right, a potential or a mature listening-speaking teaching model is on the horizon which is believed to bring our language teachers and learners more benefits.

4.2 Implications

The results presented in this study may be helpful for both English teachers and students in college. Since the establishment of English education in China, we have put more emphasis on reading and writing. What our students learned is "Dumb English". As we all know listening comes first comparing to speaking, so to improve students' listening ability should be the first step. Listening, as an important skill in English learning, should be practiced in the right way. As what we discussed in this essay, "i+1"should be the proper listening input. Then the most important one is to position which "i" the students have.

Speaking, as a representative skill in English learning, sometimes even can earn much honor and encouragement for students. If a student can speak English fluently, others around would show much respect to him/her. Then where can this confidence come, it comes from appropriate input, practice at the right level. This work could be done under teachers' guidance, but students should play a major role.

In the daily practice, most students think the more they have remembered, the better they can perform. It's completely right, that's the reason why when we were young, we were required to learn many Chinese poems and prose. It really helped us when we try to speak. In English learning, it's the same, but it's not all. Without practice, especially practice at the right level, the remembered things can be helpless. When we are communicating with others, it's impossible and impolite to just recite something if you want the conversation goes on smoothly

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