

A positive psychology approach to the teaching of Chinese college students' English listening

Na ZENG

School of Foreign Languages,
China West Normal University,
No.1 Shi Da Lu, Nanchong, 637009,
Sichuan, P. R. China.
E-mail: nanazeng2000@163.com

Abstract

Listening comprehension is one of the four main skills of English language learning commonly practiced by Chinese college students, and it is argued that students require motivations and positive emotions in their own abilities to achieve this. However, literature on integrating positive psychology principles in EFL education especially in the practice of English listening teaching is limited. Using approaches from positive psychology, this paper aimed to develop psychological character strengths of curiosity and gratitude in university students to facilitate their listening comprehension. This approach places teachers in the role of facilitator whose task is to develop and maintain a supportive class atmosphere and helps foster a climate of caring and sharing in the foreign language class. Hopefully, the present study would provide information for those who are interested in positive psychology and the teaching of English as foreign language.

Keywords: English listening comprehension, teaching, approach, motivation, positive psychology, psychological strengths, curiosity, gratitude.

1. Introduction

As a language extensively used for international exchanges, English is playing an increasingly important role every passing day. English education has long been involved in schools' curricula and has been a required course since junior high in China. In College Entrance Examination, the greatest test for young Chinese students, English scores are one of the most important requirements to place the students into the university they prefer. Because the entrance examination is only a paper-and-pencil test, the teaching methods in the schools are mostly focused on writing, reading, memorizing and cramming. Accordingly, students learn English as a foreign language by paper-and-pencil exercises much more than by listening and

speaking practices. However, after they enter the university, students find that high scores on such paper-and-pencil test are not always the open sesame to smooth communication with native English speakers and even not to a good job in the future. With the need of current society and the development of technology and internationalization, EFL education should become more valued and the teaching of listening must be reckoned with in any college in China.

2. Traditional teaching methods of English listening comprehension

The teaching methods for college students of English as a foreign language in China have changed somewhat, but the Grammar Translation Method is still the main teaching method in most English classrooms. The traditional way of teaching English listening in China is by introducing new words of content, listening to the recording repeatedly and then giving students the correct answers. Listening comprehension is a complex intelligent activity which includes the ability to hear messages, understand the messages, and communicate the purpose of the messages. In the process of interaction and interpretation, learners do not just passively receive the information, but dynamically construct the meaning (Murphy, 1991). However, such an approach focuses on teachers' explanations of the new words of the listening materials, and during listening students are just tested on how much they have understood, rather than being taught how to listen and how to cope with their listening problems in the class. In so doing, students become dependent on the teacher's explanations to complete the listening process and find it hard to have self-confidence in themselves to listen on their own. Richards & Rogers (2001) point out that the main characteristics of the Grammar Translation Method are the analysis of grammar, the memorization of grammar rules, the translation of sentences, and an emphasis on word accuracy. Without having an interest in and a motivation for learning, students feel bored in listening classes, just as Wei (1997) mentioned that only 20 to 25 percent of the students pay attention to the teachers' lectures in the traditional classroom.

The attitudes toward the target language and the speakers of the target language determined learners' success in language learning (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). And the learners' success in language learning also depends on learners' attitudes toward the teacher and the classroom environment. However, with the traditional methods of English listening comprehension, students acquire a passive attitude in listening classes that keeps them from making any progress in listening comprehension.

3. Introducing positive psychology into teaching practice of listening

3.1 Why positive psychology?

Emerging from an overview of the first 100 years of psychology undertaken by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) for the American Psychological Association, positive psychology explores what makes life most worth living and applies psychological theory to understand the human strengths that are of significance for uplifting overall well-being and happiness. It puts emphasis on "...understanding the entire breadth of human experience, from loss, suffering, illness, and distress through connection, fulfillment, health, and well-being" (Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006, p. 6). The focus of positive psychology is therefore different from the traditional problem-focused or "fixing" framework associated with psychotherapy (Cheavens, Feldman, Woodward, & Snyder, 2006).

Why should we be concerned with a positive psychology perspective in EFL education? Gardner and Lambert, in 1959, proposed a way of explaining the processes of language learning by identifying four variables related to individual differences, which includes intelligence, language aptitude, motivation and situational anxiety. On these variables, Gardner (cited in Spolsky, 1989, p.154) stated, "How important each of these (variables) is depends on the beliefs of the community of language learning. The socio-educational model further holds that cultural beliefs about the second language community will influence both the nature and role played by attitudes in the language learning process." As for English listening comprehension, lack of motivation and positive attitude can be found in most college students in China. With the employment of some principles from positive psychology, positive emotions can be boosted in students. And positive emotions contribute to transformational processes and outcomes, such as enhanced creativity, relationships, motivation, resiliency, and success (Fredrickson, 2001).

3.2 Listening teaching and positive psychology

Listening comprehension is a complex process involving a large number of different skills and activities. According to Chastain, a listening comprehension class should include pre-listening, listening, and post-listening activities (Chastain, 1976). No small set of exercises can possibly satisfy the needs of most students. Listening should involve a variety of techniques to motivate students and keep their interest high in the contents. In this way, students can make good progress in listening comprehension (Zhang, 2000).

In the tradition listening comprehension classroom of pre-listening activities, the teacher would provide students with the necessary background, guidance, and direction for the listening activities. Post-listening exercises provide opportunities for practicing, offering feedback on learners' understanding. However, for the students who are less-motivated or uninterested, the pre-listening direction and the post-listening exercises may not mean anything to them. Research in positive psychology has shown that individuals are frequently not aware of their own character strengths (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). To let the students realize their own character strengths therefore is the key to sparking their interest and hope for the listening activities.

A focus on psychological strengths is one of the most prominent aspects of positive psychology. Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2004), in a large Internet study, have identified 24 character strengths in a measure labeled the Values in Action Classification of Virtues and Strengths (VIA). Some of the strengths closely related to well-being include gratitude, hope, love, curiosity, and zest (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). Cultivating these strengths through pre-listening and post-listening activities of English classes offers various avenues to enhance well-being and thereby boost their self-confidence to facilitate the development of language learning.

3.3 Cultivating psychological character strengths of curiosity and gratitude

In today's language teaching classroom, learners should not be seen as full-time linguistic objects, but rather as human individuals. Language teaching should "represent the integrity of learners, allow for personal growth and responsibility, take psychological and affective factors into account, and represent 'whole person learning'" (Roberts, 1998, p.158). In the teaching of English listening comprehension, two psychological factors----curiosity and gratitude---- will be discussed with great emphasis.

Curiosity is, according to Kashdan and Steger (2007), a dispositional tendency to recognize and wish to pursue novelty and challenging experiences and interactions with the world. It is at the core of intrinsic motivation, focusing the individual's attention towards activities that facilitate learning (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Leonard and Harvey (2007) point out that individuals' levels of curiosity can directly affect their willingness and motivation to undertake new and difficult learning tasks, therefore it should be relevant to the classroom atmosphere of learning English as a foreign language. In the pre-listening activities, before the explanation of the new vocabulary related to the content, the teacher can guide the students with these positive statements such as *"I'm looking forward to some challenging tasks; I'm looking for new things and experiences in today's class; New words and expressions will help me get a deeper understanding of the western culture; The exotic and fascinating cultural information can tantalize my imagination."* The teacher then can summarize the listening materials and let the students respond positively to the topic. The more positive responses the student gives, the more encouragement he receives, no matter how poor the student's English is. By so doing, the personal asset of curiosity of students are greatly valued and encouraged. Accordingly, students will be able to use it more effectively to improve the functioning of listening class, which in due course assists them to cope in challenging tasks and rekindles their self-esteem and self-confidence.

Gratitude is one of the most powerful character strengths in human life, which can be defined as a particular inclination towards acknowledging and appreciating that there are positive and enjoyable things in the world (Emmons, 2007). Research suggests that a grateful disposition enables flexible and creative thinking and facilitates coping with stress and adversity (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). The attitude of gratitude can be activated and increased by listing or contemplating things to be grateful for as well as cultivating behavioral expressions of gratitude, such as writing and delivering a gratitude letter (Wood et al., 2010). Similar strategies could be followed in the post-listening activities. Instead of focusing on what is not understood in the listening process, the teacher can guide the students to express their gratitude for the parts they did understand. Positive sentences are highly recommended by the teacher to let the students talk about their feelings. For instance, *"I have so much in this class to be thankful for; I benefited greatly from today's class; I'm really grateful that I can understand the main idea; I feel deep gratitude for identifying American accent from British accent; I still feel grateful that I got nothing but a couple of words; I really appreciate the speakers' time and effort to record the listening material."* Through this kind of post-listening activity, all students will be filled with a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment because the teacher guides all the students to shift the attention from academic "bad" performance to what everyone can really get from the positive psychology perspective.

4. Conclusion

The positive psychological approach presented in this paper can blend what a student feels, thinks and knows with what he is learning in that target language. Engaging the whole person, this approach includes the emotions and feelings as well as linguistic knowledge and behavioral skills. Rather than self-doubt and self-denial being the acceptable way of students' learning process and experience, self-confidence and self-actualization are the ideals the language teaching and class exercises pursue. It cannot be denied that the teacher plays a different role from that of his/her students. The teacher and the students each have a

particular job. This does not mean, though, that the teacher has a higher status. Teachers are certainly not in the classroom to order students around, rather, they are supposed to recognize the important role of feelings and try to understand students and respect them. It is our sincere hope that more observation of students' character building from a positive or strengths-based model in the classroom of language learning will be made in China.

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