

Reading Aloud and Automatic Processes in Listening

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Abstract: *Reading aloud plays a vital role in English listening, for it can not only help listeners enlarge their listening vocabulary, but also make it possible for listeners to automatize their sound recognition task, greatly improving listeners' listening ability. It is impossible to learn listening well without reading aloud. This paper aims at analyzing the effects of reading aloud on the improvement of listening ability from the perspective of automatic processes in the process of information processing.*

Keywords: *listening vocabulary; reading aloud; automatic processes; sound recognition*

1. INTRODUCTION

Greatly influenced by grammar-translation method, some Chinese English learners have become visual learners, who can only absorb information most effectively by silent reading. Gradually these learners depend mostly on silent reading to learn English and their learning focuses are, of course, grammar, vocabulary, reading and translation. Little attention has long been paid to speaking and listening. As a result, they find it difficult to communicate with others in English, for what they have learned is “dumb English”. It is very common to hear these learners complaining that they have much difficulty in listening, especially in recognizing words just by listening, which they are very familiar with and can easily recognize in reading. In fact, it is very normal for visual learners who don't learn English the same way as the auditory learners do, who can process information most efficiently through listening to all kinds of English materials like lectures, tapes, and films etc. Some of these learners may have a habit of learning English by reading aloud and processing information aloud themselves. As a result, they may process auditory information more automatically than visual learners do, resulting a better listening comprehension. This paper presents how reading aloud English new words to learn them by heart can help learners to improve their listening ability by processing listening information automatically.

2. AUTOMATIC PROCESSES IN LISTENING

According to Carroll, the acts of comprehending and producing language are performed within the constraints of our information processing system. This system consists of three structural components---sensory memory, working memory, and permanent memory -- along with a set of control process that governs the flow of information within the system (Carroll, 2004). Sensory memory, are responsible for taking into the visual or auditory information, identifying it, and then choosing whether to process it more extensively. If so, the sensory stores can preserve this information long enough for more extensive processing to be initiated. Working memory specializes in both information maintenance for retrieval after a brief internal, and processing functions of analyzing and interpreting the stored information. Permanent memory stores all of the information we have retained from the past. These memories are used to interpret new experiences, and, in turn, the new events may later be added to this storehouse of information.

From the perspective of information processing in psycholinguistics, we may interpret listening process like this: when we listen, the in-coming audio information, the listening material, is held in a literal or unanalyzed state in our sensory memory in forms of sounds for a short period of time, which is long enough for the processing of working memory. With information coming in, working memory begins to store and processes the sensory information by retrieving information from permanent memory to recognize and comprehend listening material. The identified information, if relevant to the current activity, is held temporarily in working memory by its storage functions. As new information enters working memory, some of the older information is reorganized into larger units (a process known as chunking), other information is lost, and still other information is sent to permanent memory.

Obviously, working memory plays a transient role in information processing system for it has both storage and processing functions, which bridges the gap between sensory memory and permanent memory, and complete the task of listening comprehension. However, it has a limited capacity-- it can only retain about seven or so unrelated chunks (a chunk is a meaningful code unit) once (Xu Fang, 2011). Working memory's processing functions are greatly influenced by its processing capacity, and the assignment of this capacity may influence listener's listening ability. Processing capacity refers to the total amount of cognitive resources we may devote to a task, which is assumed to be limited (Carroll, 2004). That is to say we have a fixed processing capacity to process information. A complex task may consume substantial resources of the limited capacity, leaving insufficient processing resources for other tasks and resulting in overall impaired performance in processing these tasks. Tasks that draw substantially from this limited pool of resources are called controlled tasks, and the processes involved in these tasks are referred to as controlled processes. Tasks that do not require substantial resources are called automatic tasks; processes that do not require extensive capacity are referred to as automatic processes (Carroll, 2004).

According to cognitive psychology, both the two processes are involved in listening. Efficient listener has a good knowledge of language and can recognize a wide range of vocabulary automatically. An automatic process is quick and requires little attention; it has been built up by practice and it needs little perform; a controlled process is slow because it is temporary and under the control of attention, it is therefore limited in capacity (Cook, 2007:253). Tasks like word recognition and understanding simple grammatical structures involve automatic processing, while controlled processing involves tasks like complex grammatical structures and reference items. Besides, listeners' English knowledge needed for information processing, can make listening process either an automatic process or a controlled process, which can directly influence listeners' listening ability. Learning starts with a controlled process, in which the learner makes a one-off attempt to handle new information by giving it maximum attention; this is gradually transformed into an automatic process as the learner gets more used to handling the process (Cook, 2007:254). In listening process, the degree of control or automaticity may vary according to different texts and tasks. For poor listeners, even low-level process such as sound recognition is still very much controlled. Whereas, recognition and decoding of input is largely automatic for fluent listeners..

3. READING ALOUD AND LISTENING VOCABULARY ENLARGEMENT

With the deepening of reform and globalization in China, English communications is becoming increasingly important. In the past two decades, there has been a shift from focus on reading and writing to listening and speaking. How can we help learners to improve these skills successfully? Reading aloud is the answer.

Good English needs reading aloud. Reading aloud not only can help English learners to improve their pronunciation, intonation and good English language sense, but also do good to listening, speaking, reading and writing as well (Yang Qingyun, 2006). As a language, English has its unique sound system and the carrier of these sounds, words. Of course, the sound system of the language is the soul of it, on which people depend to communicate with each other. Without sound system, a language would die. Therefore, when we learn a language, it would be better for learners to have a good command of the sound system. Reading aloud can certainly serve the purpose.

Listening vocabulary is the key to sound recognition in listening. However, there is a big difference between second language learners' reading vocabulary and listening vocabulary. Listening is the process of decoding and interpreting of the in-coming information in the form of sounds. So, sound recognition is the prerequisite of listening comprehension. Good listeners can recognize, and decode quickly and accurately, words, grammatical structures, and other linguistic features without realizing the process they engage in. For them, listening task is an automatic processing, which don't need much attention and substantial resources drawn from working memory. However, many Chinese English learners find it is not easy to become good listeners, attributing their listening difficulty mainly to their small vocabulary and inability in recognizing the sound of their familiar vocabulary in reading. Actually, it is not small vocabulary that hinders their listening, but it is certain that they have small listening vocabulary, the amount of vocabulary that learners can recognize by listening (Wang Yan, 2013: 33). For most Chinese learners, their vocabulary belongs to reading vocabulary, for they can recognize them visually. There, in fact, exists a big difference between reading and listening vocabulary. According to the study of Liu Si (1995), second language learners' listening vocabulary only accounts for more than a half of their reading vocabulary (Cited in Wang Yan, 2013: 34). So, it is very common for these learners to recognize a word by seeing it, not by listening to its sound. This is because these learners are used to enlarging their vocabulary by matching the word's appearance, spelling, with its meaning, having no connections between its sound and meaning. However, in listening, the information input totally depend on sound system. If listeners cannot have a direct connection between words' sounds and their meaning, there won't be quick decoding of sounds, automatic processing of the sound information, and good understanding of the listening material.

Reading aloud new words can help learners to enlarge their listening vocabulary, and help change reading vocabulary into listening vocabulary. When learning a new word, there is a difference between visual learners and auditory learners. Although both of them focus on the Chinese meaning of the word, visual learners favor learning by seeing or read silently the spelling of the word and the meaning together, while auditory learners prefer reading aloud the word to remember its sound, and then its spelling and meaning. Naturally, auditory learners can recognize words both visually and auditorily. For these learners, there doesn't exist a big gap between their their listening and reading vocabulary. Visual learners are used to recognizing words by seeing them, which belongs to reading vocabulary. Their listening vocabulary is, of course, much smaller than their reading vocabulary, and they may have much more difficulty in listening than auditory learners do. To solve this problem, visual learners must change their habit of learning new words by seeing them into reading aloud the new words. In doing so, learners have to use all their eyes, mouths, and ears in a sequence. Learning by using the eyes can make the newly learned word recognized easily in reading comprehension. The leaning by using the the mouth to read aloud the new word can make the newly learned word recognized easily in listening, for learners hear the word's pronunciation when they read aloud it. Meanwhile, when they read aloud, they have to use their eyes to see the new word and its meaning. So, it is possible that learners can also recognize the word in reading. Therefore, learning new words by reading aloud can certainly do good to the enlargement of listening vocabulary.

4. READING ALOUD AND AUTOMATIC PROCESSING IN LISTENING

Vocabulary recognition, sound recognition in listening, plays a key role in the process of information processing in listening, without sound recognition, there will be no listening comprehension. As mentioned above, this process is closely related to listening vocabulary. Sensory memory takes in listening information in forms of sounds and sends the information to working memory, where processing functions are performed to analyze and interpret these information stored there for a short period of time. To finish the task of listening comprehension, working memory has to undertake different sub-tasks, like recognizing sounds, making inferences according to the context, and understanding grammatical structures. Some of the tasks need more processing capacity to finish, and this information processing process is controlled process, while other need less, Which is supposed to be an automatic process. The task of recognizing common words is an automatic process, while developing a phrase structure for a sentence is a more controlled process (Carroll, 2004). Hence, when working memory has difficulty in recognizing words, making vocabulary sound recognition a controlled process, the whole auditory information processing, listening process will be greatly impaired, resulting in some failure in listening comprehension. Conversely, with large listening vocabulary, listeners' working memory can recognize sound automatically, leaving more processing capacity of the fixed resources of the working memory to deal with the much more complicated tasks, controlled tasks in listening, ensuring a better understanding of the listening material.

Expanding listening vocabulary by reading aloud the new words has indeed become a must for Chinese English learners to improve their listening comprehension by realizing automatic processing in sound recognition task. Greatly influenced by "dumb English", Chinese English learners tend to have much smaller listening vocabulary, compared with their small reading vocabulary, which, undoubtedly, often hinders their sensory stores' vocabulary sound recognition rate, making vocabulary recognition a controlled task and consumes a large amount of the resources from the fixed processing capacity in working memory, leaving less resources of it for the more complex processes. Tackling more complex tasks, controlled tasks, with less processing capacity, will surely lead to poor performance in the listening comprehension, because with small listening vocabulary, listeners may need to pay more attention to recognize the sounds quickly and match the them with their meaning, making the simple automatic process a controlled process, and some even spend longer time and pay more attention to recognize a sound which is very familiar to them, but failed, missing the following listening sentences, and resulting in an irreparable loss of the listening comprehension of the material. In contrast, With a large amount of listening vocabulary, sound recognition process in working memory will be an automatic process, and it can assign more resources from its fixed processing capacity to perform efficiently the controlled tasks, like inferences and storage, processes which are more difficult than sound recognition and need more processing capacity. In this way, learner may have a better understanding of the listening material because more processing resources can be drawn to do the controlled tasks. Therefore, Chinese English learners need to develop listening vocabulary so that they can automatically access word meaning, making sound recognition an automatic process.

Learning new words by reading aloud can help listeners recognize most words automatically. Reading aloud new words to learn them by heart will unconsciously force language learners use their eyes, mouths and ears together, and they function well in a sequence to have their visual sense and auditory sense working together. When reading aloud, the eyes must first focus the spelling of a words to pronounce it when the eyes will unconsciously focus on the meaning, then, the ears will automatically hear the pronunciation of the word, making a direct connection between the word's meaning and sound. Usually, to recite a new word, visual learners will do so several times in the order of sound-spelling,-meaning, or just sound-meaning if they decide that the spelling of the word will not

be needed in their future study, to reinforce the connection between them. As a result, in listeners memory, there is a auditory memory of words' sound, which can be retrieved easily to enable listeners to recognize sound automatically.

5. CONCLUSION

Vocabulary does make a difference in language learners' performance, but their listening ability greatly depend on the size of their listening vocabulary, the amount of words which they can understand just by listening. During the process of information processing in listening, one's amount of listening vocabulary have a tremendous effect on information input and word recognition rate, which greatly influence listening efficiency. No matter how skillful a listener can be, and what listening strategies they are trained to use, he/she cannot be a good listener without reading aloud new words to enlarge their listening vocabulary, making sound recognition an automatic process. Therefore, to improve listening ability, foreign language learners, such as Chinese English learners, who learn a foreign language without the language environment, should learn new words by reading aloud.

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