

Constructivist Pedagogy in English for Academic Purposes Listening Instruction Mao Ting

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Abstract: *This paper analyzes China's English for academic purposes listening instruction context and finds that the behaviorist pedagogy used does not fit in the current context. We uses the Interpretation Construction (ICON) model to propose the constructivist pedagogy in English for academic purposes listening instruction at a Chinese university. A questionnaire result shows that the constructivist pedagogy is effective in developing the students' listening skills.*

Keywords: *English for academic purposes, Interpretation Construction (ICON) Model, Constructivist pedagogy*

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1. Introduction

It has been wildly acknowledged that listening skill is the most dominant skill for effective communication. Rankin's (1926) study showed that listening skill makes up almost 50% of our daily communications. Ralph and Stevens (1957) and Rankin (1930) found that listening (46%), speaking (30%), reading (16%), and writing (9%) involve our daily communication. Therefore, for an ESL learner, it is very important to develop their listening skill.

2. English for academic purposes listening

English listening comprehension ability is not only a basic skill for everyday communication but also an important study skill for college students, especially for the students enrolled in the EMI (English as a medium of instruction) courses.

Hadley (2015) described English for academic purposes as “tertiary level English instructional training that enables learners to improve their language proficiency within higher educational institutions, irrespective of the country within which that instruction takes place” (p. 23). It aims to develop learner ability to learn and communicate in an academic context.

Unlike the general English, English for academic purposes is not only concerned with the language per se, it is more of an educational approach that centers on the learner and the situation. In that case, the pedagogy of English for academic purposes cannot be the same as that of the general English (Mao, 2017). As a result, language use in a particular academic context, such as lectures, seminars, oral presentation and research papers etc. should prioritize the language learning in the teaching of English for academic purposes.

Globalization brings about the increasing frequency of the international academic activities. A growing number of ESL learners learn English for academic purposes. In academic context, listening skills serve as the basis for language acquisition and enables language learners to communicate in spoken activities. However, the research of English for academic purposes listening instruction has not been given a high profile (Han, 2017). Therefore, this paper aims to analyze China’s English for academic purposes listening instruction context and uses the Interpretation Construction (ICON) model to propose the constructivist pedagogy in English for academic purposes listening instruction at a Chinese university.

3. China’s English for Academic Purposes Listening Instruction Context

Currently, English for academic purposes listening instruction in China generally follow a traditional behaviorist approach.

To begin with, the current traditional English listening classrooms in China are generally dominated by teacher talk. Teachers are responsible for teaching activities, providing listening training materials, controlling the progress of the teaching activities, while the students follow the teacher's prompts to complete corresponding listening exercises. This is a typical teaching mode under the guidance of behaviorist approach.

The process of teaching is more of a “stimulus-response” process. Teachers are the providers of the stimulus, while the students are the recipients of the stimulus. Under the traditional model, English teaching does not pay attention to training students' ability to use English to engage in interactive activities. It is rare to see student-initiated questions and student-to-student interactions. Listening as a separate skill and limited training with monotonous methods can easily lead to depressed classroom atmosphere and low teaching efficiency.

By such a teaching approach the students have no opportunities to practice the skills required in real life. In addition, teachers are unable to achieve better teaching results, although they have put in a lot of energy.

Second, textbooks are grammar and structure-oriented. Teachers expect student to identify and replicate the knowledge. Students' interests and preferences are not a priority in the classroom, neither the construction of new knowledge.

Third, test-taking strategies are valued in most classrooms at Chinese universities. The development of the English for academic purposes learners' communicative competence, especially their strategic competence does not get the deserved attention. Students and teachers are in pursuit of high scores on tests rather than communication skills in real life. Test-taking strategies are most instructors' top priority. Many instructors try to discover whether students know the 'right' answers. Consequently, students learn not to raise their hands in response to the instructor's questions unless they are confident about the 'right' answers. Therefore, students might be able to choose the 'right' answers from the given options but not competent or confident to use the language in an academic context or in real life.

4. Constructivist Pedagogy

Constructivism is a theory of knowledge that argues that humans generate knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their experiences and their ideas. (Jean, 1967) Von Glasersfeld (2000, p.4) also held that individuals construct their knowledge by adapting to their subjective experience. In light of the constructivist pedagogy, the role of the learner, the instructor and the classroom activities, which are different from those of the behaviorist approach, are identified as follows.

4.1 The Role of the Learner

It is argued that the responsibility of learning should reside increasingly with the learner (Glasersfeld, 1989). Glasersfeld (1990) also emphasized that learners construct their own understanding and that they do not simply mirror and reflect what they read. Learners look for meaning and will try to find regularity and order in the events of the world even in the absence of full or complete information.

Therefore, the focus of the English for Academic Purposes listening instruction should be shifted from the teacher to the learners who should be actively involved in the learning process. Contrary to the behaviorist viewpoints, the constructivists hold that the responsibility rests with the learners rather than the instructor.

4.2 The Role of the Instructor

In view of the social constructivist approach, instructors have to adapt to the role of facilitators but not teachers (Bauersfeld, 1995). A teacher gives a didactic lecture that covers the subject matter, a facilitator helps the learner to get to his or her own understanding of the content and highlight his or her role in providing support. He or she makes available for consultations with students on a one-on-one basis and foster a community of practice. In the former scenario the learner plays a passive role and in the latter scenario the learner plays an active role in the learning process.

4.3 Collaboration among Learners

In view of social constructivists, the process of sharing individual perspectives, called collaborative elaboration, results in learners constructing understanding together that would not be possible alone. Learners with different skills and backgrounds should collaborate in tasks and discussions to arrive at a shared understanding of the truth in a specific field (Duffy and Jonassen 1992). However, in a Chinese classroom, collaboration among learners are rare. The students are expected to give the right answer and they tend to turn to the instructor who is considered the authority in the classroom for feedback or evaluation rather than to their peers.

5. Constructivist Pedagogy in English for Academic Purposes Listening Instruction

This paper uses the Interpretation Construction (ICON) model to propose the constructivist pedagogy in English for academic purposes listening instruction at a Chinese university.

Black and McClintock of Columbia University Teachers College derived the Interpretation Construction (ICON) Design Model from several computer technology-supported learning environments at the Dalton School in New York. The Interpretation Construction (ICON) model contains seven stages:

1. Observation: Students make observations of primary source materials embedded in their natural context or simulations thereof.
2. Contextualization: Students construct contexts for their explanations.
3. Cognitive Apprenticeship: Teachers help student apprentices master observation, interpretation, and contextualization.
4. Collaboration: Students collaborate in observation, interpretation, and contextualization.
5. Interpretation Construction: Students interpret their observations and explain their reasoning.
6. Multiple Interpretations: Students gain cognitive flexibility by being exposed to

multiple interpretations from other students and from expert examples.
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7. Multiple Manifestations: Students gain transferability by seeing multiple manifestations of the same interpretations.

We use the Interpretation Construction (ICON) model to propose the constructivist pedagogy in English for academic purposes listening instruction in the seven steps and use an example unit of “Culture and Traditions” to illustrate the application of the model.

5.1 Observation.

Students use observation to explore the theme of “Culture and Tradition”. They bring to class their results of their observation like traditional ways of life, the cultures that they are interested in and what make their own cultures special etc.

The instructor poses questions or problems of emerging relevance to students and uses some heuristic questions to guide students to construct knowledge and meaning. As the facilitator of meaning construction, rather than the leader of teaching activities, the instructor aims at training the students to become active constructors of meaning, and guiding the students to play the leading role in the classroom.

5.2 Contextualization:

The students structure learning around primary concepts. They relate the theme to what is already known using a wide variety of reference materials they have access to. They are also encouraged to engage in dialogues, both with the instructor and with their peers.

In addition to language knowledge, cultural differences and lack of background knowledge are also the main factors that cause difficulty in comprehension. Therefore, teachers provide resources to the students to help students construct contexts for their explanation.

For example, the phrase “drive-in bank” is not familiar to the Chinese students. Therefore, students should take the initiative to collect relevant background information and build up their related vocabulary, such as “drive-in cinema”, “dive-in restaurant” and the like. With this knowledge in mind, it is easier to understand the meaning of the passage.

5.3 Cognitive Apprenticeship:

The instructor models how to make observation of the source material, interpret their observations and explain the reasoning. Then he or she fades his or her involvement while coaching and supporting the students in their own study efforts. The instructor use cognitive terminology such as "classify," "analyze," "predict," and "create"

For example, in the part of Analytical Listening of the unit "Culture and Tradition", before the students listen to the talk about cowboys, the instructor models the predicting strategies. The prediction strategy is based on the research results of psycholinguistics. Prediction is the medium of interaction between language production and understanding process. It is the basic skill of language use and language learning. It is the main procedure to understand talks, lectures, speeches etc. The prediction refers to the psychological process of improving the understanding ability by the learners' screening, induction, analysis and reasoning of large amounts of information.

Then the instructor can guide students by predicting the main idea through the visual information including titles on the board, on slides, or in a PowerPoint presentation. Inspire the students to think about what they already know about this topic and analyze the relevant background knowledge of the listening materials involved.

By this approach, the students' independent thinking is trained and developed. The focus of the listening classrooms is moved from teacher-dominated activities to the students-centered activities. **5.4 Collaboration:**

Constructivist learning theory advocates learner-centered learning under the guidance of instructors. In the teaching process, teachers encourage learner-learner and teacher-learner negotiation in collaborative learning. Students should be encouraged to engage in dialogue during class discussions. Group work should be organized to facilitate dialogues. Dialogues can be extended by electronic means such as e-mail or online conferencing.

The students work cooperatively in groups to support each other in their individual work, role-plays, discussions and debates. They formulate concepts through dialogues in the classroom.

By the exchange and discussion of ideas, students connect their prior knowledge with the knowledge they will learn. This is the learning process that learners construct meaning. The negotiation process refers to the discussion and debate within the learning group. The instructor takes the initiative to create a free discussion atmosphere, give students the necessary guidance, let the students have ample opportunity to freely express their views, and listen carefully to the views of their group members, improve their ability to analyze problems and think independently and critically.

5.5 Interpretation Construction:

The students develop their own interpretations of the topics and use various kinds of evidence for their conclusions. Seek and value students' points of view.

For example, new words, sentence structures, grammar rules in the listening materials, sound liaison, loss of plosion and stress etc will cause difficulties in listening comprehension for the Chinese learners.

The instructor can guide students to discover and summarize the rules of relevant language knowledge in the listening materials via specific exercises. For instance, the instructor can use the listening materials in which there is phonetic changes but not new words or complex sentence structures. In that case, students can find out the rules and gradually learn and adapt to the change. Instead of telling the rules explicitly by the instructor, repeated intensive exercises are used to help the students construct their own understanding of the rules. It makes the process of learning transition from passive acceptance to active construction.

5.6 Multiple Interpretations:

In the unit of “Culture and Tradition”, the students form groups to discuss the questions related to the listening tasks. For example, after they listen to a peer student’s presentation about the music from another culture. They talk about the traditional music in China. By discussion with the other students and studying their interpretations of the listening tasks, they get a sense of other perspectives. Their participation gives them the opportunities to learn from their peers and make self-correction.

5.7 Multiple Manifestations:

By going through the process a number of times the general principles and rules behind what the students are doing become meaningful to the students. Then the students consciously construct information and meet the teaching objectives.

6. Questionnaire Analysis

The students taught with the Information Construction model completed a questionnaire which proved that the constructivist pedagogy is effective in listening instruction especially in the following aspects:

6.1. Improved language proficiency. Students observe, contextualize and interpret the information, which gives them the opportunity to use the language rather than only learn the language rules and uses.

6.2. Improved cross-cultural communicative ability. By constructivist pedagogy, students acquire the two different cultures in a positive and conscious way other than accepting what is taught in class.

6.3. Improved strategic competence. The instructor models the cognitive process and the use of the strategies. Therefore, the students have a way to use and practice those strategies.

6.4. Relaxed Educational Environment. Listening in a foreign language by nature involves much pressure. By giving the students opportunities to construct their own information based on their prior knowledge can help them learn on their own pace. In addition, collaboration with their peers and the multiple interpretation enable the students to learn from one another. The instructor is no longer regarded as an absolute authority in class. The students enjoy more autonomy in class. In that case, students become more confident in class and would participate in the classroom activities willingly.

7. Conclusion

The constructivist pedagogy in English for academic purposes listening instruction aims to use the Information Construction (ICON) model to improve the students' listening ability. In this context, the roles of the students and the instructor are found to be different from those in the behaviorist approach. The instructor is more of a facilitator, who guide the learners to construct information by observation, contextualization, cognition, collaboration, interpretation, multiple interpretation and multiple manifestation. The students construct meaning with the guidance of the instructor. A questionnaire result shows that the constructivist pedagogy is effective in developing the students' listening skills.

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