

Theme-Based Instruction in Chinese College English Listening Teaching: An Empirical Study

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As for college English teaching in China, students' listening performances tend to be inferior to their reading and writing skills in many cases. Student's listening competence attracts more attentions accordingly. Theme-Based Instruction (TBI) stresses that language course should be organized based on themes and topics, many studies have shown its effectiveness on English teaching to some extent. However, there is no sufficient quantitative evidence to show its effectiveness for Chinese students. This study has been conducted in a university in Zhengzhou, in which two parallel English classes are chosen. One is the control group and the other is the experimental group. The control group has received traditional instruction, while the experimental group received TBI. The results show that, after 16 weeks of experiment, the listening comprehension of the experimental group is significantly improved compared with that of the control group. Moreover, TBI has a positive impact on students' English reading ability and learning motivation. The study indicates that TBI, if combined with well-designed content and effective practice, can help Chinese students improve their English listening competence.

Keywords: TBI, college English listening teaching, English listening competence, application research

INTRODUCTION

As economic globalization progresses, college English teaching has received increasing attention from Chinese education departments, and listening teaching is an important part of English teaching (Li & Zhang, 2016). College English listening course lays the foundation of various language skills in college English teaching (Chen & Zhao, 2014). However, Chinese college students' listening proficiency is still weaker than reading and writing. Some researchers call it deaf English (Guan, 2014). Jiang (2014) has analyzed reasons for this phenomenon: most students are nervous or even anxious during listening. Excessive anxiety tends to distract students' attention and disintegrate their thinking. It is in such circumstances that the initiative of the students gradually dampens and students lose interest in learning (Yang, 2021). Second, traditional teaching mode also causes this phenomenon (Guan, 2014). Traditional English teaching method is basically indoctrination teaching, where teachers focus on instilling accurate knowledge points to students. In class, teachers constantly ask students to listen and memorize, but rarely ask them to think, cooperate, communicate or investigate (Liu, 2000; Li et al., 2012; Peng, 2018). Since the 1980s, Chinese educators have been exploring ways to effectively reform college English teaching and improve students' listening proficiency (Xu & Fan, 2017).

To facilitate and guide the reform, the Chinese Ministry of Education has revised the syllabus for College English for several times and released *College English Curriculum Requirements*, which states that English should be taught as a tool for communication rather than as isolated knowledge (Lin & Reinders, 2019). Many Foreign Language (EFL) teaching approaches developed by well-known scholars from around the world have been introduced to mainland China, and many English teachers have adopted these approaches in their class to improve teaching (He & Miller, 2011). TBI is a method of second language teaching that combines linguistic and cognitive theories with language teaching activities, focusing on the use of target language to learn a particular subject or topic. Its successful application makes it popular among second and foreign language educators around the world.

TBI views language as a medium for learning a broad range of knowledge, and learners will develop language skills while learning the knowledge. This method satisfies the *College English Curriculum Requirements* for educating non-English majors (Li et al., 2015). Therefore, since its introduction to China in the 1980s, TBI has also been interested by educators and English teachers. The findings suggest that the thematic teaching method encourages the learning process of English learners (Wu, 2010; Xiong, 2018) and effectively increases their English skills. (Li, 2009; Wang, 2021) Moreover, TBI promotes the application of English (Zhou, 2017; Xiong, 2018). However, there is little quantitative evidence to support that TBI enhances the English listening skills of Chinese college students.

Therefore, this paper uses TBI theory as the research framework to explore the application of the Six-Ts approach in listening teaching. A combination of data and experiments are used to investigate the relationship between TBI and college English listening teaching. It aims to solve problems in listening teaching and test the effectiveness of TBI in improving the listening comprehension and using ability of the English learners.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Data Collection

This research project is conducted in a university in Zhengzhou. The university stresses the importance of knowledge application and encourages teachers to make innovations in teaching methods. As learning English increases students' competitiveness in the future workplace, they are encouraged to devote more time and effort to the language study. The project was carried out throughout 16 weeks, which made up the fall semester of 2021. The researcher used the same textbook, *New Horizons College English (Listening and Speaking)*, Third Edition, Book 3, but with different teaching methods. The researcher taught the control group in traditional way, (focusing on vocabulary and grammar knowledge) and taught the experimental group with the TBI method. For the pretest and post-test, this paper used the results of two exams for comparison, to see if TBI enhanced the experimental group's language skills. The research began in August 2021, and it was based on three questions:

- 1). Does TBI alleviate students' anxiety in English listening classrooms?
- 2). Does TBI improve students' classroom behavior?
- 3). Does TBI improve students' listening performance in China's College English Test (Band 4) (CET-4)?

Participants

The 101 students who participated in the experiment were all in the 2020 undergraduate classes of Information Management and Big Data, from the Department of Information Engineering of Zhengzhou Shengda University. The experimental group - Information Management class - followed the CBI teaching mode and the control group - Big Data class - followed the regular teaching mode. The participants were around 19 years old and they had been studying English for almost 10 years.

Instruments

This research project was implemented in the fall semester of 2021 for 16 weeks. The researcher used the same textbook, *New Horizons College English (Listening and Speaking)*, Third Edition, Book 3, but

with different teaching methods. The researcher taught the control group in traditional way, (focusing on vocabulary and grammar knowledge) and taught the experimental group with the TBI method. To make the empirical investigation convincing, effective, and justifiable, various instruments were employed, including classroom observation, pretest, and post-test. Students of both experimental and control groups were observed in the classrooms to assess their behavior differences. For the pretest and post-test, this paper used the results of two exams for comparison, to see if TBI enhanced the experimental group's language skills.

Classroom Observation

Classroom observation during the experiment provides solid information for research. Examples of learning observation points are as follows: *Preparation stage*: What do the students prepare before class? How are they prepared? How many students have prepared? *Listening*: How many students have listened to the lecture? How much time do they listen? How many students listen to their classmates? What are the supporting behaviors (notetaking/ review/ response) when listening? *Interaction*: What are the interactive behaviors? How is the number, time, target, process, and quality of questions/answers? How is the number, time, target, process, and quality of participants in group discussions?

Pretest

To ensure the reliability and validity, the listening part of CET-4, one of the most important national exams in China, is adopted as the test in this experiment. At the beginning of the experiment, CET-4 in June 2021 is adopted as the pretest score of this project.

Post-Test

CET-4 in December 2021 is taken as the post-test. Two tests' difficulty coefficients are calculated to ensure equality.

Teaching Design

College English is taken by all non-English majors during their first two academic years in China. In this study, participants attend college English classes twice a week (90 minutes per class) for 16 weeks. The textbook *New Horizons College English (Listening and Speaking)* consists of eight units, each focusing on a specific topic. The participants are all sophomores.

- Teaching Design in Control Group. The control group adopts traditional teacher-centered approach. The teaching procedures are as follows:
 1. Pre-listening. The researcher introduced new vocabulary, phrases, and sentence structures in the text, using plenty of examples to show the usage to students, and then asked them to read and practice. In addition, the researcher introduced the background information for extended learning.
 2. In-listening. Students listened to the material repeatedly and then the researcher gave the correct answers. Meanwhile, students were taught some listening skills, including key words grasping, thought group division, advance thinking, notetaking, and attention to the number.
 3. Post-listening. The students were assigned to finish the exercises. If necessary, all exercises were examined and explained. The researcher analyzed exercises for students in terms of their language knowledge and listening skills.
- Teaching Design in Experimental Group. The researcher used TBI method to teach the experimental group. TBI is normally implemented by adopting the Six-Ts Approach as put forward by Stoller & Grabe (1997). It consists of six elements: theme, text, topic, thread, task, and transition. The Six-Ts approach is reflected during the teaching of experimental group. There are eight units in *New Horizons College English (Listening and Speaking)*, Third Edition, Book 3. Unit 3 *Travel around the World* is used to illustrate how Six-Ts is applied in teaching practice for listening.

1. Theme. Theme is the main ideas of the learning material. It should be both tailored to students' needs and interests, and fit teachers' professional knowledge and teaching objectives. In this experiment, when selecting an English reading theme, the instructor considered the interests and needs of the students and chose "travel" as the theme to get students interested in related studies.
2. Text. Text plays a vital part in theme teaching. The selection of text should meet certain criteria. First, the text should be managed to appeal to the tastes of the students. Second, the text should be appropriate for teaching. Third, the length, format, consistency, connection to topic, availability, accessibility of the material should be proper. In this case, the text was authentic and "travel"-related material and supplemented with travel maps, tourist videos and pictures.
3. Topic. Topics are subunits of a theme to compensate for the content and achieve more objectives. Topics should be consistent with the theme to help students study more information. The discussion of the topic can deepen students' understanding of the theme. In this case, there were numerous topics on "travel" so that students could get a thorough understanding of the theme. The following were some of the "travel" topics:
 - 1). The selection of tourism resources, as well as the reasons for that selection.
 - 2). Travel tools and their benefits and drawbacks.
 - 3). How do you organize your travel agenda before you leave?
 - 4). The individual in the text and his or her personality.
 - 5). The individual's attitude toward travel.
 - 6). The countries through which the Mekong River flows.
 - 7). What can you expect to see as you cruise along the Mekong?
 - 8). The obstacles encountered during the journey.
4. Thread. Thread is a connection among topics that helps improve the course's uniformity. In general, thread connects each topic and helps summarize the article's main point. Thread is an abstract idea that can be used to evaluate and retrieve significant content and language in a natural way. Therefore, the researcher picked travel as the thread to tie themes together.
5. Task. Task refers to activities designed to help student learn the language, extract main idea from the text, and master certain study methods. Each task is completed in a specific order and the difficulty will steadily increase along the progress. All tasks are set to meet the course's overall objectives. Task not only helps students improve their learning ability, but also develop their listening skill. Students have a range of tasks in TBI English reading lessons.
 - 1). Pre-learning Preparation. In the experiment, students were asked to do the preparation through gathering materials before the class. Preparation gave them confidence and relieved their nervousness during listening. Well-prepared students felt more motivated for knowledge.
 - 2). Listening to audio. First, the English audio was played, during which students were asked to memorize the information in the listening material. Then, topic-related questions were asked to the students. This was to encourage students to further analyze and understand the listening content. Questions included: what was the main idea of the listening material? What happened? What happened next? What was the result? These questions enhanced both classroom interaction and the effectiveness of student learning. The researcher assessed students' performance to see how well they understand. Next, the researcher replayed the audio and explain new words and difficult sentences to the students. Students were then asked to recite related vocabulary and sentences.

- 3). Presentation. The researcher began by presenting eight topics (eight questions). Students were divided into eight groups to discuss these topics and were asked to locate content in the text that was connected to the topic, think about the relationship between the topics and the theme, and answer the questions. After discussion, each group selected a speaker to give a presentation on their chosen topic. Finally, the researcher summarized the students' points of view and analyzed the connection between the topics and the theme. Through this activity, students can effectively grasp the main idea of the text.
- 4). Retelling the text. In this section, students retold the text based on the thread and transition of the text. After one student retold the text, others would evaluate his/her performance. Then, the researcher led the students to review and retell the topic. Finally, the researcher evaluated and summarized the performance of the students. In this way, students were provided the chance to exercise listening and speaking. Their mutual evaluation not only created a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere in the classroom, but also alleviated students' anxiety and improved their confidence.
- 5). Transition. Transitions smoothly connects topics and tasks and there are two kinds of transitions -- topic transitions and task transitions. They are helpful to cultivate students' ability of induction and organization.

It is wrong to think that the whole process is over when the listening activity is over. Reflection is a very important part of teaching. After listening, the researcher guided students to review each listening stage, clarify their knowledge, summarize their listening methods, and find out reasons for their mistakes. In this way, students were able to make further progress and improvement. Through questionnaires, the researcher found that: students relieved their anxiety and fear of English listening and accumulated knowledge and rules of learning at the same time.

Data Analysis

Pre-test data was collected around mid-September 2020, and post-test data was collected in March 2021. Raw data from both tests were recorded with Excel 2007. The researcher used IBM SPSS 16.0 software to statistically analyze the data. The researcher estimated means and standard deviations and used *t*-Tests to see if there were any differences between the experimental and control groups.

RESULTS

The Pretest Results

The researcher used the listening part of the CET-4 (2020.6) as the pretest. The total score of CET-4 is 710 points, and the listening part accounts for 35% (248.5 points), including 3 sections, news listening, long conversation, and passage listening. The researcher did not have access to the scores of each section. Therefore, the total scores of the listening part were analyzed (see Table 1 for the pretest results)

TABLE 1
THE PARTICIPANTS' PERFORMANCE ON THE PRETEST BASED ON THE CET-4 (2021. 6)

Group	Number	Average	Std. Deviation	<i>t</i>-value	<i>p</i>-value
Experimental	50	121.9	9.4	-0.52	0.03
Control	51	123.3	5.5		

Table 1 shows that the test scores of the experimental group and the control group in the pretest are 121.9 and 123.3, respectively. The *t*-value is - 0.52 and the *p*-value is 0.03 < 0.05. The results indicate that

the difference is not significant between the English listening levels of the students in the two groups before the experiment. The two groups are suitable for studying the effect of TBI method on the English listening performance.

The Results of Classroom Observation

The following is the analysis of classroom observation: Based on the author’s observation, the control group had the following main conditions: i) The teacher took a lot of time to explain vocabulary; ii) The students were only listeners and the teacher-student interaction was poor; iii) The classroom atmosphere was dull and boring; iv) Many students dozed off in classroom. By comparison, the students in the experimental group showed greater interest in the classroom. i) The teacher attached more attention to the theme and topics and stressed the content; ii) Every student actively participated in classroom and wanted to complete tasks as quickly as possible; iii) Teacher-student interaction was significantly higher than that of the control group. iv) The classroom atmosphere was positive and friendly.

The Post-Test Results

The result of CET-4 (2020.6) was adopted as the post-test in this study. The pretest and post-test were the same in terms of test type, test scores, and time requirements.

TABLE 2
THE PARTICIPANTS’ PERFORMANCE ON THE POST-TEST BASED ON THE
CET-4 (2021.12)

Group	Number	Average	Std. Deviation	t-value	p-value
Experimental	50	149.3	7.1	1.86	0.04
Control	51	134.9	7.3		

Table 2 shows that the average test scores of the experimental and control groups in the post-test are 149.3 and 134.9, respectively. The *t*-value is 1.86 and the *p*-value is $0.04 < 0.05$. The results indicate that the listening scores of both groups have been improved to some extent after one academic year of study. Besides, the students in the experimental group with the TBI method have gained higher listening scores. The improvement in listening performance leads to a 51% pass rate in CET-4 (2021.12), compared with the 33% pass rate of the control group. Moreover, during our follow-up research, students of the experimental group become more engaged in classroom, whether in class activities, or post-class reflections. They have better listening and speaking skills and are more engaged in the content of the lesson.

DISCUSSION

According to data analysis, the researcher explored three research questions: The first question: Does the use of the TBI in English listening classrooms alleviate students’ anxiety in listening?

Peng (2018) conducted a study on listening anxiety among sophomore students at Shengda University. Data from the questionnaires indicated that: 42% of the students did not realize the importance of listening among the five skills of English learning, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating. 67% of the students seldom accumulated relevant experience to improve their listening. Only 33% of the students adopted good listening habits, such as notetaking, reciting collocations, investigating foreign culture beforehand, and grasping the key words, etc. 95% of the students were not confident about their listening proficiency and even showed anxiety. 60% of the students admitted that they did not concentrate in the listening class.

According to the researcher’s classroom observation, the anxiety of the students in the experimental group was alleviated during listening. Students were both confident and motivated because they believed they could succeed. They were more engaged in pre-class preparation, classroom activities and post-class reflection. In classroom activities, in particular, the students became more effective listeners and speakers

with more attention to the teaching content. In contrast, students in the control group were silent or distracted. The different emphasis of the two teaching methods influenced students' attitudes towards English listening. For the experimental group, which was taught with the Six-Ts approach, language learning was contextualized and meaningful. The students were more interested in meaningful content than vocabulary and grammar. According to educational psychologist John Keller, attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction are important factors in motivating and attracting students throughout learning activities. Highly motivated students are willing to invest more time and energy in language learning.

The second question: Does TBI improve students' classroom behavior? In the Six-Ts approach, the tasks and activities carefully designed by the researcher improved the experimental group's performance. Before class, the students did good preparation, for instance, learning background knowledge related to the theme. During TBI class, students comprehensively understood the material and gave feedback in the activities of presentation, mutual evaluation, and text-retelling.

Through classroom observations (with subjective experience and objective tools such as observation sheets, audio, and video equipment), the researcher recorded, analyzed, and studied the classroom. The classroom observations were carried out without the students' knowledge, so the students' true behaviors were reflected. The results of classroom observation are shown in 3.2. According to the observation, TBI can improve students' classroom behavior.

The third question: Does TBI improve students' listening performance in China's College English Test (Band 4) (CET-4)?

As mentioned above, the average scores of the two groups in the pre-test are similar and the standard deviations are similar; the results of the post-test show that the scores of both groups have improved, but the average score of the experimental group has increased by 27.24 points, while that of the control group has increased by 11.6 points. The results show differences in listening comprehension scores for both groups, demonstrating the effectiveness of TBI in improving students' listening comprehension in CET-4.

Even though many useful findings have been discovered via scientific and empirical studies in this field. The study still has two limitations: First, limited samples. 101 participants with two different majors (one is Information Management, and the other is Big Data) are representative within one university. However, the sample size is not large enough. Second, some students in the experimental group report that TBI requires much preparation before class, which takes more time and a few introverted students are reluctant to participate in class discussion or answer questions.

The improvement of listening competence is a complex process, involving cognitive ability, learning attitudes, and learning habits, etc. Therefore, teachers need to adjust and improve the TBI method based on actual situation. The researcher will try to overcome the limitations above in the future, in the hope of applying the method to more students.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore whether TBI can effectively improve Chinese college students' English listening competence.

In this study, the researcher conducted a 16-week experiment in a university in Zhengzhou, China, in the autumn semester of 2021. Two college English classes were selected as the control group and the experimental group. The researcher applied the traditional teaching method (focusing on vocabulary and grammar knowledge) to the control group and the theme-based instruction (giving priority to the theme and content) to the experimental group. According to the data analysis, the average test scores of the experimental group and the control group in the post-test were 149.3 and 134.9 respectively. T value was 1.86, P value was $0.04 < 0.05$. The results showed that the listening competence of the experimental group was significantly improved. In addition, the students in the theme-based instruction experimental group also have higher listening scores. The improvement of listening results in the passing rate of CET-4 being 51% (2021.12), while that of the control group being 33%. Moreover, through the interview and observation of the researchers, the anxiety of the experimental group students in the process of listening has been alleviated. It can be proved that theme-based instruction is feasible in college English listening teaching.

When combined with well-designed activities and tasks, it can effectively improve students' English listening competence and stimulate students to invest more time and energy in English learning.

This study provides detailed data for teaching listening skills in a rigorous manner, and can be a reference for the reform of Chinese college on teaching English listening. It paves the way for further research under the CBI theoretical framework for developing English listening skills.

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