

# *A Study on Self-directed English Intensive Listening Training Based on the Theory of Learning Strategy*

Yunyi Zhang \*

*School of Humanities and Law, North China University of Technology, Beijing, China*

*yyzhang.bj@foxmail.com*

*\*corresponding author*

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**Abstract:** The study aims to explore the potential effects of self-directed intensive listening practice via recordings of VOA based on the theory of learning strategy on the listening proficiency among English major undergraduates at Chinese universities. The participants include undergraduates in English major in four grades from three universities in Beijing. Two sets of TEM-4 tests and one set of questionnaires are used to collect the data of different phases in the study. Results show that college students' listening proficiency improves tremendously after they apply the method of intensive listening in their self-directed time, which inspires professors to include the method in college English courses as well so as to assist students with the enhancement of listening skills.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Research Background**

Listening, as an input skill, plays a significant role in effective and appropriate communications. As one of the four essential language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), listening proficiency determines whether students can fully grasp and understand the information conveyed by native speakers, as well as whether they are able to provide correct and fluent responses in daily communications. Therefore, listening instruction has always been a crucial section in college English courses in China, in order to better assist students to comprehend native discourses under various circumstances.

Intensive listening, along with extensive listening, is a prevalent and general teaching method applied in English-major undergraduate courses. It is defined, by Professor Cheng in his book *The Teaching of English Listening* at Beijing Normal University, as “a common and universal learning and instructing method used by students and teachers in China to improve the listening proficiency of foreign language” (Cheng, 2011). It includes the spot dictation, namely, to distinguish and understand every exact word and phrase in the audio script, as well as the sound recognition, in

other words, to be completely aware of intonations and liaisons through countless times of listening and repeating practice. The primary aim of it is to help second language learners get a better understanding of the targeted language in the aspect of listening, and eventually to improve their second language listening proficiency. When used in English-major undergraduate courses, this type of instructing method is able to help students wipe off any new words in the audio script, internalizing native expressions and sentence structures, and to make intonations and liaisons clearer by slowing down the speed of audio and playing the recordings repeatedly.

As for the materials in listening practice, VOA special and standard English programs are frequently used in English-major undergraduate courses. Voice of America is an international news and broadcast organization based in the United States, providing daily VOA special and standard programs in various fields. Its audiences are worldwide, containing a vast majority of second language learners. The programs of VOA are frequently applied as listening materials in China for the reason that the expressions and the accents of broadcasters are native, yet not informal, the structures of scripts are elaborately designed, and the contexts of the communications are quite abundant. Therefore, the selection of VOA programs as listening materials in the English courses is a general approach at present, providing both content knowledge and phonetic information to English-major undergraduates simultaneously.

Learning strategy is an important part in second language learning process. It includes metacognitive strategy, cognitive strategy and social-affective strategy. By using different learning strategies, language learners are able to better improve their language learning results and further enhance their language proficiency and competence. Specifically, instructors are supposed to give targeted advice to learners in order to provide them with more opportunities to experience various learning modes and distinct learning processes.

Based on the above, it is essential to explore the influence of self-directed intensive listening training towards English learners based on the theory of learning strategy, as it might be one of the effective ways to enrich English instruction theories, if being verified, and better help English-major undergraduates improve their listening skills and, eventually, English use abilities.

## 1.2. Aims

The study aims primarily to get a clear picture of the influence and the effects of using the method of self-directed intensive listening and VOA programs as materials on listening practice among English-major undergraduates in Chinese universities, under the guidance of learning strategy theories.

The research design includes: (1) to construct a set of questionnaires to collect participants' learning habit (targeting on listening practice) and their current level (test results), to implement intensive listening method and to apply VOA programs as materials in listening courses; (2) to collect TEM-4 test results of participants as the pre- and post-tests results to see if the practice of intensive listening via VOA programs helps them improve listening skills and proficiency and to see what potential effects are there when applying the practice in courses.

## 1.3. Thesis Structure

The first part is an overall introduction of the study, presenting the background and aims as well as the structure of the study. The second part is a literature review concerning the previous research about college English listening instructions and the theory of learning strategy. The third part is the research analysis, including the research design, the process of data collection, the analysis of the

data collected and the discussion of the results. The fourth part is the conclusion of the study, containing findings, suggestions for further study and the limitations of the study.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Listening

Listening, along with reading, writing and speaking, is one of the most significant skills in English comprehension. According to several researchers, listening competency is relatively weaker than other three skills among Chinese college students (Li and Liu, 2017; Tang, 2005). Other researchers also view listening as the most vital skill and believe that it should be prioritized over other three skills mentioned above due to the reason that it serves as a pivotal role in the enhancement of English proficiency (as cited by Abdi, 2019). In order to understand a foreign language, listening is the first step of language input. Angellia and Listyani, researchers in University of Kristen Satya Wacana, argue that listening is a kind of skill of comprehending spoken language (Angellia, 2019). They point out as well that listening is essential for the reason that it is present in the majority of activities that people carry out throughout their daily lives (Angellia, 2019). Specifically, in China, scholars similarly hold the view that listening proficiency has been paid so much attention by English professors and second language learners in Chinese universities or colleges (Zhang, 2015). He also gives his opinions on the perspectives from learners that they frequently get annoyed due to their low level of understanding English on the course of listening (Zhang, 2015). It can be concluded that "how to improve English listening proficiency and teaching performance is driven by wide awareness" (Zhang, 2015).

During the course of listening, speech sounds are of much importance as they convey the basic information of what the speakers are trying to express. According to a study concerning listening improvement, over 82% of participants are convinced that getting the correct speech sounds is the very first step of comprehending the language and improving their listening competency (Zhu, 2000). Another research also show that the participants has presented "a certain level of anxiety" when they are unable to get the speech sounds when listening to others' talk, and they are eager to know that "how that anxiety had impacts them, and how they managed that anxiety" in listening courses in order to transform it into a kind of encouragement to help improve their listening comprehension (Angellia, 2019). Based on the above, to get a better understanding of the speech sounds appeared in conversations is able to help listeners grasp the ideas quicker and more accurate when they are involved in a daily talk.

### 2.2. Intensive Listening

Since listening competency is of great importance in the use of English, there should be an effective method to help second language learners improve their listening proficiency and to assist professors with listening instructions in English courses. Intensive listening is, therefore, an important practicing way in self-directed and in-class time of English learning. Huang, a noted professor in the field of foreign language teaching, defines intensive listening as a valid way of practicing listening proficiency by fully understanding every word and phrase in the listening materials and completely recognizing phonetic phenomena including liaisons, assimilations and elisions (Tan, 2006; Huang, 1998). Professor Cheng at Beijing Normal University has also given a definition of intensive listening, which contains spot dictation, to distinguish and understand every exact word and phrase in the audio script, as well as sound recognition, to be fully aware of

intonations and liaisons through plenty of times of repeatedly listening (Cheng, 2011). It is widely accepted that intensive listening is one of the effective methods of improving listening proficiency among Chinese college students.

A number of researchers has already presented their perspectives towards intensive listening. Pu, an English teacher in Qingdao Agricultural University, concludes that the primary aim of intensive listening is to help English learners recognize the speech sounds in order to master the detail information in the listening materials (Pu, 2015). There is another opinion about intensive listening presenting that this kind of listening practice is also able to "enhance the ability of vocabulary and grammar learning", because the information gets clearer when the script has been seen by learners, which tremendously boosts their confidence (Duan, 2011).

It is far from enough that merely with the help of a practice method can language learners make a huge progress in listening. The choice of listening materials is equally crucial when it comes to intensive listening practice. Angellia and Listyani consider that the quality of listening materials is quite important; it would be greater if the quality improves due to the reason that different accents and expressions are involved in different materials, which leads to the variation of learners' progress thanks to vague audio or video materials (Angellia, 2019).

### **2.3. VOA News Programs as Listening Materials**

VOA programs are considered as the listening materials in the study. There are numerous advantages of choosing a radio program as the material of intensive listening practice, as one of the researchers in the field of language instructions once stated that "radio programs on every aspect of life are available, making the medium particularly useful for content-based foreign language instruction" (Bedjou, 2006). She also points out that authentic materials "contain specific linguistic issues" that often hamper people's comprehension of the fast-speed speech, for instance, "liaisons, assimilations and elisions" (Bedjou, 2006; Xu, 1998). It is eventually found, at the end of his study, that "radio has the great virtue of exposing students to authentic English spoken by native speakers", particularly in most foreign language settings (Bedjou, 2006). Therefore, the application of VOA programs in the study is assumed to be effective and valid.

Concerning intensive listening, however, few studies focus on the self-directed of language learners, but more in the course instructions. As for VOA programs as the listening materials, the majority of workbooks provide learners with cloze tests, rather than whole-length dictation. This results in the ambiguity of whether learners have absolutely understood every word in the script or not, which requires further study on the relevant field.

### **2.4. The Theory of Second Language Acquisition**

The Input Hypothesis is a generally accepted theory in the field of second language acquisition, concerning the relation between language learners' input and output. According to Rod Ellis, a well-known linguist who focuses on the field of language acquisition, the Input Hypothesis "was first advanced by Krashen to explain how 'acquisition' takes place" (Ellis, 2014). To further explain the term, Ellis interprets that "we acquire only when we understand language that contains a structure that is a little beyond where we are now" (Ellis, 2014).

The theory is able to apply to language learning and instructing. In order to output high-quality language, whether speak or write, second language learners should have enough input in the first place (Ye, 2010; Schmidt, 2016). During the course of learning, the new words and expressions gradually become learners' high frequency words – those who will be used unconsciously by

learners because of the familiarity to the expressions (Yao, 2009). Through abundant language input, learners are getting acquainted with native ways of expressing and then beginning to output language of high quality increasingly.

## 2.5. Learning Strategy

Learning Strategy is defined as a complicated plan consciously made by learners concerning the process of learning in order to enhance the learning effect and the efficiency (Hu, 2011). O'Mally & Chamot have categorized learning strategy, from the perspective of cognitive psychology, as metacognitive strategy, cognitive strategy and social-affective strategy (as cited by Wang, 2019; Liu and Liu, 2016). Metacognitive strategy is representing the plan, the monitoring and the assessment of learners concerning self-management; cognitive strategy is directly related to learning tasks, referring to the strategies concerning dealing with input information operated by human's brains, such as repeating, reasoning, associating, etc.; social-affective strategy stands for the strategies in terms of learners' emotions and feelings, for instance, cooperation and teamwork, communication with others, emotion regulation and adjustment (Wang, 2019).

According to a number of scholars, learning strategy has always been an important part in language instruction. Shen states that the strategy instruction in the field of second language teaching is considered a crucial part in the improvement of second language teaching efficiency (Shen, 2019; Zhang, 2009). A research done by Liu and Liu has shown that advanced planning and self-monitoring are essential strategies affecting the result of language learning (Liu and Liu, 2016). Another empirical study reveals that different learning modes based on cognitive strategy have positive effects on language learners' achievement and proficiency (Wang, 2016). These show that the application of language strategy in language instructions tends to assist learners with the enhancement of language proficiency, and various strategies have positive effects on learners' language achievement.

In listening practice, specifically, learning strategy gives positive influence as well. Zhao concludes from an empirical study that language learners whose listening proficiency is better utilize much more planning strategies than their peers, and are more concentrate on their listening training (Zhao, 2016; Chen, 2019). Those learners are able to monitor the process of listening comprehension according to the different pronunciations and accents, and surprisingly, they also pay much attention to their assessment, self-management, reflection and planning during and after their listening practice, for the sake of the enhancement of listening competence (Zhao, 2016; He, 2013). Zhu claims that the training of listening strategy helps learners to be aware of correct and proper learning beliefs, to boost confidence of language learning, to improve the performance of listening, and to enhance the ability of self-learning and self-training in terms of second language learning (Zhu, 2010). Based on the above, there is a practical meaning to explore how and to what extent language strategy can influence learners' listening proficiency in the process of second language learning and instructing.

## 2.6. Potential Effects

It is assumed that self-directed intensive listening is capable of assisting second language learners with mastering vocabulary, expressions and sentence structure in the script; in the course of practice, learners tend to transform the listening process into reading, and to understand new words and phrases by getting more familiar with them until they finally become acquainted words.

Under the guidance of learning strategy theories, self-directed intensive listening is also able to

help learners to comprehend liaisons and assimilations clearer by repeatedly playing the listening materials, to react in a faster speed when listening to a segment, and to be more confident and accurate about pronunciations and intonations in the audio materials as well as the expressions and usages of the foreign language.

### 3. Research Analysis

#### 3.1. Research Design

The study aims primarily to get a clear picture of the influence and the effects of using the method of self-directed intensive listening and VOA programs as materials on listening practice among English-major undergraduates in Chinese universities, under the guidance of learning strategy theories.

The participants are English major undergraduates from three universities in Beijing, and each university includes ten. They are from: North China University of Technology (NCUT), represented as the science and engineering universities, Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU), stands for the liberal arts universities, and Renmin University of China (RUC), the comprehensive universities. The participants are randomly chosen from four grades to make sure that the data is impartial and unfiltered.

One set of questionnaires is designed to collect information of participants' habits of English listening practice. The practice frequency, the major practice method, and whether the participants have already mastered the self-directed intensive listening are the primary information that is expected to be collected in the questionnaire.

After filled in the questionnaire, the participants are asked to use self-directed intensive listening method to practice their English listening. They need to follow the instructions strictly in a three-week training in terms of intensive listening. The listening materials the participants are going to use are provided by the researcher, including 15 VOA standard news for three weeks, 5 programs for each week. All the listening scripts are provided for the participants to learn while they are listening.

On the course of the training of self-directed intensive listening, the steps are strictly regulated. First, all the new words and phrases should be mastered, which requires the participants' fully understanding towards the VOA materials. Second, all the speech sounds should be recognized, including liaisons, assimilations, elisions, etc. Third, all the materials should be dictated more than three times in order to force the participants to be familiar with every piece of material. There will not be unified examinations that are particularly for the VOA programs due to the time limit.

There is also a question concerning the latest TEM-4 score every participant gets in the most recent practice test held by every university itself. The score is collected as the result of pre-tests to be compared with another post-test TEM-4 score when the participants finish the specific self-directed intensive listening practice. The comparison between the two scores is supposed to show if self-directed intensive listening indeed help improve the participants' listening competency.

Three participants, respectively from three different universities, are interviewed after they submit their post-test scores. It aims to see and collect the participants' perspectives towards self-directed intensive listening, their actual situations and problems faced when using the method, and their opinion on whether English major undergraduates should use the method to practice listening or not.

#### 3.2. Data Collection

The online questionnaire system is used to release the set of questionnaires and automatically collect the data from the participants from three universities.

Two scores of TEM-4 tests are collected to be compared in order to quantify the improvement of listening proficiency. The pre-test score, which is obtained by the latest practice test held by each university itself, is represented as the level of the participants' listening competency before they apply self-directed intensive listening method, while the post-test score, which is obtained by the most recent practice test held by each university, stands for the level of their listening after they use the method for their practice for a certain period of time. The scores of the listening part in both tests are valid as the data to be further analyzed.

During the course of interview, three participants present their perspectives towards self-directed intensive listening. The data is categorized into several groups in terms of the similar themes. The participants are able to give opinions freely or answer the questions posed by the interviewer.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

All the data collected from the questionnaires has been analyzed as followed. The questionnaire and the results of it are provided in the appendix as well.

There are 30 participants in total who filled in the questionnaire and gave valid results. 10 participants are from NCUT, 10 are from BLCU and 10 are from RUC.

Question No.2 is about the participants' frequency of listening practice. The majority of participants practice English listening once or twice a week, 11 in particular, taking 36.66 percent. From the overall results, it can be concluded that most participants practice listening more than once a week, accounting for 86.66 percent in total.

Question No.3 is about the frequently-used method of listening practice. More than half of the participants use extensive listening as their primary method when practicing English listening. Notably, 89.99 percent of the participants do extra listening practice outside of the classroom, which is comforting. However, only three participants frequently use self-directed intensive listening to practice, taking 10 percent.

Question No.4 is a basic survey about whether the participants have heard about the self-directed intensive listening method and whether they have applied this method, if so, in their daily practicing. 20.00 percent of the participants often use self-directed intensive listening to practice, 6 specifically. 73.33 percent of the participants say that they have heard of this method but seldom apply it in their daily learning. There are still 4 participants who have never heard of the method, which is regretful.

The pre-test scores and the post-test scores are collected to be compared, in order to demonstrate if there is a remarkable increase in terms of the participants' scores.

Among 30 participants, on one hand, 19 of them present an increasing score in the post-test compared with their own pre-test score, taking 63.33 percent. The mean of the increasing score among the 19 participants is 2.316 per person. On the other hand, 7 out of 30 end up with getting a decreasing score in the post-test, taking 23.33 percent. The mean of the decreasing score among the 7 participants is 1.571 per person. In addition, there are also 4 participants who gets equal score between the two tests.

From the above data, it can be concluded that the majority of the participants, 19 to be specific, get an increasing score in the post-test, and the level of the increasing is quite prominent. However, there are 11 participants who does not present an increasing score, and there are several participants who gain a decreasing score. The comparison between the two means show that the training does

have positive effects on assisting the participants with the enhancement of listening competence, and their improvement of listening is fairly attractive.

In addition to the above, paired samples T test in SPSS 17.0 is going to be used to examine whether there is a significant difference between the scores of pre- and post-tests, in order to analyze the data from the perspective of quantitative approach. Due to the time limit, this part of data analysis is going to be presented in the further relevant studies.

### **3.4. Results and Discussion**

The questionnaire and the interview provide with a quite clear result for further discussion.

First, the data shows that the proportion of the participants who know self-directed intensive listening well and apply it to their own listening practice is not large. This indicates that not many English major undergraduates are currently using intensive listening to assist with their language learning. This thoroughly-understanding method has not been wide-spread among Chinese students.

Second, the data shows that the increasing level of two tests' scores is remarkable, signifying that using VOA programs as listening materials and self-directed intensive listening as practice method are both effective and beneficial to college students' English learning, notably in terms of listening competence.

Third, according to some participants in the interview, applying intensive listening to their English learning is tremendously helpful. All three participants mentioned that they are getting clearer about the words and sentences, the liaisons and other speech sounds the speaker said and pronounced in the audio, and they are able to do more than 85 percent correctly in the dictation of the listening materials. Two participants think it is beneficial for them to use VOA programs as the listening materials because they gain academic knowledge and extensive information in a number of fields simultaneously when they are mainly focusing on the language itself. This reveals that VOA programs are capable of enlarging one's vocabulary and broadening one's horizon as well as improving the listening performance.

Yet, several pieces of idea have been recorded as well as the opposite voice against the merits mentioned above.

First, all the participants acknowledge in the interview that they felt overwhelmed in the beginning of the training. They believe that it is more difficult to view the scripts as listening materials compared with reading it directly. They also mentioned that they need much more time reacting to the liaisons and other speech sounds when they are not quite familiar with the materials, although they are able to recognize most of the words or phrases if they are reading the paragraph. This shows that the general difficulty of VOA programs is a little higher than the English level of English major undergraduates, which requires much time for the students to adjust to the listening materials.

Second, the participants point out that it is a time-consuming process to apply intensive listening method to their language learning. They need to make a chunk of time in order to get every word and speech sound explicit. They believe it is hardly to improve their listening skills tremendously in a rather short period of time, and this type of learning method calls for a long-term effort.

## **4. Conclusion**

### **4.1. Findings**

The study aims primarily to get a clear picture of the influence and the effects of using the



method of self-directed intensive listening and VOA programs as materials on listening practice among English-major undergraduates in Chinese universities, under the guidance of learning strategy theories.

The current literature has provided a great deal of studies concerning college listening instructions and the theories of learning strategy. There are abundant experiments in terms of college students' listening performance, but few of them focuses on applying self-directed intensive listening to students' learning process. Using various learning strategies is able to help language learners be more concentrated on their study and more confident and targeted when planning their learning process. Moreover, VOA programs as authentic materials have the advantages proved for English major undergraduates to use in listening practice. But few of researchers have verified the effectiveness of VOA programs on the improvement of listening proficiency under the guidance of self-directed intensive listening.

The study uses a set of questionnaires, two tests (pre- and post-test) and an interview to examine whether self-directed intensive listening and VOA programs are beneficial to the improvement of students' listening performance. The results demonstrate that the participants get well improved on their listening performance under the specific circumstances, which gives researchers inspiration to push the method into a larger-scale for further study.

The participants offer valuable perspectives towards self-directed intensive listening, including compliments and other aspects that encourage further studies. The selection of the materials, the practice time and frequency, and the repeating times of audio playing are sample directions for further studies summarized from the interview.

## 4.2. Suggestions

The following suggestions are proposed for college students and professors of English courses in order to advance English instructions in Chinese universities.

First, for English major undergraduates, it is beneficial to use intensive listening method while doing listening practice out of class time. Be aware of the frequency and the time of practices as if could be difficult in the beginning of the training if VOA programs or audios of similar level of difficulty are being used as materials. In addition, utilize different learning strategies in the course of listening practice as they have positive effects towards learners' language learning process.

Second, for professors of English courses, try applying intensive listening method into the class time and reducing the frequency of utilizing workbooks. Listening materials are equally influential to the method, which requires cautious selections and targeted filtration. Draw enough attention to the level of language and the width of information included in the materials as these factors are also significant in the course of students' listening daily practice. Learning strategy is extremely important in learners' learning process, so it should also be mentioned by professors in course time that cognitive strategies such as planning and monitoring are equally essential for learners to be aware of.

Third, for the college English courses, reforms are appealed in order to be more learner-oriented. For English major undergraduates, practices in workbooks are certainly not enough for the enhancement of language competence. Intensive listening provides opportunities for students to completely understand the materials of second language and further to use more native expressions and collocations in the daily communications, which adapts to the demand for English major students, infinitely approach to the level of native speakers and capable of fluent and accurate consecutive or simultaneous interpretation.

### 4.3. Limitations

There are a couple of limitations to the study, as is shown in the following part.

First, in terms of the participants, the sample size is relatively small. 30 participants from three different universities in Beijing are included in the study, who might be capable of representing various levels of English major undergraduates in the entire China. Also, neither students from other majors nor postgraduate students are involved in the study due to the limit of time and efforts.

Second, in terms of the materials, VOA audio programs are the only type of materials selected for the participants to use in the study. Other kinds of materials are not involved in the study due to the limit of time.

Third, in terms of the research process, self-directed intensive listening is the only method encouraged to use for the participants in the study, thus the results apply only to the relevant research in terms of intensive listening instead of other kinds of instructing methods.

Fourth, the analysis and the results of the quantitative approach (paired sample T test) do not appear in the data analysis part, due to the limit of time and efforts. With the results of paired sample T test of two tests' scores, the data analysis is going to be more persuasive and convincing. Therefore, further studies will focus on analyze two groups of data to trace if there is a significant difference and how significant the difference is in terms of the specific analysis.

Fifth, there are still other factors that influence the results of the study, although they have been avoided with much efforts. In second language empirical research, individuals are difficult to control just for one research because of the long-term duration. It is hard to convince others that the differences and the enhancement happen only because of the particular method the study uses, for the reason that the participants might get improved by other ways of learning in class, or get well-promoted comprehensively in all aspects of language learning through positive learning methods of speaking, writing or reading.

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