Scaffolding Instruction and Its Application in the Teaching of English Listening

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Abstract: According to the theory of scaffolding instruction, the author builds a model based on the dialogues between teachers and students and aim at the construction of the interactive relationship between teacher-student and student-student. Applying this model in the teaching of English listening, we can fully exert the guidance role of teachers and the dominant role of students. In the interactive activities, we can cultivate students' interests to participate in practice and upgrade their listening skills gradually.

1. Introduction

With continuous development of globalization, international association and communication have become more and more frequent. As an international language used widespread, English plays a significant function in communication. In practice, people have realized that the listening ability is actually the key to daily communication. M. W. Rivers,an American linguist,points out that 75% information is exchanged by listening and speaking in daily communication, of which 45% is exchanged by listening, 30% by speaking, 16% by reading, and 9% by writing[1]. To efficiently develop students' listening skills, this essay tries to put the scaffolding instruction derived from the theory of constructivism into the teaching of English listening, and explore good ways of improving the teaching effects of English listening.

2. The Theoretical Foundation of Scaffolding Instruction

The theoretical foundation of scaffolding instruction derived from the Theory of Constructivism and Vygotsky's Theory of Children's Development. In the Theory of Constructivism, the essence of study is the active construction of each student on the basis of his or her own experience and knowledge,it is not the simple transfer of knowledge from teachers to the students[2]. This theory emphasizes people's subjective initiative, which requires learners to actively participate in the teaching and learning, to acquire knowledge by using the necessary study materials in the way of meaning construction with the help of other people (including teachers and co-learners) in social and cultural background. A famous former Soviet psychologist, L. S. Vygotsky, emphasized the social, cultural and historical background of learners. He put forward the important concept of "zone of proximal development" in about 1930.

In Vygotsky's theory of "zone of proximal development", all comparatively complex thinking forms of human beings, including mind, plan, intentional memory, intentional attention, creativity and control of symbol system (especially language) take place in mutual communication with others. Hence social communication plays a crucial role in the process of cognitive development. As for language learning, language itself is a social construction, and it has both constructivist and social characteristics. In the theory of "zone of proximal development", Vygotsky also figured that, in the second stage of psychological development, children gradually get rid of the control from the adults, and that once those emancipating activities are internalized, children can independently handle problems which they originally need instruction and cooperation to deal with. For children, the zone of proximal development can be different according to their social and cultural backgrounds and their experience. As a possibility, the zone of proximal development is not unique or uniform; it is different along with the stages and contents of children's psychological development. Vygotsky's theory of "zone of proximal development" emphasizes the dominant and decisive role of teaching in

children's development, and reveals that the essence of teaching lies not in "training" and "strengthening" their existing internal psychological functions, but in motivating and forming new mental functions.

Vygotsky's theory of "zone of proximal development" closely connects the individual and the society, teaching and development, the external and the internal, the present and the future, and highlights the sociality of cognitive development, the diversity of developing directions, the promotion of teaching, the guidance of teachers, and the importance of cooperative learning. On the basis of the theory of "zone of proximal development", some scholars such as Bruner, Wood and Mercer put forward the theory of "Scaffolding" Instruction[3]. It provides a set of appropriate conceptual frameworks to help students understand specific knowledge, construct knowledge meaning, and complete their missions that they cannot finish independently through effective teacher-learner's interactive dialogues; the scaffolding mode like teacher-learner's dialogues also exists in learner-learner's dialogues, therefore, learners with low ability can increase their knowledge by cooperation with those with high ability in classroom problem-solving activities.

3. The Definition and Basic Segments of Scaffolding Instruction

3.1 Definition of scaffolding instruction

"Scaffold", originally referring to false work used in constructing industry, is a figure of speech used to aptly describe a teaching mode: students are regarded as a building, their "learning" is a process of constantly and actively constructing themselves; teachers' "teaching" is a necessary scaffolding to support students to constantly construct themselves and create new skills. "Scaffolding Instruction" is defined as: scaffolding instruction is used to help learners construct the understanding of knowledge by providing a conceptual framework, in which the concepts are necessary for learners to develop further understanding of problems, and thus to decompose complicated learning tasks, in order to gradually deepen the learners' understanding[4].

3.2 Basic segments of scaffolding instruction

Scaffolding instruction emphasizes the "zone of proximal development" as the space time of teachers' intervention; thereby it actually refers to teaching and learning inside the "zone of proximal development". Students try to stride across the "zone of proximal development" with the support of a kind of scaffold in "learning"; while teachers provide the scaffold in the zone and help students leap over it in "teaching". As scaffolding instruction was put forward in the cultural background of emphasizing the student as the center, it does not only focus on the role of teachers in students' development, but also on students' actively constructing themselves. Scaffolding instruction emphasizes that the scaffold provided by teachers must be "sensitive, dynamic, adapTable to children's temporary ability, and gradually withdrawn with the growth of children's ability"[5]. Scaffolding instruction contains several basic segments: (1)establishment of scaffold-to design related listening activities around each theme; (2)entry of situation-to guide students to certain problem situation; (3)independent exploration-to make students think independently, explore actively to broaden their mind space as far as possible; (4)cooperative study-to consult and discuss in groups; (5)evaluation of learning effects-including students' personal self-evaluation and study groups' evaluation of the individual learning. The contents of evaluation involve: autonomous learning ability, contributions for the group cooperative study, and whether the meaning construction of knowledge is completed. After a stage of scaffolding instruction, the evaluation of learning effects also include the analysis of students' achievements, their self-evaluation and the new teaching model.

English classroom teaching should also be a practicing process of language communication in that the teacher is not only the provider of knowledge and information, but the instructor and cooperator for students' language communicative practice, so he should try his best to provide students with chances of language practice. Therefore, the application of "scaffolding instruction" in English classroom teaching is not only an improvement of teaching methods, but the more

important is a transformation of teaching ideas. It requires that the language teaching process must be student-centered; the student is the master of study and the main part in teaching activities. Students should improve various skills and practical abilities in learning activities.

4. Application of Scaffolding Instruction in the Teaching of English Listening

In the whole process of scaffolding instruction, teachers and students solve the same problems through mutual cooperation, the teacher instructs with rich experience and grasps the possible directions of students' activities, but does not control or restrict them, he should support and assist the students' learning by building scaffold in the way of "guiding in the front and supporting at the back". Scaffolding instruction is used to enable students to actively study by their own learning style mainly with teachers and students' interactive dialogues, share of their alternate roles' communicating opportunities, and a flexible teaching process of extending and expanding students' cognitive level provided by the teacher in the "zone of proximal development". The scaffold assists students to consider, associate and recollect, in order to promote their cognitive level. In the second level (students' potential level in which them need others assistance to complete learning tasks) of the "zone of proximal development", the teacher provides students an instructive scaffold to assist them to transfer to the first level of cognitive performance (the level in which students are able to complete learning tasks alone). The teacher understands students and provides them with necessary and appropriate supports through effective social interactive activities, which is an interactive process itself.

English listening teaching can be divided into three steps: pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening. The first step is preparation, the second step is implementing; and the third is the consolidation and evaluation. These three steps complement and influence each other. While-listening is the core of the process, as pre-listening creates sufficient conditions, and post-listening is the purpose of the first two steps, and the internalized concrete method. Concrete application of scaffolding instruction in different stages of listening process is discussed respectively as follows:

4.1 Pre-listening stage

Pre-listening stage can be divided into two activities: "preparation activities" and "instruction activities". The purpose of "preparation activities" is to motivate previous knowledge through the headings and new words, inspirational questions, or background knowledge. The teacher should determine in advance what listening objectives are suiTable to the text. The purpose of "instruction activities" is to make students clear about what they are going to do by their own determination of listening objectives. Specifically, the teacher should fully prepare lessons before class. Teachers should know the problems to be solved well in each class on the basis of good understanding of textbooks, carefully research the difficult and key points, and make such thorough arrangements as even where the tape is about to be paused. Teachers should fully arouse students' enthusiasm, motivate their learning interest of the targeted passages, and explain the new and Keywords in the material of the listening passages to remove obstacles in listening comprehension. They can also design some brief warm-up projects according to the listening contents, such as asking students to predict the listening materials related to the questions, or to present their own viewpoints about the listening topics.

4.2 While-listening activities

In the second stage of listening class, listening activities should be designed to help students form the good habit of participating the listening comprehension actively, not just let them finish the listening materials passively. In the process of listening, while-listening tasks should be connected with pre-listening tasks, to keep their coherency, and teachers need to encourage students practice more to enhance their reaction to English. In listening practice, students should be preoccupied with listening materials, and make active reactions to listening contents, such as making notes, or writing down some details. Teachers need to arrange and select some listening

activities according to students' real learning status which are suiTable to listening material as well as students' existing level.

One activity just has one aim; students can practice a certain skill and make full use of listening material. As time going on, activities which help training various skills need to be designed in teaching. In the listening period, picture and verbal prompts are two important information resources for students, and rich information in pictures, charts, diagrams, maps, etc. can help students forecast the imminent listening contents and providing more listening information. Verbal prompts are helpful to students beginning to practice English listening, because they can just hear "sounds" or noises in this stage, rather than meaningful information. Verbal prompts provide the students with references and supports while listening, to help understand the listening materials. We should grasp several aspects in listening activities as follows:

(1) To guide students to catch keywords, main points, key sentences and the topic sentence. Keywords generally refer to words which mostly reflect the premises, environment and occupational features. Sometimes they refer to the adverb with negative meaning, verbs, adjectives, pronouns, adversative conjunction, conjunction and some phrases and so on, such as rarely, hardly, seldom, beyond, unless, out of the question, couldn't agree more, nothing in the least etc. Points usually mean the six W, namely: when, where, who, what, How and Why. Key sentence in discourse usually refers to a topic sentence, or the sentence with key information. In general, topic sentence firstly appears which is very useful to the understanding of the main content of discourse.

(2) To emphasize voice training. Having a good knowledge of phonetics is the basis of improving listening comprehension. Correct pronunciation can help differentiate meaning, and wrong pronunciation will bring misunderstanding. Whether students' pronunciation is standard or not relates directly to the effect of listening, distinguishing sound, and dictating of words. Teachers can arrange students to practice their common difficulties, key points in pronunciation; or record students' self-introduction, humor and then listen to the records, pointing out their mistakes. Meanwhile, teachers should instruct students to pay attention to pronunciation features of oral English: pronunciation such as linking of sounds, reduced forms, contractions and similar sounds, and to get familiar with pronunciation characteristics of American and British English.

(3) To train the ability of short-term memory. The amount of listening materials is so large and the speed is so high that the listening information goes in a flash in students' head without awareness. Therefore, it is very important to promote students' ability of short-term memory. A key segment of the training is to reduce the times of repeatedly listening, so that students cannot rely on listening again and again.

(4) To combine the intensive and extensive listening. In addition to the extensive listening that trains students to grasp main ideas and information, necessary intensive listening training can be carried out, even if students can understand every word. We can undertake dictation training; dictation training is a kind of integrated activity that combines listening, reciting and writing. Students are not only supposed to understand the listening materials, but to write correctly and quickly. The dictation includes words, sentences, paragraphs and short passages, or main ideas of paragraphs, word by word, or blank by blank.

4.3 After-listening activities

The third stage of listening comprehension is after-listening that revolves three activities: understanding activities, evaluating activities and creating activities. The purpose of understanding activities is to examine the understanding of the language itself and the explanation of the passages. Students are required to answer questions to check their abilities of understanding and memory. On the basis of students' reality, teachers should create chances of language communication, arrange colorful communicative activities in line with the student-centered principle so as to promote the combination of students' language input, language absorption and language output. Teachers may organize the following activities according to different listening training contents and learning objects: retelling, summarizing, making dialogues, role-playing, and group discussions.

Retelling and summarizing require students to consider, arrange, process, summarize and retell

the listening materials in their own words, it can cultivate students' ability of understanding completely. Making dialogues and role-play are communicative activities based on the real communicative situations reflected in the listening materials, which enable students to activate their new and existing knowledge in specific contexts, and form a connected knowledge network. Role-play can arouse students' visual sense, auditory sense and emotions to participate positively, and strengthen their understanding about the language, so that students can learn to use the language in a relaxing and lively atmosphere. Group discussion refers to presentation of personal opinions on listening contents, and can cultivate students' speaking ability, logical reasoning ability and flexible strain ability, as well as their sense of cooperation. Teachers should stay away from students' communicative activities, participate and supervise students' discussions. A candidate from each group makes a speech about the discussion results, and the teacher summarizes the viewpoints of each group. This teaching method makes the class full of vigor, and provides students with chances of expressing themselves freely, and thus improves their language skills comprehensive.

5. Conclusion

In scaffolding instruction, teachers conduct the process to help students construct and internalize new knowledge and skills on their cognitive basis, undergo cognitive activities gradually to a higher level. Learning tasks are transferred constantly from the teacher to the students through the scaffolds which will be gradually removed at last. The application of scaffolding instruction in the teaching of English listening can not exert the teacher's role of guidance solely, it needs embodying the "student-centered" concept, as it motivates students' interest and enthusiasm of participating in listening activities through the teacher-student and student--student interactions, so as to realize the goal of improving students' listening ability.

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