Three Ways to Motivate Chinese Students in EFL Listening Classes

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Biodata

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Abstract

This paper is a report of an action research project conducted in a listening course for the second-year English majors in one university in China. After finding the existing teaching practice in the listening course not quite interesting and rewarding to my students, a new teaching plan was designed to motivate students in practicing listening. The plan consisted of three parts: providing students with explicit knowledge about the listening process, listening skills and the general process of improving listening skills at the beginning of the course; modifying ways to manage each session so that each session is a purposeful and growing experience for students; adding two ways to assess students' learning: news report following a strict format and journal writing. Based on the data obtained from classroom observations, students' journals, interviews with students, and students' response to an open-ended questionnaire at the end of the term, students developed a fairly high degree of motivation towards practicing listening.

Key words: action research, EFL listening, student motivation, journal writing

Background information of the listening course

Listening is one of the basic language skill courses offered to our undergraduate students for their first-two years of university life. With 10 parallel classes for each grade, teaching is basically synchronized across classes; that is, all the listening teachers for one grade are required to teach the same textbooks and go through the same listening materials at more or less the same pace. Each class is composed of students with mixed abilities.

Since I started teaching at my university, I have taught the listening course many times. By tradition and by my own sense, I always tried my best to handle a listening class conscientiously, making sure most students could understand a listening piece before moving on to the next one. However, during the first few times teaching this course, I had many frustrations because I often found many of my students were not motivated in class. There were always students absent from class, and even for those who came to class, some of them were often absent-minded, and some would even doze off in class. Later, after talking with some of the students, I realized that students found the class boring and didn't feel they had learned much in class. Since most students had access to the teacher's book from which they could get the answers and background information for all the listening materials we used in class, they didn't feel it necessary or important to be attentive in class. Frustrated by such feedback from my students, I decided to introduce some changes into my listening course so as to motivate my students.

Review of literature

In order to solve this problem, I set myself two tasks for a literature review: finding out what is motivation and what are the strategies that a teacher can use to motivate their students; and how those strategies have been integrated into EFL listening courses.

Definition of motivation

Research has found that motivation is concerned with both a person's behavior in carrying out a task and the reasons for carrying out that task (Maehr & Meyer, 1997). In terms of behavior, it is a kind of "personal investment" which is reflected in the "direction, intensity, persistence and quality of what is done and expressed" (Maehr & Meyer, 1997, p.373). In terms of underlying reasons, motivation is concerned with "why anyone does or does not invest in any particular activity" (Maehr & Meyer, 1997, p.380). Many motivational constructs have been identified that are believed essential in influencing people's personal investment, such as task-oriented /ego-oriented goals, attributions about past success or failure, perceived self-efficacy, etc. (Cf. Dornyei, 2001). These constructs have supplemented the traditional social approach of intrinsic/extrinsic motivation in language learning (Gardner & Lambert, 1972).

Strategies for motivating students in classroom

Researchers have found that both individual factors, such as interest in the subject matter, perception of its usefulness, general desire to achieve, self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as patience and

persistence (e.g., Sass, 1989), and situational factors, such as those aspects of the teaching situation that enhance students' motivation, may affect a given student's motivation to learn (Dornyei & Csizer, 1998; Lucas, 1990; McMillan & Forsyth, 1991; Sass, 1989). The two sets of factors actually interact with each other and work together to influence student motivation in the classroom, as the interaction paradigm suggests (Maehr & Meyer, 1997). Being very much concerned with what a teacher can do in classroom to enhance student motivation, I focused mainly on situational factors, which primarily fall into the following three aspects.

It has been found that if teachers help students set specific, short-term, achievable goals for learning, students will be motivated to learn (Locke & Latham, 1990), because very general or unrealistic goals tend to disappoint and frustrate students. McMillan and Forsyth (1991) suggested that making students' learning goals in line with their existing needs may be a good strategy for motivating students, because in this way, students could see the value and relevance of this course to their own development. This will make their learning more meaningful and purposeful, and they tend to exert more effort to achieve their goals.

It has also been found that if teachers can make students active participants in learning, students will be motivated to learn (Lucas, 1990). More specifically, it is concerned with the quality of classroom activities and the way these activities are presented and administered. It is suggested that the teaching materials should have relevance to the learning goals and be of appropriate difficulty level to the students concerned, a variety of learning tasks should be presented properly with realistic goals and effective strategies in reaching those goals, and students need to complete those tasks by doing, making, writing, solving, creating rather than just passively listening (Ames, 1992; Dornyei & Csizer, 1998; Lucas, 1990; McMillan & Forsyth, 1991; Sass, 1989). When students find a learning task interesting, engaging, meaningful, and useful, they tend to be highly motivated to carry it out.

In addition, it has been found that if teachers can provide students with opportunities to see their own progress and experience successes, students will gradually build up their self-confidence and be more willing to work hard (Dornyei & Csizer, 1998; Frosyth & McMillan, 1991). More specifically, teachers may first set realistic expectations for their students, then assign tasks that are neither too easy nor too difficult, and finally give timely and informative feedback that supports students' beliefs that they can do well and help them see their own progress. In this way, students will gradually build up their self-confidence and be more willing to continue to work hard (Dornyei & Csizer, 1998; Frosyth & McMillan, 1991; Stipek, 1988).

Motivating students in an EFL listening class

With regard to teaching an EFL listening course at the tertiary level in China, researchers have examined how tolerance to ambiguity might affect English-major students' listening comprehension (Zhou, 2000), various factors influencing listening teaching and their functions (Mo, 1999), obstacles in English listening comprehension and teaching strategies (Li, 2005), the effect of syntactic simplification on English-major students' listening comprehension (Su, 2002), and stylistic features of authentic listening materials (Mo & Chen, 2000). It can be seen that all these articles are concerned mainly with how to make teaching and learning of listening skills more effective. A search of the key English Language Teaching journals in China revealed few articles that are especially devoted to motivating students in an EFL listening class. Though it can be assumed that effective teaching methods should enhance student motivation, I decided to start from the motivating strategies suggested in mainstream psychology and see how they could be integrated with my own teaching context.

The study

I carried out some changes to the way of managing my listening class during the fall term of 2001, during which time I taught the listening course to one class of second-year English majors. There were 24 students in my class with mixed abilities, and we met once a week, each time for two hours. We used *Listen to This* (Book II) (He et al., 1993) as our textbook. Bearing the motivating strategies and my own teaching context in mind, I made the following three changes to my teaching: devoting the first session for needs analysis and goal setting, changing ways for managing each session, and changing ways for assessing students.

Devoting the first session to needs analysis and goal setting

Before I introduced this first change into my teaching, I often started teaching from the textbook immediately after a short "getting-to-know-each-other" activity for the first session. Usually I would introduce myself first, and then students took turns to give a very brief self-introduction. It wouldn't take more than half an hour, and then we would start to deal with the listening exercises in the textbook. After learning the importance of giving students a clear purpose and goal at the beginning of a course, I decided to devote the first session helping my students' to find out their own learning needs, learning expectations, and see the value of this course.

Therefore, for the first session, I spent the first period providing students with explicit knowledge about the listening process, listening skills and the general process of improving listening skills obtained from research results in this area (Mendelsohn & Rubin, 1995; Rost, 1990, Rost, 2001). I pointed out to them that listening is a goal-oriented activity, involving both "bottom-up" processing and "top-down" processing (Mendelsohn & Rubin, 1995; Rost, 1990). As an integral part of communicative competence, successful listeners not only "attend to data in the incoming speech signals" at phonological, grammatical, lexical and propositional levels but also "utilize prior knowledge and expectations to create meaning" (Rost, 2001, p. 7). In listening, because we listen in real time and our short-term memory is limited, the characteristics of spoken language such as fast input, unfamiliar accent, unknown words, complex sentence structures, etc., might all pose difficulties to listeners, especially to a foreign language learner (Rost, 1990). Then, I introduced to them some effective listening strategies and pointed out to them that it takes time and effort to make improvement in listening. After that, I gave every student a copy of a list of the possible difficulties in EFL listening (Appendix one) and organized a class discussion asking them to reflect on their own listening processes and to pin down the difficulties they have encountered.

Changing ways for managing each session

Before I introduced this second change into my teaching, my teaching generally followed the textbook, although at the beginning of each session I asked two students to report two recent pieces of news respectively to the whole class. My way of handling the textbook was like this: I usually played the listening materials, asked students to do the related exercises in students' textbooks, and then checked answers. When some students couldn't answer a question correctly, I usually played that part of the tape again and explained those difficult points. Sometimes we would listen to the same part for three or four times. After making sure most students had understood a part, I would play the listening material for the next part and we would go through the same cycle again. It seemed that the teaching objective was to finish the exercises in the textbook. Since many students had the teachers' book that contained all the answers to the exercises in our textbook, they didn't listen attentively in class, and when asked to answer a question, some of them would simply read answers from the teacher's book. Obviously, they were coping with my questions rather than making use of the exercises.

To make each session purposeful, engaging, and well structured for students, I divided each session (2 hours) into four parts: skill training, news, conversation or story, and lecture. Skill-training usually came first in each session so that when doing the following tasks, students would purposefully practice the skills they had just learned. Regarding the listening materials, news was recorded from

the recent broadcasts (VOA or BBC), and the materials for the other parts were taken either from the textbook or other resources and I tried to make them relevant to the topics they were discussing in their oral class or the topics they were writing in the writing class at the same time. I also tried to arrange the materials in such a way so that they became increasingly difficult in terms of input speed, vocabulary, or sentence structures as we went through a whole session. During the class time, students were not required to do exercises in the textbook. Usually before listening for the first time, I gave them some background information about the material they were going to listen to, and then gave them two or three general questions to guide their listening. Then they were asked to take notes during the listening. After that, I gave them a few minutes to discuss the questions based on their notes. Then we listened to it again, but this time they had to answer a few more questions which were more specific. I usually allowed them to discuss first before I called a student to give the answer. If it was a difficult piece, I usually asked them to discuss which part was difficult and why. For example, it might be weak forms of some words, stress, difficult vocabulary, sentence structure, accent, background knowledge, etc. Most questions required students to work out a summary or general idea, but some did need specific details. Sometimes I would organize a discussion about what they had listened to and asked students to speak out their own opinions.

Changing ways for assessing students

In order to promote learner autonomy and personalize the learning process as well as to help students see their continued progress and gradually build up their confidence, I used news reports plus journal writing to assess my students, in addition to the traditional assessment methods which included dictation, mid-term and final exams, and evaluation of students' classroom performances.

  I decided to ask students to follow a strict format in news reports (Appendix two) because in the past, although students were asked to do news reports in class, many of them didn't do this task conscientiously. I sometimes found some students simply copied down some pieces of news from newspapers or the Internet and read them aloud in class. Obviously, they didn't benefit from this exercise.

  In order to force my students to really listen to news broadcasts, I asked them to listen to news three times a week and follow the required format. It didn't matter much if a student couldn't write down many words in their notes. But if there were no notes but some complete sentences about certain pieces of news, I would not give him/her a good mark because I suspected that he/she didn't listen to the radio but copied that news from somewhere.

I decided to try journal writing because previous research suggested that journal writing can be both a reflective tool and a communication tool (Loughran, 1996; Morrison, 1996; Norton, 1998; Peyton & Reed, 1990). Therefore, it can be a personal writing place where students may reflect on their own learning experience, describe their feelings and reactions to the class activities and express their thoughts about the new way of learning. In addition to being a reflective tool, journal writing may also offer a safe place for a written dialogue between the teacher and students where the teacher may provide individualized feedback to every student. Furthermore, it has been used in different subject areas and to people of different age groups. Considering all the advantages of journal writing as well as the characteristics of my students, I thought it might be worthwhile to try this method, although it was totally new to me, in my listening course to satisfy the different needs of all my students in this mixed-ability class and to motivate them to work hard.

For journal writing, there were two parts: reflections on in-class activities and their outside-class listening practices. For in-class activities, I asked students to write about their feelings about the listening materials, the listening activities, and their own performances. I sometimes asked them such questions as "How do you feel about the listening materials we had today? Are they at the right difficulty level for you? What are some of your difficulties?", "How interesting or useful do you find the tasks we did today? Would you like to do more of this kind of tasks in future?", or "How well did you perform on today's tasks? Are you satisfied with your own performance? Why or why not?" For students' outside-class listening practices, I asked students to write down how well they could understand the news they listened to, what problems they had and what they planned to do next. I especially encouraged them to keep a record of any progress they made no matter how small it was. I hoped that by requiring students to do this kind of reflection, it might to some extent force them to become conscious of the listening process and their own way of making progress. Every time students came to the classroom, they should bring this exercise-book which contained both their news report and journal writing. I would randomly collect eight students' journals, give feedback, and return to them the next day. I assessed students' news report and journals according to how conscientious they were.

Data collection and analysis
The full period of data collection covered the whole term. During the term, I used the following four ways to help me see the effects of my interventions:

Classroom observation

My observation falls on three aspects: students' attendance, classroom behavior, and performances on the listening exercises. If they really wanted to learn and valued the opportunity of having a teacher help them to improve in class, they should be more willing to attend the class, they should be more attentive when listening, and they should do each exercise carefully and be honest to themselves, to others and to the teacher. My observation was noted down in my teaching journals after each lesson.

Students' journals

I required students to write a journal each time after they listened to the news to reflect on their listening processes, and write another journal entry after each listening session to reflect on their classroom performance, on the class activities, and the listening materials. I randomly collected 8 journals every week.

Informal interviews with students

Throughout the whole term, I conducted informal interviews with my students during class breaks. My major concerns were their opinions of the new way of teaching, new way of assessing, and how useful they thought it was to reflect regularly on their learning. Information obtained from my students was also included into my teaching journals.

Open-ended questionnaire

One week before the final test, I asked my students to give written answers to an open-ended question (What do you like and/or dislike about this course, including classroom activities, after-class homework and journal writing?) in order to find out their opinions on the course and their suggestions.

Data analysis

I started the analysis as soon as I got students' first journal assignments, and my analysis went on as I went on with my teaching. After the first three or four journals, I worked out a general code list which included the following codes: students' attendance, students' classroom behaviors, students' learning behaviors after-class, students' feedback on the new way of teaching, and the effects of the new way of teaching on students. As more data was collected, more specific codes were included within these general codes. When the same code appeared again and again, I made a note, indicating its importance. Throughout the whole term, I had 18 teaching journals, collected students' journals six times for each

student for the whole term, and had 24 responses from my students to the open-ended questionnaire. According to the recurring codes, the following five major themes emerged from the data.

The findings

Students became more attentive and conscientious in class

Through my class observation, I could see the difference in my students' classroom behavior and performance when they were in second year compared to that of their first year, for I taught the same class when they were first-year students. First, class attendance was higher compared with that in the previous term. In the previous term, in most cases there were three or four students absent and many students were late for class. But during that fall term, only two students were absent only once throughout the whole term, because they were ill, and there was a student from another class who attended many of my lessons. During the class hours, nobody dozed off, although we had our class in the afternoon. They were active in taking notes, discussing with their partners, and checking their understanding. Nobody referred to the teacher's book when we listened to some materials from the textbook. Seeing this attention and conscientiousness on my students' part, I felt quite rewarded and thought my efforts were not in vain.

Students became more enthusiastic about practicing listening

In addition to their attentive behavior in class, my students also did a lot of practice after class, as shown from their news reports and journals. From the randomly collected journals, I could see that all my students finished the tasks as required, and about 1/3 of them even listened to the radio more than three times a week, and each time more than half an hour.

Students' practicing became more purposeful

At the beginning of the course, most students' journals were filled with all kinds of problems they encountered during their listening practices. A typical journal was like this, "*It's difficult for me to follow the news report. There are many new words, the speed is fast, and some sentences are too long for me to understand. I can't note down everything I have heard.*" To help students make their practice more focused, I advised them to choose the appropriate materials for themselves and tackle one problem at one time. Later, through students' journals, I found that the top students listened to VOA or BBC at the normal speed, the average students listened to VOA special English or CRI, while the struggling students listened to the Intensive Reading texts.

Students' journals also reflected that they were more able to concentrate on one problem at one time. At the beginning, a common problem among many students (20 out of 24) was the conflict between listening and taking notes. If they were busy taking notes, they would miss the following parts, and consequently failed to get a general picture of what the material was about. However, if they just listened without taking notes, they felt they had understood every word, but once asked what it was about, they forgot everything. For this common problem, I explained to them that many factors might have contributed to this problem, such as difficult vocabulary, lack of background knowledge, fast input, unfamiliar with the type of materials listened, etc. I also tried to focus on one of such factors during my skill-training session each time. Sometimes, I devoted several weeks focusing on one factor. Later, through students' journals, I found that two students set themselves the goal of learning five new words each day, three students set the goal of improving their pronunciation, especially *liaison*, two students said they would learn more political words, and one student said he would read more news. All of these showed that they began to understand themselves better, understand their own difficulties better, and could make their practicing more purposeful.

Students realized the importance of persistent practice

Through students' journals as well as the informal interviews with some of my students, I found most of them realized the importance of persistent practice in spite of the difficulties they were having then. Three students told me that before they became conscious of their difficulties in listening, they often felt frustrated because they thought they had practiced a lot but couldn't see any progress. After they became clear about their own difficulties, and after I told them the stories of some successful interpreters, they became more patient with themselves and were more determined to work hard and practice more. This change was also reflected in three other students' journals. Here is one journal entry from one student:

> *I always find listening the most difficult[y] in my English study. New words, the speed of speaker and the complicated sentence structure usually block my way of understanding. I know this is because I haven't got enough practice. Practice makes perfect. So I must look for opportunities myself to listen more. I think with continuous practice, listening will become more and more natural. I will feel at east when I listen to English then.*

Students liked this way of teaching

From students' responses to my open-ended questionnaire at the end of the term, I learned that the majority of students were satisfied with this course. Eight students mentioned the first session of this

course and found it enlightening because it helped them to see what they should learn and how to learn. Six students mentioned the teaching materials and classroom activities, thanking the teacher for carefully choosing and arranging the listening materials, and the classroom activities were also well organized. The majority of students (15 students) especially liked the journal writing part, saying through this form of communication, they could get helpful feedback from the teacher. Here are two typical comments made by two students:

> *I like this new way of teaching in this course. We would not let textbook control us. Instead, we based on some other materials and grasped the main idea of these articles to improve our listening. I think this is a good way, scientific and effective.*
>
> *I like journal writing. It helps me to see clearly of my own problems. There are so many difficulties for me and sometimes I feel frustrated. But your feedback has encouraged me to continue. Thank you for your feedback.*

Conclusion

In conclusion, my efforts to motivate my students in my listening course were, to a large extent, effective, as shown from both their learning behaviors and their underlying reasons for their behaviors. In terms of their behaviors, both in-class and outside-class, the data showed their study became more focused, and they put more effort into practicing listening and they were more persistent and patient with themselves. According to the definition given by Maehr and Meyer (1997, p.373), my intervention brought about fairly high motivation on my students' part.

In terms of their reasons for their behaviors, the data showed that my intervention helped them see the relevance and value of this course to their own needs. According to the Expectancy-Value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), when they attached higher value to this course, their motivation was enhanced. The data also showed that they were engaged in the classroom activities in general, which reflected that they had higher situational motivation (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). In addition, the data showed that they tended to consider efforts as the reason for improvement in listening skills. According to attribution theory (Weiner, 1984), when my students attributed improvement to efforts, something internal and within their control, it showed that my students were motivated in listening practicing.

Afterthoughts

In general, I feel teaching the listening course that term was quite rewarding, although there were some disappointments as well. The feedback I got from my students, both from their behaviors in class and from their journals and questionnaire responses, was very encouraging to me. In

retrospection, I find I have learned a few important lessons from this experience, and there are still a few areas that should be improved in future.

First, I have learned that to motivate students in a listening course, it is important to help students understand their own listening process and difficulties, and help them set specific goals for themselves. Such kind of understanding and goal setting are important for both advanced students and struggling students. Once students know what they are striving for and how to achieve their goals, their efforts will be more focused and lasting. Practicing listening should not be a blind process.

Second, I have learned that classroom teaching is only part of students' learning process. Students do a lot of learning after class. Therefore, to make classroom teaching more effective and useful for students, teachers should try to make each lesson purposeful and well structured. Class hours are the time when students' problems are called to attention, tackled, and advice is given for further practice. Teachers should also try to create a cooperative environment in the classroom so that students feel relaxed while learning. A listening class is not everything and should not be a test.

Third, it is a worthwhile effort to try journal writing in a listening course. It provides the channel for the teacher to understand and help each individual student, and this individualized communication can be quite motivating for most students. Therefore, it is particularly useful for a mixed-ability class.

However, in my action research, I find there are also a few places that should be improved in future. First, I need to improve my data collection methods. For this research, I didn't have a class observation checklist for my class observation. I didn't record my interviews with my students, but based my data on notes and memory. Because of my open-ended questions, students' responses were varied and not all of them touched upon all the questions. Although I knew my students very well, the findings would be more solid if I could provide some hard data. Therefore, in the future, I will pay attention to my data collection methods to make them as valid and reliable as possible. Second, I need to consider carefully how to evaluate students' journals and how to give feedback. For this research, the evaluation of students' journals was based on whether students had done them or not. But when I actually read students' journals, I discovered qualitative differences among them in terms of their reflections as well as their language. How to demonstrate this difference remains a problem for me. When giving feedback about students' journals, I am not sure whether I should correct students' mistakes in their journals. I can see that the limited writing ability of some struggling students was restricting them from expressing their real feelings and thinking, but I worry my correction might undermine their confidence in continuing to write.

On the whole, this action research was a fruitful experience for me. In the future, I will continue to try my best to understand my students and to make my teaching interesting and useful to my students.

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Appendix One: Possible difficulties in EFL listening:

1. Fast input: the speaker speaks too fast (weak forms and linking)
2. Unfamiliar accent
3. Unknown words that may block your understanding (when you can't guess its meaning from the context).
4. Long sentences
5. Complex structures
6. Text with a higher information density (news)
7. Synthesize scattered information / summarize the main idea
8. Listening strategies:
   a. predicting
   b. selective listening
   c. rephrasing
   d. recognizing main ideas
   e. recognizing main ideas and supporting details
9. Taking notes: (can't find key words, can't write fast enough)
10. Unfamiliar background information
11. Others:

Appendix Two: Form for your news report

I. Date:
II. Time: (e.g., 8:00 – 8:20am.)
III. Source: (e.g., VOA or BBC)
IV. Notes: 1.
    2.
V. News report based on the notes: (in sentence form)
    1.
    2.
VI. Improvement: improving your news report by referring to other resources such as the internet, or the newspaper.