

# Chinese Students Interpretation Listening Strategies as Foreign Language Learners

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## Abstract

Mastering listening comprehension skills is vital especially against Chinese background of FL (Foreign Language) listeners whose listening ability is restricted due to the great differences between English and Chinese as well as a large proportion of English testing in learning process. Compared with FL Learning, CI (Consecutive Interpretation) learners need to listen, comprehend the meaning, decode the phonetic organization, reconstruct the logic, take down notes, retrieve the memory also form the meaning of the original and express it in Chinese. CI listening is more complex on the completion of both phonetic, grammatical, logical, contextual content of the English source language in a more demanding time, involving cognitive behavior. By adopting and revising FL cognitive researches, the author tries to explain the process in listening process by exploring the strategies adopted by the students in cognitive ways. 232 students in China of 10 universities were involved in this study, majoring in MTI (Master of Translation and Interpretation). Based on cognitive processing theories in FL learning in interpretation, the study finds Chinese interpretation learners adopted listening strategies in bottom-up strategies, which leads to the cognitive overload of listening and coordination between note-taking and listening.

## Keywords

Listening, Comprehension, Consecutive Interpretation (CI) Cognition.

## 1. Introduction

In China, FL listening has long been focusing on testing the students' listening skills instead of mastering listening skills. It is commonly seen that college students who have passed College Entrance Examination with high scores of English listening test are still facing great listening problem in academic lecturing, oral communication and daily listening.

Consecutive Interpretation (CI) on the other hand, also emphasize on the information hearing, process and organizing process. Thus, without listening, there will be no interpreting and the quality of listening determines the quality of interpretation.

Various taxonomies of FL listening strategies have been proposed. Among these, O'Malley, Chamot and Küpper (1989) classified FL listening comprehension strategies into three main categories as cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Among them, cognitive strategies are defined as something that can boost students in processing a language in order to complete a task including clarification, resource, and note-taking which are unconscious relations with the material that they will be learned (Mulyadi, 2018)[1].

Anderson proposed a three-stage cognitive framework for language comprehension. According to him, language comprehension consists of three stages: perception, parse and utilization (Eli Hinkel, 2011). Perceptual processing is the encoding of sound or written information. Listening involves segmenting phonemes from a continuous stream of speech. The process of parse process, which is the transformation of the words heard into mental representations of their

combined meanings, occurs when the discourse is segmented on the basis of grammatical structure or meaning. Such mental representations are related to prior knowledge and are stored in permanent memory as propositions or schemas in the third stage, the utilization stage. In this stage, the listener makes different inferences about the incoming information, interprets it differently, makes it more personal, or uses mental representations to respond to the speaker.

Similar to FL listening comprehension process, CI listening also involves decoding the phonetic information to cognitive processing. However, beyond this, CI listening goes further. Because of the nature of CI, the student is required to express the listening context in source language into another language with the greatest equivalent meaning, content, the students have to use top-bottom processing to separate, integrate, distract the process all the meanings in the source language after comprehending the source language. Though there are many researches on FL listening as well as interpretation from cognitive perspective, few of the study focus on the possible differences between the two different learning process, and the differences bring difficulties for FL interpretation students, who are also FL learners since high school before enrolled in the university. On the other hand, the curriculum design of China interpretation focuses on techniques skills of others(Lu, 2011), seldom pay attention to listening as an independent and important researches from the FL listening perspective[2]. Thus, it is very important to look at the cognitive listening process and strategies and skills adopted by Chinese students especially.

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## 2. Methodology

This study adopted quantitative descriptive design to collect the participants' information and then make analysis. The participants were purposely selected Interpretation learning students from MTI major of Foreign Language College in several Chinese universities. The total population of these CI major students is 232. Questionnaire was made based on the questionnaire of Ayami, (2014) and modified to reveal the cognitive process in CI listening from three sub-scales: contents, structure and function.

## 3. Result and Discussion

The results shows students need to strive to write down note even though they had problem in listening, which is not common to see in FL learners. In FL listening, note-taking serves as an important tool in cognitive processing of listening, whose crucial function is to store processed information and to facilitate encoding (Teng, 2011)[3]. However, the cognitive demand for CI learning is more limited, thus when the students have difficulties in listening, the notes they took down were invalid, no matter what the notes are observed after listening. Even if the listeners can understand individual word meaning, it is still difficult to recognize the same word in different context. Vandergrift (2003) mentioned in the book that word segmentation is so solidly embedded in the language of the listeners that the FL learner automatically apply it in

the FL listening[4]. In sound flow listening, if the listener uses bottom-up ways of cognitive processing, the listener to comprehend only word single instead of getting the meaning and logic from “up” levels.

The learners agree on they have difficulties in listening. Numbers, times, and proper names are difficult to listen because as Gile’s cognitive load has pointed out that the load of listeners in CI must be smaller than the capacity the interpreter learners can handle. However, for listening numbers, or times or proper names, the cognitive load of students are overwhelming since these words has no meanings.

Respondents tended to adopt strategies of word-by-word translation in CI. From cognitive perspective, if students only listen to the information in this way, that means the students have problems in word segmenting at the perception stage. This strategy mainly derives from the low proficiency students, and as low students showed less capability in mastering advanced cognitive skills like prediction, deduction or note-taking (Mu, Zhang & Chen, 2021)[5]. Overemphasizing words hinders greatly on the comprehension of English sentence structures, and thus if the learners need to develop skill of listen to logical meaningful sentence, more attention should be given to the English structure and syntax use.

Respondents cannot comprehend the information for one time, they cannot help but insist on listening to the part that they do not understand. This is common for interpretation learners. Students began to listen to the part that they can note understand automatically without association the contextual information or guessing because they are not able to, not because they do not want to. What they want to is to comprehend the on-time speech in source language as soon as possible, and listen again is the best choice in exercise at least.

What happens to Chinese FL learners is that there is gap between listening comprehension training and CI training, which means the cultivation mode of English majors including translation majors is to cultivate students’ language ability in the first or second year of the university and then concentrate on cultivating students’ interpreting ability, which seems to be gradual and orderly, but in fact, it is a simple division of the two kinds of ability training into two independent phases, which is not in line with the actual needs of the development of students’ interpreting ability (Mu, Zhang & Chen, 2021)[5].

The result also show students tend either to stop immediately or keep repeating the part they do not understand. Part of the cognitive reason is still the FL listening ability incompetence. Berber (2017) conducted the study how anxious FL listeners deploy cognitive and metacognitive strategies to cope with listening difficulties[6]. And the result show training on listening abilities can largely reduce their anxious level. Neither stopping immediately nor repeating listening makes qualified strategies. For some new learners, this greatly triggers their anxiety level at the same time.

Indicator implies these interpretation learners still are not able to deduce the word meaning based on the contextual structure. Moreover, even if they can recognize individual words, listeners may not always recognize those same words in connected speech (Broersma & Cutler, 2008). That is why students cannot interpret English into Chinese even if they recognize every words in it.

Students generally agree that taking down notes facilitate listening. And data also shows the contradiction between the two tasks during CI, which is the cognitive load of interpretation learners and the attention distributed for the respondents has exceeded the cognitive load they bear, since they agreed. Listening, as shown on the table can be hindered by note-taking, which the learner cannot automatically write down, shall be detriment the quality of both listening and note-taking.

Indicator shows students enrolled in MTI programs are expected to have a high level of mastering knowledge and adequate FL proficiency. The reason behind the deficit is that most

students in China learn English through formal classroom teaching and seldomly are taught with conversational listening and speaking competence due to the limited opportunities for immersive English language learning with native speakers.

#### 4. Conclusion

As a result, the difficulties faced by the interpretation student in China are as follows. First, the respondents wrote down notes even when they cannot understand what they have listened as a way of comforting and cognitive strategy even when it only made listening more distracted. Second, Chinese interpretation students adopted word-by-word listening in FL listening, which is partly due to lack of English environment as FL learners in Chinese education experience, as well as the great difference between Chinese and English sentence structure. Third, as to the indicators suggested the respondents showed cognitive difficulties in sound segmentation, including the speed, sound variant, and accent. Fourth, since number, times and proper nouns has no logical expressions with contextual links, these are great challenges for the respondents, and they showed great concern. Fifth, respondents try to use cognitive strategy of using none language knowledge, such as prior knowledge, speaker's emotions, or logical links in parsing cognitive stage to decipher the potential meaning of the information. Sixth, respondents adopted the strategy of compensation as a problem-solving method in listening, and to reasonably guess certain words they do not know. Seventh, respondents tended to give up listening or listening again and again at where they do not understand. Eighth, the respondents express great passion in hope of accepting more listening courses in university. Ninth, respondents have shown cognitive contradiction between listening and note-taking, this is due to possibly not automatic systems of note-taking, but more likely to be caused by deficient listening competence (Bao, 2010)[7].

The research result shall benefit interpretation new learners in knowing the cognitive way of acquiring CI listening knowledge in self-checking and monitoring different stages of learning. It can be also used as a reference to CI teachers for knowing the stages in listening and cognitive strategies and skills induced by different learning stages, benefiting the students more than just looking at skill performance level and offering accessibility to look deeper into the reason behind students' CI performance.

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