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Explaining listening comprehension among L2 learners of English: The contribution of general language proficiency, vocabulary knowledge and metacognitive awareness

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ABSTRACT

Listening comprehension constitutes a major problem for second language learners but little is known about the relative contribution of different factors to listening comprehension. Since there are still only very few studies in this area by comparison with studies focusing on the relationship between reading and vocabulary, there is a need for studies which can fill the gap in our knowledge about the specific contribution of generic and discrete-point measures of language ability to explaining listening. In the present study among 151 non-English major students at a university in Northwest China we explore what proportion of the variance in listening comprehension is explained by general language proficiency, vocabulary size and metacognitive awareness. Our results show that vocabulary size is the strongest predictor, followed by general language proficiency, while metacognitive awareness is less important. We discuss implications for the componential structure of the notion language ability, theories of listening and pedagogical practice in L2 classrooms.

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1. Introduction

Listening comprehension is a complicated process because it is based on linguistic knowledge, such as vocabulary or grammar, as well as non-linguistic information, such as knowledge of the world (Buck, 2001; Vandergrift & Baker, 2015). Although there is now a considerable body of literature on listening comprehension among non-native speakers, explaining individual differences in listening has not been high on the agenda by comparison with studies which look into individual differences in reading comprehension (Andringa, Olsthoorn, van Beuningen, Schoonen, & Hulstijn, 2012). A better understanding of the listener characteristics which determine L2 learners' success in understanding speech is urgently needed because, as pointed out by Graham (2011), "listening is a source of frustration to learners and an area in which it seems difficult to make progress" (p. 113).

This study addresses the gap in our understanding of the learner variables which impact on L2 learners' listening comprehension, by providing empirical evidence about the extent to which L2 learners' general language proficiency, vocabulary knowledge and metacognitive awareness can explain the variance in L2 learners' listening comprehension. Studying

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listening comprehension is particularly relevant in the Chinese context because Chinese L2 learners often find it hard to understand native English speakers (Goh, 2000). This is not only due to typological differences between the languages, but also to important differences between the cultures of the source and the target language, which makes it more difficult for these learners to make strategic use of contextual information in the process of listening. The few available studies among Chinese listeners all point out that there is important variability among Chinese learners in their ability to understand English and that Chinese learners of English find it very challenging to improve their listening comprehension (He, 2005; He & Bao, 2006; Long & Zhao, 2009). This makes it very important to help identify the causes of the problems they encounter so that interventions can be based on solid empirical evidence.

2. Explaining listening comprehension

2.1. Factors contributing to listening comprehension

In a seminal paper, Rubin (1994) mentions five groups of factors which affect L2 learners' listening comprehension, namely text characteristics, interlocutor characteristics, task characteristics, listener characteristics and process characteristics. In the current study we will focus on individual differences in listener characteristics, as these have received little attention by comparison with studies on individual differences in reading comprehension (Andringa et al., 2012). The factors that have been studied in relation to listener characteristics include general language proficiency (J. Zuo, 2013), vocabulary knowledge (Bonk, 2000; Staehr, 2009; Vandergrift & Baker, 2015), listening strategy use (Graham, Santos, & Vanderplank, 2008), metacognitive awareness (Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal, & Tafaghodtari, 2006; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010; X. Zuo, 2013), working memory and processing speed (Andringa et al., 2012). While we cannot do justice to all these factors in the current study, it is important to try and disentangle the contribution of a number of important factors which impact on L2 learners' listening comprehension performance. In our choice of variables for the study we have been guided by Bachman and Palmer's (2010) model of communicative language ability. In their conceptual framework language ability is defined as "the capacity that enables language users to create and interpret discourse" (p. 33). The fact that the interpretation of discourse is explicitly mentioned in the definition of language ability makes this an appropriate definition for a study on listening comprehension. We have chosen Bachman and Palmer's model for our study because it does not just narrowly focus on language but also on the strategic knowledge that is needed to use language in everyday life. Bachman and Palmer specify that language ability comprises language knowledge and strategic competence. Among other components, language knowledge covers grammatical knowledge (which includes vocabulary, syntax and phonology) whilst strategic knowledge covers higher-order metacognitive strategies that provide a management function in language use, as well as in other cognitive activities. In the current study we will focus on the contribution language knowledge and strategic competence make to listening comprehension among Chinese L2 learners of English. In the following sections we will briefly discuss the constructs of language knowledge and of strategic competence. Their operationalisation will be presented in the methods section.

2.2. Language knowledge

According to Bachman and Palmer's (2010) widely used model, language ability is a multidimensional construct. Most researchers nowadays share this view and there is little support for the unitary competence hypothesis associated with the work of Oller (1973). However, there is considerable evidence from the field of corpus linguistics that grammar and vocabulary cannot so easily be separated (Hunston & Francis, 2000). This is also the view which emerges from Halliday's (1994) Systemic Functional Grammar. Halliday introduced the concept of lexicogrammar because "grammar and vocabulary are merely different ends of the same continuum – they are the same phenomenon as seen from opposite perspectives" (p. 15). Under such a view holistic assessments are more likely to give a valid indication of the competencies of language users. A renewed interest in what unites the different abilities under the overarching construct is also emerging in the field of language testing. On the basis of a review of the factor structure of language test scores, Harsch (2014) argues, for example, that "language proficiency can be conceptualised as unitary and divisible, depending on the level of abstraction and the purpose of the assessment and score reporting" (p. 153). We support this view and assume that it is of interest to include both holistic and discrete-point measures of language proficiency in a study of listening comprehension, so that we can investigate to what extent discrete-point measures of specific components of language ability such as vocabulary tests are able to explain variance in listening comprehension over and above generic measures of language ability. To the best of our knowledge this has not been attempted so far.

Among the available discrete-point measures of language ability we focus on vocabulary knowledge, as many studies show that L2 vocabulary knowledge is one of the most important predictors of listening comprehension in adult second language learners (Andringa et al., 2012; Bonk, 2000; Kelly, 1991; Mecarty, 2000; Staehr, 2009; Vandergrift & Baker, 2015). In a study of the relative contribution of grammar and vocabulary in explaining variance in listening comprehension Mecarty (2000) found that vocabulary but not grammar was a significant predictor of listening comprehension in non-native speakers. This is possibly the case because in processing non-native speakers are mainly guided by lexical and semantic cues but not by syntactic cues (Clahsen & Felser, 2006).

Since Nation (2006) holds that a smaller vocabulary is needed to understand spoken language than written language, it is possible that vocabulary is less important in listening than in reading. In the comparisons of the contribution of vocabulary

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