

The Application of Indirect Speech Act Theory in College English Listening Study

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Abstract: *Listening skills in the English language is challenging for those having English as their second language. English listening teaching occupies an essential position in college English teaching. Students are required to have a good inferential ability on the listening comprehension. As for the traditional teaching, it aims to apply the speech sounds and grammars into the English listening teaching. However, the process of listening teaching should probe the meaning in depth of the listening learning and students should develop the ability of analyzing the indirect meaning of the listening texts. This paper explores the practical applications with the basic theories of indirect speech act theory, showing that the theory can improve students' listening comprehension ability and inferential ability.*

Keywords: *Indirect Speech Act Theory, English Listening Teaching, Inferential Ability*

1. Indirect Speech Act Theory

J. L. Austin is a prominent English philosopher. Austin was the first to put forward the speech act theory. His speech act theory had a revolutionary influence in this field since he published his book *How to Do Things with Words* in 2001. J. R. Searle, the student of Austin, systematizes Austin's theory, and his most valuable contribution is to put forward indirect speech act theory. Austin and Searle point out that the function of language is more than inform or describe things, what's more, it can be used to "do things", which means to perform acts.^[1] Austin indicated that a person moved his organs and produced a number of sounds, organized in a certain way and with a certain meaning.^[2] In this sense, the act performed is locutionary act. While the illocutionary act means the purpose of the speech act. The illocutionary act is the extra meaning of the utterance produced on the basis of its literal meaning. And the perlocutionary act is the effect of the utterance on the hearer, depending on specific circumstances.

When a person says something, which intends the content to be understood or which has certain forces, the act in this sense is known as illocutionary act. As for the illocutionary act and perlocutionary act, the former is speaker-based, and the latter is hearer-based.^[3] Brown and Yule state that listening comprehension consists of far more than understanding the meaning of each word or sentence; it also means to get the intended meaning of the speaker.^[4] Thus, when a person changes the hearer's opinion or mislead him to do something and so on by saying something, the act performed in this sense is perlocutionary act. The speaker expresses himself by an indirect way in which the hearer understands the deep meaning. The hearer has to integrate many factors to think what the speaker wants to say.

To be more specifically, indirect speech act has a mismatch between the linguistic form and the illocutionary force; That is, in these cases, the illocutionary force is something other than the force canonically associated with that form. For example, "Today is the summer solstice, so I feel so hot." The locutionary act is the surface meaning of the sentence, which is "the temperature is so high that I'm hot". The illocutionary act can be a request of the hearer to turn on the air condition. The perlocutionary act can be the hearer's turn on the air condition or his refusal to do this thing. The situation, then, can be schematized as the following figure 1:

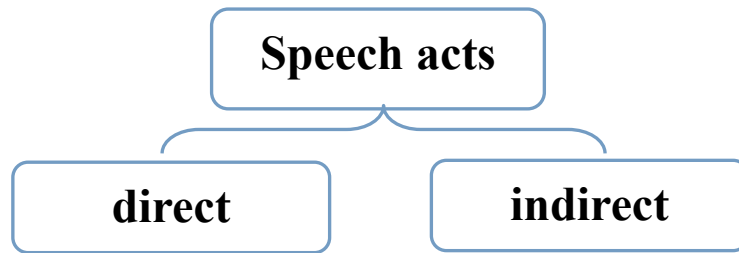


Figure 1: Introduction of Speech Acts

And the problem of the indirect speech act is that the speaker says something, but actually he expresses other intentions. Another key point is whether the hearer can understand the meaning of the speaker correctly.

2. Influence of Indirect Speech Act Theory on Listening Study

Generally speaking, listening, as one of the main ways to obtain information, is the prerequisite of communicating with others. Listening is a form of language input and an important part of English learning. The greatest challenge in listening study is the lack of a systematic theory to direct the activity. A lot of discussions have been around what the general principle of listening is. Teachers and theorists have long been working for establishing a scientific basis for listening learning studies. They made great effort from different angles. Linguistics is where they have paid most attention as both linguistics and teaching process are the study of language. Therefore, as soon as indirect speech act theory came into being, scholars have been interested in applying this theory to the scientific research of language teaching. Some researchers analyzed the influence of the indirect speech act on children. Researchers prepared short stories for children and let them answer questions like Wh-question. The research indicated that children had difficulties in dealing with questions on indirect speech acts. Li Ying put forward that the application of indirect speech act theory to listening teaching in senior high school. She supposed that it was necessary to apply this theory into listening comprehension, and she also gave the relevant approach of teaching practices. But she did not point out specific procedures in her experiment.^[5] Han Xiaodan aimed to prove the practical applicability of the indirect speech act theory by using a lot of teaching examples. The subjects of her research are students in higher vocational schools that are different from those in senior high school.^[6] Qiao Yuhong and Cui Lin paid attention to the listening teaching by virtue of the speech act theory. They just sketched out the theory of Austin and Searle, then put forward some implications on the basis of the theory.^[7] They did not have any experiment. Although teachers have known the significance of English listening, they still have problems in practical teaching because the traditional teaching method has a deeply rooted impact. Listening has been increasingly attracting emphasis, the ways teachers adopt in class are still traditional: when teachers play recording once more, students give their answers, and then teachers correct their faults. In fact, it is difficult to advance the ability of students, and students just repeat the same process without thinking. It is obvious that traditional ways have some limitations to be adopted in the English listening teaching, so teachers should improve their teaching method.

3. Practical Application of Indirect Speech Act Theory in Listening Study

Nowadays, indirect speech act theory and some other pragmatic methods such as contextual adaptation theory are widely used in English study. Researches are making great effort to improve the ability of acquiring second language of the students. Though not sufficient to solve all the problems in listening study, indirect speech act theory is practical in most routine listening activities. To understand it better, it is necessary to explore the specific methods in our listening studies. Rost had shown that listening is crucial in the process of learning a language, which offers input for learners. If these learners didn't acquire comprehensible input, they would not begin their learning. That means listening is the foundation of speaking.^[8] Although Rost hadn't provided specific listening teaching method, he showed clearly that listening hold an important position in learning English, and he attracted people's attention to English listening.^[8] Listening activities have technical requirement in practical study. Undoubtedly, the development in linguistics especially in indirect speech act theory will provide powerful support for the improvement of listening study.

3.1 Based on Context of the Listening Texts

In the process of listening teaching in college, teachers guided the students to get the implication on the basis of acknowledge the context constraints, or the students should understand the contexts of the utterance.

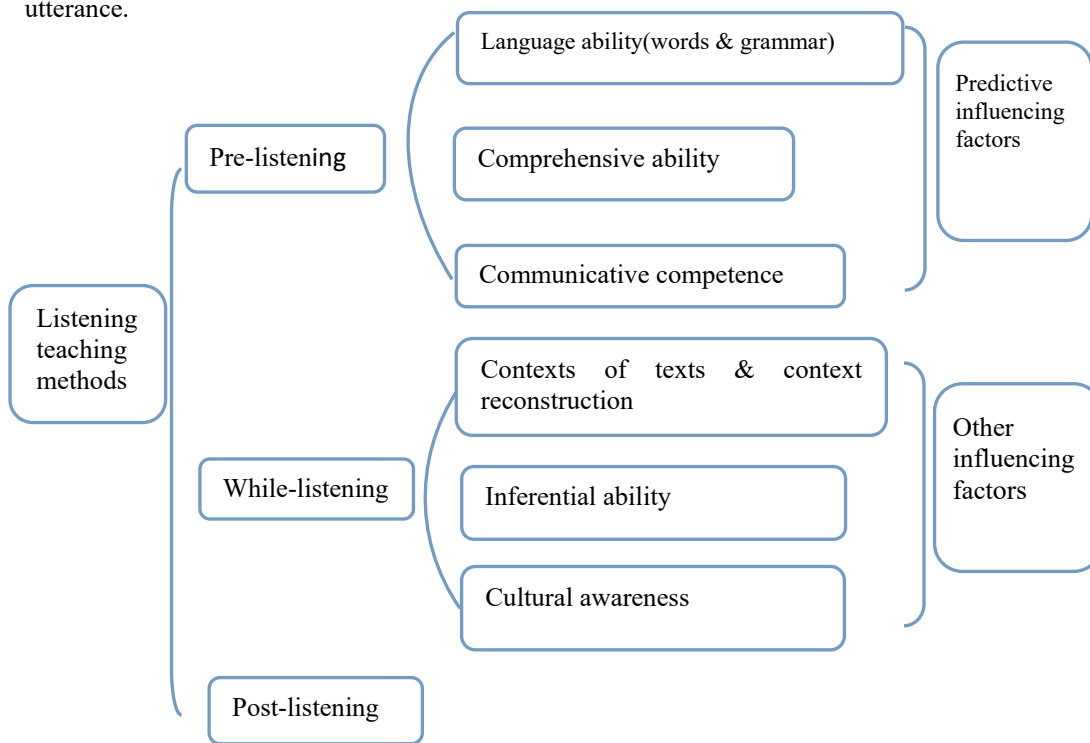


Figure 2: Major factors of Listening Teaching Methods

Figure 2 is a model of listening instruction based on the indirect speech act theory which can provide guidance for teacher to teach students. According to figure 2, the stage of pre-listening aims to help students understand indirect speech act which can lay the foundation for the listening training in while-listening. Most of students do not know what is indirect speech act, so they need to have a general idea on this theory. After they have gotten familiar with the indirect speech act theory, they can do the listening training more smoothly. In the while-listening, teachers choose some listening materials about inferential questions as practice. At the same time, teachers can teach students some strategies on how to catch the intention of the speaker quickly. In the post-listening, in order to help the students understand the theory better, teachers can lead students to look back to the listening material to summarize indirect speech acts and have a discussion, which can be found in this material, which can deepen students' understanding and consolidate their knowledge on this theory. In the end, teacher can guide students to learn how to transfer, which can make them improved more quickly.

Example 1:

I went Ecuador in 1993 just after graduating from university. After three years of studying, I wanted adventure. I loved travelling, so I decided to join a voluntary organization and was sent to Ecuador to carry out land surveys.

The question requires that students should combine the context of the listening text. According to the text, the man has mentioned the trip to Ecuador in 1993, because he loves experience adventures, he decided to participate the organizations to be a volunteer.

3.2 Rebuilding Context Based on Various of Background Information in the Listening Texts

In the practical teaching procedures, teachers should combine the certain conversation, including social factors, cultural factors as well as mental factors of the utterances. Guiding students to discover the potential context, teachers ought to expound the regional culture, historical background and social environment before listening the texts. Through the pre-listening, students could reconstruct contexts, which contributes to improving the competence of the listening comprehension.

Example 2:

W: The demand for bikes is enormous, which makes them very expensive locally.

M: You're right. Do we should sell them for 5% for the normal price. But in order to continue operating we need to have a constant supply of bikes which we send out every six months.

Q: The man said the charity relies on _____.

- a) Getting enough bicycles to send regularly
- b) Finding new areas which need the bicycles
- c) Charging for the bicycles it sends abroad

Example 2 reflects different manners of answering questions. That is, the speakers and hearers don't response directly. They would like to express the opinions by the usage of implications. In the conversation, speaker said mildly they provide bicycles every six months. Thus, students should focus on the implications of the contents in listening texts.

3.3 Based on Verbal Contexts, Improve the Inferential Ability of Students

From the perspective of indirect speech act theory, teachers can conduct students to learn from the verbal contexts. For instance, students can figure out the information upon the mental factors and physical world of the speakers.

Example 3:

W: Your neighbor was successful in business, right?

M: Yes, my neighbor's business was unusually successfully, and for years I couldn't understand why. Then I realized having a bike meant he could get where he wanted to go without much trouble.

Q: What does the man mean?

Example 3 shows that teachers should guide the students to analyze the event happened in the conversations. The woman mentioned the success of her neighbor's business. It indicates that she wants to inquire the methods of the successful business. The man said the neighbor had her own vehicle, so it is convenient to go to some places. Through the analysis, we can be informed of the method to the success. That is the convenience to contact with customers.

Thus, students should notice the contexts provided by the speakers, analyze and work over the information received from the listening texts in order to comprehend the intention of speakers correctly. Acknowledging the contexts requires further understanding the context first, which refers to the situation of the utterance. What's more, students should rebuild various contextual assumptions in the process of understanding the meaning of utterances. The semantic meaning hidden in the words, structures and logical information can be explored through students' common sense. Based on the certain context, students can search the relevant opaque context, and then gain the contextual assumptions. In other words, utterers make transparent context in order to show the hints of the intention, from which students look for the optimal relevance and rebuild the optional context. The reconstruction of context help students make the right choices effectively.

3.4 Focus on the Cross-cultural Differences, Improve the Competence of Listening Comprehension

Due to the various aspects involved in improving listening comprehension, focusing on students' cultural difference understanding ability is an important entry point in listening training. Teachers should explore the transformation of listening teaching models in teaching. In some college English listening dialogue tests, speakers in listening materials often do not directly express their intentions and behavioral goals, but instead adopt a tactful way to engage in dialogue. This requires students to be able to recognize the cultural differences between China and the West, correctly understand the meaning in the dialogue, and make reasonable judgments and choices. In college English listening teaching, teachers apply the indirect speech act theory to guide students to master the language factors in listening conversation in a planned and purposeful way and understand the "implicit meaning" in discourse.

Example 4

W: You don't really want to do the full-time course, then?

M: No, not really. It's also a question of finances. You see, my office has agreed to pay the cost of the course itself, but I would have to take unpaid leave if I want to study full-time and, well, I don't think I could afford to support myself with no salary for a whole year.

Q: What can we learn from the dialogue?

It is a requirement for students to have a good knowledge of the learning system to understand the intention of the conversation. Thus, what is important is that teachers arrange the class hour to introduce the relevant cultural information.

4. Conclusion

The listening study is by its nature an interdisciplinary subject. It concerns knowledge of languages, linguistics, communication studies, learning skills and a range of types of cultural factors. The developing history of listening studies is actually a process of looking for a systematic theory for listening activities. However, the diversity in its nature determines the difficulty of this process. And great efforts have been made from different aspects of listening teaching, especially from linguistics. The influence of indirect speech act theory to listening teaching is a good example of this combination. Of course, as we have analyzed, many listening study problems cannot be solved yet, but I'm sure the development in listening studies will soon give us a better answer.

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