

# A Comparative Study of Inference Strategies and Their Training Effects in College English Listening

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**Abstract:** In the study of foreign language listening, learning strategies play an important role in enhancing learners' listening competence. As an indispensable element in listening strategies, inference strategy has seldom been exploited and practiced. This paper suggests that strategy training and active learning should be encouraged in the college listening classes and, for the students of the novice and intermediate English levels, grammar training should be the foundation of other strategy training. Finally, considering the similarities between the processes of listening and reading, inference strategies could also be practiced to improve learners' reading competence in foreign language learning.

**Keywords:** College English Listening; Inference Strategy; Grammatical and Pragmatic Inference Strategy Training; College

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## 1. Introduction

Listening as a method of taking in information is used far more than reading and writing. It is the channel most often used for learning. However, listening has long been the neglected skill in second language acquisition, research, teaching, and assessment. This neglect may have stemmed from the fact that listening is considered a passive skill and from the belief that merely exposing the students to the spoken language was adequate instruction in listening comprehension. What most college teachers have to do in the listening class is only to play the tape, ask the students to listen and do the comprehension exercises, and then check the answers. However, exposing the students to incomprehensible input would only add to their frustration and anxiety. The students would gradually lose confidence in English listening and then stop trying.

Among the listening strategies listed by the researchers, inference strategy plays an important role. EFL learners will encounter many problems in the process of learning. They need to identify the words from the obscure sounds and use their grammatical knowledge to draw inferences from the spoken text. They will also use pragmatic knowledge and logical knowledge to infer the implicit meaning of the text to figure out the speaker's intention. Inference competence is needed all through the listening process. Inference strategies are supposed to be very helpful to EFL listening learning and teaching. But what are the effects of inference strategy training? Is inference strategy training effective in enhancing the learners' listening competence? Will it be well received by the novice and intermediate EFL learners? Do different inference strategy training have the same effect on these students? Few researches have been done in this field. Hence a study of inference strategies and their effects is required. This study will be helpful to EFL listening learning and teaching for both teachers and students.

## 2. Inference and Inference Strategies in Listening

### 2.1 The Classification of Inference

Cummings (2005) classified inference into three main categories: deductive inference, elaborative inference and conversational inference. Each of these categories of inference is closely associated with particular areas of enquiry—deductive inferences with logic and semantics, elaborative inferences with psychology and artificial intelligence, and conversational inferences with pragmatics. All these inferences are integral to the understanding of discourses within a multidisciplinary perspective.

## **2.2 Inference in the Process of Listening**

### **2.2.1 Inference Strategies in Listening**

As is discussed in the previous chapter, as a form of language comprehension, listening and reading have some similarities. The readers and listeners are both trying to make inferences and get the implied meaning from the input language. Inferencing is the core of comprehension. In the book *When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do*, Kyleene (2003) provides thirteen types of inferences that skilled readers make:

1. Recognize the antecedents for pronouns
2. Figure out the meaning of unknown words from context clues
3. Figure out the grammatical function of unknown words
4. Understand intonation of characters' words
5. Identify characters' beliefs, personalities, and motivations
6. Understand characters' relationships to one another
7. Provide details about the setting
8. Provide explanations for events or ideas that are presented in the text
9. Offer details for events or their own explanations of the events
10. Understand the author's view of the world
11. Recognize the author's biases
12. Relate what is happening in the text to their own knowledge of the world

These inferencing strategies in reading could also be applied to listening comprehension. While listening, we draw conclusions from prior knowledge, our knowledge of pronouns and antecedents, and the knowledge of the relationship between explicitly stated information and implied meanings.

### **2.2.2 Phonological Features for Inference**

Speech is rapid and transitory medium. In order to manage speech in real time, it is essential that the listener quickly separates the speech into a small number of constituents that can be worked with in short-term memory. According to Rost (2002), researchers have found a number of following phonological features in speech. All these features could help to make inferences.

### **2.2.3 Grammatical Inference Strategies and Pragmatic Inference Strategies**

grammatical inference strategies include the syntactic and semantic clues. Pragmatic inference strategies include the clues from the incoming context. Here, “grammatical” and “pragmatic” might be different from the normal definitions of grammar and pragmatics. This classification is for the easy understanding and conduction of the experiment.

Speech-processing requires the mapping of incoming speech on to a grammatical model of the language. It is possible, but only with slow speech, for a listener to do a complete parsing of incoming speech: assign all recognized words into grammatical constituents and compute a precise relationship between these constituents. However, under normal or fast speech conditions, listeners need only draw upon a set of grammatical cues to assist them as needed in interpretation of form-function mappings. The primary grammatical cues that are used are word order, subject-verb agreement, pro-form agreement and case inflections. Selective use of the syntactic, morphological cues and semantic cues allow the listener to draw upon grammatical knowledge of the language and infer the meaning of the sentence while listening.

While listening, the listener would assign recognized words into grammatical categories and assign structural and semantic relations between them. Then a complete propositional model of the incoming speech will be created.

### **3. The Empirical Study of Inference Strategies**

In order to test the hypotheses, three experimental tools will be used in the research: questionnaires, tests and interviews. All the subjects took the questionnaire which investigated their use frequency of inference strategies in listening comprehension. The test for inference is used to examine the students' inference competence in listening comprehension. This test aims to detect whether the subjects' inference competence was at the same level at the beginning of the study.

#### **3.1 Subjects**

The study was carried out among 107 non-English major freshmen at a non-governmental college in Zhejiang Province. They are from three classes and the researcher teaches College English listening in these classes.

#### **3.2 Training Materials and Process**

The experimental groups received the training while they were having College Listening class in the language lab. The tests were also tested in the lab. The control group didn't receive any strategy training. They just listened to the material and answer the questions on the book.

The training materials used for the experiment are chosen from Listen to This and the listening comprehension tests in CET4. Conversations, passages and compound dictations are included in the tests.

#### **3.3 Data Processing**

Descriptive statistics were gathered from the study and analyzed with Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 16.0. To determine whether there was a training effect associated with the study intervention, differences between the two experimental groups and differences between the experimental groups and the control groups were determined with Analysis of Variance (ANOVA).

#### **3.4 Results**

##### **3.4.1 The Analysis of the Inference Test**

we could see that the inference competence of the three groups was about the same. In the test of homogeneity of variances,  $p$  (two-tailed significance test)  $< 0.05$ , and it means the variances are unequal. But in ANOVA (Table 5-6), we could find that  $p > 0.05$  when it is analyzed between the groups. This indicates that there were no significant differences between these three groups. We might draw the conclusion that the subjects' inference competences in listening were at about the same level at the beginning of the study.

We could further notice that the mean score of the control group (50.54) is a little higher than those of the two experimental groups (50.26, 50.03). The inference ability of Group 2 (the pragmatic inference training group) was the weakest. From the data of the inference test, we could infer that with the mean of about 50, most subjects were not good at making inferences in listening. The result of the inference test is similar to that of the questionnaire.

##### **3.4.2 The Analyses of the Tests of Listening Comprehension**

The grammatical inference training group still has the highest mean score. Its standard deviation is the lowest among the three groups. It suggests that the scores in the grammatical training group are more evenly distributed and that most of the subjects in this group have made progress in listening competence. From the rising minimum and maximum scores through the experiment, we could see that both the higher-achieving subjects and the lower scoring subjects have improved their listening proficiency after the grammatical inference training.

## 4. Conclusion

From the feedback of the subjects, we found that the grasp of inference strategies can not only increase the EFL listeners' marks in listening comprehension, but also change their listening styles and attitudes. Instead of trying to catch every word in the spoken text and then getting lost in the fragments of information, they learned to focus on the key words, to formulate the structure of the sentence and to understand the implied meaning of the utterance through the context. The listeners began to grow an interest in practicing listening and they had more confidence in English study. The inference strategy training also triggers the use of other strategies, such as selective attention, grouping, analyzing and summarizing. Language learning is the product of many interacting factors pertaining to the learner. The practice and training of other listening strategies will also improve the listeners' inference competence. This implies that while instructing the learners with the listening strategies, the combined training of inference strategies and other listening strategies will work wonders. Considering the similarities between listening process and reading process, the inference strategies could also be used in improving the learners' reading competence.

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