

Renovating Listening Training Approaches in Chinese Language Courses at UBC: A Formal Report

For

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INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in 1957–1958, the Chinese language program at UBC has had over 2000 individual registrations per year, making it the largest and most comprehensive program for Chinese studies in North America. It currently offers all levels (100-400) of language and literature courses to meet the special needs of students of diverse backgrounds and conforms to a fundamental policy that students be placed in courses appropriate to their existing level of ability so that they can learn and develop their language proficiency to a higher level.

Despite the program's determined efforts to serve all students well by maintaining the highest standards of teaching and learning, there exist deficiencies in the present educational approaches that may result in a negative perception of the courses by students. These deficiencies are most apparent in non-heritage language courses, which are designed for foreign language learners who have had no previous exposure to the Chinese language and who need to develop all four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening, among all language skills, is regarded as the most difficult skill for L2 learners, especially for those with lower proficiency (Renandya and Farrell). Without a better understanding of what listeners do and what problems they may confront in a certain context, teachers in the Chinese language program are likely to hinder students from taking independent, creative control of the language.

Currently, there is a lack of effective training in listening skills in the non-heritage courses provided by the Chinese language program at UBC. Most materials selected in class, including a limited number of exercises in textbooks, fail to suit listeners' language competence or are simplified texts that eliminate the rhythms and pause patterns of natural speech. Contextual information is often lost in listening activities, where audio recordings with no visual support are the primary sources of training. Success in listening is solely measured by correct responses to questions or tasks, which thus turns listening into a repeated encounter with failure.

The purpose of this report, therefore, is to suggest ways in which teachers in Chinese language courses at UBC can better support their students in developing listening skills. It addresses five fields of inquiry:

1. What teaching approaches have been adopted in the present Chinese language courses at UBC?
2. What improvements would students in Chinese language courses wish to see in terms of boosting their listening skills?
3. Based on the existing research in listening training, which teaching approaches are deemed the most effective?
4. What features or practices can be introduced in future Chinese language courses to provide students with better listening training?

5. What implications can be drawn from a recent study done in China, where the researcher attested to the effectiveness of authentic materials in improving Chinese language learners' listening skills?

By looking into these five areas, this report aims to find out if there are any problems with the way Chinese language classes at UBC are taught now and to find out which teaching methods might be the best for helping students improve their listening skills. Educators may draw pedagogical implications from this report as a way to diagnose and adjust their teaching practices.

DATA SECTION

Evaluation of primary sources of data

Primary data was gathered to evaluate the methods of instruction used in the current UBC Chinese language courses as well as the enhancements that students would like to see in the development of their listening skills. The data was collected via an online survey that did not request any personally identifying information from respondents. Refer to the appendix for the survey's questions.

Among the 32 valid responses gathered, 26 were from UBC students enrolled in Chinese language courses, while the remaining 6 were from current or former TAs. The majority of respondents (25 of 32) are enrolled in intermediate-level non-heritage language courses, either as students or teaching assistants.

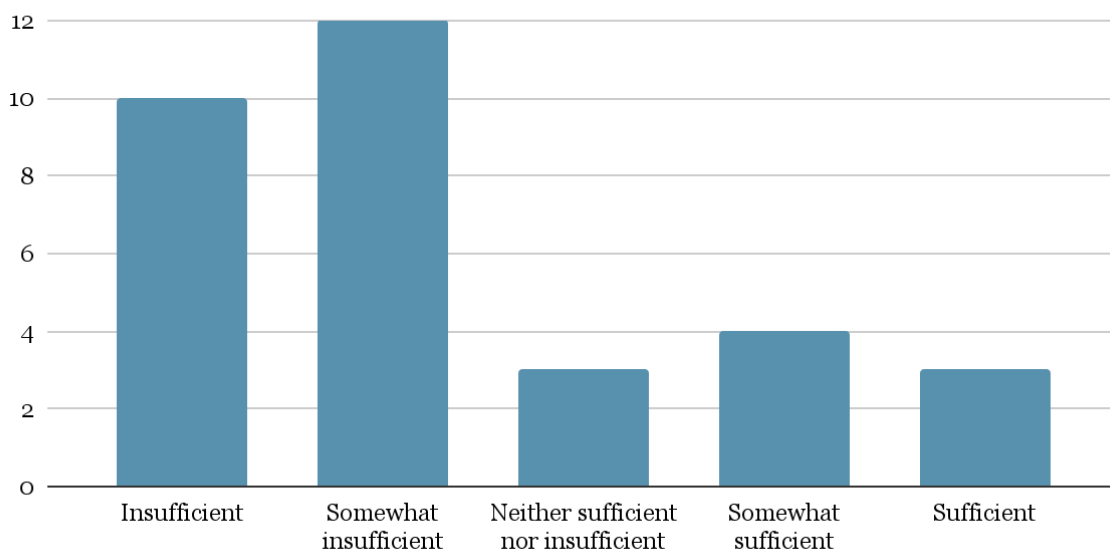
The collected data identifies potential flaws in the current classroom instructional strategies:

1. Inadequate Training in Listening Skills

Top-down inference is a crucial component of effective listening. Learners are expected to use contextual information to make educated guesses when understanding is hampered by a lack of vocabulary or syntax. When asked to what extent they believe in-class training in top-down inference is sufficient, 34% of respondents selected “insufficient” and an additional 37% felt “somewhat insufficient.” In contrast, fewer than 10% of respondents believed the training is adequate (see *Figure 1*).

Figure 1

To what extent do you think top-down inference training in class is sufficient?

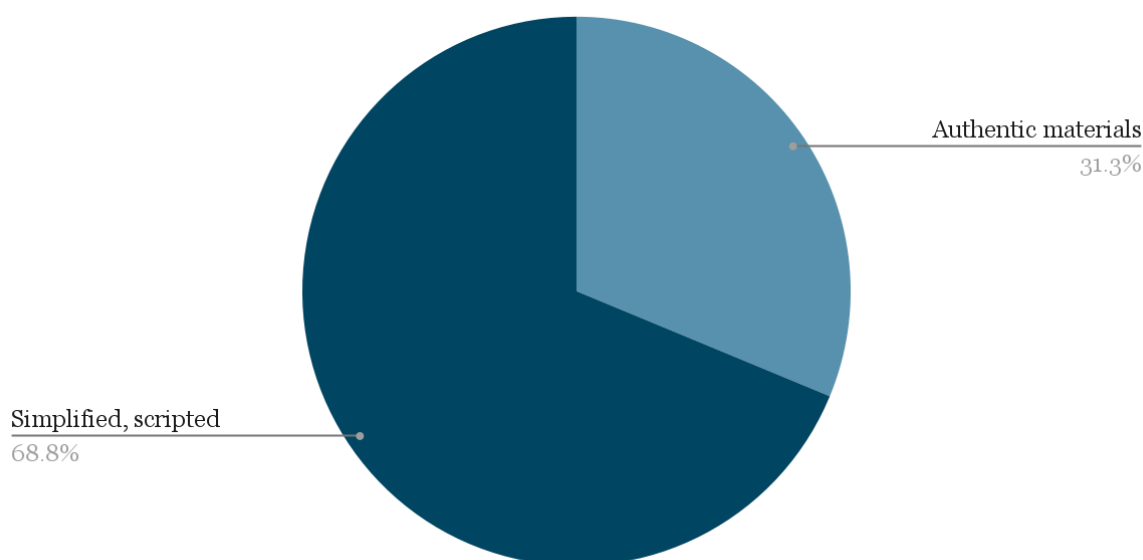


2. Simplified Listening Materials and Poorly Conceived Listening Exercises

According to respondents, the majority of classroom materials, including a limited number of exercises in textbooks, do not match the language proficiency of listeners or are simplified texts that eliminate the rhythms and pauses of natural speech. In response to the question “which types of listening materials are used most frequently in the classroom?”, 69% of respondents chose simplified, scripted materials (e.g., audio or video recordings made specifically for textbooks), while only 31% chose authentic materials (e.g., Chinese songs, conference lectures delivered by native speakers) (see *Figure 2*).

Figure 2

Which kind of listening materials are used in class more frequently?



Another issue worth mentioning is the frequent loss of contextual information during listening exercises, where audio recordings without visual support serve as the main training tools. Only 28% of respondents considered listening materials with visual support (e.g., videos, images, or live speech) to be more frequently utilized, while the majority (72%) chose listening materials without visual support (e.g., pure audio recordings) as the most prevalent.

Meanwhile, 74% of respondents concurred that the majority of tasks in Chinese language courses involve completing listening exercises that require exact recall of verbal detail (e.g., dictation), whereas only 26% identified completing listening exercises that prioritize reasonable interpretation of the entire text (e.g., summary) as more common.

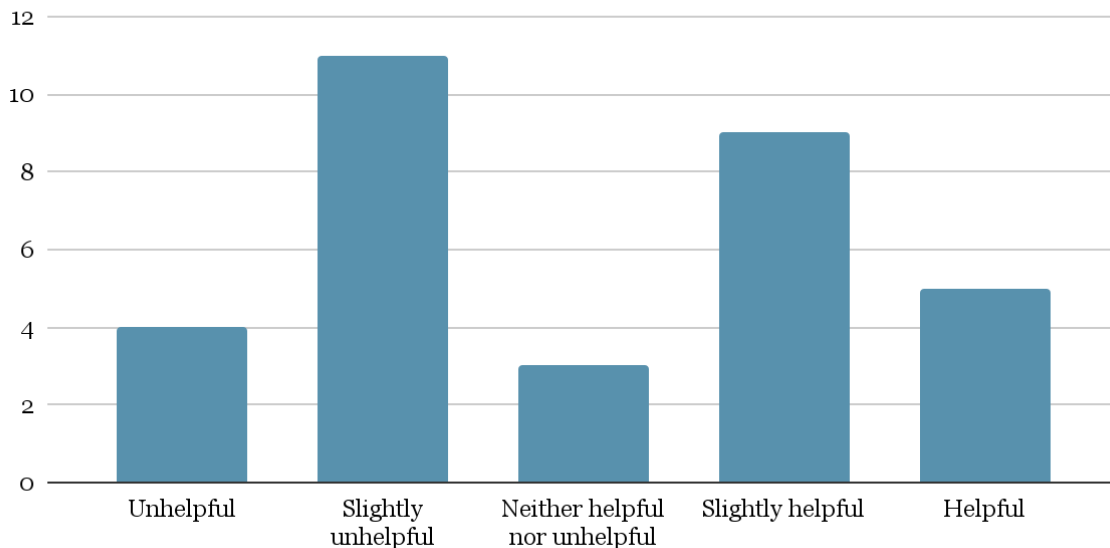
3. A Single Criterion to Gauge Listening Success

In current Chinese language courses at UBC, listening success is measured solely by correct responses to questions or tasks, which may inhibit students' ability to exercise independent,

creative control over the language. In terms of diagnosing error patterns and recommending corrective action, the instructor's feedback is deemed insufficiently helpful. Only 46% of students viewed instructors' feedback as somewhat helpful or helpful, with the remainder leaning toward unhelpful (see *Figure 3*).

Figure 3

How helpful or unhelpful is the instructor's feedback in terms of diagnosing error patterns



Literature review and proposed solutions

1. Strategic Approach

According to Field, learners in fact make considerable use of top-down information when understanding is impaired by limited vocabulary or syntax (“‘Bottom-up’ and ‘Top-Down’” 338). To compensate for lack of lower level knowledge, L2 listeners resort to top-down inferencing: they draw upon contextual evidence to make intelligent guesses based on the dislocated words they recognize (Field, “Skills and Strategies”). The way this trade-off works can be described as “strategic” (Field, “Not Waving but Drowning”).

Contextual guesswork helps to compensate for inadequate bottom-up processing, but it is not necessarily an easy task (Wilson). Before L2 learners reach the knowledge threshold where a more natural listening process takes place, they have to adopt a different, more strategic type of listening and may benefit from strategy training (Field, “Not Waving but Drowning”).

Field states that there are two groups of L2 listeners: the first are risk-takers who treat hypotheses as certainties instead of checking them carefully against new evidence; the second are risk-avoiders who feel inhibited by their inadequate bottom-up information and are

reluctant to make inferences (“Skills and Strategies” 116). The purpose of strategy training, therefore, is to “encourage risk-avoiders to take more risks and to encourage risk-takers to proceed more cautiously” (Field, “Not Waving but Drowning” 188).

Proposed Solution

Strategy training is particularly important for Chinese language learners who tend to get lost during lectures: the key is to persuade them not to panic if they do not understand every single word, but rather to concentrate on the overall message (Sheerin). Several strategies can greatly help in lectures, for instance, working out the gist by identifying key words or using markers as guides to changes of topic. These strategies can also be taught and practiced individually, and should be incorporated into UBC’s Chinese language courses.

2. Extensive Listening

Opponents of the strategic approach have argued that an overemphasis on strategy training may undermine the value of ample practice which learners need most (Renandya and Farrell; Ridgway). What they propose instead is extensive listening, employing a large amount of comprehensible and enjoyable input through all types of listening activities (e.g., reading aloud) (Chang and Millett). It has been claimed that frequent exposure to the target language leads to enlarged vocabulary, increased cultural knowledge and heightened language awareness (Blyth). Such an argument queries the necessity of strategy training.

Proposed Solution

What extensive listening cannot solve, however, is the comprehension mistakes learners make while listening (Wilson). Without pinpointing the problems precisely, learners will continue to replicate the same mistakes with little chance for intervention or remedy (Siegel). This indicates that extensive listening “should be used to support, rather than be central to, L2 listening methodology” (Siegel 319). In Chinese language courses, once strategies have been isolated and practiced adequately, they can be applied outside of class through extensive listening.

3. Material and Task

Listeners will not be motivated if the material fails to suit their language competence (Wilson). This would seem to imply that simplifying a listening text can enhance understanding; however, this is not necessarily the case: “what is gained by syntactic simplification at sentence level is often lost in terms of coherence and cohesion at text level” (Field, “Not Waving but Drowning” 188). Furthermore, simplification often involves eliminating redundant language (e.g., repetitions, rephrasing), which results in much greater density of information (Thornbury).

In contrast, authentic materials usually embody the rhythms and pause patterns of natural speech as well as changes in speed or complexity (Walker). This accords with real conversations in which interlocutors constantly adjust how they speak to be optimally intelligible (Walker). Another virtue of authentic materials is that they are ungraded, which provides learners with practice in the real-life task of extracting meaning from utterances beyond their current state of knowledge (Field, “Skills and Strategies”).

Proposed Solution

The materials selected for Chinese language learners should come from college or conference lectures originally given to native Chinese speakers. These authentic materials help students increase their awareness of lecture discourse, specifically, the high degree of paraphrasing and redundancy, and the use of cues that introduce topics, signal organization, and conclude lectures. “Through awareness and practice, students gain an understanding of how important these discourse factors are, enabling them to predict ideas and lecture direction” (Lebauer 7).

In order to make these authentic materials accessible to learners, an established practice is to “grade the task, not the text” (Thornbury). Therefore, listening tasks that require only a very general understanding of the text become identified with authentic materials (Harmer). Whatever the type, the tasks should prioritize reasonable interpretation of the whole text rather than exact recall of verbal detail (Sheerin). A feasible practice could be asking students to listen to the lecture once without taking notes and then answer questions about the gist of the information presented. This allows them to focus on the larger picture without becoming preoccupied with details.

4. Context and Visual Support

Just like real-life lectures which usually start with contextual information of the main topic, pre-listening activities should invite students to discuss their expectations of the lecture by connecting the topic to their personal experiences and beliefs (Lund). Contextual information is also indispensable when listening to daily conversations. Without this information, students have to sort out who the speakers are, how they interact and in what situation: such demanding tasks rarely occur in real life (Ur and Thornbury).

Visual support, in the form of videos, pictures or live speech, offers more contextual clues that are otherwise absent in audio recordings (Sheerin). These include the speaker’s facial gestures, lip movements and body language, all of which contribute to understanding and are normally present in real listening situations (Ur and Thornbury).

Proposed Solution

It would be preferable for teachers in Chinese language courses to play video clips, deliver the lectures live, or bring a native speaker in for face-to-face interactions. Movies help too: the use of movies in listening classes enhances learners' motivation, eliminates anxiety and consequently helps them to improve their listening scores (Ismail). To emphasize the importance of visual support, movies can be played at normal speed but without the sound. Students have to guess what the characters are saying, which gives them practice in identifying paralinguistic behavior and cross-cultural clues as well.

5. Teaching or Testing

Conventionally, success in listening is solely measured by correct responses to questions or tasks (Field, "Skills and Strategies"). Such overemphasis on outcomes turns listening into a repeated encounter with failure (Walker). However, as Sheerin suggests, the diagnosis of error patterns, positive feedback and remedial action are also crucial elements in the teaching of listening (126).

Proposed Solution

Rather than merely telling learners the right answers, it is more imperative for teachers in Chinese language courses to consider what difficulties the text may present, why breakdowns of understanding occur, and how to prevent similar problems in the future. Implicit here is a view of the listening class as diagnostic and a role of teachers as strong supporters who willingly provide positive feedback while being able to identify listeners' weaknesses and come up with corresponding remedial exercises.

Meanwhile, students themselves should be encouraged to perceive their own performance and progress by keeping listening logs, filling in report forms or writing comments on social media. This metacognitive process asks students to reflect on each listening experience: how challenging the task is, which strategy they have used and what they could have done to become more efficient. Self-reflection, together with the teacher's support, keeps students motivated.

A recent study of the effectiveness of authentic materials

Targeting non-native Chinese speakers with listening proficiency between low-intermediate and high-intermediate, this recent study conducted in China looked into the superiority of authentic materials over simplified ones in listening classes at East China Normal University (ECNU).

1. Materials and Methods

The participants in this study were 60 ECNU non-Chinese students. Before the experiment all had been studying Chinese for approximately 240 hours; thus, the participants had been exposed to the same amount of Chinese and listening practice. To begin with, they were randomly formed into two groups: one was chosen as the experimental group, and the other as the control group. All participants were given one pre-test (i.e., Chinese Proficiency Test, also known as “HSK”) prior to the intervention. The results indicated no significant difference in listening proficiency between the two groups. In the next stage over an 18-week-period Chinese course, the students in the experimental group were given authentic materials (e.g., Chinese songs, conference lectures delivered by native speakers) as the sources of listening tasks. Meanwhile, the control group stuck to exercises adapted from simplified, scripted materials in their textbook.

After the intervention, the participants were immediately post-tested with another set of questions from the same HSK Listening Test. A quantitative-qualitative approach was adopted in this study which collected two sources of data: one was students’ post-test scores; the other was one-on-one interviews with participants to find out their motivation and anxiety during the course. 20 interviewees (10 from each group) were selected on a voluntary basis and were assured of anonymity.

2. Results

The descriptive statistics of post-test scores showed that the mean gain scores of the experimental group were significantly higher than those of the control group (see *Figure 4*). In other words, the experimental group outperformed the control group in listening proficiency and had made more progress throughout the period.

<i>Figure 4</i>	Pre-test		Post-test		Gain Scores	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Experimental Group	55.00	10.23	69.58	10.29	14.56	1.43
Control Group	57.00	10.78	63.00	10.21	6.02	1.52

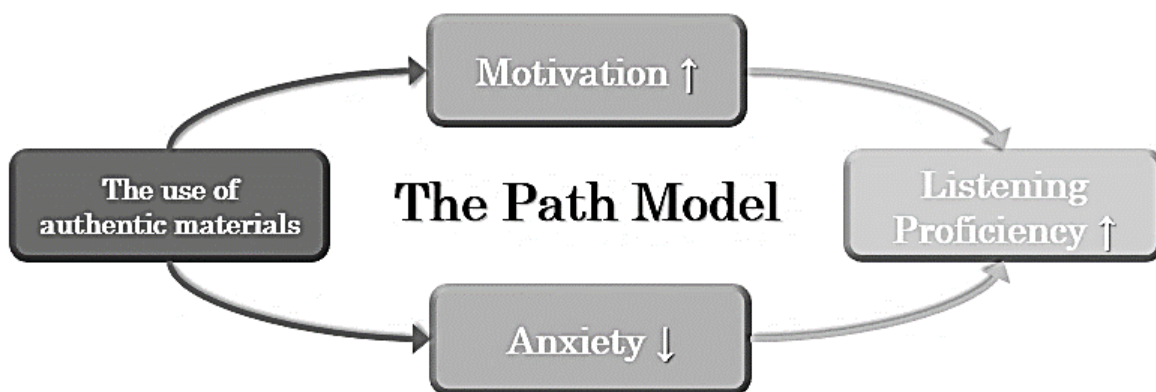
Later, the participants’ motivation and anxiety were analyzed based on the interviews. Generally, the students in the experimental group reported a higher level of motivation when completing listening tasks during the course, the reasons for which corresponded with some previous findings on authentic materials. For instance, Chinese songs can lighten the atmosphere in class through their memorable tunes and lyrics, while making a connection between the world of leisure and the world of learning (Harmer). Aside from a higher level of

motivation, the experimental group also experienced less anxiety than their counterparts. This might be because authentic materials incorporating paraphrasing and redundancy are more natural and relatively easier to understand in comparison with simplified, scripted materials densely packed with information (Ur and Thornbury). The latter is found to hinder students from further learning as affective filters (O’Neill).

Another finding worth noticing was that according to the experimental group, listening tasks that required only a very general understanding of the text were more accessible to Chinese learners. This finding accorded with an established practice of handling authentic materials, that is, to “grade the task, not the text” (Thornbury).

What remains unknown, however, is the causative relationship between authentic materials, students’ motivation/anxiety level and their test performance. It may be that the use of authentic materials in class could enhance students’ motivation, lower their anxiety, and in this way, promote their performance in listening proficiency. In short, students’ motivation and anxiety levels might serve as predictors of their test performance, which constitute a complete path model (see *Figure 5*).

Figure 5



3. Discussion

This recent study attested to the effectiveness of authentic materials in improving Chinese language learners’ listening skills. While the experimental group attained up to 70% comprehension level in the post-test, the control group only scored 63.00 in the same test on average. A potential cause might be that the students in the experimental group who were given authentic materials felt more motivated and less anxious during the course, which helped to improve their listening scores as a result. Nevertheless, teachers need to be cautious when handling authentic materials in class; specifically, they should follow Field’s recommendation to “grade the difficulty of the task rather than that of the text” (“Not Waving but Drowning” 193).

CONCLUSION

Listening, among all language skills, provokes most anxiety because of the affective baggage learners carry when facing speech signals that can neither be touched nor be held (Renandya and Farrell). Therefore, it is a teacher's job to gain a better understanding of what listeners do, what problems they may confront in a certain context, and what they can do to teach their students more effectively (Lund).

For Chinese language learners, the most effective way to improve listening skills is through a combination of strategic approaches and extensive listening exercises. This combination, nevertheless, cannot succeed without the support of suitable materials, well-designed tasks, multiple activities, and teachers' encouragement and constructive feedback.

To summarize what can be done in Chinese language courses to facilitate the development of listening skills among students:

- Combine a strategic approach with extensive listening exercises;
- Introduce authentic materials and listening tasks that require only a very general understanding of the text;
- Include more visually supported audio content;
- Consider listening class diagnostic and teachers as strong supporters who willingly identify listeners' weaknesses and provide remedial exercises.

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