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Learning Strategies for the CET-6 Listening: A Study of Chinese College Students

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Abstract. Many students who do not study English as their main subject have trouble with the listening part of the CET-6 exam. Old studies did not talk much about how these students' learning strategies connect with this trouble. So, this study uses a questionnaire. It asks these Chinese college students about their listening learning strategies when they get ready for and take the CET-6. The study wants to find two things. First, how the students use these learning strategies. Second, how these learning strategies connect with their listening scores in the exam. The study finds that students like to use two kinds of learning strategies more. These are strategies to plan and check their learning, and strategies to learn directly (like taking notes). They use the other much less. These are strategies to learn with others and strategies to control their feelings. Also, how often students use the planning and checking strategies can tell us their CET-6 listening scores. From these findings, the study gives useful ideas. These ideas can help students get better at listening. They can do this by learning on their own and with teachers' help for the CET-6.

Keywords: English Listening Learning Strategies, Metacognitive Strategies, Cognitive Strategies, Social&Affective Strategies, CET-6

1. Introduction

Listening is one of the four key language abilities. It comes first among "listening, speaking, reading and writing." For college students, listening and reading are more important than speaking and writing [1]. But now, many college students cannot follow or understand spoken English well. Especially, students who do not study English as their main subject often get bad scores in the listening part of CET-6. The reasons include no regular training on listening strategies and not enough practice. So, studying college students' listening strategies to help them get better at listening becomes an urgent issue.

Since people first introduced listening strategies, this topic has been popular among experts around the world. The first researchers O'Malley and Chamot said: listening strategies are the clear or half-clear ways of thinking and doing things that learners use. They use these to understand, remember and use what they hear [2]. Based on this, they divided English listening strategies into three types: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social & affective strategies. Chinese experts have added their own ideas to this field. For example, Wen said: listening strategies are planned methods that Chinese learners use in their culture. They use these to understand better. These methods include practicing language forms and building meanings [3]. There are many theory studies on this topic. But few studies explore how listening strategies connect with students' real CET-6 listening scores.

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To fill this gap, this study uses a data-based method. It studies the English listening strategies of students who do not study English as their main subject. This study aims to help with the theory of using listening strategies. It also offers inspirations to help learners get better at listening through targeted and effective training on listening strategies.

2. Literature review

2.1. Learning strategies

"Learning strategies" has been discussed a lot in the study field for a long time. But there is no same idea about what it exactly means. O'Malley and Chamot suggested learning strategies are specific thoughts or things people do. They use these to understand, learn or remember new information [2]. Oxford held a different opinion. He considered learning strategies are steps students take to make their learning better [4]. Chinese researcher Wen thought like Oxford. From her perspective, learning strategies are methods learners use to learn well [3]. Liu and Huang made this definition wider. They said any steps, rules, methods, skills or control ways that help learning better can be called learning strategies [5]. Though experts have different definitions, they all agree: learners use learning strategies to make their learning more effective.

As this field developed, experts began to divide learning strategies into different types. O'Malley and Chamot divided them into three types: ways to plan and check learning (metacognitive strategies), ways to learn directly (cognitive strategies), and ways to learn with others or control feelings (social & affective strategies) [2]. Oxford made this system bigger. He divided learning strategies into two big groups: direct strategies (including memory strategies, cognitive strategies and compensation strategies) and indirect strategies (including metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies) [4]. Cohen had a simpler division. He put learning strategies into two groups: ways to learn language and ways to use language [6]. Before, most studies used O'Malley and Chamot's theory [2,7-9]. So this study also uses this division. This makes the study match and compare with other existing studies easily.

2.2. English listening learning strategies

Studying how Chinese college students learn English listening (their listening strategies) is an important topic in learning a second language. It has got much attention in recent years. Concerning participants in the studies, past studies mainly focused on six groups: (1) graduate students (including master's and doctoral students); (2) non-English major undergraduates; (3) English major undergraduates; (4) vocational college students; (5) middle school students; (6) primary school students [10]. Among these groups, non-English major students are the main focus. Because they represent general English education, so they are valuable for research. Concerning the topics of the studies, existing studies mainly discussed: how college students use listening strategies [11,12], how listening strategies are used in teaching [13], the effect of listening strategies [14,15], and the link between listening strategies and students' test scores [16].

But few experts studied the special learning strategies for CET-6 listening among non-English major students. Most studies about listening tests and related ways focused on test-taking strategies [17,18], and how test rules or test types affect students' learning strategies [19,20]. Few studies researched the strategies students use to deal with CET-6 listening. So this study focuses on non-English major students (a group often studied) and explores the learning strategies they use for CET-6 listening.

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3. Research methodology

3.1. Research questions

This study will answer three questions: (1) How different are non-English major students' CET-6 listening scores? (2) How different are non-English major students' use of listening learning strategies? (3) Is there a link between listening learning strategies and CET-6 listening scores?

3.2. Participants

The participants in this study are 56 Chinese college students. They do not study English as their main subject. Their ages are between 20 and 22 (average age is 20.61). There are 34 girls and 22 boys. All of them took the CET-6 exam between 2023 and 2024.

3.3. Research method

This study uses a number-based research method. It uses questionnaires to get information. The listening learning strategy questionnaire is made based on O'Malley and Chamot's theory and Oxford's SILL [2,4]. It also refers to scales (question sets) made by Huang [21], Yu and Zhang [22], and Zhang [23]. And some parts are changed to fit the CET-6 listening section. The questionnaire has 34 questions, which are divided into four parts: (1) personal information (like name, age); (2) metacognitive strategies; (3) cognitive strategies; (4) social & affective strategies. Questions 8 to 34 are about how students use listening strategies. They use a 5-point scale to answer: 1 = don't agree at all; 2 = don't agree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = agree very much.

3.4. Data collection

We collected 56 questionnaires through Wenjuanxing (an online questionnaire tool). The participants are from many places and each of them got a small reward after finishing the questionnaire. The places include: Tianjin, Beijing, Changsha, Xiangtan, Xi'an, Xiamen, Shiyan, Chengdu, Wuhan, Huhehaote, Guangzhou, Jinan, Cangzhou, Loudi, Qingdao, Huanggang, Jieyang, Kunming and Shanghai. Having participants from many places makes the sample (the people studied) more representative (can stand for more people).

3.5. Data analysis method

We used SPSS (a software to analyze data) to study the collected information. First, we calculated the average score for each of the three listening strategies. Then we did ANOVA (a test to check differences) to see if there are big differences in how students use these three strategies. Since the average score of metacognitive strategies was the highest, we did a paired-sample t-test (another test). This test compares how often students use this way when practicing and when taking the real exam. Next, Pearson correlation analysis (a way to check links) was utilized to study the relationship between listening strategies and CET-6 scores. We checked the link between each of the three listening strategies and CET-6 listening scores, to see if using strategies more/less connects with better/worse scores.

If we found a clear link, we used regression analysis (a test to predict) to see if how often students use listening strategies can predict their CET-6 listening scores.

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4. Results

We got 56 questionnaires in one month. We took out the questionnaires that are not useful (like scores that are way too low, or finished in less than one minute). After that, 52 useful questionnaires were left.

Table 1 shows the average score (M) for each type of learning way. Overall, students used the planning and checking ways (metacognitive) the most. More specifically, they used these ways more often during exams than during training. We did a test to check differences (one-way ANOVA) on the three types of learning ways. For the test, we called: Category 1 = planning and checking ways (metacognitive); Category 2 = direct learning ways (cognitive); Category 3 = ways to learn with others or control feelings (social and affective). The test result showed a very big difference ($F(2, 153) = 16.849$, $p < 0.001$). We did further tests (post-hoc tests). These tests found:

Category 1 scores were much higher than Category 3. This means students used planning and checking ways more than ways to learn with others or control feelings. Category 2 scores were much higher than Category 3. This means students used direct learning ways more than ways to learn with others or control feelings. There was no big difference between Category 1 and Category 2. This means students used planning and checking ways and direct learning ways about the same amount. Since planning and checking ways were used the most overall, we did a test to compare two situations (paired-samples t-test). We compared how often students used these ways during exams and during training. The result showed students used these ways much more during exams (average score = 4.01) than during training (average score = 3.27; $t(51) = -7.05$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 1. Results of students' questionnaires

	Metacognitive strategies			Cognitive strategies	Social and affective strategies	CET-6 listening scores
	Training	Examination	Total			
Mean	3.27	4.01	3.64	3.67	2.90	147.65
SD	0.90	0.58	0.65	0.64	0.97	29.79

We did a way to check links (correlation analysis) between CET-6 listening scores and the three types of learning strategies. The results showed: There was a small positive link between planning and checking ways scores and CET-6 listening scores ($r = 0.295$, $p = 0.033$). This means using these ways more may lead to a higher listening score. There was no big link for direct learning ways ($r = 0.207$, $p = 0.14$) or ways to learn with others/control feelings ($r = 0.087$, $p = 0.54$). Also, within the planning and checking ways: Using these ways more during exams had a clear positive link with CET-6 listening scores ($r = 0.403$, $p = 0.003$). Using these ways more during training had no big link ($r = 0.169$, $p = 0.230$). Because of this positive link, we did a test to predict (regression analysis). We wanted to see if using planning and checking ways during exams can predict CET-6 listening scores. The prediction model was useful ($R^2 = 0.162$, $F(1, 50) = 9.67$, $p = 0.003$). The result showed that using these strategies during exams could significantly predict listening performance ($\beta = 0.403$, $t(51) = 3.11$, $p = 0.003$). We used a software to analyze data (SPSS) for all these checks. First, we calculated the average score for each of the three learning strategies. Then we did a test to check differences (ANOVA) to see if there were big differences in how students used the three strategies. Since planning and checking ways had the highest average score, we did a test to compare two situations (paired-sample t-test) to see how often students used these ways during practice and real exams. We used a way to check links (Pearson correlation analysis) to study the relationship between learning strategies and CET-6 scores. We checked the link between each of the three learning strategies and listening scores, to see if using strategies more or less connected with better or worse scores. If we

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found a clear link, we used a test to predict (regression analysis) to see if using learning strategies could predict CET-6 listening scores.

5. Discussion

5.1. Metacognitive strategies

How often students used the three types of learning ways ranks like this: planning and checking ways ≈ direct learning ways > ways to learn with others or control feelings. Also, the study found that non-English major students used planning and checking ways more often during the CET-6 listening exam than during training. Most importantly, using these ways more could predict better listening scores. This means using them more often usually leads to higher test scores.

These results tell us that non-English major college students know and use planning and checking ways quite well. It means most students can: Get ready in advance; Organize their study materials; Manage and check their own learning [2]. They do these things when preparing for and taking the CET-6. These things are very important for their final scores. There are two main reasons for this: College students are more mentally mature [24]. Maria and other researchers showed that as people get older, their ability to plan and check their learning gets better because their minds develop more [25]. Listening tests have special rules. Unlike reading tests (where you can read and check again), listening test audio is usually played only a few times. You can't hear it again. You have to finish all questions in a short time, with no chance to check or correct answers. So you need planning and checking ways. For example, you need to watch how well you are doing and change your way in real time. This helps you answer correctly and pass the CET-6. Huang's study got similar results. He found the same rank of how often students used the ways: planning and checking ways > direct learning ways > ways to learn with others or control feelings. This shows students like to use planning and checking ways a lot [21]. But not all old studies have the same rank. For example, Cui and Zhan found a different order: direct learning ways > ways to learn with others or control feelings > planning and checking ways [26]. The difference may come from different study situations. Our study looks at how students use planning and checking ways during exams. Cui and Zhan's study looks at how students use ways during normal English learning [26]. So the different results may show that students feel and think differently in different learning situations.

5.2. Cognitive strategies

Direct learning ways were also used very often among the three types.

This means non-English major college students mostly use simple methods to solve listening problems. These methods include: Using tools (like dictionaries); Repeating what they hear; Grouping words by meaning; Guessing meanings from rules; Making mental pictures [2]. Listening needs you to process and answer what you hear right away. But students—especially non-English majors—often can't understand every word clearly and fully in real time [26]. So they use context clues to guess meanings from the parts they understand. These clues include: What they already know; General reasoning; The language around the unknown words; This helps them understand the listening content.

5.3. Social & affective strategies

Compared with the two types above, students used ways to learn with others or control feelings (social&affective strategies) the least.

There are three reasons for this: No chance to practice with others. These ways usually include: Asking others to explain clearly; Working with classmates; Talking to themselves to stay focused;

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Giving themselves encouragement [2]. All these need real communication and interaction. But many students—especially non-English majors who have few English classes—often have no good language partners or real-life situations to practice. The lack of such interactive environments makes students use these strategies less [26]. Nervous feelings about listening. Many learners don't know how to control their emotions well when learning English. This is especially true during listening tests, which often make them feel nervous and stressed. These bad feelings stop them from using ways to learn with others or control feelings. Students often don't know how to manage their nervousness or ask classmates for help [27]. Fear of losing face. College students care a lot about their image at this age. So asking others for help can make them feel embarrassed [21]. Over time, most students don't want to ask for help when they have problems. They prefer to solve problems by themselves, or even leave the problems unsolved.

6. Conclusion

This study used a method that uses numbers and surveys. It looked at how non-English major students use learning strategies when they get ready for and take the CET-6 listening test. The study's findings give useful ideas for both students and teachers about the CET-6 listening section.

For students: You should use planning and checking ways (metacognitive strategies) more. Using these ways more is linked to better CET-6 listening scores. So you are encouraged to use these ways a lot to get better at listening.

For teachers: You should help college students know more about English listening learning ways, especially the ones useful for CET-6. When students are in their first year of college, you can teach them many different listening ways. This helps students learn how to get better at listening and use these ways well in their study.

In short, this study looked closely at the CET-6 listening learning strategies of non-English major college students. Future studies can do more tests in classes. These tests can check how well different listening strategies work.

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