

# Inquiry into Teaching Listening and Speaking in High School English Classes Based on an Activity Perspective

Junnan Pan

School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, Nanchong, Sichuan, 637001, China

---

**Abstract:** This paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the issues present in current high school English listening and speaking classes and proposes corresponding improvements. Firstly, it identifies the challenges faced by high school English listening and speaking instruction, including inadequate emphasis on training listening and speaking skills by teachers, lack of operational and measurable course objectives, monotonous forms of activity organization, limitations in the use of listening materials and tools, weak connections between introductory segments and thematic content, failure to understand listening and speaking discourse based on thematic significance, neglect of teaching learning strategies, absence of learning activities in authentic contexts, and singular evaluation methods. Subsequently, a series of suggestions for enhancing teaching quality and efficiency are put forward, such as designing instruction around thematic contexts that integrate listening, speaking, reading, viewing, and writing skills; fostering the development of students' core competencies, particularly language ability and cultural awareness; conducting comprehensive, interconnected, and practical learning activities; utilizing modern information technology to create a culturally rich learning environment; and implementing formative and multifaceted evaluation mechanisms. These improvement measures aim to enhance students' listening and speaking abilities and cultivate them as lifelong learners with good listening and speaking habits.

**Keywords:** English Instruction; Listening and Speaking Classes; Core Competencies; New Curriculum Standards.

---

## 1. Introduction

Listening and speaking classes are among the most common types of courses in high school English education and serve as a vital pathway for developing students' core competencies in the English language. The Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition Revised in 2020) (hereafter referred to as "the New Curriculum Standards") provides specific descriptions for the level of proficiency in listening and speaking, including the ability to grasp the main ideas and extract key information, viewpoints, and cultural backgrounds from spoken discourse; to comprehend the special effects conveyed through vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation; to utilize multimodal resources for accurate understanding of speech; to describe experiences and events, express emotions, and articulate opinions and explanations in relatively complex contexts; to select appropriate forms of linguistic expression according to communicative situations; and to purposefully choose vocabulary and grammatical structures in oral communication. These descriptions closely resemble real-life language usage scenarios, underscoring the importance of listening and speaking skills and their significance within the high school English curriculum.

According to the Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2022), the content of the high school English course comprises elements such as themes, texts, language knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills, and learning strategies. Language skills are categorized into receptive skills (listening, reading, and viewing) and productive skills (speaking and writing). These skills, both receptive and productive, complement and reinforce each other in the process of language learning, and English listening and speaking courses exemplify this interplay. However, despite the recognition of their importance, high school English listening and speaking instruction has long been beset by

various issues, such as neglecting introductions or having introductions that are poorly connected to the theme, overly simplistic analysis of listening and speaking texts, a lack of language practice in authentic contexts, and insufficient attention to understanding listening and speaking texts based on thematic significance.

## 2. Analysis of the Current State of Listening and Speaking Classes in High School English Education

In the context of examination-oriented education, teachers generally place insufficient emphasis on listening and speaking classes. Although the new textbooks have significantly increased the proportion of listening and speaking content, problems still persist in actual classroom instruction due to teachers' limited understanding of the essence of the learning activity perspective and inadequate appreciation of the importance of these classes. For instance, teachers often fail to give sufficient importance to the training of listening and speaking skills, thereby not providing students with adequate time and opportunities to express themselves in English. Moreover, teachers commonly rely solely on test scores as the sole criterion for evaluating students' listening abilities, neglecting the cultivation of strategic awareness. Additionally, in the design of listening and speaking classes, there is a notable absence of language practice activities grounded in authentic contexts. Over time, this can lead to a loss of interest in learning listening and speaking among students.

### 2.1. Lack of Emphasis on Training Listening and Speaking Skills

In actual high school English instruction, teachers frequently adopt a traditional review-style teaching model, which involves pre-teaching vocabulary and sentence

patterns from the textbook's listening passages using extensive pictures and personal oral input before proceeding to play the audio recordings sequentially and only once. This is followed by a review, consolidation, and reading of dialogues to complete the listening and speaking instruction. Such a "misaligned" approach lacks effectiveness, as students do not develop the ability to learn proactively, nor do they improve their listening comprehension and text understanding.

From the perspective of course objectives, the goals of English listening and speaking classes often lack operational and measurable characteristics. Some teachers fail to formulate teaching objectives under the guidance of thematic contexts, focusing on the exploration of thematic meanings and considering students' actual learning conditions. They do not align these objectives with the three levels of the English Learning Activity Perspective (ELAP) and do not express these objectives using concise and precise language that indicates clear directions. As a result, the teaching objectives and evaluation criteria lack measurability and operability, making it difficult for teachers to effectively organize and implement teaching and learning activities in the classroom. Furthermore, some teachers do not intentionally observe students' performance during learning activities, hindering the effective assessment of teaching and learning outcomes and the promotion of learning and teaching through evaluation.

In terms of activity organization, the activities in listening and speaking classes tend to be monotonous. Teachers most frequently employ teacher-student dialogue, followed by paired activities and group work, while individual presentations and role plays are much less common. This significantly reduces students' opportunities to communicate in English during class and diminishes their motivation and the importance placed on the exercise of listening and speaking skills.

Regarding listening materials and tools, teachers often rely on the accompanying audio materials provided in the textbook, playing them using cassette tapes or multimedia players on classroom computers, after which students answer written questions or provide oral responses.

## **2.2. Neglecting Introductions or Weak Thematic Relevance in Introductions**

The New Curriculum Standards advocate that English classroom instruction should be guided by thematic significance, where the exploration of thematic meaning is the most crucial aspect of students' language learning. It directly influences their understanding of discourse, cognitive development, and the effectiveness of language learning. A lack of thematic relevance in introductions manifests in two primary ways: first, initiating discussions based on non-critical keywords within the thematic context, and second, overemphasizing entertainment at the expense of thematic relevance.

## **2.3. Failure to Understand Listening and Speaking Texts Based on Thematic Significance**

The New Curriculum Standards emphasize that English learning activities, characterized by comprehensiveness, interconnectivity, and practicality, primarily include three categories: learning and comprehension, application and practice, and transfer and innovation (Ministry of Education, 2020). Learning and comprehension activities involve

perception and attention, acquisition and organization, summarization and integration, and are text-based, corresponding to lower-order thinking processes such as recall and understanding in Bloom's cognitive taxonomy. Application and practice activities encompass description and explanation, analysis and judgment, internalization and application, delving deeper into the text and bridging lower-to higher-order thinking. Transfer and innovation activities include inference and argumentation, critique and evaluation, imagination and creation, transcending the text and aligning with higher-order thinking processes.

Teaching listening and speaking from an English learning activity perspective requires attention to the following aspects:

1. Thematic Significance Exploration: Begins with the introduction and continues throughout the lesson.
2. Textual Analysis: Starts with details, accurately capturing information.
3. Context Creation: Originates from students' cognitive levels, ensuring authenticity.
4. Activity Design: Is multidimensional and progressively structured, prompting deep thinking.
5. Post-Class Assignments: Are innovative and expand upon what was learned, consolidating listening and speaking outcomes.

Furthermore, all nine levels across the three categories of activities do not necessarily need to be fully realized; sometimes, certain activities may need to be repeated. Teachers must focus on the theme, set goals, create contexts, anticipate potential barriers in students' listening and speaking, and design appropriate activities along with suitable scaffolding to support the enhancement of students' listening and speaking abilities.

## **2.4. Neglecting the Instruction and Guidance of Learning Strategies**

In listening and speaking classes, after teachers have led students through the material and sentence patterns in the listening and speaking resources, they typically play the recordings and require students to complete listening exercises, concluding with the verification of answers. Under this approach, teachers may only intermittently incorporate listening and speaking strategies when explaining the answers. This method is detrimental to students' growth and development, especially for those with weaker foundations. Without a solid grasp of listening and speaking strategies, these students may struggle to take notes and may experience feelings of frustration and anxiety. If teachers fail to promptly recognize and address these changes, students may gradually lose their motivation to participate, which can directly impact the efficiency of teaching.

Therefore, in secondary English education, teachers need to acknowledge the issues present in listening and speaking instruction and integrate listening and speaking strategies into their classroom guidance. By doing so, they can stimulate students' enthusiasm for participating in classroom learning and enable them to make progress under the teacher's scientifically ordered guidance.

## **2.5. Lack of Authentic Contextualized Learning Activities**

In listening and speaking classes, it is essential to construct relevant and authentic thematic contexts for students. Only by solving problems within genuine contexts can students develop their disciplinary competencies. Focusing tightly on

the thematic significance of the unit, constructing thematic contexts in listening and speaking classes can motivate students to learn and apply language, engaging them in explorations of texts, thematic meanings, and cultural knowledge. This promotes deep learning of the theme and assists students in constructing new concepts within new thematic contexts, thereby fostering the development of their cognitive qualities and facilitating language production.

Without appropriate thematic contexts, students find it difficult to apply their acquired knowledge flexibly in practical situations, hindering their ability to transition from listening and reading English to speaking and using English effectively.

## **2.6. Single-Minded Assessment and the Over-reliance on Listening Test Scores**

The assessment methods in English listening and speaking classes are often overly simplistic, with listening test scores serving as the primary criterion for evaluation. However, such scores do not adequately reflect students' oral proficiency and therefore cannot serve as the sole standard for assessing their overall listening and speaking abilities. Teachers, influenced by exam-oriented pressures and evaluation requirements, have not given sufficient attention to the appropriateness of the assessment criteria used in these classes.

Peer assessment activities are rarely organized by instructors in listening and speaking courses, resulting in a lack of formative assessment. Given that students' English listening and speaking skills are rapidly evolving, it is imperative that teachers integrate formative assessment into the process of developing these skills. This approach would better support the continuous improvement of students' communicative competencies in real-world contexts.

## **3. Enhancing the Quality and Efficiency of High School English Listening and Speaking Classes**

Firstly, the foundation of English learning activities is the integration of the six core elements of English curriculum content. Teaching design based on the perspective of English learning activities should revolve around a specific thematic context, drawing on various types of texts, integrating listening, speaking, reading, viewing, and writing skills, and employing different learning strategies. This approach promotes the acquisition of language and cultural knowledge, enabling students to analyze and solve problems in new contexts using their acquired language and cultural knowledge, ultimately fostering correct values and positive emotional attitudes.

Secondly, the goal of the English learning activity perspective is the development of core competencies in the English discipline. The Curriculum Standards state that high school English courses have an important role in nurturing students' linguistic ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning capacity (Ministry of Education, 2020). The perspective embodies the "activity" nature of language learning and the centrality of the student. Wang Qiang points out that three key terms in teaching design based on the English learning activity perspective are "context," "problem," and "activity." Students, as the main actors in the classroom, engage in effective teaching activities, which involve learning, organizing, summarizing, analyzing, comparing, evaluating, and transferring knowledge and skills.

Furthermore, activities based on the English learning activity perspective possess comprehensiveness, interconnectedness, and practicality. Three categories of activities are learning and understanding, application and practice, and transfer and innovation. In learning and understanding activities, students perceive and focus, acquire and organize, and summarize and integrate knowledge, activating prior knowledge and forming new structures. Application and practice activities involve describing and explaining, analyzing and judging, internalizing and applying knowledge through communicative activities, consolidating new knowledge and developing new abilities. Transfer and innovation activities involve reasoning and arguing, critiquing and evaluating, imagining and creating, applying strategies and skills to solve problems in new contexts and express personal views. These activities progress from lower to higher levels, from simple to complex, promoting the development of students' thinking and learning capacities in a sequential manner (Ren Zhou, 2019).

Additionally, teachers should integrate modern information technology to create a culturally rich learning environment. In the 21st century, modern information technology has permeated daily life and entered the classroom. Teachers can create more convenient learning platforms and realistic listening and speaking contexts. They can use multimedia technology to present background images, audio, or videos to help students learn about cultural backgrounds and overcome barriers. For example, when teaching the Listening and Speaking section of Unit 4 in the 2019 edition of the compulsory second volume of Senior High School English published by the People's Education Press, information about Confucius, his educational philosophy, and the "Three Confuciuses" can be effectively supplemented through videos, pictures, and text. This helps students appreciate Confucius and his ideas, consider his profound impact on Chinese history, and cultivate cultural awareness and confidence. Another example is the listening and speaking section of Unit 1 in the third volume of the 2019 edition, which covers Japanese coming-of-age ceremonies, Rio's Carnival, Chinese Lantern Festivals, and Christmas. These can be illustrated with typical festival costumes, food, and celebration methods using pictures and videos to create an intuitive cultural learning environment, helping students understand and compare cultural differences between East and West, and enhancing the effectiveness of cultural knowledge learning.

Lastly, there is a lack of scientific assessment standards for English listening and speaking instruction, with test scores still being the predominant basis for evaluation, which is imbalanced. When assessing, the focus should be on core competencies, aiming to foster good listening and speaking habits in students. Attention should be paid not only to language knowledge but also to the application of English and students' emotional experiences, providing comprehensive support for their development. Therefore, teachers should align their teaching with core competencies, achieving the integration of teaching, learning, and assessment. Based on the cultivation of core competencies, teachers set detectable and operational teaching objectives around thematic contexts, textual meanings, and the levels of thinking quality, and create learning activities at various levels. They establish assessment criteria based on these objectives. During teaching activities, both teachers and students participate as evaluators, using self-assessment, peer assessment, teacher questioning, and feedback evaluations. Teachers consciously monitor the

effectiveness of teaching and learning according to the objectives and evaluation criteria, encouraging students to explore problems in their learning and providing timely assistance and feedback, thereby promoting mutual growth in teaching and learning.

## 4. Conclusion

The current landscape of high school English listening and speaking instruction faces a series of challenges, including insufficient emphasis placed by instructors on training listening and speaking skills, neglect of introductions or the use of introductions that are weakly connected to the thematic context, failure to base instruction on the understanding of the thematic significance of listening and speaking texts, overlooking the teaching and guidance of learning strategies, the absence of authentic context-based learning activities, and reliance on a single evaluation method where listening test scores serve as the primary criterion.

To address and transform the current state of high school English listening and speaking classes, teachers need to:

1. Understand the Foundation of English Learning Activities: Recognize that the foundation of English learning activities is the integration of the six core elements of English course content.

2. Design Goals Aligned with Core Competencies: Develop teaching designs that aim to foster the development of core competencies in the English discipline, including linguistic ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning capacity.

3. Implement Comprehensive, Interconnected, and Practical Activities: Design learning activities that are comprehensive, interconnected, and practical, based on the perspective of English learning activities.

4. Incorporate Modern Information Technology: Utilize modern information technology to create culturally enriched learning environments that facilitate authentic and contextually relevant learning experiences.

5. Apply Formative and Multi-faceted Evaluation Methods: Implement formative and multifaceted evaluation methods that encourage the development of good listening and speaking habits among students, focusing on both the

acquisition of language knowledge and the application of English skills within real-world contexts.

By adopting these strategies, educators can enhance the quality and effectiveness of high school English listening and speaking instruction, ensuring that students are better equipped with the necessary skills for effective communication in English.

## References

- [1] Newton, J. M., & Nation, I. S. (2020). *Teaching ESL/EFL listening and speaking*. Routledge.
- [2] Oprandy, R. (1994). Listening/speaking in second and foreign language teaching. *System*, 22(2), 153-175.
- [3] Locke, A. (2013). *Teaching Speaking and Listening: One Step at a Time*. A&C Black.
- [4] Maulana, A., Musthafa, I., & Hayati, T. N. (2020). The efficiency of teaching listening and speaking skills to develop students' communicative competences. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 8(3), 802-808.
- [5] Flanders, N. A. (1973). Basic teaching skills derived from a model of speaking and listening. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 24(1), 24-37.
- [6] Wu, S., & Wang, F. (2021). Artificial Intelligence-Based Simulation Research on the Flipped Classroom Mode of Listening and Speaking Teaching for English Majors. *Mobile Information Systems*, 2021(1), 4344244.
- [7] Idrissova, M., Smagulova, B., & Tussupbekova, M. (2015). Improving listening and speaking skills in mixed level groups (on the material of New English File). *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 199, 276-284.
- [8] Murphy, J. M. (1991). Oral communication in TESOL: Integrating speaking, listening, and pronunciation. *TESOL quarterly*, 25(1), 51-75.
- [9] Noom-ura, S. (2008). Teaching listening speaking skills to Thai students with low English proficiency. *Asian EFL journal*, 10(4), 173-192.
- [10] Hendrickson, J. M. (1980). Listening and speaking activities for foreign language learners. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 36(4), 735-748.