

What is your opinion on the recent trend to marginalize English in formal education?

What do you think would be the rationale behind the de-emphasis of English?

Do you think it is necessary to set English as a compulsory course?

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Book reviews

Exploring Listening Strategy Instruction Through Action Research by Joseph Siegel, Palgrave MacMillan UK. 2015 (pp. xvi+259)

Reviewed by Elizabeth Wohlers, Mahidol University

Nearly in tears, the student approached me at the end of a listening test and said, “Teacher, I try so hard, but I can’t understand. *How can I get better at listening?*” “Practice a lot,” hardly seemed a satisfying response, but it was the best I could offer. This memory from my early days at a Thai university in mind, I eagerly read Joseph Siegel’s *Exploring Listening Strategy Instruction Through Action Research*. In this book, Siegel details how he sought to change the status quo of the ‘listen, answer, check’ (p. 13) approach to listening instruction by creating, implementing, and evaluating a listening strategy instruction program at his home university in Japan. The book transformed the way I think about listening instruction and inspired me to implement Siegel’s approach in my own classroom.

Siegel begins by providing compelling support for the assertion that, although listening is the most used skill in communication (p. 5), it is one for which pedagogy remains highly underdeveloped. Siegel states, “Consistent, focused, and widely accepted methods for the teaching of L2 listening has yet to reach the L2 education mainstream” (p. 39). He explains that common methods of listening instruction are based on one of two approaches: reliance on listening exposure, or use of practices that mimic testing (‘listen, answer, check’) (p. 39). In neither of these does the teacher actually perform much *teaching*; he/she is merely setting up practice for the students. Siegel explains that a reason for the underdevelopment of teaching

methodology is the complex nature of listening, a process occurring totally within the mind of the listener, and the resulting lack of thorough research into listening.

However, Siegel highlights some promising emerging ideas in the literature - the *process approach*, and the *listening strategy instruction approach* (LSI) - which are the basis of Siegel's process-based LSI approach to his listening instruction program. In short, his concept uses teacher modeling to train students on how to use specific strategies for listening in order to build skills which can be transferred outside of the classroom to everyday listening events.

Siegel put these theories into practice using an Action Research (AR) approach within the context of his university's compulsory Upper Intermediate English (UIE) course. The participants were 121 students in six different classes, which were divided between two instructors and three semesters. Each semester was viewed as a different phase and reflection and modifications were completed between phases. A new listening strategy was explicitly taught each week, for a total of thirteen strategies. (Examples of strategies include prediction, genre recognition, and identification of main ideas.) Classes met four days per week and instruction each week followed the same pedagogic cycle: strategy introduction, guided practice with teacher modeling, and strategy transfer and review (p. 59). The intervention was measured using questionnaires, student interviews, a researcher journal, class observation, teacher interviews, and pre/post-semester listening tests (including the TOEFL and an in-house test). Siegel focused his findings on student and teacher perceptions.

The results were consistently positive across all three phases. The vast majority of students felt that the LSI contributed to their listening skill development throughout the semester and said that they benefited from teacher explanations of the strategies. The majority of students also predicted that they would make use of the strategies learned in a variety of everyday life situations. The increase in the averages between the pre and post-semester test scores seemed to confirm the student perceptions. The teachers shared the generally positive feelings about the success of the program in teaching students transferable skills for real-world listening.

In general, I was impressed by the rigor of Siegel's research and I felt that his use of a variety of research methods and triangulation compensated for the potential downfalls of his insider status as researcher, teacher, and program designer. However, one question continually

nagged me as I reviewed the research findings: How would the students' perceptions of the course and their listening skill improvements compare to those of students who took the course in semesters prior to the intervention? Evidence of student perceptions of the course and its impact on their listening skills in semesters under the old modes of instruction would have stood as an insightful point of contrast with the findings of perceptions post-intervention.

Nevertheless, as a teacher, I was very impressed by the research findings, and I closed the book with a desire to put the concepts into action. I have used numerous textbooks which include strategy use to a certain extent, but I was compelled by two of Siegel's concepts that were quite new to me. The first was the idea of modeling- a teacher is an expert listener who can actually demonstrate his/her thinking to the students. The second was the explicit teaching of a strategy over the course of an entire week with focused and repetitive practice of it. As far as the practicality of replicating a program like Siegel's, I believe it is possible, but not without challenges. Siegel's co-teacher for the study reflected on the difficulty of explaining the concepts of the strategies, and Siegel himself states that how to effectively model remains an area with many questions in need of future research (p. 203). The book itself does not provide a detailed explanation of how to teacher model, nor does it explain in detail the design of the segments of each strategy lesson or the creation and modification of materials for the lessons. A reader of this book can expect to be inspired but not instructed on how to use these methods.

In conclusion, I highly recommend *Exploring Listening Strategy Instruction Through Action Research* for those who desire to take a critical look at how listening is taught. As he endeavored, Siegel inspired me, the reader, to think that it's possible to actually *teach* listening , so I can have a more satisfying answer next time a student approaches me with, 'Teacher, how can I get better at listening?'

Author Bio:

Elizabeth Wohlers is an English lecturer/visiting professor in the Mahidol University Faculty of Liberal Arts in Bangkok, Thailand. She holds a BA in Sociology-based Human Relations and French from Connecticut College and an MBA from

eliz.wohlers@gmail.com