

THE ROLE OF LISTENING COMPRESSION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Annotation: *Listening is a significant language skill to develop in second language learning. Despite its importance, language learners consider listening as the most difficult language skill to learn. Since the role of listening comprehension in language teaching has been repeatedly emphasized, many teachers do not pay enough attention to its importance in their classes. In this paper, the researchers review some important issues concerning listening comprehension to provide a basis for developing listening skill in English language teaching. It starts with a definition of listening and listening comprehension, a brief discussion of reasons for listening, followed by reviewing listening comprehension process, the importance of listening, teachers' roles in listening comprehension, and discuss strategies, techniques, and goals of listening. The review of literature indicated that learners can improve their listening comprehension through the help of teachers, using suitable materials and activities, and practicing a lot.*

Key words: *listening comprehension, reason, process, importance, role, strategies, techniques, goals*

Foreign languages have been taught formally for centuries and records of language teaching materials have been around for over 500 years. However, teaching listening comprehension as a part of teaching a foreign or second language is a relatively recent development whose history lies mostly in the last thirty years. In the earliest of teaching methods known, the grammar-translation method, learners focused exclusively on the analysis of written texts. Listening was used solely to accompany these texts and to provide models for oral reading. It was not until the late 1800s that listening was used in language instruction as a means of developing oral communication. It was assumed that students would simply acquire the ability to understand the spoken form of the language if they occasionally heard their teacher speak it or listened to a tape of it being spoken.

Listening comprehension process provides beneficial intuitions in teaching listening. Learner may find listening comprehension skill difficult to learn and this can also provide teachers with opportunities to change their listening exercises into more effective ones. Developing listening comprehension skill helps learners to succeed in language learning

to enhance comprehensible input. Since learners' self-reliance in listening comprehension will be increased, they will be motivated to have access to spoken English such as conversations with native speakers.

Reasons for teaching listening comprehension

One of the main reasons for getting students to listen to spoken English is to let them hear different varieties and accents - rather than just the voice of their teacher with its own idiosyncrasies. In today's world, they need to be exposed not only to one variety of English (British English, for example) but also to varieties such as American English, Australian English, Caribbean English, Indian English or West African English.

There are, of course, problems associated with the issue of language variety. Within British English, for example, there are many different dialects and accents. The differences are not only in the pronunciation of sounds ('bath' like 'laugh' vs. 'bath' like 'cat') but also in grammar (the use of 'shall' in northern varieties compared with its use in 'Standard English' - the southern, BBC-type variety). The same is of course true American, Indian or West African English.

The second major reason for teaching listening is because it helps students to acquire language subconsciously even if teachers do not draw attention to its special features. Exposure to language is a fundamental requirement for anyone wanting to learn it. Listening to appropriate tapes provides such exposure and students get vital information not only about grammar and vocabulary but also about pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, pitch and stress.

Lastly, students get better at listening the more they do it. Listening is a skill and any help we can give students in performing that skill will help them to be better listeners.

What is listening?

In order to define listening, we must outline the main component skills in listening. In terms of the necessary components, we can list the following:

- discrimination between sounds
- recognizing words
- identifying grammatical groupings of words
- identifying 'pragmatic units' - expressions and sets of utterance which function as whole units to create meaning
- connecting linguistic cues to paralinguistic cues (intonation and stress) and to nonlinguistic cues (gestures and relevant objects in the situation) in order to construct meaning
- using background knowledge (what we already know about the content and the form) and context (what has already been said) to predict and then to confirm meaning
- recalling important words and ideas

Principles for developing listening ability

Using general knowledge about language skill development, we can draw up some guidelines for developing listening ability:

(a) Listening ability develops through face-to-face interaction.

By interacting in English, learners have the chance for new language input and the chance to check their own listening ability. Face-to-face interaction provides stimulation for development of listening for meaning.

(b) Listening develops through focusing on meaning and trying to learn new and important content in the target language.

By focusing on meaning and real reasons for listening in English, learners can mobilise both their linguistic and non-linguistic abilities to understand.

(c) Listening ability develops through work on comprehension activities.

By focusing on specific goals for listening, learners can evaluate their efforts and abilities. By having well-defined comprehension activities, learners have opportunities for assessing what they have achieved and for revision.

(d) Listening develops through attention to accuracy and an analysis of form.

By learning to perceive sounds and words accurately as they work on meaning-oriented activities, our learners can make steady progress. By learning to hear sounds and words more accurately, learners gain confidence in listening for meaning

Organisation of listening comprehension

Listening comprehension is divided into four main sections:

I. Attentive listening

II. Intensive listening

III. Selective listening

IV. Interactive listening

Each section helps students develop a range of skills and strategies.

Attentive listening is designed to give students practice with listening and with supplying short responses to the speaker, either verbally or non-verbally (through actions). Because this kind of 'responsive' listening involves immediate processing of information and quick decisions about how to respond, the activities in Section I provide a great deal of support to help the learners 'process' the information they hear. The support is of three types: linguistic, in the form of cue words and previewed utterances, non-linguistic, in the form of visual aids, photographs, tangible objects and music used in the activity, and interactional, in the form of repetitions, paraphrases and confirmation checks by the speaker. By providing this support, the activities allow the teacher to introduce real-time listening practice to students at all levels, including beginners. Because the support in each activity can be varied, teachers can utilise these activities with more proficient students as well, to help them increase their attention span for spoken English.

Intensive listening will focus the students' attention on language form. The aim of this section is to raise the learners' awareness of how differences in sound, structure, and lexical choice can affect meaning. Because this kind of listening involves an appreciation of how form affects meaning, all of the activities in this section are contextualised - placed in a real or easily imagined situation [9,p.10]. In this way, all students - even beginners - can practise intensive listening in a context of language use, from which it is most likely to

transfer to 'real life' listening situation. Because the activities in this section require attention to specific contrasts of form - grammatical, lexical, or phonological - the teacher can easily adapt the activities to more proficient students by increasing the complexity of the language forms.

Selective listening will help enable students to identify a purpose for listening. By providing focused information-based tasks, the activities in Section III help direct the students' attention on key words, discourse sequence cues, or 'information structures' (exchanges in which factual information is given). By learning to attend to words, cues, and facts selectively, students at all levels come to handle short naturalistic text (such as announcements) as well as longer and more complex texts (such as authentic video programmes). Because the task support in these activities can be adjusted, Section III is useful for students at all proficiency levels.

Interactive listening is designed to help learners assume active roles in shaping and controlling an interaction, even when they are in the 'listener's role'. Because it is important for learners to take an active role as listeners, each activity in this section has a built-in need for information or classification questions by the listener. In order to work toward the goal of active participation by the listener, the students themselves - rather than the teacher or an audio or video tape - become the focus of the activity. To this end, in Section IV, listening skills are developed in the context of interaction - mainly through information gap pair work, jigsaw groups, and student presentations and reports

Listening comprehension tests

An effective way of developing the listening skill is through the provision of carefully selected practice material. Such material is in many ways similar to that used for testing listening comprehension. Although the auditory skills are closely linked to the oral skills in normal speech situations, it may sometimes be useful to separate the two skills for teaching and testing, since it is possible to develop listening ability much beyond the range of speaking and writing ability if the practice material is not dependent on spoken responses and written exercises.

An awareness of the way in which the spoken language differs from the written language is of crucial importance in the testing of the listening skills. For example, the spoken language is much more complex than the written language in certain ways, as a result of the large element of 'redundancy' that it contains [4, p.64]. Such features of redundancy make it possible for mutilated messages to be understood. Furthermore, the human brain has a limited capacity for the reception of information and it would often be impossible to absorb information at the speed at which it is conveyed through ordinary speech. Such conversational features as repetition, hesitation and grammatical re-patterning are all examples of this type of redundancy.

What is the significance of these features for testing purposes? Firstly, the ability to distinguish between phonemes, however important, does not in itself imply an ability to understand verbal messages. Moreover, occasional confusion over selected pairs of

phonemes does not matter too greatly because in real-life situations listeners are able to use contextual clues to interpret what they hear.

Secondly, impromptu speech is usually easier to understand than carefully prepared (written) material when the latter is read aloud. Written tests generally omit many of the features of redundancy and impart information at a much higher rate than normal speech does. Consequently, it is essential to make provision for restating important points, rewriting and rephrasing them when writing material for aural tests

Conclusion: We have outlined the main reasons for teaching listening comprehension in a foreign language. It is now widely accepted that oral communication plays a vital role in second language teaching for it provides an exposure to language which is a fundamental requirement for the learner. Progress in listening guarantees a basis for development of other language skills. Spoken language provides a means of interaction where participation is a significant component of the listening programme.

We have discussed the use of authentic listening material and stressed the need for authentic-like texts at different levels. The teachers and students may encounter some difficulties not only in the reliability of the listening material, but also in the quality of English language media (TV and radio broadcasts, audio and videotapes, records) with the help of which listening material is presented. The important point is to satisfy the learners' requirements and to involve their abilities to understand and reproduce the given material.

We have stressed the importance of careful selection of practice material for testing listening skills of the learners. It is necessary to construct different types of practical exercises for students to experience language. Listening comprehension tests present an effective method for developing listening abilities.

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