

Analyzing the Forms & Techniques of Teaching Listening Comprehension

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Abstract

Teaching of listening is probably the most ignored component of ELT in Pakistan. Though it is the first window of mind, which gives birth to the very concept of language acquisition, it has not been studied in pedagogical perspective. There is a relevantly good rationale to discuss the nature of listening; it is a reciprocal process, and an active rather than a passive skill of communication, hence there are necessary techniques to master it by using variety of texts. The paper, therefore, is an attempt to analyze such forms & techniques of teaching listening, which could possibly help our teachers to understand this very important skill and use the same in ESL classrooms.

Introduction

Teaching of listening is generally neglected, as it is believed that this skill can be mastered automatically by accepting the environmental influence, Mckeating (1981). However listening is taught integratively with speaking as both relate each other in the process of communication. Bowen and Madsen (1985) argue that though the listening function in language use can be isolated, it is typically linked to speaking in normal patterns of vocal interchange, with regular shifts or roles in oral discourse between speaker and hearer. Certainly role shifts are a typical feature of language use, and one that is particularly applicable to language education. Nevertheless there are situations where listening is exclusively employed, as when a radio or television presentation or a movie is the focus of a listener's attention. A similar relationship prevails when a subject attends an actual dramatic performance, or listens to a live lecturer. Listening is occasionally referred to as a "passive" skill. This interpretation oversimplifies the definition of listening; a listener is far from passive as he receives, analyzes, and interprets the oral signals that come his way, recreating the message of the speaker. The order in which language skills are acquired by native speakers, and frequently assumed as most appropriate for second language learners, is first listening and then speaking, with reading and writing coming later, usually as part of a formal educational program.

Definition and Nature of Listening

Geddes (1981) defined communication as a two-sided process: a message cannot be communicated unless there is someone to receive it. Discussions of the implications of a communicative approach to the teaching of spoken language tend to emphasize

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the development of the student's ability as sender of spoken messages, by looking at the language activity normally called listening, I want to focus on the development of the student's ability as receiver of spoken messages. Obviously he will need to have some knowledge of the language forms he hears. What I am particularly interested in, however, is how we can train him to understand and respond to the realization of these forms in communication.

It is of course somewhat misleading to suggest that, when discussing spoken communication, we can isolate listening from other language skills. There *are* times when the only language skill we use is listening, as when we eavesdrop on a conversation on the bus, or listen to the radio or attend a public lecture. But, more often than not, other language skills will be involved in the communication. With so much of our lives spent in conversation with other, listening and speaking are the two that most often co-occur. This means that the on-going speech reflects and requires the feedback given by the addressee(s), and a process of mutual adjustment is evident as the roles of addresser and addressee are continually exchanged Geddes (1981). The implications for a teaching methodology are clear: often we cannot restrict our focus to speaking *or* listening but must consider both skills together.

Reading and writing skills may also be needed at the same time as listening skills. I said above that we may sometimes only listen to a lecture. But a college or university student will probably want to take notes as well as listen, both to help his concentration as well as for later recall purposes. For some lectures he may need to use reading skills to follow a printed handout or notes written on the blackboard. Examples can be found in social communication as well. When a friend phones me to suggest we spend the evening at the cinema together I may continue to listen to him talking about arrangements for meeting as I skim through the newspaper to find out what time the film we want to see starts.

The nature of the additional skills required will depend on our purpose in listening. What is important to note is that, as in reading, we never listen without a purpose. Even when we note the intended receiver of communication, as in eavesdropping situations, we listen with a purpose – either because we are spies or because we have nothing better to do on a tedious bus journey or because our curiosity has been aroused, and we wish to satisfy it. and our purpose in listening will affect how we listen and what we select from the stream of sound. Again, this has obvious implications for a teaching methodology.

The more one tries to analyze just what the listener's task involves, the more impressed one becomes at the human ability to understand speech! Widdowson (1978) has made a useful **distinction** between '**hearing**' and '**listening**'. He uses 'hearing' to refer to the listener's ability to recognize language elements in the stream of sound and, through his knowledge of the phonological and grammatical systems of the language, to relate these elements to each other in clauses and sentences and to understand the meaning of these sentence. He reserves 'listening' to refer to the ability to understand

how a particular sentence relates to what else has been said and its function in the communication. It is at this stage that the listener selects what is relevant to his purpose and rejects what is irrelevant. This distinction is similar to Rivers' (1966 p 142) distinction between two levels of activity in a foreign language: the recognition level and the selection level. I will restrict myself to 'listening' and the selection level.

I now want to look at some of the implications for **classroom methodology** of the ideas outlined above. Let us start with the question of text selection. When we select listening texts for our students, we sometimes want the text to serve as a model for the students' own production. Texts of this kind are not sufficient, however, to prepare the student for all his eventual communicative needs. In selecting additional texts we will be guided by these needs and by the suitability of the texts for training the student to 'listen' and select. What does this mean in practical terms?

In considering the needs we will be concerned with such variables as the number of speakers and the sex and age of each, the kind of English they speak (native or non-native; American, British, etc; accent and dialect), register, subject matter. In addition we will want to help the student to understand spontaneous speech with all its 'ums' and 'ers', its ungrammatical features, incomplete sentences and mid-utterance changes of direction. This raises obvious problems. An authentic text of spontaneous speech may confront the student with so many problem that he will simply panic. We need to find texts that will give the student controlled and guided experience.

Nicholas (1988) defined listening in several ways. First, it has been said that listening is not a passive but an *active* process of perceiving and constructing a message from a stream of sound. This process depends on what one knows about the phonological, grammatical, lexical, and cultural systems of a language. Proficient listeners apply these internalized systems to what they are hearing, thus forming expectations of what is to come. As knowledge of these systems increases, so does the ability to comprehend streams of spoken discourse. In addition, a shared knowledge of the real world between the speaker and the listener becomes crucial to total comprehension of the message.

In an EFL situation, the importance of the cultural context of the spoken language cannot be overemphasized. A lack of understanding of this cultural information can be a major impediment to listening comprehension, and the teacher should make an effort to become acquainted enough with the cultural context to be able to explain it to students *prior* to the listening task. This might include, for example, names of people and places given orally in a newscast, dialogue, or story, as well as comments of historical or cultural nature.

Understanding what listening entails helps us not only to select and design activities for learning; it also allows us to define the teacher's role in developing oral/aural language skills. The teacher should be the exemplary listener, listening to students with understanding, tolerance, and patience. The teacher who listens with understanding creates a relaxed, trusting environment for language learning which is much more inviting

than one in which a teacher demands a perfect response to every question – although there are times when an exact response may be desired, as in pronunciation and grammar drills and in evaluation exercises, for example.

Students have to learn how to listen, just as they have to learn how to speak, and therefore they should be exposed frequently, from the earliest stages of language learning, to listening-comprehension activities based on natural, authentic speech. Moreover, teachers need to prepare students psychologically for the listening activity, telling them that they will not be able to understand everything they hear and that they should not panic because of this. Instead, students should be invited to guess at the meaning of words and phrases they do not comprehend. Listening activities should encourage students to develop tolerance and acceptance of those features of language that they do not yet comprehend due to certain degree of ambiguity while listening to the spoken language. This will enable them to focus on anticipating what is to come and on getting the gist (i.e., the main points, the essence) of a speaker's intended meaning or message.

Developing tolerance of the unknown is not an easy task, however, and this means that the teacher needs to give systematic (not sporadic) listening practice in identifying and selecting information. This calls for methodically planned activities in listening comprehension and speaking through regular, thorough, and repeated practice. When we apply these techniques at Shah Abdul Latif University students we see great change in listening comprehension level. At intermediate and advanced levels, these might take the following forms:

Forms of listening

i. Pre-listening

- Set learner expectations about what they are going to hear by using visual aids (pictures, photos, and drawings).
- Set theme/topic/setting by discussing the topic with regard to the learners' culture and comparing it to the L₂ culture represented by the speaker.
- Present new vocabulary/idiomatic expression.
- Give a reason/purpose for listening; assign a concrete task to be completed by students.

ii. Listening

- Listen the first time for general comprehension.
- Listen the second time, pausing after meaningful “chunks” of language to discuss what has been said and what is to follow, checking for comprehension.
- Listen several more times, stopping to answer students' questions and to create pauses for language processing.
- Allow time for completion of the listening task. Students should be responding in some physical way to the listening passage, either by indicating appropriate pictures or answers to multiple-choice questions, completing a cloze exercise, true/false, filling in the blanks of incomplete sentences or of a grid, or writing

short answers to questions.

- Listen a final time; all students should confirm by responding in writing or orally to the teacher's questions that they have gotten the gist of the listening passage.

iii. Post-listening

- Teacher discusses students' reaction to the content of the listening selection and compares their answers with his own.
- Teacher asks students thought provoking questions to encourage discussion about how the speaker's message relates to them.
- Set students to work in pairs to create dialogues or synopses based on the listening selection.
- Engage students in role-play based on the listening selection.
- Assign reading and writing activities based on the listening passage.

The above teaching Format has proved effective with the students of mixed ability in the interior of Sindh .The same can be applied with no or little modification to different situations in Pakistani perspective.

Stages of Listening

Rivers (1968) suggested following four stages in teaching of listening.

Stage 1. Identification

At this stage students need practice in discrimination of sounds and in the elements of meaning conveyed by stress, pitch, and intonation. An exercise of consisting dialogues is appropriate.

State 2. Identification and Selection without Retention

At this stage the student listens to a connected sequence with a development of thought which he tries to follow. The student and the teacher are satisfied if he has followed the passage as delivered without worrying about ability to recount or discuss what he has heard. The most suitable materials for this stage are simple plays or sketches depicting normal situations in which the characters use the common, repetitious speech of conversation. The parts should be read with normal everyday diction, not the artificial diction employed on the stage. Also suitable are dramatic readings, by several participants, of stories with a considerable amount of conversation. At a more advanced stage students may listen to group conversations where two or three native speakers with easily identifiable differences of voice discuss a subject of interest to the student.

Stage 3: Identification and Guided Selection with Short-Term Retention

Material similar to that for Stage 2 may be used, with clearly distinctive voices and lively themes. At this stage the student is given some questions beforehand, not a great number, and he listens for the answers which he marks on a question sheet as he hears them, or, at a more advanced stage, after he has listened to the whole passage. The passage should be repeated so that the student may have further practice in listening and selecting, and may have an opportunity to verify his answers.

Stage 4: Identification, Selection and Long-Term Retention:

This is the final stage. Here the student is encouraged to listen freely to all kinds of material. He may listen to literary extracts, plays, poems, and lectures on literary or cultural subjects related to his work, or he may listen to all kinds of aural material (news bulletin, discussions on subjects of typical interest, plays, songs, film scenarios) for his own pleasure. At this stage he should have practice in listening to regional accents and to all types of voices. After a period of listening, the student is expected to be able to talk or write about what he has heard.

Techniques of Listening

Zaytoun (1988) suggested a few techniques for teaching listening for foreign learners. (a) Teacher if possible should expose the students to real life situations in which native speakers of English use the language in a spontaneous conversational and communicative way. (b) An other technique to teaching listening is using short taped-segments of Radio or TV news and weather reports. (c) To encourage the use of language laboratory. A method of teaching listening should take into account the skill elements and their subsequent development. In a listening situation, as states Rivers (1968) a student should recognize without effort sound patterns (Sound discriminations affecting meaning, intonation patterns, significant levels of pitch, word groupings), grammatical sequences and tenses, modifiers and function words, cliches, expletives or hesitation expressions which can be ignored as irrelevant to the message, levels of discourse (colloquial or formal), emotional overtones (excited, disappointed, peremptory, cautious, angry utterances), as well as regional, social, or dialectal variations. Rivers (1968) suggested following four stages in teaching of listening.

Candlin (1987) asserted that effective teaching of listening involves motivation and stimulation. The teacher before teaching or introducing any activity, should ask some questions to motivate the learners so as willingly to involve them in the activities.

Listening is a complex operation integrating the distinct components of perception and linguistic knowledge in ways, which are poorly, understood, Rivers and Temperly (1978). Some linguists maintain that knowledge of the same system of grammatical rules of a language is basic to both listening and speaking. Some psychologists, on the other hand, believe the rules we apply are different and that we employ *perceptual strategies* for surface scanning of what we are hearing, stopping to penetrate to underlying relations only to resolve ambiguities or untangle complexities.

Extensive & Intensive Listening

Rixon (1986) observed that at times a person might find himself listening to something in a relaxed way, not concentrating on every word, but for the sheer pleasure of following the content of what is said. An example might be the experience of listening to an interesting or amusing radio program, which poses no particular problems of language or difficulty of concepts. At other times the same person might find himself in a situation where he has to listen with great attention, because he is trying to pick up

and remember a series of important instructions, as in the case of the employee listening to his boss's orders. Alternatively, the speaker might be using complex or unfamiliar language, as with an undergraduate listening to lecture on a subject new to him.

The parallels between a native speaker and a learner are not exact here, but there is certainly a case for giving students the two different types of listening experience – those in which the language-level is well within their present capacity, and which therefore allow them to listen for pleasure or interest without having to make a great effort to overcome linguistic difficulties, and those in which they need to pay more attention to content and language. The first sort of experience can last quite a long time, several minutes, as in the case of easy stories read aloud by the teacher or heard on tape. They can also be quite short, when, for example, they hear a short poem or joke, just for pleasure or fun. In both cases they are not asked to do 'language work' on what they hear but have the satisfaction of an almost complete, direct, understanding of something worth hearing. This type of listening can be called *extensive* listening (by analogy with extensive reading, a term widely used in the teaching world. It is an experience which it is important to give all students to keep their motivation and interest high, as well as giving them valuable extra contact with English in its spoken form.

The second type of listening might be called **intensive listening** (again by analogy with reading). This is perhaps the more widely used form of listening practice in modern classrooms. Here, the students are asked to listen to a passage with the aim of collecting and organizing the information that it contains. The type of passage used, is usually a little different from that used for extensive listening. It contains more concrete information, which may be quite densely packed, and often is not as easy for the students to understand on first hearing. This is because the aim is to give the students *challenge*, to allow them to develop listening skills or knowledge of language through the efforts they make, guided by exercises or activities related to the passage. For this reason, passages for intensive listening should be short, not more than a few minutes long, because they should be played several times, straight through or in sections (usually in both ways during a lesson). This is so that students have the chance to get to grips with the contents and to have several tries at parts that at first hearing they may find difficult. Practically, the passages need to be short in order to be fit within the time limits of a lesson, and also because of the effort that the students will be expending in their attempts to make out as much as possible. Such heavy concentration on a long passage would be extremely tiring, and would probably result in making students dislike the experience rather than finding it challenging but rewarding.

The Use of Recorded and live listening material in Teaching Listening

These days, the use of recorded tapes or cassettes for listening comprehension has become standard. This has many advantages, but it is important to remember that students can also benefit from listening to the teacher or to each other in live listening practice.

Authentic and specially constructed Materials

Rixon (1986) found that most of the teachers want to give their students some thing realistic to listen to, because they want to equip them to cope with listening in real life. This has led to a great interest in so-called authentic materials.

Authentic listening materials consist of speech recorded in real situations, often without the speakers' knowledge at the time, so that the students are encountering a totally natural 'slice of life'.

The advantages of using materials of this type for some purposes are clear, but the teacher should also consider some possible drawbacks and limitations.

- (i) The English heard is real, not the construction of a textbook writer or an actor's performance. This makes it both more interesting for students, and satisfying if they are able to understand what these genuine English speakers are saying.
- (ii) Because the speech is a sample of real English, you have the scope to do work on it that a scripted, acted, listening passage might not permit. You could, for example, look at accent, tone of voice and actual expressions used, confident that you are using good linguistic data.

Narrowing the Options technique

According to a Psycholinguistic theory of teaching listening narrowing the options technique brings about considerable development in listening abilities. Rixon (1986) carried out experiments in which both native and non-native speakers of English have taken part show the value of exercises and activities in which the learner is given the chance to resolve any doubts he may have by using information which helps him to 'narrow the options' about what is being said.

In one experiment, a recorded phrase is said very unclearly, with a lot of background noise and other interference to make things harder. At first, the listener can make out nothing. Then he is given a small number of phrases, and is told that one of them is the phrase in the recording. He has to listen again and choose which is the correct one. Having been given this hint, he is usually able to recognize the correct phrase when he hears the recording again. On subsequent playing of the tape, he seems to 'hear' the phrase more and more easily and often ends up wondering why he found it so difficult in the first place.

Experiments which as this trend supports is to the sort of teaching that encourages students to form their own expectations about what they will hear. This seems to help them to recognize and understand much more than if they had come to a listening passage 'cold' without any preparation. There are two main techniques.

- (a) Students are told the topic of the listening passage and are asked to guess some of the words or phrases they think they might hear.

- (b) They are given a list of words, which might possibly occur in the passage, and are asked to listen for which ones occur and which do not.

Both these techniques ‘narrow the options’, in that students have in mind a limited set of language items against which to match what they hear. Both techniques can notably increase the amount of language recognized at first hearing, although the first option makes more demands on the students’ imagination and common sense.

Conclusion

In Pakistani universities listening of English is generally not according to the above principles other than in very few institutions otherwise listening is learnt automatically. The state of listening is much better in institutions where Direct Method of teaching English is applied, whereas in the government run colleges or public sector institutions, no such method is applied to promote listening of any type. Therefore by introducing the above discussed techniques based on communicative approach to listening, the students will be more interested to listen and communicate, and they can also enjoy taking the active part in the activities prescribed. Teachers of English, therefore has to realize that listening is not a passive but an active process of perceiving and constructing a message from a stream of sounds. This process depends on what one knows about the phonological, grammatical, lexical, and cultural systems of a language. The only way out is to learn to teach the target skill.

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