

Issues on Teaching Listening In English Classes and Its Basic Principles

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Abstract: *The article analyzes issues related to issues on improving and designing listening tasks in English classes and suggests effective methods which can deal with the forthcoming problems. The author analyzed the research on how to create listening tasks based on improving listening skills of learners while studying foreign languages and presented them in this article.*

Key words: communication, speech activity, listening comprehension, listening skill, efficiency of teaching, listening tasks, listening activities, systematic approach.

As we know, the process of communication in a foreign language is possible thanks to two types of speech activity - speaking and listening.

Despite the fact that listening is a receptive type of speech activity and proceeds without external manifestations, this is an active process during which the listener performs complex mental operations aimed at perceiving, understanding and processing the heard information.

In addition, listening skills, formed in the process of mastering the native language, are not transferred to a foreign language, so listening in a foreign language has its own specific features.

The difficulty of mastering this type of speech activity in a foreign language is associated with subjective (associated with the personal characteristics of the hearer) and objective difficulties. These difficulties include:

1. Language (the presence of unfamiliar words, new grammatical

material, colloquial forms, features of pronunciation, pace of speech, etc.)

2. Psychological (fear not to understand the interlocutor or listening to the material).

3. Contextual awareness (ignorance of context or background information).

Thus, the special importance of listening for the process of communication and receiving information on the one hand and the objective difficulties of mastering this type of speech activity on the other, indicate the relevance of this issue in modern methods of teaching foreign languages. The underestimation of listening extremely negatively affects the language training of schoolchildren, since unformed auditory skills may cause the impossibility of the process of communication. Therefore, the understanding of foreign language speech needs to be taught specifically, and the ability to understand speech at a different pace, different intonation design, a different level of correctness.

As we design listening tasks, we should keep in mind that complete recall of all the information in an aural text is an unrealistic expectation to which even native speakers are not usually held. Each activity should have as its goal the improvement of one or more specific listening skills. Listening exercises that are meant to train should be success-oriented and build up students' confidence in their listening ability. According to J. Harmer¹ the importance of tasks lies in the fact that they create a purpose, motivation and expectations in learners, which are all characteristics of listening in real life.

In analyzing tasks and their effect on the development of listening skills, different classifications of task types have been proposed. Rost, for example, classifies tasks into open tasks, such as note-taking and closed ones, such as true/false sentences, which differ in terms of whether the

¹ Harmer, J. The practice of English language teaching. London: Longman.1985

level of difficulty is fixed or open. Thus, in open tasks it is the learner who determines the level of difficulty by adapting the task to his or her proficiency level. In note-taking tasks, for example, the quantity and quality of notes that the learner writes down while listening will depend on his or her proficiency and motivation. In contrast, in a closed task such as a true/false exercise, the difficulty level is set in advance, and the learner can either perform the task or fail to do so. It is important to note, however, that the division into open and closed tasks is not based on the level of difficulty itself, as tasks of both types can be of various levels of difficulty depending on task design and the listening material used. What this classification emphasizes is that tasks differ in the amount of choice the learner has in his or her response while performing a task.

Another classification outlined by Rost is based on the factor of time, according to which tasks can be

prospective, that is, carried out before listening, simultaneous with listening and retrospective. Each of these types of tasks focuses on a different sub-skill. For example, prospective tasks develop learners' ability to raise expectations and use them in the process of listening. A prospective task like brainstorming on the topic of the listening activity not only creates expectations but also helps activate the language that the learner will probably need in the process of comprehension. Awareness of different processes involved in each of these types of tasks is necessary in task design so that task features can be used optimally. For example, simultaneous tasks must be formulated in a very simple way, either graphically or textually, so as not to distract the listeners while they are focusing on listening. Similarly, retrospective tasks must take into account the limitations of memory and should not require the learners to focus on memorising a large number of details.

Tasks can also be classified according to the quantity of response required. Ur² distinguishes four categories of responses required in different types of tasks, which range from no response required (e.g., in listening to a story), short responses (such as true/false sentences), long responses (answering questions) to extended responses (such as discussion based on the listening material). Again, it is important to note that the difficulty level is not directly related to these four types of tasks. In other words, a task requiring a short or no response can be linguistically and cognitively more demanding than a task requiring a long response. As this short overview shows, task type is an important factor in teaching listening. Different types of tasks focus on different stages of the listening process, listening strategies and sub-skills that learners need to develop.

² Ur, P. A course in language teaching: Practice and theory. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.1996

The choice of task will therefore depend on the aims of listening instruction at a particular learning stage and on the characteristics of a particular teaching context. Thus, in an academic listening course note-taking tasks will be more frequent than other types of tasks, reflecting the needs of students attending such a course.

As for the procedure for conducting listening activities, most methodologies divide listening activities into three basic stages:

1. Pre-Listening
2. Listening
3. Post-Listening

Each of which has a clear aim and function. The importance of pre-listening activities is especially emphasized in recent methodologies, since they not only provide the context necessary for activating the language and background knowledge related to the topic, but also help to raise learners' expectations and motivation. Post-listening activities, in turn, offer a natural opportunity to link listening



with another language skill, as they usually lead on to speaking or writing. A systematic approach to the teaching of listening requires a careful selection of materials, tasks and procedure at all levels of language learning. At tertiary level of studying English the teaching of listening acquires yet another important dimension: not only is listening practiced and developed as part of general language proficiency but also as a necessary element of students' study skills. Studying English at university implies listening to lectures and participating in seminars conducted in English, which presents students with demands for concentrated listening to material dense with information for a longer period of time. Furthermore, listening to lectures is accompanied by note-taking, which puts additional pressure on the listeners in terms of time, since several activities take place simultaneously: listening, summarizing and writing.

Moreover, listening skills are vital for learners. Of the 'four skills,' listening is by far the most frequently used. Listening and speaking are often taught together, but beginners, especially non-literate ones, should be given more listening than speaking practice. It's important to speak as close to natural speed as possible, although with beginners some slowing is usually necessary. Without reducing one's speaking speed, one can make your language easier to comprehend by simplifying your vocabulary, using shorter sentences, and increasing the number and length of pauses in one's speech.

Additionally, listening skill makes you successful in workplace, family and in the society. Good listening skill is mandatory to get into a profession in communications, management, planning, sales, etc. Listening skills involve a different set of etiquettes, questioning for explanation, showing empathy and providing a suitable response. Good listening skills include

the understanding ability. Body language is also a part of listening skill. Eye contact with the speaker, sitting straight and alert are the good gestures of a good listener.

Listening comprehension has received considerable attention in the fields of applied linguistics, psycholinguistics and second language pedagogy during the last two decades (Anderson & Lynch³, Flowerdew,⁴ Rost,⁵ Underwood,⁶ Ur⁷). Results of the large body of research have shown that listening is not a passive process, in which the listener simply receives a spoken message, but rather a complex cognitive process, in which the listener constructs the meaning using both her linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge. The importance of the

listeners' cognitive and social judgements in the process of listening, in addition to the linguistic knowledge, has been especially emphasised.

Although most of the findings relevant to understanding how listening operates come from research into listening in the mother tongue, many of the conclusions have had important implications for the teaching of listening in the foreign language. It is widely recognised today that listening is an active skill, or rather, a cluster of various sub-skills, which are both learnable and teachable. Listening is regarded as an essential element of foreign language proficiency, and as such plays an important role in foreign language programs. Various methodologies for the teaching of listening have emerged. These have had a considerable influence on course design and textbook writing, especially in terms of features of materials for teaching listening (authentic vs. constructed), types of listening tasks, ways of raising learner awareness of

³ Anderson, A., & Lynch, T. (1988). *Listening*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴ Flowerdew, J. (Ed.). (1994). *Academic listening: Research perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Rost, M. (1994). *Introducing listening*. Harmondsworth: Penguin

⁶ Underwood, M. (1989). *Teaching listening*. London: Longman.

⁷ Ur, P. (1984). *Teaching listening comprehension*. London: Longman.

the listening process and effective strategies for listening, stages in listening activities, and integrating listening with other language skills. The importance that listening receives in foreign language pedagogy today is reflected at various levels: in one form or another, listening is present in syllabuses, course books and teaching materials available on the market, general proficiency language exams and is even the main focus of specialized courses, such as academic listening.

Research into the specific features of academic listening has shown the complexity of this skill. Richards,⁸ for example, specifies a list of micro-skills within academic listening as opposed to conversational listening, such as understanding the main points in a lecture, or distinguishing between the main line and digressions. A different classification is offered by Rost, who

starts from the assumption that listening sub-skills are grouped into certain clusters, arranged into hierarchies. Both classifications, however, indicate that academic listening is a skill whose development requires special training. These and other findings have contributed to the fact that many universities today recognize the need to offer courses in academic listening at the beginning of university studies, either as special courses or as part of study skills courses, with the aim to train students to develop skills for listening in the academic context.⁹

Listening skills are an essential part of any language. There are several things one can do for English listening practice. One of the most common ways to do this is to watch movies. Whether they are dubbed in your native language or not, it is useful to hear the natural speed in which native

⁸ Richards, J. C. The context of language teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.1985

⁹ Flowerdew, J. Academic listening: Research perspectives. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1994

English speakers speak. In addition, there are many sites you can find around the Internet to help. Segments for free listening English can easily be found on YouTube or any other video site, such as video.about.com. Look for segments in which the speaker speaks clearly at a natural speed. For beginner ESL listening, the speed will seem difficult, but in time it becomes very easy. To increase the challenge and difficulty of your listening, start listening to a wide variety of songs in English.

Without the video in the background, the speed changes, or even the music in the background, this makes for very challenging English listening.

If these are not available there are more innovative ways to get ESL listening skills in. Download short stories off the Internet and read them out loud to yourself or a partner. A tricky thing that comes up often in English listening practice is a homonym. These are words that are pronounced or spelt the same, but have

different meanings. A good English listening exercise will have several of these, which you should be able to figure out from the context of the narrative. For ESL listening, these should be practiced often until the meanings of context are understood.

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