

The Role of Listening in Language Acquisition; the Challenges & Strategies in Teaching Listening

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ABSTRACT:

Listening, the very basic language skill is consistently interrelated and intervened with the other language skills - speaking, reading and writing. Until the late nineteenth century written mode is predominant in language learning and then onwards listening began to gain its significance in language teaching. The challenges towards teaching listening are now better understood because of the new strategies contributing to effective listening and moreover the widespread availability of technology supports the language learners in enhancing their listening skills. Still, the assessment of their listening skills, remain far behind the current views of listening and hence innovations to be made to renovate the teaching or learning of listening. This paper deals with the prime importance of listening in language acquisition and the challenges in attaining listening competence and suggests some strategies to overcome it.

KEYWORDS: Listening, Learning, Language skills, Teaching skills and Language Acquisition

LISTENING-A MACRO SKILL IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Listening has an important place in learning as it is one of the four major skills in language acquisition. Even though the other skills such as reading, speaking and writing are essential to develop language proficiency, listening contributes primarily for language expertise. Listening awakens awareness of the language as it is a receptive skill that first develops in a human being. Learning to listen to the target language improves language ability. The sound, rhythm, intonation, and stress of the language can only be perfectly adapted through listening. To understand the nuances in a particular language, one must be able to listen. As we get to understand spoken language by listening it is easier to improve the other skills and gain confidence.

Other than being the primary form of communication, listening helps the language learner to understand the beauty of the language. Especially in terms of communicative language teaching it is said that the basis for communicative competence is listening as it provides the aural input and enables learners to interact in spoken communication and hence language learning largely depends on listening. Thus listening forms the concrete basis for the complete language proficiency.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING IN COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Listening is the most significant part of communication as it is pivotal in providing a substantial and meaningful response. Especially in learning a language for communicative purpose, listening plays a vital role, as it helps the language learner to acquire pronunciation, word stress, vocabulary, and syntax and the comprehension of messages conveyed can be based solely on tone of voice, pitch and accent; and it is only possible when we listen. Without understanding input appropriately, learning simply cannot get any improvement. In addition, without listening skill, no communication can be achieved [1].

Also, every study conducted regarding the language skills acquisition has proved that when we communicate, we gain 45% of language competence from listening, 30% from speaking, 15% from reading and 10% from writing. With the highest percentage of involvement in the exchange of information in effective communication, listening has to be considered a language forerunner. Listening, unlike the other language skills, is felt comparatively much difficult by the learners, as it has all its interrelated subskills such as receiving, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding. But with the advent of communicative language-teaching and the focus on proficiency, the learning and teaching of listening started to receive more attention. However, listening is not yet fully integrated into the curriculum and needs to be given more attention in a language learning setting.

TEACHING LISTENING-THE CHALLENGES

According to Yagang (1994) [2], the problems in listening were accompanied with the four following factors: the message, the speaker, the listener and the physical setting. The problems were believed to cause by the speech rate, vocabulary and pronunciation [3]. As Flowerdew & Miller (1996) [4] assumed that the problems of the students were for the speed of delivery, new terminology and concept, difficulty in focusing and the physical environment.

The main reasons why the learners feel listening difficult are:

- i. Lack of effort to understand each and every word while listening. Especially in L2 acquisition they are unable transfer their L1 skill easily to a second language.
- ii. Failure or laziness to build up their vocabulary gradually and this greatly reflects in their listening and keeps them low spirited in acquiring the language skills.
- iii. Listeners problem with different pronunciation, accents as they stick to one particular articulation.

- iv. Listener's concentration power or listening stamina greatly influences their listening skills, which is not so in the case of acquiring the other language skills (reading, speaking and writing) even when they are carried for a longer period of time.
- v. Distraction by the physical setting or the environment in which listening is to be carried out. This becomes an added challenge for an average learner and a main confront even for good listeners.

Listening activities generally induces the anxiety and stress among the learners as it involves the interpersonal and interpretive modes of communication in which he/she has to actively participate. Mainly, unlike other language skills it is not at learner's control and may be done at variable speeds as it is not at the complete control of the listener at all settings.

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHING OF LISTENING

Listening strategies are techniques or activities that contribute directly to the recall of listening input. In the recent days, a number of listening strategies have been formulated to match with every different listening situation and because of this, in teaching listening skills, the language learners are facilitated in getting adjusted to their listening behavior to deal with a variety of situations, types of input, and listening purposes. Listening strategies can be broadly classified as Top-down strategies and Bottom-up strategies.

Top-down strategies are listener based; the listener relies on the background knowledge of the topic, the listening context, the text type, and the language and they help the listener to interpret the ideas he has listened. Top-down strategies are for

- listening for the main idea
- predicting
- drawing inference
- summarizing

On the other hand, Bottom-up strategies are text based where the listeners use linguistic knowledge to understand information. Here the listener relies on the language in the message, that is, the combination of sounds, words, and grammar to arrive at the final message. Bottom-up strategies are to

- concentrate on specific details while listening
- recognize word-order patterns.

But listening comprehension is not constrained either to top-down or bottom-up processing, but it should be an interactive, interpretive process where listeners apply both their prior knowledge and linguistic knowledge in understanding messages.

Strategic listeners also use metacognitive strategies to plan, monitor, and evaluate their listening.

Metacognitive development can be described as conscious development in one's metacognitive abilities, such as the move to greater knowledge, awareness and control

of one's learning, selecting strategies, monitoring the progress of learning, correcting errors, analyzing the effectiveness of learning strategies, and changing learning behaviors and strategies when necessary [5]. The use of metacognitive strategies activates one's thinking and leads to improved performance in learning in general [6].

The metacognitive strategies train the language learner to cope with the demands of listening [7]. It is quite evident that metacognitive strategies make their learning more effective, hence, they are able to maximize the information received and thus this can be used to improve their listening skills. Wenden (1998) [8] argues that learners who use their metacognitive abilities seem to have the following advantages over the others:

- Learners become more strategic.
- Progress in learning is faster with improved quality and speed of their cognitive development.
- They are confident in their abilities to learn and hence can provide accurate assessments of why they are successful learners.
- They think clearly about inaccuracies when failure occurs during an activity.
- Their tactics match the learning task and adjustments are made to reflect changing circumstances.
- They perceive themselves as continual learners and can successfully cope with new situations.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it can be said, without listening skills, language learning is impossible. This is because there is no communication where there is no human interaction. Also, listening is crucial not only in language learning but also for learning other subjects. But even today, with all the technological advancements in the field of education, learners have problems with listening. The main reasons are: they spend too little time to improve their listening skills; the inappropriate strategies tested on them in a learning setting may be an important reason for their poor listening comprehension. The problems are also caused from the listening material and physical settings. To acquire high level listening skills, more exposure is given to the learners with variety of listening comprehension. Knowing the context of a listening text and the purpose for listening greatly reduce the burden of comprehension. Listeners can use both bottom-up processers (linguistic knowledge) and top-down processes (prior knowledge) to comprehend. Teachers should play an important role in teaching learners strategies and how to apply them into the listening task. They can help students develop sound strategies for comprehension through a process approach to teach listening. These are some suggestions to overcome the challenges in listening as well as to upgrade the listening skills of students.

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